

Of colours and culture

Rickshaw painting is an art unique to Bangladesh with its unusual burst of colours. What started in as early as the 40s, with a view to attracting more customers with colourful rickshaws, has now become an ambassador of our lives.

Over the years, this form of art has not only showcased our film stars, animals, villages, and beliefs, it has also followed through the curves of our political and cultural history.

During and after the Liberation War, the rickshaw artists, with great patriotism, have depicted the scenes of the atrocities of the war as well as the valiant faces of the war heroes. With the official concern against atrocities, film stars, and human images portrayed on the rickshaws around the mid-70s, the artists turned towards fabled animals. How wondrous a turn that was! We have seen ever so many gorgeous animals in the roles of humans in singing, in working, and in close embrace of their dear ones.

At the start of the 80s the film stars came back on the rickshaws with their sunglasses, iconic hair, blushed cheeks, and huge eyes all too alluring to onlookers. Even though movie references have reigned over the rickshaw paintings, and for good reasons too, the cheerful animals, Taj Mahals, floral designs, religious

motifs, country scenes and even airplanes had their place on the numerous rickshaws of the more prominent cities.

While rickshaw painting in all its colourful glory has been able to capture the hearts of the city-dwellers and tourists alike, it was yet to enter our homes in regular objects until the 2000s.

Around that time, fashion designers took a keen interest in the art and the rejuvenating of it. Fashion houses such as Jatra and Bibi Productions have designed clothes and decor in the rickshaw art style and have shown that it has infinite potential that needed to be explored. For a long time, there was even a rickshaw without the wheels in one of the Jatra outlets that could be used to sit on while one tried new shoes.

The interesting part of this art is that, even though it is fairly aged, it is now more fashionable than ever. Clothes designed in rickshaw painting style are one of the high fashion trends which can be made to look as

traditional or contemporary as one wishes.

A light coloured kurta with a hand-painted animal in front can portray the look of a modest and serene beauty whereas a skirt showing off a collage of rickshaw panels paired with a dark top demands attention like no other.

Rickshaw painting on cloth handbags is also a favourite among the fashionistas who have sported them with edgy and trendy apparel.

Home decor with rickshaw art is found in many stores around the city but you can have your own take in this area. When decking your house with such decor the necessary thing is finding the balance of colours. The right contrast will bring a bright and happy yet culture-conscious identity to your home. Consider these accessories for your home for an entirely different way of living.

Cushion covers painted with floral motifs or city scenes can be a great way to change the look of your house with minimum effort. It will create a warm and cosy sitting area perfect for afternoon tea. Perhaps a red rickshaw-painted kettle or a vivid yellow bowl can become the centrepiece of attention on your table.

Or, an eye-catching curtain on the living room window with partly hand painted designs or a drape over a curtain in full rickshaw paint glamour will liven up the mood of anyone who enters your home.

Patchwork quilts are now all the rage and with the film stars of our glorious cinemas with their unique rickshaw paint expressions can add more sophistication to that. Rickshaw panels have been sold to enthusiasts as wall hangings since the '80s and it is time we took that into our homes. If you should be so bold, you can leave the wall hanging and paint one of your walls in this motif that is sure to leave an impression for a long time.

Rickshaw art is about the people of our country. It is one of the few things that is uniquely ours. A home with rickshaw painting is therefore the upholder of our urban identity and the beauty of this crazy city that stays with us even when we are far away.

By Afsin Ahmed

Photo: Shahrear Kabir Heemel

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