

## From pain to paint

The 30th January 2011 was World Leprosy Day. On February 28th an exhibition "From pain to paint" opened at Kalakendra Gallery, showing art created by people suffering from leprosy who live in a leper colony near Chengelpet, .

A unique exhibition of 50 paintings created by 24 people from a leper colony village near Chengelpet, a town about 60 kilometres south of Chennai, was hosted by Kalakendra. The pictures were vivid and colourful and in their stark simplicity reminded one of aboriginal paintings or highly-coloured Grandma Moses pictures.

"Lepers still experience much prejudice and social isolation," says Werner Dornik who established the Bindu Art School seven years ago. "These people were forced to beg and were considered the lowest of the low. Leprosy is also a social stigma and, though it is now curable, the stigma still lingers.

"I came to India as a young man on the hippy trail," continues Werner, "And remember being overcome by pity when I saw my first lepers. Most of them had been thrown out of their families and villages because of their illness. When I heard it only took 8 euros for a cure I impetuously gave them all my money and had to return to Germany. But I knew that one day I would be back. When I did return seven years ago I

realized I had nothing to offer them except my training as an artist. I decided to teach them to draw and paint. In the first few weeks only a couple of people volunteered – they were very shy, and many had no fin-

chosed the name *Bindu* as in the Indian tradition the Bindu spot, the still small centre, symbolizes the origin from which all grows and develops."

Werner explains the present arrangement of Bindu Art School.

"The students now range in age from 20 to 84 years and most are illiterate. Some are from different religious traditions. Each day they begin their class with meditation. They draw on their own intense life experiences and use their unique personal qualities to express themselves. The immediate, innocent and spontaneous nature of their art work is both touching and witty at the same time. The simplicity of ideas and the use of space and texture are tinged with the inner beauty of each student.

"The students support similarly-affected individuals from their income, and in turn, teach them what they themselves have learned. For leprosy-affected people, this unique process is far removed from a charity based approach. They are treated with respect and dignity, indeed their lives are resurrected. They have cre-



The first phase of a work has been finished

gers and very bad eyesight, or often only one eye. I had to learn patience, however, and after a few weeks, then months, more people joined in. I started them with black and white poster paint, then over the weeks slowly added blue, then yellow. They now use all the colours and have developed their confidence and unique styles."

"This is 'Real Art from the Heart,' says Werner passionately. "These people have suffered so much pain and they are able to overcome it with their pictures of uninhibited pure shapes and colours. They also have remarkable concentration and visitors comment on the atmosphere of peace and calm here. I try to resist guiding them too much and limit myself to making small suggestions. After all, these people have never seen a picture, never mind held a pencil or brush. They especially love doing large Bindu paintings, circles of patterns and shapes around a focal Bindu point. This takes them a week of work. I



Busy with painting the second circle

ated a new family and livelihood and have discovered the hidden talents within themselves.

"They have had several shows in the big Indian cities and sometimes sell very well. Last year we took four of them to Austria, my home country, and then to Paris for the opening of their show. You can imagine their pride when they see someone admiring and buying their picture. Their personal charm and innocence affects



The shed where the leprosy-affected people are working

people, especially Indians who have been brought up to despise them. "We never knew these people had it in them," said a gallery owner in Mumbai. "They have always been 'underdogs'. I am ashamed that a foreigner had to show me what they are capable of."

"The school is obviously a life time project for me," explains Werner. "I now spend about four months here and have trained two people to organize the work and do the accounts in my absence. I am trying to set up shows for them in other countries but do not believe in pushing them. Things have always come to them and I like it this way. My main goal is to reduce the terrible social stigma of these leper people and this seems a great way to do it. Bindu

Art School has provided to these people the most magnificent example of the therapeutic value of art and creative expression."

Dianna

For more info visit [www.bindu-art.at](http://www.bindu-art.at)



Proudly showing a finished product



Another finished product

## GARDENS

### The orchid garden

The Orchid Garden began in 1984 and is now tucked away in Matrimandir Nursery Garden. Orchids have a deserved reputation for being elegant and exotic yet I am told they are not difficult to grow if one understands and respects their needs. Unlike other plants, they do not get their nourishment from the soil but from the air which should be humid, warm, and preferably moving. They like being close together as this raises the humidity and they enjoy being above water. They prefer a "wet feel" but must never become soggy and they hate their leaves becoming wet. And they must never be allowed to dry out.

Shankar has been in charge of them for many years and was trained by Narad who started the Orchid Garden. He proudly shows visitors around. Pots of beautiful trailing flowers are hanging

in rows under the trees. The flowers like the dappled light and it helps to keep them cool.

Shankar points out one of the most popular species, *Dendrobium*, which is the easiest to grow and comes in many colours. Their flowering habit varies enormously. Some come into flower after several years then flower for a few days while others can flower for six weeks or even on and off throughout the year.

Shankar has experimented with different potting mediums over the years but always comes back to charcoal. Coconut husks become too wet, as do bricks, and bark rots after two years. With charcoal the burning process has killed any bacteria; it can be easily broken into small pieces and is cheap.

Like the Nursery, the Orchid Garden is undergoing financial difficulties and some people think it is cheaper to buy orchids from outside sources when needed instead of growing them in our own Nursery. Some are now sold to Aurovilians and outsiders for donations as the garden is trying to be



A blossoming orchid in the orchid garden

self-supporting.

Orchard growing can be expensive as it can take four years before a flower appears from seed and the hormone chemicals used for propagation are expensive. As with all plants, especially in the tropics, pests are a big problem. Shankar tells me that one traditional remedy is to spread cinnamon on a cut leaf which acts as an effective fungicide. They used to be grown by seed culture but that takes several years, so now a hormonal paste is painted on the stalk to encourage new growth.

Shankar says he used to have about 5,000 orchids but because of the intense care they require he has reduced the number to 3,000.

"For some reason Mother did not give names to many orchids, therefore only a few can be used in the Matrimandir gardens," added Tina. "When the new changes come in the Orchid Garden, they will probably move to a new home in the Botanical Garden."

Dianna

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