

Memories of the Asian Biennale

by Sayeed Ahmad

IN 1980, I remember the hectic activities at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Religion (which are now separate ministries) with the idea of holding an Asian Biennale. Until that time, we had no such experience in the field of arts, therefore, it required careful scrutiny and feasibility studies. I had to brief the higher ups about the possibility of such an event in our neighbouring countries they had not done an Asian show in the arts area.

I remember how I discussed this matter on different occasions with various eminent artists and bureaucrats of Asian countries. My work was made easier, because of my relationship with them in the past. I had known Mr. Tantiuk of Bangkok, in 1978 when I had lectured in the art department of Silpakorn University of which he was the head. He has fortunately agreed to be a member of the jury this year and is already in Dhaka. I am told I well known artists Lawrence Tam, Chief of Hong Kong National Museum whom I had known in 1979, Mr. Kurata of Japan Artists Association, Tokyo in 1980 and Mr. Hangedel, Chief of Royal Nepal Academy in Calcutta in Kathmandu in 1986. They were convinced of the necessity of holding an Asian congregation of artists and arts. Dhaka as a venue was readily acceptable to them.

When the Minister in the ministry got convinced that this need be done, I was asked to be the chief coordinator of the proposed Asian Arts Exhibition, which I found quite a challenging offer. Later on this exhibition was turned into a biennial event.

Somewhat things were organized in spite of many constraints in a nice manner in 1981, except a few days before the show a number of volatile local young artists demanded certain conditions to be fulfilled in printing of the brochure. We found it very difficult to accommodate their wishes due to budgetary constraints though ultimately, happily, a compromise was achieved. This last minute arm-twisting is not unknown in the Third World, so we took it in our stride. There were many dark moments which threatened the success of the exhibition and yet, the goodwill prevailing all around helped sort out all major problems.

I remember in 1979 in Sao Paulo Brazil, I had gone to participate in the famous Sao Paulo Biennial which is the biggest exhibition in Latin America and would certainly

rate very high in the two Americas. I had also lectured in its University's art department during the exhibition. On the opening day at 10 am everyone nicely dressed up stood in a line on the ground floor. The Governor opened the show. There was much laudatory Artists and critics from all over the world including representatives of buying agencies, like Rockefeller and some important European and American galleries were eagerly eyeing to buy. The Governor amidst clapping and sound of trumpets requested us to enter the main hall and then gradually, we moved to the next one and the next one, when suddenly, we heard a loud whining sound (as made by dumb people). About 50 artists in a snake-like formation entered the hall on the ground floor, their eyes tied with coloured ribbons, and they moved from room to room making the protest noise. I gathered

that this group of artists didn't like the selection of some of the Brazilian artists to the exclusion of others, hence the reaction. But it was so disciplined, colourful and effective. They did not damage any property, but simply made their presence felt and the protest was lodged. With the passage of time the Asian Biennale has achieved a distinguished name for Bangladesh. I remember we invited the Grand Maestro Ellardi of Indonesia and George Keyt of Sri Lanka, both of whom were my old friends since 50's and 60's in Paris and Kandy. They could not attend due to health reasons. But they are both dead and gone now. We also invited M F Hussain of India. He could not make it in the past. But this year, he is expected in Dhaka any day. During the Biennale of different years, I had a very happy reunion with Sankho Chowdhury (Ex-chief of Zilli Kala Academy, Delhi) and

Paritosh Sen of Calcutta, who had not only been my neighbour in Lalazar in Dhaka a old city before 1947, but also were friends of my elder brothers. It was a pleasure to have worked with of Kuanadi of Indonesia, Seigi of Tokyo, and Ali Imam of Pakistan, who is a member of the jury this year.

Governmental support is indeed a very important aspect but to make an exhibition respectable one needs the wholehearted support from those artists and critics who create the lifeblood of this art movement. I remember my meeting with then Director General of UNESCO Mr M Bow Mahtar and Mr Makaganar ADG in Paris in 1983 to lend budgetary support to our Biennial exhibition and bringing out of an Asian art magazine (Art Asia) from Dhaka. We got in due course of time the financial support for our exhibition. But an Asian Art magazine is yet to see the light of the day. I am sure our government with the support of other Asian countries would materialise this important publication.

With the size of this year's exhibition (which has risen to 30 countries) there is no doubt that Bangladesh has earned a name and gained confidence of the Asian art world and we have no hesitation to be thankful to our bureaucracy and government the artists, critics and art lovers.

We pay tribute to our foreign artist friends and their governments, who enabled us to forge an Asian family network. As a person associated with the preparatory work and the launching of the first Biennial I feel happy to see some of our efforts have found sympathetic echo in the Asian Region.



1981: President Ziaur Rahman at the inauguration of the First Biennale. The writer (centre) is seen explaining the paintings while Mr Zillur Rahman, DG of Shilpakala Academy looks on.



Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh



A Rhapsody of Forms and Colours

by Fayza Haq

on October 27th and 29th.

INDIA

THE paintings, sculpture pieces and photographic works at the sixth Asian Art Biennale of Bangladesh are an undoubted delight for those wishing to learn about the progress of art in Asia. Selected pieces collected from countries such as India, Pakistan, Japan, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Korea, Iran and Saudi Arabia will dazzle the viewers with their ingenious experimentation with line, colour, form, texture and composition. It is wonderful indeed that sitting in Dhaka we can acquaint ourselves with the imagination, skill and prowess of artists from thirty far flung countries. The works of 147 artists from Bangladesh are also on display.

This preview has been done on what could be seen

Abbas Batiwalla in Durga has shown the mask of a goddess with its vermilion tongue hanging out seen at a door of a house. There is also a clay elephant whose head has been emphasised. To be seen is also a string of vegetables - chillies and onions. The sculpted effect in the openings of the wall of the house has also been presented. The painting is divided into three rectangular forms, the centre being brighter than the rest.

Another enormous painting by Batiwalla has the Durga subject again. The face has bright eyes and the head bears a conventional crown. The numerous hands of the goddess wave weapons while she

alts across a lion. The decorations and graffiti on the wall of the house on which the goddess is painted are also visible. An ominous snake painted green, yellow and red is depicted as coming out of the house.

Updhatay Vidhyasaagar has done an abstraction with a rectangle placed on another geometrical form. The rectangles have an abundance of black squiggles. Green, yellow, blue and pink swirls and dots merge with them. White strings appear to come out of the geometrical shapes, apparently to lend interest to the composition.

P. S. Chandr Shekhar has a restless chafing horse in white, yellow and pink. The charger is shown as stampeding in a meadow with wild leaves and blossoms, done in mauve, blue and green. There is an emaciated form of a man with an ape like face in the foreground. In the background are more wild plants. The surrealistic painting has a mystic



India

Dhaka to Feature on Hussain's Canvas

by Aziz ur-Rashid



MAGHOOOL Fida Hussain, the 'grand old man' of Indian art, who is due in the city today will, without a doubt, be the cynosure of the Sixth Asian Art Biennale which begins in the capital this morning.

Hussain, as he is better known, is a genius in his own right whose works have helped set India's artistic tradition on a higher plane. The 77-year-old painter who started life in poverty, painting cinema posters for a pittance, today commands a price of millions of Rupees for each of his works.

His unconventional dress code and lifestyle have earned him such sobriquets as the 'barefoot fakir' and his social antics often have fuelled raging controversies for which it is said they either love him or hate him in India. But he is never ignored.

Sporting a silver hair and flowing beard like that of a biblical character, the enfant terrible of modern Indian painting is on his maiden visit to Bangladesh.

Invited by the Shilpakala Academy, organisers of the Biennale, which is being participated by artists from a record 30 nations, Hussain will no doubt be feeling a sense of personal regret for missing out on this morning's opening ceremony. Keeping with his style, he managed to lose his passport, which has delayed his arrival. However, he should be attending tomorrow's seminar.

During his brief stay here Hussain is expected to do some paintings on our city, similar to the ones he has done on Lahore, Calcutta and Hyderabad. These cities are the subject of his planned A

Tale of Four Cities' which hopes to complete by year.

One of his major work a set of 24 paintings or cutouts, exhibited in that city January 1990. The theme that show was 'Job Charn Calcutta, 1960 to Satyajit Mahanagar 1990' - a chronology of colour and characters encompassing 300 years that city's history.

Only recently, he completed a huge mural in United Nations headquarters in New York. One of his exhibitions - History of World - is a collection of large pieces on canvas which are expected to tour Japan several major European American cities.

Born in 1915 in Maharashtra, Hussain lost his father for his second birth. He attended a madrasah for time but essentially he self-taught artist.

He has held several solo exhibitions in different cities in India, Europe, USA, Canada, Middle East and South Asia. But one of the high points of his colourful career has an invitation to attend as special artist a show in Sao Paulo, Brazil with none else Pablo Picasso.

Although he has been living the needs in his country several decades, yet it is until 1970 when he hit international headlines the famous Western art Harry Abraham discovered him on the pavement of I bay Street then, as they say, the rest is history. His art the boldness of his strokes the choice of colour as well composition have earned the pre-eminent position among his contemporary peers.

In Quest of a Take-off Point

by Wahedul Haque

THESE two words often go together signifying perhaps neither this nor that but a more general area of more than even what the two would denote combinedly. Art and culture. Do they represent similar things, one used to complement the other to cover areas not completely overlapping? Or are they mutually exclusive and are brought together to designate riches generally originating in the mind - more specifically having to do with taste and discrimination tradition and human relation, and man's eternal quest for knowledge and for relating himself to the universe around him.

However, the two - art and culture - have very rarely been discussed in relation to one another. Even if it had been, and very exhaustively too, we would not till now have arrived at any culminating point showing very surely the areas of both and their mutual relationship. For both of these are living processes growing and dying after the fashion of organisms. The heat we can do is to say for a specified juncture of time, that the situation - the situation of art and the situation of culture - and the situation of their relationship is such. Taking up the present times for illustration, it can be generally said that the arts are transcending national

and cultural barriers and are growingly addressing a world audience. But culture - and culture is essentially national - is not rushing to become world culture leaving its moorings and indeed the very soil seeding it and nurturing it to give many splendoured blossoms for the senses and fruits for the bodies of nations to live. This in spite of the nations coming ever so close what with the supra-national sciences gaining in primary and what with the revolutionary communication explosion compelling nations to adopt and practice and be very largely influenced by a "ubiquitous" communications base.

Differentiation leading to species diversity has been appreciated on all hands as a most wonderfully effective evolutionary mechanism making life a success story only on this planet in all of the vastness of galaxies of the known universe. If only by this token, the thousand flowers that blossom as a thinking and feeling colony of organisms. As exactly as diversity of life is congenial to life's existence, cultural diversity is essential to man's unrelenting evolution into higher order - negating the most certain and constant of physical

laws - that of entropy. Doesn't this globalisation of art and the continued localisation of culture effect something like the two coming of loose? Can art be art without being based on culture? And can culture amount to much without having to throw up its best of congealed stuffings as art?

This and related questions stare us in the face when we confront the visual arts of present-day Bangladesh. Non-figurative works done by our painters invite the question whether these are born of any nation - specific culture. From here it is not a long way to question also the paintings of broken forms and those bordering on what used to be called realism - and their creators - how much are these two categories involved in culture.

The popularity of the so-called "band music" and the way our new generation is flourishing an unprecedented infatuation for it in ever greater number, formulates another and very disturbing question for us. Very evidently "band music" is an importation and has very little to do with specifically, the Bengali culture or broadly the Subcontinental one. Is modern painting in Bangladesh and Bangladesh's band music extra-cultural in the same manner? If they differ, is it a matter of degrees or of kind? About 200 years of familiarity with and a hundred of universal practice of easel painting has perhaps taken out of this is pronouncedly extra-cultural aspects and has rather spawned a sub-culture of its own. Band music has all this yet to happen to it - and is that the whole difference or a substantial part of it? Perhaps not. But the question has to be faced seriously and an answer formulated to drive home the difference between true art and caricatures of it. In doing so, perhaps one inescapable point would be the cultural validity of modern or European painting - which "band music" has yet to achieve, even in its land of origin. If art, then, has to be validated by culture, how shall we bale out Bengal easel painting,

especially, of the non-figurative kind? Two very pertinent developments add both colour and difficulty to this topic. One is the phenomenon of Tagore's paintings. Although almost the whole of his prolific outpouring of paintings is figurative - they are the farthest removed from being representational. They are visual expressions of rhythm - some Pakhwaj drummers weaving his rhythm in colour and space. There was no precedent to this either in our art or in our culture. It will be difficult both to find its roots in our culture or to dub this as extra-cultural.

The other development is about the post-Kandinsky pre-occupation with pure painting to which the trio Picasso, Matisse and Braque - all of them decidedly figurative painters - contributed so much. The plank of a superficial realism removed, painting with a white canvas and nothing in the world to make a copy of demanded delving into two big sources. Delving deep into the painter's mind and into the 'art' - or architectonics - of colour and space organisation. The first probe led to the sub-conscious of the painter as also of his artistic traditions and, more, to the repository of his society's myths and legends, dreams and revelations - culture in a word. The second was a quest for some objectivity in the building of quality into a painting which aspired to make the resulting paintings more painting than thousands of pictures with a discernible message and very recognisable images of beings and things. Post-Cezanne, especially all of post-Kandinsky European type easel painting thus, rather than becoming supra-cultural, sends its roots deep down the national culture which for all Europe and America and Australia is one.

The Tagore approach to painting as so amply borne out by his interesting array of work has so much in common with the Kandinkian lunge for pure and more painting as to mislead many to see in his works the latter's influence. This mis-

take is made the more compelling by this man of supreme cultural achievement ignoring wholesale, only in the matter of painting, the three thousand year old Indian way about this art - or precisely the Indian painting culture. And he went straight for the objective in visual beauty. Tagore was the first great painter of modern India - one that will endure. But he very much represents a cul-de-sac with very little to lead on the painters coming after him.

From where does the 'modern painter of Bangladesh take off? Does he or she have a take-off point similar to what the European moderns of the first generation had? What sets Picasso apart from Matisse is largely one's belonging to the Spanish tradition of things moulding Pablo into a Hispanic persona and the other's belonging to galle traditions and coming to represent the galle persona. Does the Bengalee persona come out in the work of a Dhaka painter? From Cezanne to Sutherland, things were so securely rooted in the European development of painting, in answer to demands of European cultural artistic realities that the post-impressionists went out on influence hunting in Japanese prints, with Ganguin going to the other end - the Mayan traditions. Picasso did not dither while borrowing from Negro forms or giving his paintings of sunshine around the warm Mediterranean a distinctive Arab flavour. How does a Bangladeshi painter stand in comparison to them? He is largely a person shorn of most of his cultural moorings - no myths and legends, no collective memory of any kind or national psyche or ethos. For want of dependably responding take-off point, he is concentrating his talent and energy on working on the objective aspects of painterly beauty. But this quest, although paying in certain cases, is patently a search for the chimera and can serve art in at best a partial way. A painter in Bangladesh is very badly in need of culture both as a shaping element and a take-off point.

Jury Boards of Asian Art Biennales (1st to 6th)

FIRST BIENNALE
Mr. Heikichi Kurata (Japan)
Mr. Lain Singh Bangdel (Nepal)
Mr. Mochar Apin (Indonesia)
Mr. Saifuddin Ahmed (Bangladesh)
Mr. S. M. Sultan (Bangladesh)

SECOND BIENNALE
Mr. Adan Turani (Turkey)
Mr. Raymundo R. Albano (Philippines)
Mr. Saifuddin Ahmed (Bangladesh)
Mr. Murtaja Baacer (Bangladesh)

THIRD BIENNALE
Mr. Prof. Senechi Segi (Japan)
Mr. Ram Kumar (India)
Mr. Redza Piyadama (Malaysia)
Mr. Saifuddin Ahmed (Bangladesh)
Mr. Aminul Islam (Bangladesh)

FOURTH BIENNALE
Mr. Biren De (India)
Mr. Oh. Kuyng Hwan (Rep. of Korea)
Mr. Gerard Xuriguera (France)
Mr. Saifuddin Ahmed (Bangladesh)
Mr. Aminul Islam (Bangladesh)

FIFTH BIENNALE
Mr. Paritosh Sen (India)
Mr. Kim Ser Bhong (Rep. of Korea)
Mr. Joseph Tan Chan Jw (Malaysia)
Mr. Mohammad Kibria (Bangladesh)
Mr. Aminul Islam (Bangladesh)

SIXTH BIENNALE
Mr. Ali Imam (Pakistan)
Mr. Hideki Nakamura (Japan)
Mr. Sawadde Tantsook (Thailand)
Mr. Quayum Chowdhury (Bangladesh)
Mr. Abdur Razzak (Bangladesh)



Singapore



Nepal