

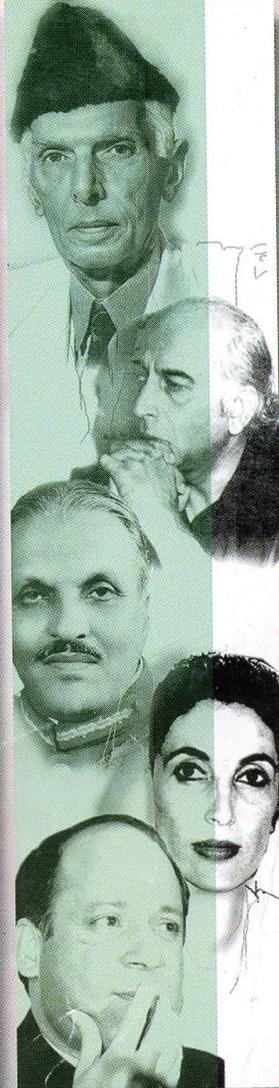
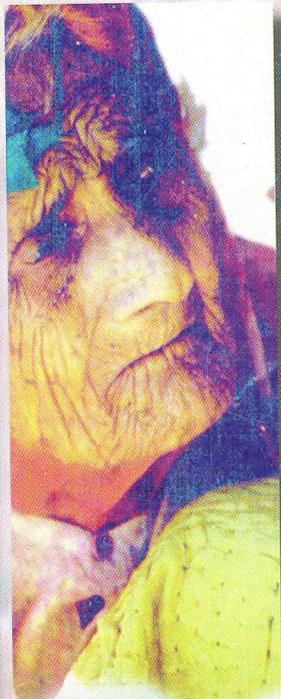


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PAKISTAN TURNS FIFTY A TIME TO CELEBRATE?



Looking back over half a century of Pakistan's visual arts, one is struck by the parallels of its fractured discontinuities and its continuous journeys of expressive articulation.

One can discern broad phases which reflect Pakistan's turbulent socio-political history, sometimes in covert ways and occasionally in very distinct transformations.

Before 1947, Lahore was the only established venue of art activity in the urban-euro centric sense, in what became West Pakistan. It had been active in art education with the Mayo School of Arts, (and since 1940) a Fine Arts Department in the Punjab University. Artists from all over the subcontinent lived, visited and exhibited here, including Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, B.C. Sanyal and, of course, Amrita Shergil and Chughtai. The events of 1947, and the mass exodus in both directions enforced a sudden transmutation and reshaping of art activity at all levels. Established networks of practices and patronage were disrupted.

And so, one found the paradox of Haji Sharif, once court painter of Patiala, and the cubist Shakir Ali, both ensconced in the Mayo School of Arts.

The fifties and the sixties saw the emergence of a lively, iconoclastic group of painters, first in Lahore and then in Karachi, whose belligerent discussions and flamboyant

A Brush with the Past

By Salima Hashmi

lifestyles set the framework in which their work was seen by a small, but well-informed audience.

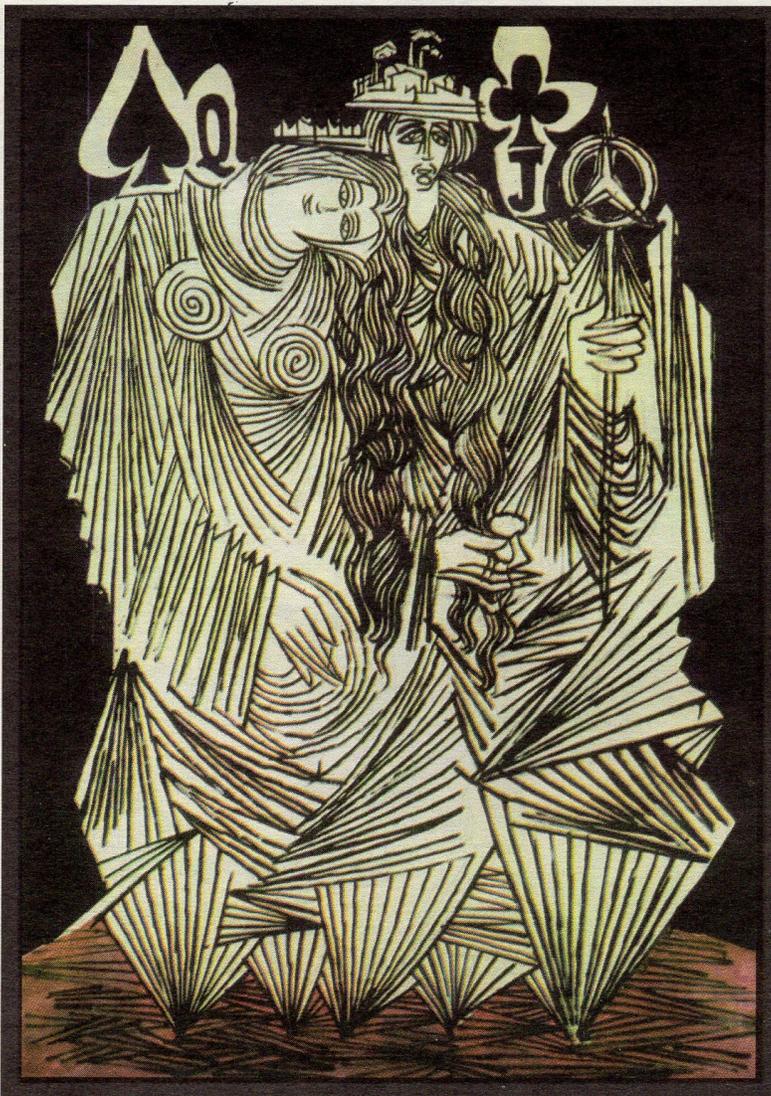
Ahmad Parvez, A.J. Shemza, Ali Imam, Moyene Najmi, S. Safdar, Murtaza Bashir and Raheel Akber Javed, formed the core. Chughtai and Allah Bux, while acknowledged

and patronised, were already on the periphery of what was an embryonic modern movement, looking up to Zubaida Agha, but more effectively, to Shakir Ali.

Skirting tradition, which they saw as constricting, the progressive painters of the '50s were determined in their pursuit of the modern wherever they could find it. The close contact between artists and writers had always been part of the intellectual and artistic milieu. Artists also tried their hand at both prose and poetry, starting with Chughtai, Shemza, Ramay and Enver Sajjad.

The '60s saw the growth of state patronage.

The martial rule of Field Marshal Ayub Khan, advised by the likes of Altaf Gohar, saw art as an effective means of building bridges with the then east wing of Pakistan. Regular visits and mutual exhibition of artists from Dhaka and Chittagong influenced and stimulated the emergent art scene. The



familiar post-colonial problems of ethnic, regional and national identities, preoccupied artists and enticed many of them to the west. The “international style” was the refuge for many, but for others who came back or stayed home, the problems required a more complex response.

During his lifetime, Sadequain defined the role of the romantic Bohemian artist, while the understatement of Shakir Ali’s life and painting stood poised at the other end of the orbit. The populism of the ’70s brought large public commissions to artists and also witnessed the next generation of artists formulating their artistic agendas in very differing ways. Zahoor-ul-Akhlaq, Shahid Sajjad, Jamil Naqsh and Bashir Mirza grappled with issues of modernity and tradition from intensely personal viewpoints. Zahoor-ul-Akhlaq pursued a range of formal concerns, while Naqsh embarked on an odyssey which eulogised a single ideal. Sajjad’s commitment as a sculptor has been uncompromising in its varied journeys into bronze, wood and beyond.

The re-imposition of martial law in 1977 had far reaching consequences for the Pakistani artist, more particularly its women artists. The new ideology consciously patronised work that it recognised to be acceptable in form and content which was very often non-figurative, and pseudo-Islamic. Non-threatening and reassuring, the genre of landscape painting and even more appropriate, calligraphy, evoked both a sense of national pride and a wider “Islamic” identity. Paintings which explained themselves at first glance, could not harbour hidden or suspect meaning and were acceptable.

Women artists disengaged themselves from the official scene, not necessarily at a conscious level. Probably unaware of the feminist maxim of the ’70s “the personal is the political,” they ignored the lure of officially sanctioned art. The sub-standard calligraphies being touted as “modern, abstract and Islamic” ranked poorly with the energy in Mehr Afroze’s, Nahid Raza’s and Qudsia Nisar’s work. They not only established themselves as artists of substance in Zia’s time, but challenged the notion that an oil on canvas was somehow more “serious” a work than the water-based medium on paper.

Many other hierarchies in the practice of art were demolished in the ’80s – issues of scale, medium, surfaces, ran parallel to issues of content and relevance. Printmaking and



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mixed media-expression gained validity as a number of serious practitioners emerged. Anwar Saeed, Summayya Durrani, Nagori and a host of others succeeded in widening formal contexts and articulating issues.

Pakistani artists living abroad watched from afar the events in their homeland. They responded through their work in a variety of ways. Lubna Agha, Sylvat Aziz, Mansoor Hassan and Nilofer Akmut were observant, sensitive, caustic and angry in their artistic responses.

Collectively, the women artists of Pakistan stood their ground in a milieu that did not encourage their kind of work. That their productive output was encouraged and nurtured by the private art galleries in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad, owes much to dedication of the gallery owners as well as to their audiences which registered their disapproval of "official" art by buying and patronising the available alternatives. The Indus Gallery, Nairang and Rohtas in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad, and later the Chawkandi Gallery in Karachi, sustained many an artist who was not "accommodated" officially.

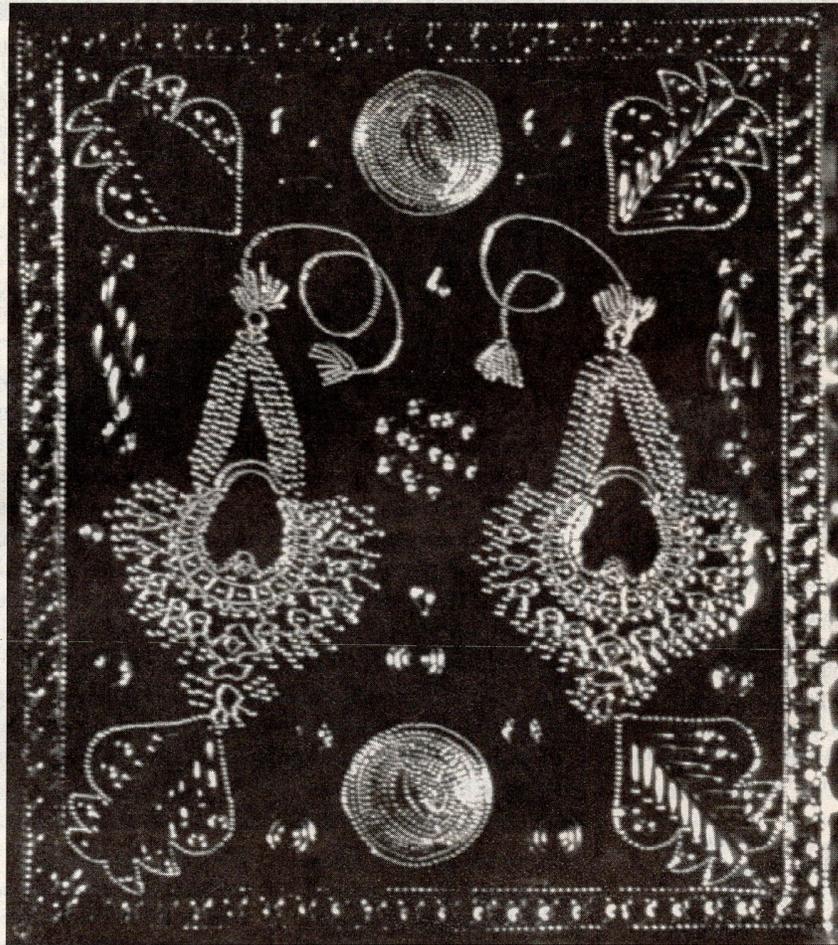
The nineties have seen a mushrooming of other galleries and private art schools all over the country. The sisters Zuberi pioneered the Karachi School of Arts; the Arts Council set up the Central Institute of Art; the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi parallels the NCA in Lahore. Art departments, artists teaching studios in all major cities have made the practice of art viable and socially acceptable.

Today, the growing middle class in urban centres and the satellite world alongside the multiplying political uncertainties present the Pakistani artist with complex choices.

The caustic humour and careful naivete of Quddus Mirza's painting is as telling as the painful imagery of Samina Mansuri. Prising open thorny issues of gender, ethnicity, ideology, authenticity and relevance, the younger generation of Pakistan artists are confronting these and more.

Artists are now bonding in content and through group work. Elizabeth Iftikhar Dadi, David Alesworth and Durriya Kazi worked with craftsmen, incorporating popular urban idioms. Women artists and NCA students col-

laborated on installations for "Woman Scape." Truck painting and multi-media experimentation infuse the work of young artists like Faiza Butt and Masooma Syed. Looking back into the miniature tradition and bringing it into the present has been challenging for the artists at NCA. Fasihullah, Talha Rathore, Imran Qureshi, and Nusra Latif were well trained by their mentor Bashir Ahmad. But no one more so than Shazia Sikandar, Pakistan's star in the international art firmament. Shazia has been described in the *New York Times* as the



"Whitney Biennale's new discovery" – and further described as having "a '90s sense of feminist verve and breathtaking skill, she conducts a series of surgical strikes, extracting figures from traditional miniature while seamlessly insinuating photographs of herself into exquisite facsimiles in others." The *Times* further sums up Ms Sikandar's multi-perspective art as brimming with promise.

One's own summing up then, at the approaching end of the millennium, acknowledges that Pakistan's uneven political history, seems to have provoked and stimulated an intense and lively exploration in the visual arts, which is beginning to come together as an exciting, troublesome mosaic. ■

