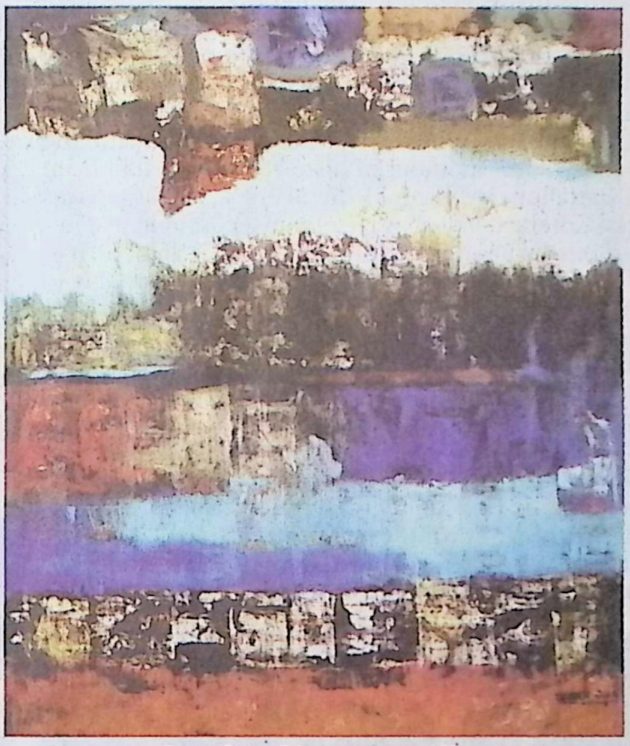
they deserved respect. That is not something that all of us can do, as much as we try, but he managed it very well, perhaps because it came from within."

Debdas' ability to see all human beings as equals comes out in many of his works of art. One of his more popular works, a poster circulated by the Publicity Department of the Government of Bangladesh in 1971, stated very simply the words: "Hindus of Bangla, Muslims of Bangla, Christians of Bangla...We Are All Bangali." This, and many other paintings that he came out with in 1973, indicated the deep impact that the Liberation War had on him.

By the time the Liberation War broke out, Debdas had long since graduated from the Zainul Abedin Institute. After his graduation in 1956, he worked for a year as a teacher in the Armanitola High School before leaving his post to join the Agricultural Extension Centre of the Government of East Pakistan. He soon met Saleha Begum Rani and married her in 1962, having two sons -- the elder being Goutom and the younger, Rosseau. In 1970, Debdas left Dhaka to be a guest lecture in the newly founded Department of Fine Arts at the University of Chittagong, but returned suddenly to Dhaka in order to make sure his family was safe during the war.



Burnt Ship, Oil on canvas, 1993.

After liberation he went back to Chittagong and in 1976, he was awarded a Polish government scholarship for studying graphic arts for four years. He had a solo exhibition in Warsaw in 1977 and a year later he won first prize for painting at the International Art Workshop. His elation, however, was short-lived, as, in 1979, he found out that his wife had cancer. With a year left to complete, he left Poland to be with his ailing wife, who soon died, leaving Debdas devastated. Like most artists, his pain came out in his paintings, which according to his son and his friends, made him unique.

"My father was the type of painter who got his inspiration straight from life," says Goutom. "He was inspired by anything beautiful. He always responded to the times. It is not necessarily true that he always had a message that he wanted to convey, or a particular issue, but just that whatever he felt or saw around him, influenced him.

"Another thing is that he always tried to find new openings. I guess that is what enlightened individuals do, they try to find something new. It's like a journey in which a person's character is formed. For example, when we are looking at a drug that will fight diseases, scientists are always looking for new ways to refine the drug. In that same way my father was always looking for different ways to refine his work. He would leave some of his paintings for months without looking at it, and I would think it was finished, and then one fine day he would take it out and work on it some more, painting over the painting, with a use of tone and texture, which reveals your deepest feelings in a subtle way. In that sense, nothing was ever finished for him, but there was always a time where he would have to let it go."

In addition to his untiring dedication to perfecting and re-perfecting, another thing that made Debdas Chakraborty so different was his stark honesty and lack of pretension.

"What he felt, he did directly, without any bias whatsoever," says Goutom. "Every artist should try to do this more often. It is so important to be unpretentious in your art, to be honest and to not be afraid to be oneself. My father had that ability. He would just do something because he felt it and that is what made him so special."

Another thing that made Debdas stand out in his son's eyes particularly was that he never tried to influence either of his sons to take their lives in a certain direction. Goutom, for example, did not always want to be a painter. For years he dabbled in different fields, such as architecture and filmmaking. It was only later on that he decided he would, like his father, become an artist.

"My father never forced anyone," he says. "He always left our options open in front of us and let us decide what we wanted."

It is these unique characteristics; to love and be involved without having your own expectations and dreams for those you love; to see everyone, even little children and those less fortunate than us, as equals; to be able to showcase your soul so openly, so honestly; it is these characteristics that made Debdas Chakraborty, renowned and award winning painter, one of those inspiring beings, who, even when they leave us, are still able to influence and affect us for days to come. ■