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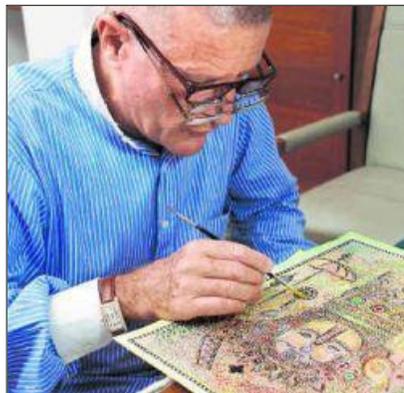
Variety - Arts & Crafts

## Crystal gazing

**Aditi Roy Ghatak**

*Gem-studded artworks with hues of Kolkata love — that's the latest from Olaf Van Cleef of Cartier fame.*

*What sets the Bejewelled Fireflies apart from his earlier works is the deliberate care with which "every emotion has been made distinct;" every dot that Van Cleef "places on paper is a separate identity, conveying something significant" and his paintings are replete with them.*



BEJEWELLED MUSE: Olaf Van Cleef — colours and crystals.

The purist may look askance but Olaf Van Cleef does not really care. The carping critic may wonder what's going on and the trained painter may cringe at the veritable mixing of artistic metaphors but the delightful outcome is precisely what Van Cleef is all about. Fundamentally, a jeweller with a passion for the chic in quite the classical sense; then a brand ambassador for Cartier, Paris; third — and much later in life — a painter expressing the turbulence of his soul in an emotional outburst of complex colours; Van Cleef in his fourth incarnation is a jeweller and painter morphed into one with his crystal-studded performance, the `Bejewelled Fireflies', which opened in Kolkata's Galerie La Mere recently, under the aegis of the Sri Aurobindo Institute of Culture.

Having overcome the impact of the initial encounter with what may be called a typically Olaf-ish genre of art, one cannot but take a second look and a closer third look into the vivacious world of sparking colours that contains such inexplicable strains of black and grey.

Van Cleef is pouring out his turmoil-filled soul into his external world, which he has immersed in the most striking hues: the turquoise blue against the magenta or the bright yellow or the pale green against the ink blue and the golden brown. The added dimension in this kaleidoscope comes in the shape of tiny bits of Austrian crystals embedded into the art or, in

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possibly the lighter moments, minuscule strips of chocolate wrapping pasted daintily alongside strips of delicately drawn bamboo. The French expert Ghislain Mollet-Vieville had suggested that Van Cleef bring his jewel craft into his paintings and even as the `classical Olaf' was hesitating, "friend David quietly poured some diamond chips on his work. The effect was stunning". Van Cleef had realised that the jewelled touch would be well worth the effort.

Into this luminescent world enters the black: in herringbones, through serpentines, crosses or even via the deformed Swastika. Many in Van Cleef's family have fallen prey to the Swastika's evil regime but the symbol in the Indian context brings solace to the soul of the painter who has never ceased to grieve for the death of his dearly beloved on the one hand and for the death of simplicity or innocence in the `cultured' world around him.

It is similar to the solace that the City of Joy, Kolkata, provides him with — drawing him for biannual visits, inspiring his art, enlightening his mind "with the sheer depth of its culture" and "invigorating" him with the "throbbing of its heartbeat", which Van Cleef can feel even in distant Paris. There he paints through the night, like a man possessed, placing his colours in mosaics or in a labyrinth of lines wending their way around circles, triangles, rectangles.

"Kolkata peeps out from unexpected corners" of his art: a Krishna-Gopi sequence in a possibly Rajasthan painting with a miniature Howrah Bridge conspicuous through the archway of a palace or the Royal Bengal Tiger placing itself majestically in the midst of another.

What sets the Bejewelled Fireflies apart from his earlier works is the deliberate care with which "every emotion has been made distinct;" every dot that Van Cleef "places on paper is a separate identity, conveying something significant" and his paintings are replete with them. They are striking because of the sheer contrast of the white on black — the artist using his "half a micron felt tipped pen under magnifying glasses to ensure that no dot touches another".

Whether the overall picture is one riot of colour or a mass of confusion reaching out for a world of comprehension possibly depends on the viewer but it does not fail to raise questions. Save a few paintings that are clearly self portrayals: a bemused young Van Cleef contemplating his beloved grandmother or a young French boy seeing an elephant for the first time in India and then envisioning a grand entry into this land of palaces and fountains as a caparisoned pachyderm in the company of two younger members of the species, which convey wonderment, others are poignant even in their splendour. There are the monarchs, the fish, the weeping women by the well, the batiked fabric or the timeless clock. Most are fenced by spotted lines of black and white; sorrow and joy.

Elephants are very central to Van Cleef's current series: the dancing twins with their crystal-studded cloaks or the majestic shape framed against the equilateral arch of a maharaja's abode. It is not just the physical presence of the jewels that give the paintings an embossed look; it is the Moulins Papier d'Arches paper, "pure cotton, produced by a company of 1492 vintage". Van Cleef has found in this a material that has a mind of its own: "making a very special contribution to the painting as it soaks up the colours". For some artists it may have been nightmarish but Van Cleef has found a way of making the paper cooperate with his fingers, which choose to do a bit of calligraphy now, or again some delicate stone placement or even engaging in some careless dabbing of paint on paper, and then, when the fingers want to shock deliberately they just pick up chocolate paper, snipping it into infinitesimal bits to be

scattered over the easel; carefully carelessly. Van Cleef does not know what he will paint; his soul takes over as he devotes about a 100 hours to each work.

Bejewelled Fireflies is more than special because it is a tribute to the city that Van Cleef loves more than any other: its spirit encompassed by the Howrah Bridge that connects everyone and everything "without any sense of stratification; like a soul that is set free".

It is this sense of freedom that Van Cleef is seeking ; freedom from the complexities of his mind that snatch his sleep over endless nights; freedom to lose himself in his world of jewels and gems; and in the colour of crushed lapis lazuli or simple *sindur* that adorns the forehead of the Indian woman.

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