Sage of Sacred Art
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TRADITION

# Sage of Sacred Art

B.G. Sharma Speaks out on the inner discipline of his craft

SITTING FOR HOURS CROSS-LEGGED on the floor of his Udaipur home, encircled by paints and brushes, B.G. Sharma creates depictions of Deities that Hindus around the world look to with prayerful veneration (see also pages 3?5). Recognized as one of the foremost painters of Indian miniatures, Sharma, 75, is world famous for his originality in composition, design and ornamentation. Through years of dedicated effort, he has mastered the traditional styles of Kangra, Kishangarh and Mughal painting. In January, 1999, after 68 years of painting, a stunning coffee-table book of Sharma's works, Form of Beauty (Mandala Publishing Group, San Francisco), was ceremoniously released at Indian Prime Minister A.B.Vajpayee's home in Delhi. In February, Hinduism Today interviewed Sharma at his Udaipur gallery. He spoke in Hindi, and Hinduism Today correspondent Rajiv Malik--connected by conference call--translated from Delhi.

## On painting Gods and Goddesses

It is not an easy thing to paint a God. I must be able to see the God in my mind, so I first meditate on Him for some time. I

recall all the activities of Lord Krishna and visualize every detail of His actions. Whatever Lord Krishna has done, I see before my eyes. First I study the various scriptures--Ramayana, Mahabharata--and try to understand what the God actually did at those times. I try to visualize what kind of environment He was living in, so that the backgrounds are fitting. If the image is of a child-God, then the environment must relate to children, and so on. On this I meditate for quite some time, and then only do I start to paint. I always pray to the God for blessings before beginning.

On his daily ritual

I still paint at least seven hours each day. I rise at 5:00am and take a walk. Then I bathe and exercise. Then I perform my daily puja and begin painting. Sometimes I am moved to paint by inspiration, but I find it best to work from 7:00am to 1:00pm. Then I have lunch, rest and resume painting from 4:00pm to 7:00pm. I retire at 10:00pm.

On entering the Srinathji temple shrine

I was commissioned to paint the image of Shrinathji. When I went inside the sanctum, I felt as if God Krishna Himself was there, standing directly before me. I went into a kind of samadhi. The impressions I received during that meditation were translated into many paintings that followed.

On the early years

I started painting when I was seven. At sixteen, we had a small shop where I painted portraits, but I could paint anywhere on short notice. Wealthy businessmen from Mumbai came to me for their sketches and portraits, and I also did the portraits of the Maharaja and Maharani of Udaipur. I could complete such works in just half-an-hour, but full-fledged paintings took from one week to six months. I was carefree doing this, but in 1947 I went to the J.J. School of Art in Mumbai. I had to labor very hard just to get to Mumbai. Resources were a big problem. I had to struggle a lot. It is only because of sheer hard work that I have reached this stage, and I still see that there is more to learn. Every time I paint, I try to improve.

On family training and successors

I have passed on my heritage to my son, Mukesh Sharma, 50. Two of my grandsons, Hitesh and Harshvardhan, are also learning to paint. My third grandson, Madhusudan, helps in running the gallery office. I have established a gallery especially for the youth. There, in Udaipur, 300 paintings are on display as a repository of the tradition.

On advising young artists

If the youth want lasting success, they must work very hard. Painting is a sadhana, a penance. It is not handed over on a platter. Today the youth do not want to work hard. They want to become big artists overnight, but that is impossible. The youth today are not serious about the work. They waste time watching movies and television. Luck also has a big role to

play. But one should work hard first, only then will luck play its role.

## On modern styles

Modern art is valid, but it has a short lifespan, whereas traditional art forms have everlasting value. Viewing traditional art is a blissful experience, but modern art does not give you that bliss. In modern art, nothing is obvious. The viewer is asked to see something where nothing is evident. What is this all about? Nothing is apparent, and you have to look for the meaning? In traditional art, everything is visible. Traditional art can be learned only from hard work, and it is a very time-consuming affair. Modern art! By just sketching with a pen or pencil you can call it art, but it will not last. It is good to learn modern art, but the youth are learning it because it is easy and because they lack patience.

## On the use of traditional materials

With the feather of the pigeon and the hair of the squirrel I make my brushes. Sometimes I use goat hair. I also use gold, grinding the gold myself on a special stone. Cow's urine is used for creating yellow color. But the cows must first feed for days on mango leaves and other medicines. This has to be done very carefully. My grandfather and father were artists, and they passed on the secrets of the use of these traditional materials. The beauty of these materials is that they do not fade away over time, as do chemicals.

On his artistic discipline

The images I paint stem from my own visualizations after contemplating the subject for some time. I do not copy anyone. Whatever I paint, I do so with the feeling of devotion to God.

With Rajiv Malik, New Delhi

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