



# SAYING A LOT WITH LITTLE

The Indian Cartoon Gallery has serendipitously become the proud owner of works by Frederick Joss (1907-1967). We uncover more about Joss and his legacy of minimalist art



From left: VG Narendra, Vasant Shengde and Lisa Shengde

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**V**G Narendra is at the helm of India's only cartoon gallery, which is tucked in the basement of Midford House, off MG Road. A cartoonist himself, Narendra says he is always on the lookout for budding cartoonists and creating an archive for the gallery. "See this portrait of Ganeshha by RK Laxman," he points out proudly to first-time visitors to the gallery.

There are collections by several eminent cartoonists which he has ensured are showcased here. "My aim has always been to get the best of cartoons for our viewers."

Still, it was a pleasant surprise when he received an email from the son-in-law of cartoonist Frederick Joss around the time when he was planning the 100th exhibition for the gallery. Vasant Shengde, in an email, offered to donate books and 'exhibition-worthy' cartoon prints from his father-in-law's collection. "I had known a bit about Frederick Joss since I had read about Abu's journey to the UK," says Narendra.

He refers to one of India's famous exports Abu Abraham, the cartoonist who packed his bags to the UK on the basis of a one line invitation from Joss - "When are you coming?" Joss, a regular visitor to India, had recognised the talent of Abraham much to the dismay of K Shankar Pillai, the editor of *Shankar's Weekly* where Abraham worked. "You have stolen my cartoonist," Pillai is believed to have told Joss.

Joss was a cartoonist who could bring out a person's character with the minimum strokes possible. "That

is the hallmark of a good cartoonist," points out Narendra who, after receiving the email, studied the caricatures done by Joss. Three things, according to Narendra, set the caricatures by Joss apart from the rest. One, the person is brought out well. "Look at the caricature of Nehru he has done and see the way he comes alive in it," he says. The technique comes next. The brush strokes and line drawings are well executed. The third point, of course, is that the caricature is drawn with the minimum number of lines.

The UK cartoonist, who had migrated from Austria in 1933, was known popularly as Joss of *The Star* who drew caricatures and cartoons for the paper and was even sent to cover European political meetings and conferences, particularly in Geneva. His pen portraits of world leaders regularly landed on the coveted front page of *The Star*. One of the editors had called him the 'black and white champion of the underdog' as he was good at getting to the core of the subject. After the war, he was able to draw from almost all spheres including theatre and film. Highly gifted in capturing movement, he was able to sketch popular dancers and foreign dance troupes, including the Les Ballet Negres, the first black dance company in Europe performed in London in 1946.

Lisa Shengde, the second daughter



ter of Joss, speaks of her father's intrinsic observation skills: "He listened, looked and took in anything and everything. He and I were very alike and my great joy comes when I learn anything new. I think he was probably the same. He was adamant that a caricaturist or cartoonist needed to understand and draw the human form as it is before attempting to change it in a caricature."

Narendra reads out some of the titles amongst the 24 books that have come into the collection. *Golden Age of Indian Art* (1955), *Bharatiya Kaseeda, Mahatma Gandhi: Sketches in Pen, Pencil and Brush* by Kanu Desai (1932). Narendra feels, "He would have studied a lot before attempting caricatures."

Joss travelled to India in the 1950s. On his return, he exhibited a large body of work that was not exactly portraiture but based on the observations of the land and people around him. Krishna Menon, erstwhile diplomat and statesman, described his snapshots of India as "essays in understanding". He drew several Indian leaders including Moraji Desai, Vijayalakshmi Pandit and Indira Gandhi to great effect.

In 1955 Joss was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and awarded the French Croix d'Honneur. It also saw him work as a freelancer. Work didn't suffer but as Shengde puts it, "Joss did many caricatures but they had to be produced regularly and frequently as that was his main source of income." He had a nervous breakdown and needed psychiatric help. His wife died during his period of incarceration. For four years, the world knew nothing about what happened to him. But after serious illness and hospitalisation, Joss left for the Far East.

With a renewed life, a new Korean wife and later, a daughter, he returned to London and exhibited his works to great acclaim. He was again fa-



mous. He even wrote a book based on his experiences of attempting to get his wife and daughter to join him. But in 1967, he died suddenly after falling from one of the highest floors at the Hilton Hotel in Hong Kong. He was 60. Rumours of suicide spread, but since he had been attempting to expose the Hong Kong drug racket, journalistic circles felt that he had been pushed. By the time of his death, he had practised journalism in at least half a dozen languages and his drawings had been published all over the world.

Shengde, when asked of her father's legacy, says that she isn't sure what it could be. What she holds close to her is his advice to live by 'Duty, Honour, Truth'. "I try as he tried to," she states simply. Narendra, the man who had the pleasure of accepting the precious gifts in UK at Lisa and Vasant Shengde's home in the UK plans to have an exhibition later. Most are exhibition-worthy prints which have been segregated into categories of sketches, cartoons and caricatures.



"How much do I pay for a job on the Anti-Corruption Authority?" (Social in R.W. by British cartoonists "Joss")

SHANKAR'S WEEKLY

### STILL TO COME

One precious gift from the collection of Frederick Joss is a set of rare prints (A2 size) of engraved cartoons by William Hogarth, (1697-1764) considered a pioneer of cartooning. In the 17th century, cartooning was not done on paper but engraved on metal plates, with one work taking weeks to complete. "I will hold a separate exhibition on this," says a visibly excited Narendra who points out that the prints are priceless as they are not available in the market.