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INTERVIEWS

DU STUDENT AMIO PAUL ON CARRYING FORWARD A 150-YEAR-OLD LEGACY OF IDOL-MAKING

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On the occasion of Durga Puja, we must acknowledge the artisans behind the idols we see in mandaps. Campus spoke with Amio Paul, a student of the 33rd batch of the Department of Oriental Art at the Faculty of Fine Art, Dhaka University (DU), who, along with his family, has been involved in this craft for approximately 150 years. Generation after generation, his family has continued to make idols with pride.

Campus (C): You grew up in a family that has made idols for generations. What is your earliest memory of watching your father or grandfather make an idol, and when did you first feel you wanted to learn this craft too?

Amio Paul (A): There is always some work going on at my home or workshop, so the whole working period becomes a collection of small memories. We do the work with great joy.

As a child, I especially enjoyed the time of painting Durga idols with my father, Achinto Paul. I have felt a special fondness for art since childhood, and because work is always going on at home, I have been watching and learning since I was little.

C: What have you learnt from your father and grandfather about making idols that cannot be learnt from books or at art school?

A: The biggest lesson I received from my father is that making an idol is not just art; it is work that involves feeling, faith, and patience. I learnt how to understand clay, how to work by judging its quality and moisture, and how to bring life to an idol's facial expression.

Above all, I learnt from my father how to work in the traditional method. At art school or the Faculty of Fine Arts, the entire process of making a sculpture follows academic rules, and every measurement is taken precisely. The traditional method, however, I learnt from my father.

C: How has formal art education as a student of Oriental Art at DU influenced your idol-making? And how has your experience as an idol-maker helped you see what you learn in the classroom?

A: Formal art education has made my idol-making far more conscious and refined. The ideas I gained there about drawing, form, proportion, colour, composition, aesthetics, and art history are useful when I make idols.

Earlier, I perhaps relied more on experience and family teaching, but formal education has given me a new way of analysing my own work.

At the same time, my long practical experience as an idol-maker has helped me understand classroom lessons differently. The theories of proportion, form, and balance taught in books and classes, I see applied in practice right before my eyes as I make idols.

So, theoretical knowledge and practical experience have complemented each other. For me, the union of formal art education and the idol-making education I received from my family has enriched my art practice the most.

C: What does making an idol mean to you: simply creating a work of art, or something more?

A: For me, making an idol is not just creating a work of art. It carries a deep connection with tradition, emotion, and people. When I make an idol, I do not merely shape a form out of clay. I try to express the form of a goddess and people's feelings of faith and devotion.

This work has been done in our family for generations, so for me, idol-making is at once an art, a family heritage, and a responsibility. When an idol is installed in a puja pandal, and people pray before it with devotion and reverence, my work as an artist takes on a different meaning. Being part of that faith and joy is the greatest reward for me.

So, I believe idol-making is not just creating a beautiful form from clay, straw, colour, and ornaments; it holds a culture, a tradition, and people's feelings.

C: You are part of a young generation joining a craft that has been passed down through families for generations. What changes have you seen in idol-making compared to your father's and grandfather's time?

A: Quite a few changes have come to idol-making compared with my father's and grandfather's time. Earlier, the work depended largely on conventional methods and family experience. From collecting materials like clay, straw, and bamboo to the idol's structure, ornaments, and colours, everything was done mostly by hand, drawing on long experience.

Today, new kinds of designs, colours, and decoration are being used more. The demands of buyers and puja organisers have changed too, so alongside traditional styles, modern design and creativity are gaining importance. Because of social media and technology, it is easy to learn about idol work from different parts of the country, which has created opportunities to work with new ideas and designs.

Even amid so much change, we try to hold on to our core tradition and our family's technical knowledge. What matters most to me is that, while keeping pace with modernity, this traditional art form should not be lost. Rather, I hope it becomes richer through the new generation and moves forward.

C: Do you feel interest in learning traditional crafts like idol-making is declining among young people today? If so, what do you think could be lost if this knowledge and skill are not passed on to the next generation?

A: I feel that interest in learning this traditional art is declining somewhat among young people. If this chain breaks, it is not only the techniques of idol-making that could be lost, but also our family heritage, technical knowledge, and generational experience. That is why it is important to get the new generation involved in this art.



Amio Paul

C: Do you want to continue idol-making professionally in the future and carry your family's heritage forward? What do you want to preserve in your work, what do you want to change, and what do you want to add anew?

A: Yes, I want to continue idol-making professionally in the future and pass our family's heritage on to the next generation. I want to preserve the traditional methods of construction and the technical skills we have received from our forebears. At the same time, I want to bring some changes in design, materials, and technology to keep pace with the times. By adding modern artistic thinking and creativity, I will try to make idols more aesthetic and diverse.

I dream that one day our art will spread beyond the country. I dream of exhibiting my work internationally.

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