

WHEN Elthem B Kabir, an art collector and the chairman of the Society for Art Promotion of Bangladesh, first heard of a couple of paintings by Mohammad Kibria being offered for sale he had no reason to suspect that the works might be of spurious origin. When a certain broker broke the news to him, he could not even speculate that he was to encounter fakes. It was in the month of February, 2005 that the man in possession of Kibria's paintings approached him. "When he did actually come to my office with the paintings I was first astonished by their number. There were eight of Kibria's work, and all of them looked spurious to me," remembers Kabir. He arranged for his well-wishers to take a look at the paintings and they too were unanimous on the fact that the paintings were not done by Kibria, an avant-gardists who is known for spearheading the abstract movement in the 1960s. The seller's claim could not mislead Kabir, who is a collector with an eye for the extraordinary. However, to clear all vestiges of doubt, Kabir took the paintings to the artist to whom they were being attributed. "When Kibria saw them he immediately dismissed them as fakes," recalls Kabir.

The story did not end there. "It should've ended there, as we vehemently remonstrated the man who wanted to sell the fakes. We told him if he carried on dealing in fakes we would take legal actions," recalls Kabir.

But strong words did not prove to be a strong enough deterrent. One of the paintings from this batch that Kibria himself had declared as fakes ended up in the wall of a renowned gallery called Tivoly. "I was doing my rounds in the Gulshan-2 gallery district when I spotted one of the fakes that had been brought to me for sale. I asked the gallery people to bring it down, and they did. They themselves did not know that it was a fake," assures Kabir who believes that the incidents of fakes and forgeries are on the rise.

"Works on paper by the late masters like Zainul Abedin, Kamrul Hasan and SM Sultan have flooded the market and most of them are fakes. The forgers have their own way of making the painting look old. What they do is keep the piece of paper on which they would paint underneath a pile of rice for three or four months, and the paper achieves that old look," says Kabir. As a collector he feels confident with works on oil. "I would readily recognise a fake if it is done with oil paint. As for works on paper it is becoming more and more difficult to sort out



The touch of genius: Harrowing, a famous water-colour by Zainul Abedin.