

Tri-spectacled Indophile artist

With his love for jewels, given his long stint at Cartier, and his obsession with India, which he visits three times annually, **OLAF VAN CLEEF** has taken to creating one-off bejewelled works of art centred around Indian iconography

BY SHERNAAZ ENGINEER

OLAF VAN CLEEF, self-appointed Indian Ambassador (may his tribe increase), has been visiting the country determinedly for a decade-and-a-half. The wonderful Frenchman dons two avatars.

During the day, he is the spiffily suited Sales Associate at Cartier, selling diamonds to the international glitterati, who flock to the iconic joailliers' flagship store on 13 Rue De La Paix, Paris. He has been doing this for 27 years and confesses he adores it. "I cannot drape myself in diamonds and exquisite jewels as neither am I an Indian prince, nor an Indian God!" he smiles, "But I enjoy seeing my clients glitter as I sell them exquisite jewellery."

So much for his day job. By night, he is the slightly dishevelled artist who dons three

pairs of spectacles (one on top of the other – and more about that later) and savours his untiring labour of love as he creates his unique artworks. An exhibition of them just concluded at the Cymroza Art Gallery.

Insomniac Artist

Of his unusual artistic odyssey he explains, "I need very little sleep. I'm awake by 3 am and I start painting until about 8.30 every morning. Then I go to work. I enjoy the strong synergy between my job at Cartier and my paintings. You see, I use a lot of Swarovski crystal and chocolate wrappers in my paintings – basically, shiny bits. And I'm selling shiny bits all day at work! So it's one and the same thing."

His artworks do have jewel tones and twinkle with crystals and, not unexpectedly, his latest exhibition (he's had several al-



OLAF VAN CLEEF



ready) was called 'Bejewelled Mosaics'. Using the gouache technique on paper, he creates Indian iconography (his main theme) and some eye-catching abstracts, with fine detailing that gives his work a miniature/mosaic effect.

Auschwitz Holocaust

Reflecting on his India connection, which underpins most of his artworks, he explains, "My great grandmother had her honeymoon in India in 1935. I came here in 1965 with my grandmother, when I was 15-years-old. We stayed for a month at the Taj Mahal Hotel. We came by boat. My grandmother (a German Christian) had lived in India for six years after she married my grandfather, a Dutch Jew. It was unsafe in the 1940s for them to live in Europe, with Nazi rage against the Jews.

"In 1944, when they thought it was safe, they left India for France. A few months later, my grandfather was caught and deported to Auschwitz. That was the last anyone heard of him. In fact, many men of the Van Cleef family died at Auschwitz, and I'm the last male member in the jewellery business."

The Van Cleefs have a haloed name in the gems trade and Olaf virtually had his destiny marked out for him in diamonds. Of his late grandmother he says, "She wore a beautiful six carat ring on one hand, and a five carat one on the other. As a young boy, all that my eyes caught was the twinkling of her diamonds as I held her hand."

He lost his French mother at 18-months, when she died at the

Ivory Coast where his father was based. Back in France, his paternal grandmother raised him. "When I was good, her diamond-encrusted hands would lovingly pat my cheeks. When I was bad, those diamonds flashed as I got a smack! But she spoke of India and when I was 15 she brought me here. I remember how happy she was to be back in Bombay, where she had spent happy times with my grandfather and their many Parsi friends."

Taj in the '60s

As he mentioned, they stayed at the Taj for a month. "We were at the Bella Vista suite and my grandmother wanted to change the furniture! So we were taken to the basement of the hotel, where they stocked antiques, and she picked what she wanted. She fancied a big brass bird cage and got it brought up. Next afternoon, we went to Crawford Market and bought a bunch of pink-plumed parrots. Can you imagine we came to the Taj and put those parrots in the cage inside our suite! Before we left, we opened the door and let them fly across the Gateway."

Undoubtedly, all this has coloured his imagination with such vibrancy that he finds it easy to create, on paper, illusionary worlds of Gods, kings and exquisite Indian iconography in his very chic style.

Art and Jewellery

"You could say I do eco-paintings," he offers. "All the foil I use in my artworks is from discarded chocolate wrapping strewn across Paris."

Paris has street litter! "On yes, everywhere," he adds. "On my way to work, I keep picking up the wrappers. Of course, I turn around to make sure no one is looking! What is garbage for someone is gold for me!"

He snips the foil into one-millimetre squares and then accessories them with Swarovski crystals. The work is so minute that he needs the magnifying effect of three sets of spectacles, pushed one atop the other.

Of course, his career at Cartier continues to be his mainstay. "People from all over the world come to Cartier. Nowadays, women come by themselves and buy whatever they want. They're working, they don't need rich men to gift them jewellery. They dare to fulfil their dreams."

Shopping at Cartier

So, what does a working girl dare to buy at Cartier? "The Cartier three-rings in yellow, pink and white gold, is my top-seller. I must have sold over 3000 pieces and it's still flying off our shelves. It costs 600 Euros, but for women who cannot afford it we have the three-ring scarf – it's for 150 Euros and is also popular."

What keeps him coming back to India, considering his life is so perfectly set in Paris? "India gets better every time I visit," he exults, challenging our jaded vision. He seems to see only the good things! "The India is shining," he asserts, "so many changes are happening. The tiny Tata car, for instance, the concept that it can be for everyone, is incredible. India is the country for tomorrow." ■