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## When 'The sky is the limit'

The unique Indian sculpture in stainless steel which is a monumental creation of Bangalore based ace sculptor Balan Nambiar has been installed recently at the Indian Oil Corporation, Delhi. Nambiar shares his experience in a free wheeling chat with K.K. GOPALAKRISHNAN.

Almost five decades ago a young chap from Kannapuram, one of the most culturally vibrant villages in Kannur district of Kerala, inebriated by the pageantries of the ancient ritual art form of Theyyam joined at the Govt. College of Arts & Crafts of erstwhile Madras to become an artist hub. Late K.C.S. Paniker was the then Principal.

During the second year of his five year course ~ he was directly admitted to the second year of the course ~ one of their practical includes making sculptures in clay and this student started making a five feet tall sculpture for which his teacher admonished him by pointing out that "second year students are not supposed to make sculptures more than two feet tall" and ordered him rework his creation. Sans any protest the student, ruled by his instinct as he was always and even now, created another sculpture - just one foot nine inches tall, adhering to the orders of the master, but with five feet in breadth "as no specification was prescribed for breadth". Obviously the teacher was not very pleased with the result. The student and his teacher, however, reached to a compromise that the student would get his own clay to do his work as he wants. The result is a nine feet high sculpture which has been acquired by the Govt. Museum, Madras same year.

"Perhaps my special love for tall was inborn", quietly reminiscences a clam Balan Nambiar who has every reason to be jubilant – he had recently created one of his monumental best creations in stainless steel in Delhi. "Because of its size and complexity, it may be the prominent metal sculpture in India" believes Nambiar.

The earliest landmark in his career was his solo exhibition of out-door sculptures held in 1975 at the lawn of Hotel Ashoka, Bangalore. There were 24 metal sculptures in the exhibition, the

smallest being taller than his height of 6 ft; the tallest was 18 feet. Over the years he has done over 130 out-door sculptures, mostly in metal, but some of them in stone and cement.

Fourteen of his significant sculptures are in Delhi – including five at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), and another five sculptures at the Max Mueller Bhavan. The other four are at private premises. The tallest of these sculptures, which is 3.3 meters high, is at the National Gallery of Modern Art. “Ever since 2005, when I had a solo exhibition of my stainless steel sculptures at ART HERITAGE on Tansen Marg, I have wanted to execute one of my unique monumental sculptures in Delhi”, he adds.

#### Invitation from IOC

So when the Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) contacted him about a year ago regarding a monumental sculpture to mark its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Nambiar thought that the appropriate opportunity has come. “Yet, I was hesitant to take part in its peculiar format. The Dossier and its subsequent Addendum were weird documents, something like a tender notice not ideal for a creative artists’ work. I refused to respond to them till some of the terms are revised and a formal invitation was extended to me to participate in the procedures. Several weeks later I was formally invited and given 14 days to submit the proposal with all the relevant details such as sketches, three dimensional drawings super-imposed on the site-plan and a 1:20 scale model. In the normal situation I would have liked about two months to conceive a concrete proposal to make a really unique monumental work. I did not give a proposal of a significant work I could have created in five to six months, instead of that, I gave a proposal to make a sculpture based on a model and drawings which were made in 14 days. As a creative artist, I was used to a free hand, so the terms stipulated by the IOC appeared as limitations at the outset. From the very beginning I made it clear to the IOC officials that I had a clear vision of the work I sought to do and it would be entirely my own and no interference or suggestion will be tolerated.. The IOC symbol of “50 years of growth” was to be pivotal to the sculpture, commemorating a growing, vital organization.”

#### Creative Process

Nambiar decided to create a distinctive design with equilateral arms stacked one over the other, attached to a central pipe. “These plates would be assembled with equal space between layers to give an overall elliptical shape with the proportion of the Golden Ratio. Accentuating the elliptical shape in the middle of the composition, I introduced a solid ramp spiralling upwards from the granite base. This would have a two meters diameter at the base, narrowing to a slender waist where the IOC logo marking 50 years would be integrated appropriately. Equiangular spiral motifs were used at various points of the sculpture.”

Nambiar introduced three solid elliptical arches to encompass the central elliptical form. These arches, with six legs firmly anchoring the entire structure, added to the sculpture’s compactness while maintaining its elegance and lightness. Though the 6.3 x 5.2 x 4.8 meter arches look delicate and graceful, they are made of 16mm thick solid and firm plates. The fifty layers of horizontal plates are made of 5mm thick sheets. The principles of trigonometry and mathematics, golden ratio, Fibonacci number sequences, equiangular spiral, etc. along with latest welding technology and application of computer knowledge were his bibles during its painstaking execution with 304 grade stainless steel as the chosen medium for the sculpture. The latest water-jet cutting technology that ensures precise edges without any danger of warping but thrice as expensive as laser cutting was opted for cutting the 16mm plates and the precision of cutting is less than half millimetres.

“The Sky is the Limit”

The total weight of the sculpture titled as ‘The Sky is the Limit’ is a little over 3 metric tonnes, shaped from 5.75 metric tones of stainless steel, for which Nambiar and his assistants toiled 12 to 14 hours every day for three weeks to just complete the installation of the work during the climax of the heat wave in the month of May with the temperature reaching to between 45 and 47 degrees Celsius.

Is this title out of his passion for tall things? “The Sky is the Limit has multiple layers of meaning - it looks to the future, to the limitless scope for the growth and beyond that, more personally, it points to distant horizons with regard to the future of my monumental sculptures in stainless steel”, aptly comes the answer.