

Decolonizing The Spirit

Pakistani Art from 1947-79

The maelstrom unleashed by the cartographer's pen, circa 1947, deepened political fault lines in South Asia. The resulting volatility, fractured a people that were once united in a freedom struggle against colonial fetters. What followed, was the largest displacement of people in history and the birth of two nations.

Like 'midnight's children' poised on the cusp of loss and gain, the nations struggled to gain a sense of self. The itinerary of the artists could not escape new ideologies. The dynamics of disconnect and displacement opened unexplored territory and a different imperative. To the Indian artist a continuum of the aesthetics of land and religion held no contradiction. The Pakistani artist faced with the aftermath of a three way divorce between land, religion and cultural history had yet to determine philosophical moorings.

Fully aware of their place in history, the manifesto of the artists of nascent Pakistan could not escape the spirit of the time. The political and social leadership that had its roots in the Western educated Muslim elite of undivided India had begun to seriously question the relevance of orthodoxy in a progressive modern future. Contemporary values of the industrialized nations based on reason and science were considered the engine of advancement. Their primary concern became a robust intellectual, economic and social participation in the modern age. Poet Iqbal, the mentor of this generation with his message of *khudi* (self) had already reinforced the awakening of individuality and personal ambition and this chipped away at the edifice of fatalistic beliefs, as his verses became the new mantra

Khudi ko kar buland itna kay ha taqdeer say pehlay

Khuda panday say khud poochay, bata tayree raza hia hai

(elevate yourself to such heights of achievement that god is compelled

to consult you before he decides your fate)

This paradigm shift manifested itself in art and experiments with the modern idiom provided a framework to re-examine a familiar cultural terrain.

The upheaval of the last years of the Freedom Movement had created an awareness for the need of 'a vital new expression, as Raza's explained ' the revivalist movement of the Bengal school despite laudable effort it made to instill an awareness of our cultural heritage, seemed literary works,

sentimental, delicate and unresponsive to the pace and anguish of our time' These views found resonance among the aspiring modernists of Pakistan. Ahmed Pervaz, Sheikh Safdar, Shemza, Moyene Najmi and Ali Imam founded the Lahore Art Circle in the early 1950's. Once again, Lahore, home to Emperor Akbar royal atelier, became the site of a bold new experiment in the visual arts.

A similar movement led by Zainul Abedin was initiated in the Eastern wing of Pakistan.

Zubeida Agha, also a Lahorite, had the honor to be the first modernist to hold a solo show as early as 1949 in Karachi. Social taboos separated her from her peers of the Lahore Art Circle as it was unacceptable for a young woman to be seen in the company of male artists and poets at their nocturnal meetings at Lahore's coffee houses where debates usually raged well into the night. Her gender however did not stop her from making a seminal contribution even if it dictated a separate, often lonely path.

Privileged by her family's support, the missed interaction was compensated by a formal education in artist Sanyal's studio and later by Mario Perlingieri, a prisoner of war who has received some training from Picasso. Zubeida, a life long admirer of the passionate oeuvre of Amrita Sher Gill, herself sought inspiration from philosophical introspection and painted intangible ideas with an emotional distance.

In the words of Mussarat Hasan, the author of Zubeida Agha's recent biography "She was one of the great colourist of Pakistani painting. She employed colour not only for itself, but to lend veracity and meaning to her images, culled from life and restructured by her amazing imagination to provoke the viewer into thought."

Zubeida discussed the partition with Marjorie Hussain in an interview shortly before her death in 1997. 'Speaking of the turmoil that accompanied partition in 1947, Zubeida recalled the confusion and uncertainty ...aware and compassionate, she employed her energies to the need of the time, gradually becoming suffused with the desire to create from chaos...' Zubeida's years at St Martins School of Art and Ecole de Beaux in Paris prepared her for the role beyond that of an artist. She was an influential figure on the art scene for half a century both as a strong advocate of Modern Art as the director of The Contemporary Art Gallery in Rawalpindi, which she founded and ran and an activist in the campaign for the National Gallery.

This early exploration of the new idiom was a purely visual response to what the pioneers had been exposed to through colour plates and black and white printed reproductions in magazines and art books. None of them were fully cognizant with the philosophies that energized the Schools of Paris;

by default their lack of formal education led to an eclecticism that opened a new space for inventive work.

Akbar Naqvi Pakistan's eminent art critic explains ' Modern art in Pakistan was seen as Cubist and Abstract, and it became the catalyst of freedom for painters. Zubeida Agha and Shakir Ali took the academic version of modern art forms from Paris and rejuvenated them. It was this, and the feeling that they too could rove and ravage the West, as Picasso, Matisse and Klee had done with non-European cultures before, which made this enterprise.' This was a multicultural interface that did not anticipate that colonial mindset often survives territorial loss and the initiative to dehegemonize art was not going to be without a challenge. The Eurocentric art scholars could not appreciate the work outside the fixed notion of one way appropriation and that all non-European dialogue had to fit into a fixed pre conceived space of the exotic or the derivative. The canons of modernism were simply not open to multiple modernities.

The advent of Modernism also must not be seen as a continuation of the politics of cultural intervention in South Asia. The systematic interference through overt and covert means during the British Raj had eroded the craft base and mutated Miniature Painting into the Company School of Painting. Marginalized and mis-represented, the cultural legacy was being erased from the Indian mind. C R Das in 1917 voiced his concerns "We had made aliens of our own people, we had forgotten the ideals of our heart...."

Unlike previous attempts the post partition artistic synthesis was not an outcome of social engineering but the intellectually motivated decision of free citizens. To the artists modernism symbolized many different things, progress, freedom, search for identity, nationalistic zeal, the excitement of discovery of the immense possibilities within an aesthetics not bound by moribund tradition. To them it was the genesis of a hybrid articulation that would be reflective of the radical change in their social and political environment. An art capable of the resilience and flexibility to cross cultural lines and this became increasingly visible in the oeuvre of the Pakistani Modernist.

For each of these artists Modernism did not mean a denial of their legacy, experiences and affinities but an engagement with them. Shemza who belonged to a family that traded hand-woven carpets, his reference was design. On this matrix he sought new asymmetrical configurations of the perfected balance of the woven rectangle. What sprang on his canvas in jeweled colors was the distilled and contemporarized vision of an heir to centuries of skilled crafts. This imaginative leap and unity could only be the product of a transformed spirit, as despite the intensive craft- based training at Lahore's Mayo School of Art, the subaltern was not empowered to script his narrative.

Moeen Najmi canvas reflected the architectonic complexities softened by ornamental details of Lahore's regal and humble, built spaces.

Ahmed Pervaz the most prolific of the group achieved prominence at home and abroad, and was an inspirational figure. His visual dialogue via colour at a purely intuitive plane was a mind map of emotions. It was an inner compulsion that drove him to repeat a dynamic movement energized by exploding small abstract forms. A closer look shows that his forms were not identical, nor static but continuously evolving in the changing amorphous space, constantly challenging the eye to find a focus in the chaos. Maybe it is an affirmation of his tremendous talent that he could create endless variations to rescue his art from the commonplace.

It was the vision of three artists Shakir Ali, Ali Imam and Anna Molka Ahmad, whose pedagogic intervention that took the movement from musings of a few to a mainstream art movement.

Anna Molka Ahmed who came to Lahore before 1947 with her husband Sheikh Ahmad, established the Fine Arts Dept. of the Punjab University. Open only to women, the partition was a setback when many students joined the exodus to India. Undeterred, she went knocking on the door of Muslim homes to send their daughters and her passionate appeals were not ignored.

Pragmatic Anna Molka emphasized teaching as a way to sustain art practice. With her students in institutions all over Pakistan, modernism was able to make inroads in smaller towns. According to the artist "... I practice colouristic painting, using colours of different light values for each shade of light and dark." Her energetic impasto paintings were inspired by the physical geography of her adopted land.

A devoted member of the Lahore Art Circle, Ali Imam's focused on building a support system for the arts in Karachi. As the head of one of the city's oldest art academies, in the 1960's he gave The Central Institute of Arts and Crafts (CIAC) a modern curriculum with theoretical studies integrated with skills to build the intellectual resources of the next generation of artists. When he left it in 1970 to establish the Indus Gallery, today, the longest running commercial gallery of the country and a cultural institution in its own right, he successfully cultivated a group of discerning art buyers in the country's financial center. The artist, in Ali Imam, always took a back seat, maybe his brother Raza's genius always made him feel that he could never step out of his shadow. Imam Sahib, as he was known to the generations he influenced, was not a prolific painter. In his art he referenced the figurative tradition in painting and used textural techniques to create visually enigmatic effects under a veil of white to create a signature canvas.

To his students, Shakir Ali despite his anglophile demeanor, was the bridge between the dynamism of Modern European painting and the resilience of the indigenous artistic legacy. Years at Slade School of Art in the UK and School of Industrial Design in Prague provided him with aesthetic strategies to frame his personal experiences and traditional references into a contemporary philosophy. The artist's oeuvre can be distinctly divided into two groups, one of formalistic innovation with a preoccupation with 'the significant form' and an emotive body of work that interprets the vibrant Rajput miniature in a modernist's tribute.

Hands on experiences like cataloging of the Lahore Museum's Miniature collection and excursions to mountain villages were common for students while he headed National College of the Arts, At the country's largest art school, he encouraged new ways of seeing and enhanced their ability to view things through the prism of a modern thinker. This cultural interface is best seen in his house turned museum in Lahore, where the minimalist interior showcases a collection of vibrant crafts, meticulously collected for their enduring aesthetic appeal.

Pakistan's enterprise of modern art faced resistance when it tried to enter the mainstream cultural discourse and challenge established principles of 'jamaliati zouk' or aesthetic conventions. Chuqhtai and Allah Baksh were two masters with popular following and their art found a resonance with the artistic preferences of a majority of the population. The art in the urban centers of Pakistan developed a dual personality and was divided along economic and linguistic barriers. Social polarization was exacerbated by the system of education that was divided between Urdu and English as a medium of instruction. The national sensibility was clearly tiered. The large rural population who were on the periphery of industrial change continued to respond to folk art, classical realism, Islamic design elements and calligraphy unlike their urban counterparts. This sharp division was gradually blurred with the advent of terrestrial television in the late 60's.

The formalist emphasis on the development of the new visual syntax to investigate the personal and psychological space in the 50's and early 60's was gradually expanded to include political and social commentary. Bashir Mirza in the Black Sun series spoke of the anguish of a nation at war and Sadequain's satire with his bleeding fingers and truncated head with a crow nest became emblematic of an impotent intelligentsia.

Innovations with calligraphy points to two distinct streams of thought, artists like Hanif Ramay, Gulgee and Sadequain preferred to retain the integrity of the word. For Hanif Ramay, one of the first modern artists to discover possibilities within calligraphy and in his art the curvilinear script became a way to organize space with stylized letters.

For Gulgee who began his career as a portraitist in the expressionist mode discovered action painting in a collaborative experiment with a visiting American artist. For the monumental calligraphic painting that followed he made gesture painting his point of departure. A deeper exploration of this new genre reconnected took him to the Islamic art of the book.

It was Sadequain's calligraphic works that broke class barriers as people thronged the gallery. As an heir to the strong calligraphic tradition of Amroha, Sadequain was perhaps the most comfortable with his inherited tradition and modernity. After a brief flirtation with Cubism during his stay in Paris in the 1950's he developed a figurative iconography suited to his content of social satire.

Sadequain's calligraphic paintings looked to the meaning of the text and created calligrams informed by a constructivist vocabulary. His canvas was encyclopedic and he looked at universal themes from classical literature. He became Pakistan's most prolific painter of murals ceilings that presented an epic view of man's destiny as envisaged in the poetry of poet Iqbal.

Shemza and Zahoor looked beyond the meaning and transform texts into spatial and rhythmic patterns well beyond their function of communication.

Partially eclipsed Miniature Painting by modern art it was kept from disappearing by two traditional miniaturists Haji Mohammad Sharif and Ustad Shujaullah in Lahore.

The 1970's presented the challenges of a new political reality. The loss of East Pakistan had bewildering repercussions for the populace and after the turmoil in the first two years of the decade; the National Exhibition of 1973 reflected both the rejuvenation of the cultural institutions under Prime Minister Bhutto's government. Himself a serious collector he took personal interest in culture and the artists responded to his optimism with a will to construct a better future.

Held in Karachi, the 1973 National Show saw the emergence of new trajectories in Pakistani art. The generation that came of age was the true 'midnight children' as they had arrived in the new homeland, sometimes as infants.

Bashir Mirza remembered crossing over from Amritsar on his father's shoulders. The images of violence that haunted his childhood often found their way in his art particularly his drawings. The 'Lonely Girl' series that caused a stir on the art scene announced the modern woman of Pakistan that hoped to banish forever the timid damsels from the canvas. He continued to dominate the time with his brash innovations.

Zahoorul Akhlaq return from UK to interface with the world as a global citizen. His oeuvre did not appropriate but question as he expressed a preference for the conceptual. The nuclear mushroom within the format of the 'farman ' or the royal decree suggests a subtext beyond the cross pollination of visual symbols.

With a commitment to root his art in the terra firma, Khalid Iqbal became the moving spirit behind The Lahore School of Landscape. His interpretation of the fertile plains bordered on the spiritual. In keeping with the spirit of an agrarian society linked to the land and its productive soil, both nature and culture were intertwined in this genre of Pakistani painting. Kaleem Khan in Quetta and Imtiaz Hussain in Peshawar continued to capture the ageless mountain spirit. This decade will also be remembered for Jamil Naqsh's visual thesis on 'Woman and Pigeon', which propelled him to the forefront of art history.

Mian Salahuddin a ceramist trained at NCA and The Cranbrook Academy in Michigan

became the pioneer of clay expressionism, adding a new dimension to the ancient clay continuum.

It was the commitment of a handful of sculptors that kept this field alive in Pakistan despite lack of official and private patronage. Shahid Sajjad, the most prominent among them was largely self-taught. His life-size wooden works executed in the hill tracts near Chittagong bring into question the definition of civilization. A word denied to aboriginal people who live in harmony with their world unlike the predatory and wasteful developed nations. The 70's saw him embrace bronze as a medium.

One of the few artists from the former East Pakistan who made Karachi their home and remained active was Zainul Abedin's student Mansur Rahi. Married to Hajra, of the Zuberi sisters who founded the Karachi School of Art. An accomplished painter he will also be remembered as the mentor of a group that revived watercolour as a significant medium in Karachi.

Colin David and Ijaz ul Hasan diametrically opposite in their approach to art both added to creative tapestry of the 70's.

Women artists emerged as emblems of new consciousness. Art and poetry by women in Pakistan documented their emancipated voice and served as a catalyst for alternate attitudes.

Laila Shahzada, who came on the scene in the 1960's by her 'Driftmood Series', turned her attention to the interfaith legacy of spirituality in South Asia. A group of younger women who became a major presence in the decades to come, among others, included Lubna Latif Agha, The

Zuberi sisters- Hajra and Rabia, Rumana Saeed, Sumbul, Mehr Afroz and Nahid from Karachi and Salima Hashmi and Zubeida Javed from Lahore.

Lubna Latif Agha a graduate of the Karachi School of Art was recognized as an outstanding talent and honored with a solo show at Indus Gallery. Behind the veil of glacial white, molten crimson waited to flow from the fissures, Lubna's intensely emotive works were read as the statements of 'a body denied' or 'a wounded spirit' and broke the silence of the disenfranchised.

Mehr's a printmaker from Lucknow Arts College was motivated to introduce this discipline in Karachi. Her sophisticated language of textures won her awards at the National Exhibition and the honor to represent Pakistan internationally.

After graduating from CIAC, Nahid's search took her to the necropolis of Chawkhandi through which she entered in a dialogue simultaneously with culture and modernity. A prolific career as a watercolourist established Sumbul as a committed exponent. In this group Hajra preferred to strike out on her own and follow the footsteps of her guru, Chughtai through oriental wash painting. A student of Shakir Ali, Salima returned to her alma mater as faculty in 1970. During this period her visual statement had begun to have a political edge, which runs through her work as a common thread.

To Zubaida Javed, the influence of Anna Molka her mentor must have been difficult to shed but her strong spatial sensibility succeeded in transforming the landscapes from the physical to the ethereal.

The DNA code of Pakistani painting is a complex one. The early experiment with the stem cells of modern art movements to further a nationalist agenda birthed a Pakistani modernity. The artist not content to be on the fringe turned into the protagonist of the 'other story'- a saga of three decades that chronicles the trauma of a heterogeneous people learning to be a nation and an agenda of conscience that defied the colonization of the spirit.

*Bol kay lab azaad hain...*challenged the revolutionary, Faiz.

(speak out for your lips are no longer sealed)

With this independent spirit, the artists create an expressive contemporary mosaic. For those who can penetrate its layers the most important sub- text is the latent philosophy. Naqvi in his tome 'Image and Identity' locates the Pakistani artist in the *malamati tradition*..A group of free- thinking Muslim writers and poets that occupies the nimbus between the secular and the religious. The art of

Pakistan reaffirms that the artist unlike the politics of the time, has transcended religion into the cultural domain, a timeless matrix of creativity.

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