

In the land of the highest philosophy

Kalyani N discovers why painter Kathleen Scarboro is so fascinated by India



On a recent visit to India, the multi-faceted Kathleen Scarboro, painter, sculptor, muralist, mosaic artist, was in Chennai to engage in “intense spiritual practice”. The American who divides her time between the US and France, points out that her paintings concentrate on spirituality and on “projecting a positive image of India to the Western world”. She is passionate when she says, “I was tired of the negative image of India that exists in the West. When I talk to someone and they point out the oft-repeated negative aspects of India, and I ask them if they have been to India, their answer is ‘No!’ There is more to India than poverty depicted through photographs and movies.” Her opinion is borne out of her own experience from travelling regularly to India over 15 years now. The painter, adds, “India symbolises the spiritual cradle of the highest philosophy, the most developed philosophy.”

During her latest exhibition in Paris titled “India & the Eternal Feminine”, she reveals, there was also an exposition of various aspects of Indian culture—dance, music and the



martial art Kalaripayattu.

Scarboro, who has travelled extensively in India, speaks, for instance, of the caves of Ajanta and Ellora, the house where Rabindranath Tagore lived, then Rajasthan and the Gangaor festival, and Khajuraho. Everywhere, she says, she found “idyllic landscapes, old temples, villages, all making me pick up my paint and brush. And I could go on painting. India is aesthetically very attractive. I prefer a bright purple sari, for instance, to the so-common American sight of a sweat shirt and blue jeans.” And “Gangaor” is a case in point. It is one of her grand paintings that richly portrays the vibrancy of Rajasthan, the women and their attire being as authentic as their facial expressions are realistic.

One cannot but feel awed viewing

Scarboro’s paintings; the colour, the technique, the form, the realism, the fantasy, all weave magic. Explaining the technique of her paintings, she refers to the European Renaissance that took place between the 15th and 17th centuries, and the two schools, the Italian and the Flemish. She owes her expertise in the Flemish style to her teacher from Trinidad, Patrick Betaudier. She points out that the renaissance techniques are dying and that she is therefore teaching these to students in the US.

Her art is related to her philosophical and spiritual bent of mind. Says she, “We need to get rid of clichés. We need to go beyond the differences between us. The child, for instance, is universal, as is the mother, or the woman. People have much more in common than what separates them, notwithstanding the cultural differences that do exist. In any form of art we need to get down to what is essentially human, and this can be shared by all, can be understood by all. This is what helps in communication.”

Scarboro, who started painting seriously from the age of 18, bemoans the fact that only wealthy people can afford to buy art. She believes, “Art should belong to everybody.” And that is why she has gone in for high quality reproductions of her works, priced at affordable prices. Co-founder of Friends of Community Public Art in Joliet in Illinois, Scarboro has been giving an impetus to public art works that enable anyone to be introduced to, appreciate and enjoy art. And she has made many public art works such as murals in schools, sculptures that stand in street corners and mosaics. And to her credit is a life-size statue of Abraham Lincoln, made in 2009, titled “Unity”, that stands in a beautifully landscaped street corner in Joliet, and a recent 1,700-square feet mural in the US in the corporate headquarters of the American art material distributor, Dick Blick.

Scarboro has held three exhibitions in India, in Chennai and Fatehpur. She has also interacted with art students of Chennai’s Stella Maris College and the Lalaji Memorial Omega International School. In fact, one of her canvas paintings that represents a child’s mind in the process of education, “opening up to different subjects” and “expanding through learning” also adorns the main hall of the school.