

# Pope On A Leaf

## Leaf painter, Bagla, gets in touch with an old passion



While thousands from all over the world will converge on Toronto this weekend to greet the Pope, the head of the Catholic Church, there is one man who is doing something different. Kailash Bagla will not be at the mass at Downsview, but he has already captured the popular Pontiff in brilliant colours and on a large peepul leaf. "This is my tribute to him. Also I would like to sell it to the highest bidder," says Kailash Bagla, a Scarborough resident who has suddenly found his old passion for painting on leaves coming back to him after decades of non-activity. Bagla came into the country 32 years ago and like thousands of others had to set aside his creativity to concentrate on the nitty-gritty of making a life for him and his family in the new country.

Back in his village Hathras in Aligarh District of UP, he had first learned to paint on leaves (always the leaves of the peepul tree) from his art teacher. Then he came to Canada to study art at the Ontario College of Art in 1970. Of course, it is a different story that he eventually would have nothing to do with art in Canada but would hold down decent jobs like Quality Control Manager at Motorola! Of course, in those early days, he did dabble with his leaf painting once or twice. He even did

one on Mahatma Gandhi that he sold later. "I was an art student here in 1972 when the then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau got married, I painted the couple's portrait on a leaf. I went to Ottawa to present it to them. Unfortunately for me, Trudeau was out of town and I didn't



have the money to stay there for three or four days. So I sent it to him by registered mail. I got a letter acknowledging it from him." The only other time that he put brush to leaf was to do a portrait of his wife. "It's still there in its original frame," Bagla says proudly.

Decades would go by before he decided to go back to his original passion. It happened last December when he turned a new peepul leaf. It was the happy holiday season. His son, who knew his dad's talent, encouraged him to do a Santa Claus. And that was the first time in 26 years Bagla was painting. Bagla says now that he has got his flow back, he is able to do much more work. He has already built up a collection ranging from Mickey Mouse to Krishna, Shiv-Parvati to Taj Mahal and Self-portrait to Princess

Diana. "It was after 26 years I touched the brush again. But my family was very encouraging. They knew that I had this in me. And now I am very excited and spent quite some time doing paintings."

It's quite an intricate work. First you treat the peepul leaves (which come all the way from India) and then paint the figure on its almost transparent surface. Bagla claims the leaf paintings last long without suffering damage. "I still have the ones that I did thirty years ago and they are intact," he says. He spends on an average 16 to 25 hours on each painting. "I am not retired yet. I still have my catering business. But I find this very absorbing."

Bagla is now ready to be commissioned by anyone (with the resources) wanting his or her portraits painted on leaf. But then it will come at a stiff price, say around \$2500. He says, "I am not interested in doing portraits of people for 100 or 200 dollars. It's not worth my while. This is art and it's forever. You cannot buy them at Eaton's or the Bay."

And one last question, why peepul? Why not the maple leaf? After all, that's our national leaf! Bagla says the reason is purely technical. "The maple leaf would dissolve if you treated it in the chemical." The leaf of the peepul is the only leaf that stays intact and creates a fascinating surface held together by a luminous web of veins for the artist to paint on. "Even in India, they cannot use any other leaf," says Bagla. You can get in touch with Kailash Bagla at 416 606 8129. Δ