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A diamond sutra



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Special arrangement



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French artist and jewellery counsellor Olaf Van Cleef, who's in the city for his 12th show, tells Deepa Alexander why India continues to inspire his work

1492. The year links two men, nearly five centuries apart, who set out on a self-possessed quest to discover India. Christopher Columbus, however, landed in the New World. But Olaf Van Cleef, who brings alive India on air-dried paper made by Moulin A Papier D'Arches, a brand established that year in a French town, seems to have ended his journey here.

His artistic hands rest as lightly as the lily pads in the moss-lined pond. Bamboo copses and heliconia bow low with the breeze at Amethyst, in a dreamy tropical setting that artists chase whole lifetimes. "It is this Zen-like quality to the Indian outdoors that I find captivating," says Olaf, who hails from the family of legendary French jewellers, Van Cleef and Arpels.

In the city for ‘Deities in Diamond Dreams’, his 12th show in as many years, Olaf says in thickly-accented English: “It’s Chennai I always choose to exhibit my works in first because it was here that I was discovered as an artist.” When he opens the door to the colonial-styled hall displaying nearly 47 of his paintings, it’s like stepping into Aladdin’s cave. Swarovski crystals, glass gems and cabochons wink in the sunlight. Glinting through glass frames that fail to trap their brilliance, they throw a halo of luminous light that makes visitors gawk. Olaf, however, seems unfazed by all this show of beauty. A high-range jewellery advisor for Cartier, that “king of jewellers and jeweller of kings” as King Edward VII put it, Olaf’s work here with the Cartier mission between 1989 and 2002 made him familiar with the idea of India.

But his love affair with the country began decades ago when he first visited Bombay as a teenager with his grandmother, and later on his own. His travels across the subcontinent translated into a book, *From Darjeeling to Pondicherry*.

“India doesn’t speak globalisation. It speaks you,” says Olaf, who learnt to capture Indian faces at Kumortuli, the traditional potters’ quarter in Kolkata, and counts among his influences artists Paritosh Sen and Jamini Roy. “Here, men and gods too wear jewellery and I find that fascinating.”

And so, the walls are lined with multiple images of gods from the Hindu pantheon — Lakshmi, Muruga, Ayyappa, Ganesha and Krishna — Baroque-styled angels, a peaceful Buddha, peacocks strutting across Mughal courtyards, mosques and doe-eyed women from the Orient veiled behind butterfly wings.

Olaf employs almost every method in the art world to make his traditional paintings stand out. “My work is multi-technique. There is pointillism, which softens bright water colours with multiple white dots, tachisme that involves painting with fingers and the use of industrial glue to hold together gems and crystals.”

But, it’s the chocolate wrappers that tell a remarkable story. “Your garbage is my gold,” says Olaf, as he pulls out used sweet wrappers from across brands — Quality Street, Godiva and Suchard. Whipping out a pair of scissors, he proceeds to cut them so fine that the strips fall gently to the floor like confetti. “I have chased wrappers whipped by the wind, down the street much to the amusement of people.”

Décollage on air-dried paper, a special ink from Leipzig, watercolours that wash over in transparent shades, fine felt-tip pens, European influences on Indian subjects, a pair of pincers, opaque gouache, three pairs of spectacles that magnify the intricate work, swirling patterns on abstract art — all these have come to signify Olaf’s work. Gems course out of Lakshmi’s gold pot, Krishna plays from a stone-studded flute and the Buddha meditates on a crystal-embroidered base. “It takes 200 hours to make a painting,” says Olaf, who prefers to work at dead of night. “I am an insomniac and work between 3 a.m. and 8 a.m. I love working on Krishna but Ganesha is more serene and interesting to create.”

Abstract painting is Olaf’s comfort art. “My India-inspired art is to give back to the people and the country that helped me create it. Abstract art is what I do for myself,” he says of the maze of

colours that squiggle across the paper in captivating patterns. “I’ve never exhibited in Europe; this kind of work would rarely be accepted there as anything but kitsch. Here, I don’t need to explain why my art is the way it is.”

Giving back is something that Olaf has mastered. “In life, we co-exist. When you promote the other that, in turn, will promote you,” he says, speaking of the Van Cleef Hall at Puducherry that offers upcoming artists and others a place to showcase their work.

As the interview draws to a close, Olaf sees me off at the door. Every year or so, when he flies down from Paris for his annual ritual here, the same chorus of words can be heard. “charming”, “spiritual”, “exotic”, and “unusually imagined”. To these, may be added “Inspired by India”.