

# All those Missing Masterpieces of Shilpacharya

By Faiz Ahmad

The Daily Star publishes the pictures of the missing sketches and paintings as part of an effort devoted to the tracing of those masterpieces hopefully leading to their early recovery. Cooperation from common people and art-lovers are sought in this regard.

THE country's biggest art theft, till date involving 17 of the 70 paintings by Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin housed in the art gallery (Sangrahashala) named after him in Mymensingh made news. But only this much. Both sensational and shocking of the first order, the incident had barely let go one or two ripples across the country before it quietly slipped into oblivion.

That the theft has left Bangladesh poorer — so far as creative art by a genius of Zainul's order is concerned — has not been understood yet, specially by the government which alone is capable enough to go for an all-out and incisive hunt required immediately after the occurrence for recovery of the original

transit points of the country seeking, moreover, people's cooperation to prevent the paintings from being smuggled out of the country. Even such reproductions could be sent abroad through Bangladesh missions as an added precaution. Neither of which has been done.

Inaction on the part of the authority has compelled Jahanara Abedin to seek the Prime Minister's audience on June 6 last so that the missing paintings can be recovered at the earliest and the rest 53 preserved — if necessary restored — with full security. Apart from assurance from the Prime Minister, nothing worthwhile in the form of a concrete measure, if any, is not known to have come about.

One never knows if the



Portrait : a Japanese woman



Japanese woman in traditional dress



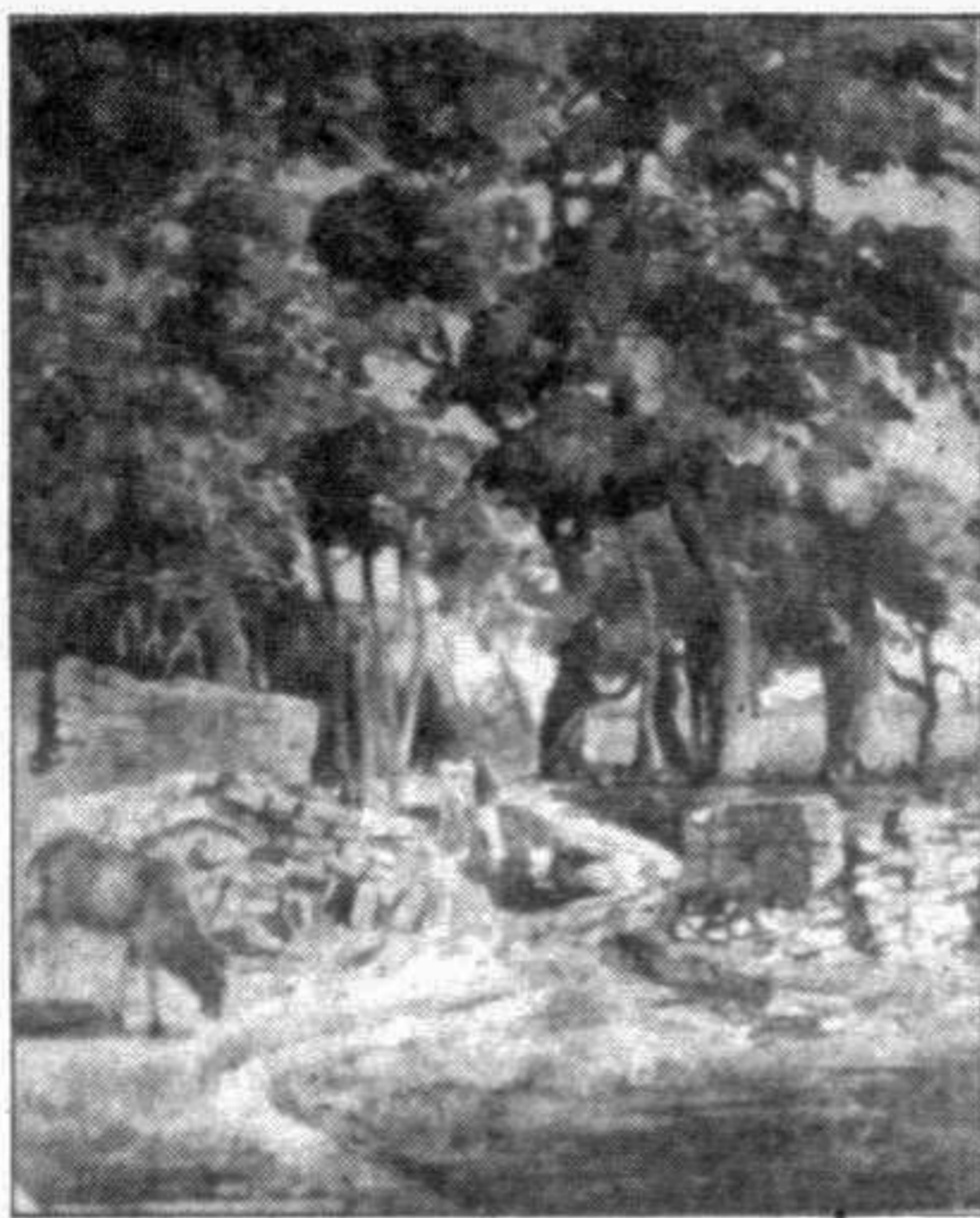
Portrait : Japanese



Famine of 1943



Portrait : Mustafa, Mexico

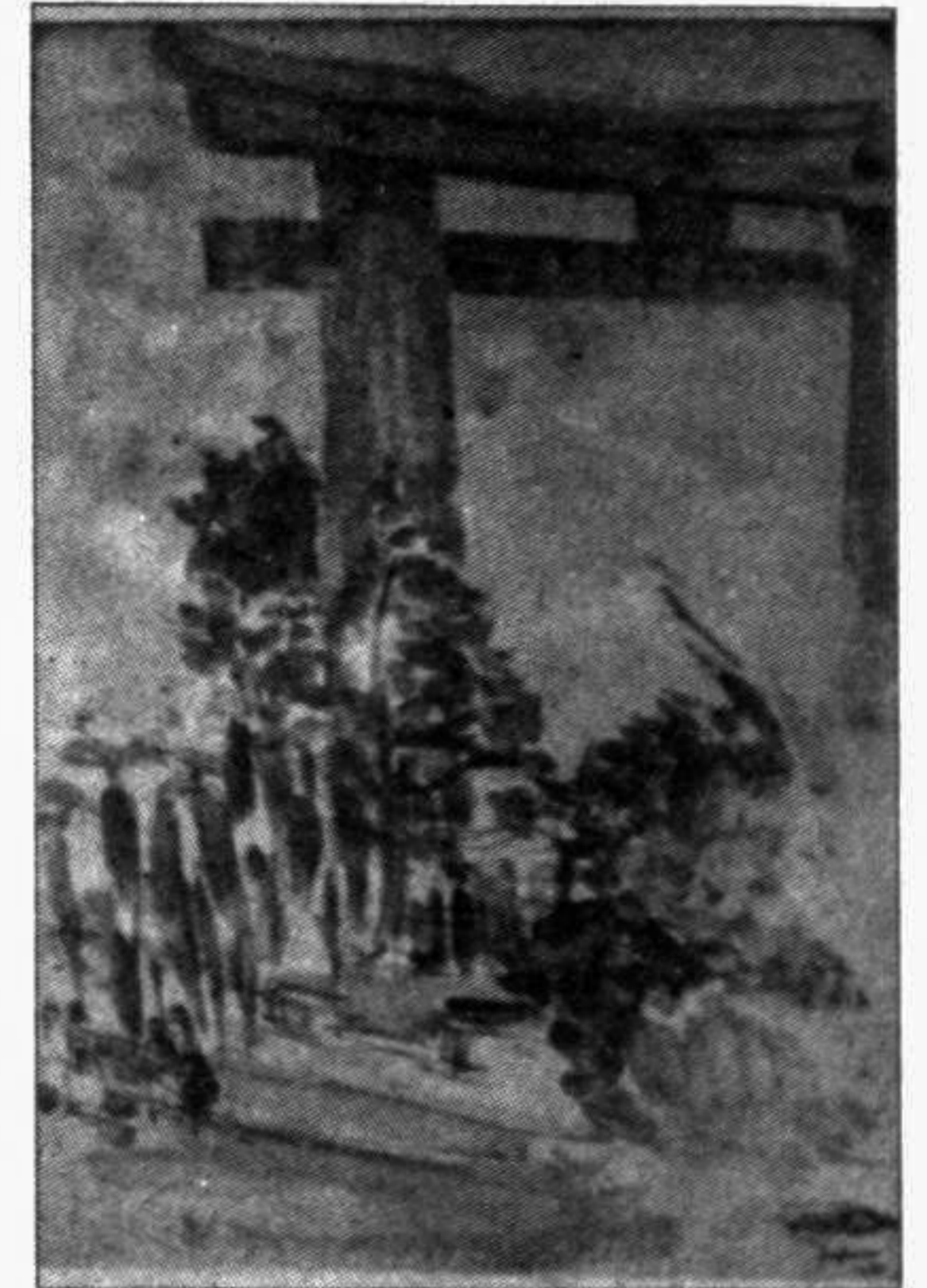


Village

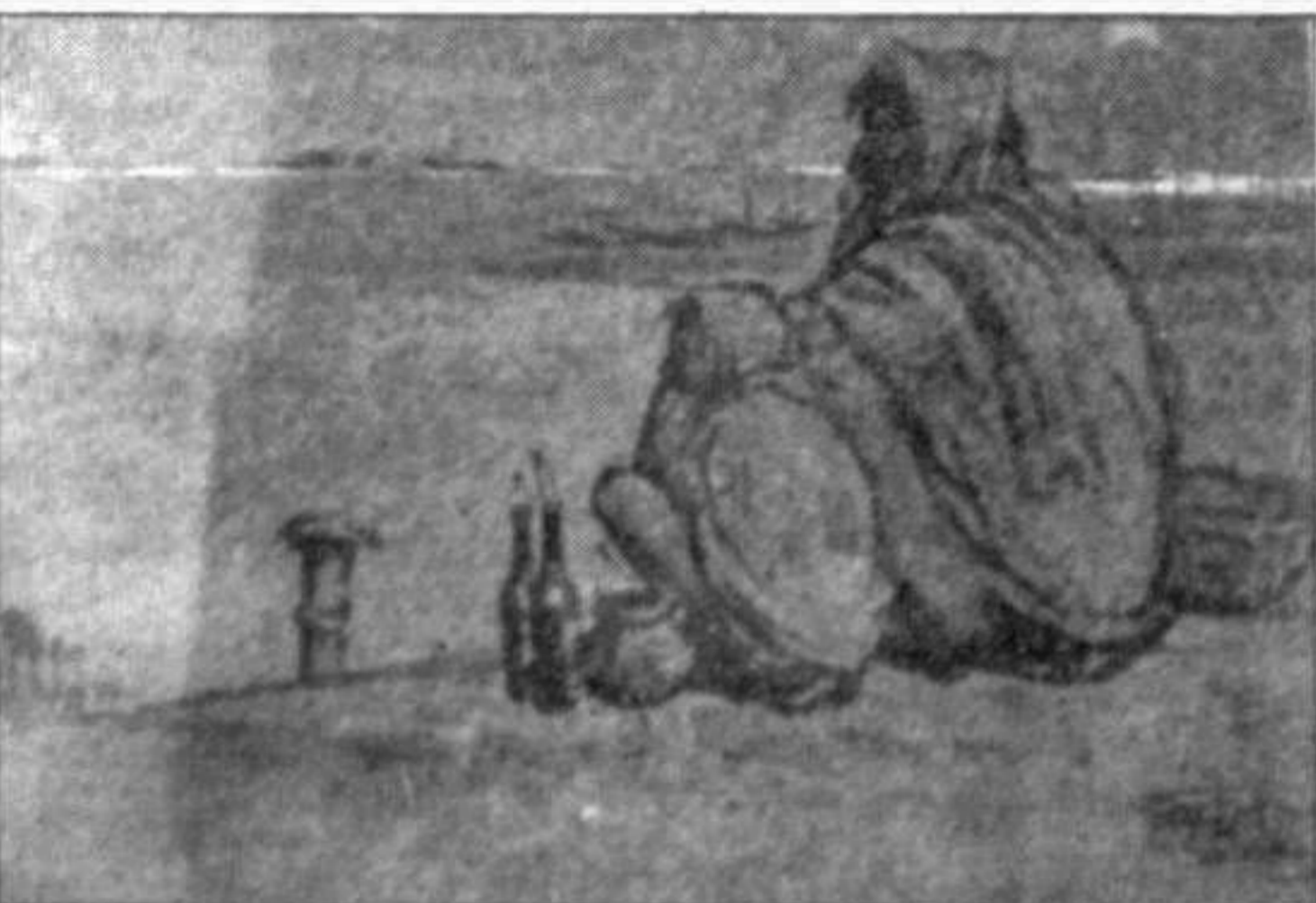


Restaurant near Niagara Falls

The stolen 17 paintings can be categorised in a) two paintings of 1943 Famine Series; b) five portraits in pen and ink; and brush; c) one fullfigure Japanese woman in traditional dress; d) two in ink-brush; e) seven water colours which include the famous paintings of an open restaurant near the Niagara Falls and boatmen pulling the boat against current (study).



Gate of Japanese Garden (Water)



Waiting



Portrait : Anwar

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The theft that took place on the night of May 2 was not followed by the necessary prompt actions usually taken by governments the world over in similar cases. No quick investigation followed, nor did anyone step into Shilpacharya's house during the past month where his wife Jahanara Abedin has been passing agonising hours.

But the government, if it had been serious about its task, had the responsibility to flash time and again on the TV screen the copies of those paintings, to send facsimiles along with the message of the theft to the airports, checkpoints of the border and other

paintings have already made good their escape beyond the boundary of the country. Indications, many have concluded, are clear that an organised international network of art thieves might be involved in the lifting of the more famed and classic of the paintings.

The gallery, having had its opening on the first day of the Bengali calendar or April 14, 1975 by former Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam, was run by an annual grant from the government. Six armed guards used to ensure security of the gallery once.

Later on, Moudud Ahmad, on behalf of Ershad government, promised Tk 1,000,000 for the gallery only never to be fulfilled. An additional secretary of the concerned ministry struck the gravest blow to it by stopping the government grant in 1987. This forced the withdrawal of the six armed guards — a measure that has proved decisive for the ill fate of the paintings and in the long run to be culminated in their mass theft.

(Abridged from original Bangla by Nilratan Halder)



Famine of 1943

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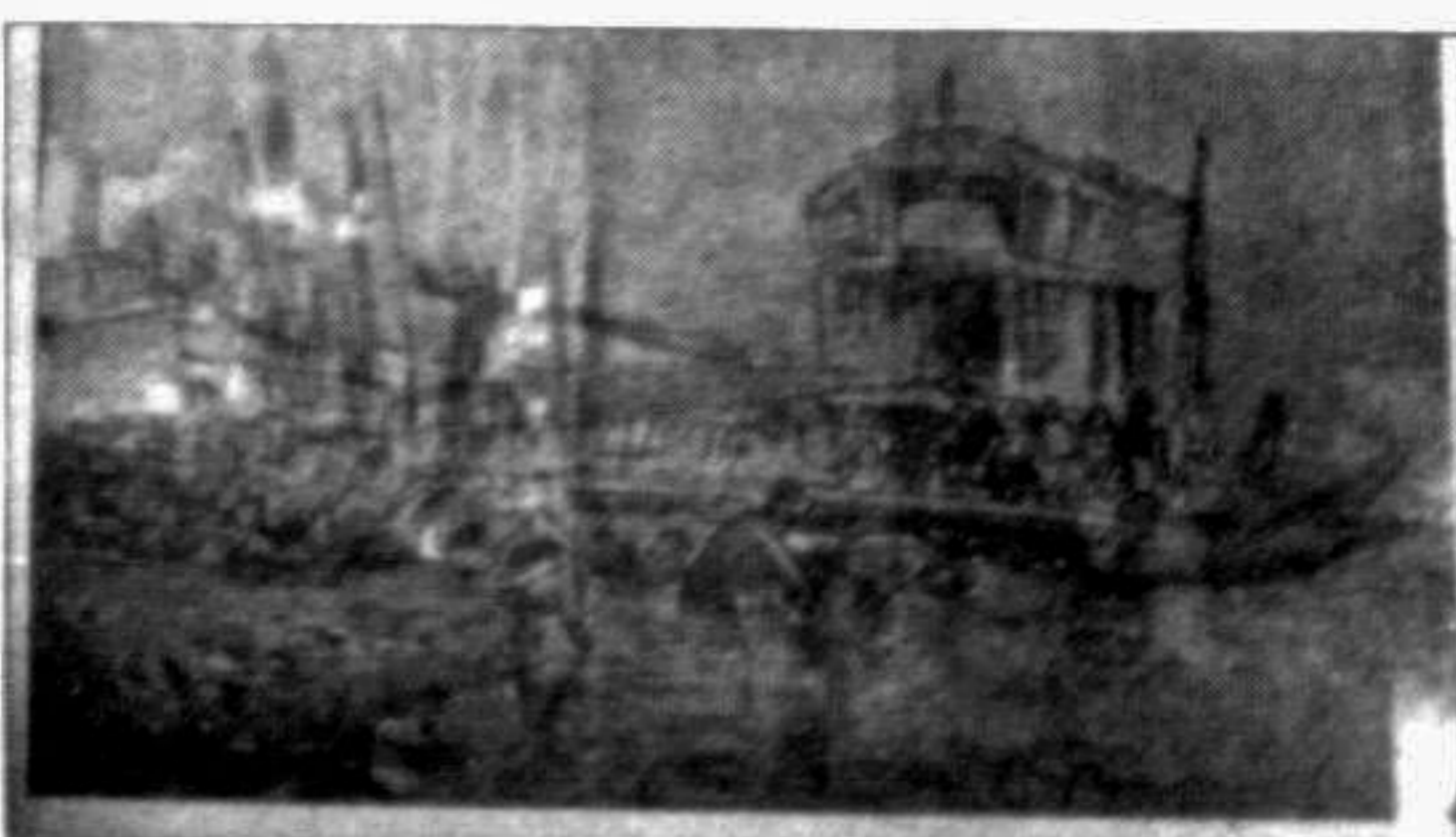
Sea-beach (Water)



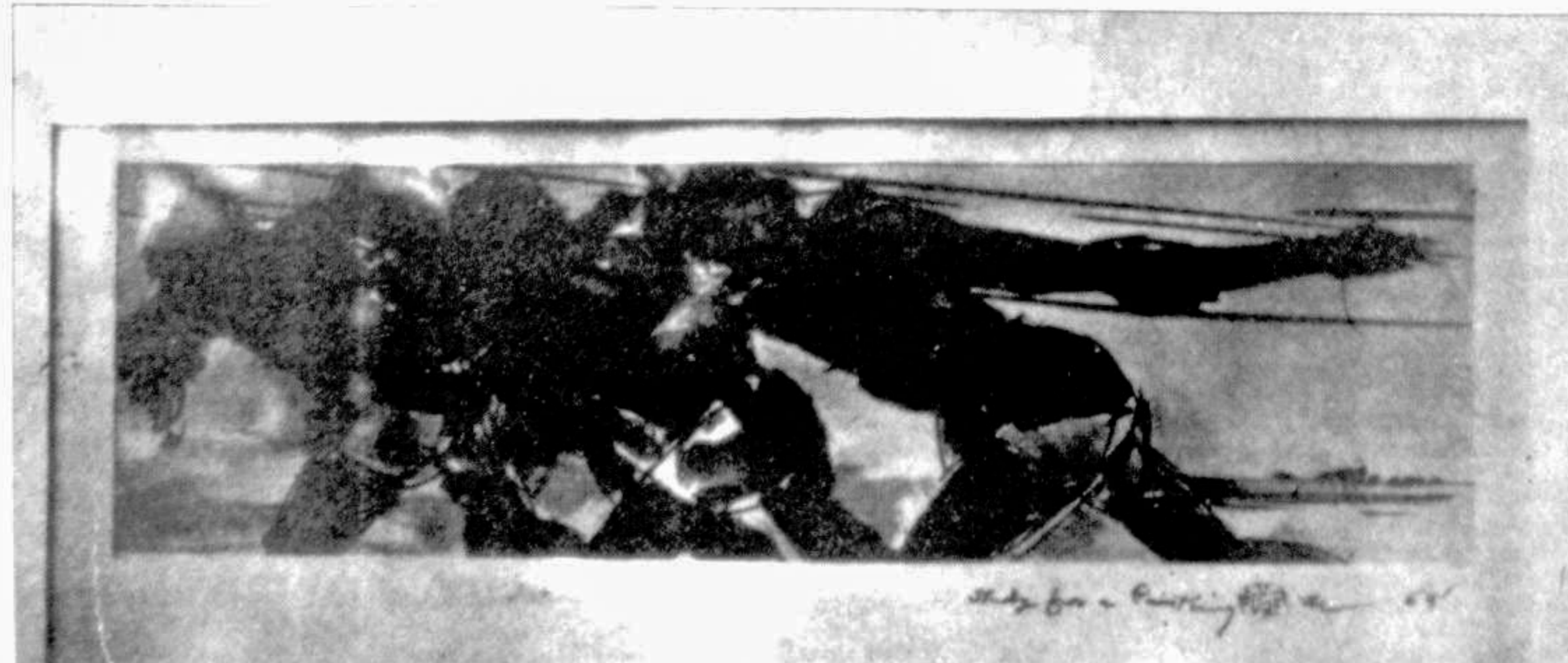
Portrait : Chila Humberto



Study



River-bank



Boatmen



Old building (Water colour)