

The first thing you notice about Qayyum Chowdhury's paintings is a kind of optimism even festivity in his childlike use of colours – blues, reds, greens and yellows. Yet the strokes are strong, deliberate, effortless – an indication of his membership in the exalted club of maestros. Like many of his contemporaries he drew inspiration from rural landscapes; folk motifs are aplenty in his curiously geometric shapes of the simple village life. Being part of the great art movement that took Dhaka by storm in the 50s, painting the village and village folk was also a political statement for Qayyum. It was an assertion of identity. He was mentored by none other than the legendary Zainul Abedin who started the first art school in Dhaka. He was inspired by the stalwarts around him, some of them teachers, some of them classmates. He pursued his passion during the most exciting stages of political change and cultural renaissance.

His earlier works in the 50s are definitely well thought out and controlled – visually delightful in their detailing – the creases in the starched white kurta and prayer cap of 'Pawnbroker' (1956), the dreaminess of 'Boat in the moonlight' (1956) and in 'Village woman' on lithograph. This control can be seen in his perfectly balanced collages often on the covers of books and magazines. About a decade later, the figures turn more abstract and have that distinctive pattern-like quality.

As the political landscape of the country began to dramatically change so did his canvas. A spectacular oil on canvas '7th March, 1971' encompasses the spirit of revolution. After independence the colours are more muted, somber as in 'Protest' and 'Bangladesh '71' depicting the genocide of '71. In an interview for a cover story in *the Star* he said: "After Liberation, the canvases of all artists suddenly became brighter."

His most productive period, however, was the 90s. It was after he had moved into his own studio in Naya Paltan that the speed of his work increased because of the space which allowed him to do larger-sized paintings. Married to an artist – Tahera

Khanum with whom he brought up his son, he was never weighed down by familial duties. His flowing white hair and quiet charm gave him a saintly aura that few were not enamoured by.

He was born in a small town in Feni but was often on the move to different districts because of his father's occupation as Inspector of Cooperatives who loved literature and music. Travelling all over

Bangladesh gave him a taste of the addictive beauty of rural Bangladesh that made such glorious manifestation through his brush strokes. In Mymensingh Qayyum, then a teenager, met Zainul Abedin, who asked him to join his art school in Dhaka. In the art school he was exposed to the works of Zainul Abedin, Shafiuddin Ahmed, Anwarul Huq and Qaumrul Hasan. He also got a taste of Picasso and his favourite, Van Gogh, from the art books in the library. Qayyum and his classmates had the opportunity to mingle with writers and poets thus honing their minds along with their brush strokes. One of Qayyum's closest friends was author Syed Shamsul Haq, a friendship that lasted till the end.

Even in his twilight years Qayyum was prolific. Waking up early in the morning, after taking his customary walk in the park, he would shut himself up in his studio for hours, painting away while listening to classical music. "When I look at a picture," he said in the interview, "I try to see whether there is anything lyrical in it, whether there is music or poetry. Music, as you know, can be interpreted through colour. My personal opinion is that an assimilation of all these elements are

necessary to bring about the depth in an artist. When these elements are missing, I feel the artist has not matured."

And it was this music that bade him farewell when he abruptly exited the world during a speech at the Bengal Classical Music Festival. He had come back to the podium saying 'I have something else to say' but never got to say those words to his huge audience. For the thousands of fans he has left bereft, he will live among them in his paintings and it will be the notes of a joyful raga that will play in the background. ■

## Painting with Love and Music

Qayyum Chowdhury died on November 30, 2014 at age 82

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN



Qayyum Chowdhury

PHOTO: ZAHEDUL I KHAN