

# Contemporary Art in Bangladesh

The history of (folk) art in *Bengal* dates back a thousand years. 'Institutional art' in Bangladesh is a relatively recent phenomenon. The first fine arts institution i.e. the Government Institute of Arts, was established in Dhaka in 1948 by the doyen of Bangladesh Art, Zainul Abedin. Prior to that, Kolkata was at the center and Dhaka was regarded at the margins of art in (undivided) *Bengal*. Abedin himself went to the art school in Kolkata in his studentship.

Abedin first became famous through his dry brush and ink sketches of the 1943 famine that ravaged much of Bengal. He was socially conscious, a social worker and a nationalist. In Dhaka, he initiated an art movement: a group of young talented artists trained in Kolkata e.g. Safiuddin Ahmed, Quamrul Hassan, S M Sultan, Anwar-ul-Haque, and Habibur Rahman joined Abedin. They were later appointed as faculty at the Art Institute that Abedin founded. Little later, Mohammad Kibria, the pioneer of abstract art in Bangladesh, also joined the art movement that Abedin initiated.

During the 23 years of being part of Pakistan (1947-'71), people in Bangladesh (the then East Pakistan) were focused more on the development of their education and culture. This was reflected in the national exhibitions held in Pakistan where artists from East Pakistan would win accolades regularly. During that time, Pakistani fine art was deeply influenced by the works of Mohammad Kibria, Murtaja Baseer, Mobin-ul-Azim, Syed Jahangir *et al.*

Given the socio-political reality of the then East Pakistan, the Art Institute established by Zainul Abedin was a unique response, rather a movement, in establishing the Bengali identity, self-expression, liberalism: Bengali artists were in the forefront of organizing protests whenever the Bengali identity was suppressed. The role of the artists was notable during the language movement (1952), the mass uprising (1969) and eventually the War of Liberation (1971).

In the 1950s, our fine arts practice was dominated by **representational** style. During the 60s, **realism** was supplemented by new experimental constructions. Many of these artists realized that they could not create a new language unless they were able to free themselves from the pervasive stagnation in Bengali fine arts. The domination of figures was replaced by **figurative abstraction** and **pure abstraction**. Many of the artists came up with a new language by blending forms from Bengali folk art and Western canonical art.

The formation of independent state of Bangladesh gave rise to new dreams and aspirations. Practicing art freely that was more of an act of defiance prior to independence, became more widespread. The aim of the first artist group of the country i.e. Dhaka Art Group was to "paint and paint, paint without any allegiance to any person or any institution."

The aim of the artists, who united under "Sketch Group", was not to popularize any particular style but to keep alive the uninterrupted practice of art. These artists derived inspiration primarily from two sources i.e. folk art of Bengal and cubism. The Sketch Group was composed of Qayyum Chowdhury, Abdul Baset, Samarjit Roy Chowdhury, Rafiqun Nabi, Hashem Khan.

On the other hand, the artists from Dhaka Art Circle focused on the world of nostalgia and fantasy that resides in memory, including the likes of Abu Taher, Shamsul Islam Nizami, Pranesh Mandal, Reza ul Karim, Biren Shome, Chandra Shekhar Dey, Rafi Haque *et al.*

There were other artists who were not part of any group. For instance, Monirul Islam (*who shot to fame working in Spain*) is notable for his attempt to make a new aesthetic language through his visual analysis of nature. Kalidas Karmakar explored the foundation of self by blending contemporary events with *tantrik art*. Shahabuddin Ahmed powerfully depicts the psychological vastness of the freedom fighters of the Liberation War where ‘motion’ remains his signature.

All along, the painters and sculptors took up the responsibility of creating a national ethos, in addition to creating their own individual visions. The first generation of artists stamped a distinctive local flavor on their work i.e. a pastoral landscape, a land in disquiet and discontent. The artists in the following generations expanded the range of art e.g. many artists who went to the West and Japan, clearly brought in futurism, expressionism, constructivism, American abstract expressionism and ‘internationalised’ our art.

By the 1960s, the visual arts arrived in the cultural scene. As the art scene continued to grow, the artists consciously shaped a distinctive Bangladeshi modernistic ‘referentiality’. A broad stream of urban sensibility and folk imagination i.e. urban folkism took roots and opened the way for more meaningful interactions with culture, history and myths. In a profound ‘local journey’, many young artists maintain their allegiance to ‘modern sensibility’ and yet expand their range of vision by going to the centre of our mythical and cultural existence.

In grooming and supporting the works of the artists, the first **Asian Art Biennale** was organized in 1980 in Dhaka, supported by the government. Although the Biennale began with only eight countries participating, by now, it has grown to get over fifty countries from around the world. With the exposure to the artistic trends from across the world, art scene in Bangladesh started to experience shifts.

Some artists united in the 1990s with the aim of making art affordable for middle class Bangladeshis. The “Dhaka Printmakers”, for instance, came up with the belief that with relatively low price, prints could make art accessible to a wider audience. This forum brought together artists like Rokeya Sultana, Ahmed Nazir, Rafi Haque, Rashid Amin, Mostafa Jaman, Humaira Rahman *et al.*

During the 2000s, art patronage began to shift away from governmental organizations. A myriad of private organizations stepped forward to patronize art. A number of (private) art galleries came up e.g. Shilpangan Art Gallery, Bengal Gallery of Fine Arts, Society for Promotion of Bangladesh Art, Cosmos Gallery of Fine Arts, etc. Art workshops, symposiums and publications on visual arts became a regular feature across Dhaka, round the year. Since 2014, **Dhaka Art Summit**, for instance, is regarded as a key event in international art calendar.

Quietly, Bangladesh art keeps moving to art capitals of the world. Paintings from Bangladesh are now regularly featured in international events e.g. Venice Biennale, Fukuoka Biennale, Tokyo Biennale, Beijing Biennale, Tate Modern, Guggenheim Museum. Even though it is difficult to engage with the ever-changing trends in contemporary global art, the young Bangladeshi artists are aware of the global aesthetic discourse. It is debatable if Bangladeshi art had the burden of “catching up” with contemporary art from the developed world i.e. Euro-American art. The Bangladeshi artists believe that they have to be modern yet remain grounded in heritage, traditions.

## Aminul Islam

(November 1931 – July 2011), a Bangladeshi artist, was a part of Bangladesh modern art movement in the 1950s.

He was decorated with both the highest civilian awards - Ekushey Padak (1981) and Independence Day Award (1988) - by Bangladesh Government.

He had his schooling in old Dhaka when he started copying Japanese and Chinese art. Finishing his schooling (1947), while he proceeded to Calcutta Art College for admission but he decided to get admitted as the first batch student to a newly-established Dhaka Art School (now Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka), founded by Zainul Abedin (1948).



Graduating in 1953, with an Italian Government scholarship, he completed advanced studies in Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze in Florence (1953–56). Several solo exhibitions of his works were held in Rome and Florence.

Returning to Dhaka, in 1956, his first solo exhibition was held at the Press Club. He then joined as a faculty member in the Institute of Fine Arts, Dhaka. He became the Principal of the Institute in 1978, from which he retired in 1983.

Some of his finest murals are prominently on display in Dhaka: interior of old Bangladesh Bank building (1968); the mosaic mural on the front wall of National Osmani Hall (1984); 20 X 20 feet mural at the entrance of the Janata Bank HQs, Motijheel (1986); 84 X 15.1 feet mural at the terrace of the 32-storied Bangladesh Bank building (1996); mosaic mural on the wall of the Holy Cross College, Dhaka



## Ranjit Das

Ranjit Das was born in Bangladesh, in 1956.

Graduated from the Bangladesh College of Arts and Crafts (1975) and did his MFA from the M S University of Baroda, India (1981).

He shot to fame when he received the grand award at the Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh (1995).

His other prizes include the Best Award (Painting) in 8th Young Artists Art Exhibition (1988), Hon'ble Mention Awards in the 9th National Art Exhibition, Dhaka (1990); 5th Asian Art Biennale (1991), and 2nd Award, in the 18th International Miniature Show, Florida, USA (1993).

He retired as a teacher from the Teacher's Training College, Dhaka; and continues to work in his studio at the outskirts of Dhaka (Narayanganj).



### *He introduces his art and himself as ..*

“...in my paintings, I focus on different essences of nature, the transformation, and the abstraction, while combining prose and poetic forms, and thus the form and content. For example, the man and his substance, his behavior and nature, and his past and present experiences.

I always try to seek and add something new to my paintings. While painting, I think of color, space, and spontaneity in my aesthetic pursuit. In my paintings, the schematic language and the space symbolize the steadiness of life, with accent-less sound, and the unsteadiness of life, with jumping and falling sounds. To me, paintings must express their beauty and fragrance in their own way, own form, and own color. It must come almost effortlessly from one's soul.

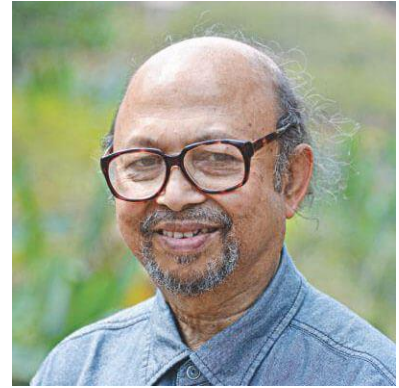
In the past, great masters like Rembrandt, Matisse, Mondrian, Picasso, and Van Gogh have inspired me. In the present time, Far Eastern, Indian, and Middle Eastern paintings, music, dance, and



poetry help me challenge my work and inject ideas for growth. As for the future, modern art in the form of video and installations is fascinating to me....”

## Hashem Khan

Hashem Khan, now at 75, first came into prominence with a series of watercolours depicting nature and rural Bangladesh. His works combined simple aesthetic pleasure with a commitment to the toiling classes. As a result, these were invested with a symbolic intensity that found a wider application when he turned to oil. His favourite symbols—fish, crow, birds, empty rice plates, toiling people — all interact to narrate the story of our existence where exploitation and deprivation mark the flip side of his arcadia.



Hashem Khan likes to experiment with colour, space and form. Over the years, his pictorial space has been filled up with newer configurations of forms, figures and objects that give new interpretations of experience. His predominantly figurative canvas sometimes gives way to non-objective or semi-abstract compositions where, with thick brush strokes and bold colour arrangements, Hashem Khan gives unique interpretations of reality, nature or the life of things. Then he returns to a realistic presentation or figurative portrayal leading to the same or similar emotions. He moves with ease between different modes and disciplines of his art, yet each composition has its own unique merit. Whether it shows a preference for geometric shapes, or familiar figures of women, or the outline of trees, or birds or kites, the composition displays a formal simplicity while evoking in the spectator a feeling of profundity and expansiveness.

Hashem Khan's works are never ambiguous—his use of symbols is straightforward; his colours correspond closely to the mood he attempts to capture and his perspectives do not blur or erase his dominant feelings; his figures are sometimes stylized but they move to the rhythm created by his surface design. There is an aesthetic ordering of his contents that promotes a calm introversion.



Hashem Khan does repeat some of his themes, motifs and contents—one may find his preoccupation with childhood memories, wideopen spaces, the changing seasons, and birds and butterflies quite recurrent. Yet each time these are repeated (reworked should be a better word), as in his most recent (2002) exhibition entitled Six Seasons the context and the contour are changed: they are invested with a meaning that changes the spectator's perception.



Over the years, Hashem Khan has extended his artistic range. His colours have become more selective and bold, while a certain restlessness can be discernible in the formal arrangements of his compositions. This is reflected in the more dynamic nature of his space—the earlier expansive and somewhat relaxed space is now 'crowded' and more interactive. His canvas has become more active: a sign perhaps of the artist's need to accommodate more of his own as well as the country's past. But the exercise becomes increasingly difficult in the context of changing times.

## Jahangir Hossain

Born in 1964 in Dhaka, he is a contemporary artist.

Jahangir was self-employed in the art fields since 1982. He worked as a free-lance artist throughout his life with the degrees of Masters of Fine Art from Institute of fine Arts (Dhaka University).

His painting style is western based and modern thus the artist have numerous number of exhibitions, both solo and group shows, in Bangladesh and abroad. The western figurative style of his work was mainly inspired from the Oxford Gallery (UK). Having also done traditional work with modern techniques, till date he has participated in over 11 solo exhibitions and over 39 group exhibitions.



### Artwork

Jahangir's art interests lie in the relationships we have with one another and with the nature in which we live. His artworks explore various figures which translate in sometimes a mother and child, as well as couples in loving embrace. Though sometimes exotic, he tries to define emotions, making his artworks rather stylish than realistic. Remaining featureless but still showing the strong emotions and the hidden expression his figures go through. Through his art, he aims to influence a single message: we need to love in order to survive.

Hossain essentially seeks to question where the true path to happiness lies. He encourages us to celebrate values which are of global as well as individual benefit, with the importance of love and the need to respect ourselves, each other and the environment providing the thematic undercurrents of his latest series of work.

### Recent Achievements (2011, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018)

- Multiple Expression with Indian Arts with MF Hussain's base group show (Taz Hotel, London). Two group show with renowned Indian artists (Birla Museum, London; and Nehru Centre, London).
- Solo paintings exhibition at Oxford gallery (with as symbolic original works of Picasso, Salvador Dhali and Henry Hoore).
- Italy Beanale 2015, joined by 120 artist 40 nations.
- Autumn Group show with European and UK artists (London PallMall Gallery, 2015; London Art Beanale, 2017, with award).
- His art work has been selected and published at the First Berlin Art Book 2018.



## Kanak Chanpa Chakma

Since her student days she has been experimenting with a range of styles and expressive modes—from realistic to abstract and non-representational. Now she seems to favour a combination of the two.

Although her most recent works employ a great deal of abstraction, there is a marked presence of landscape features and human figures in suggestive details. The hills, valleys, lakes and human figures of her paintings belong to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where she grew up.

She has been a close observer of the life of the people of this region who were locked in an antagonistic relationship with mainstream *Bengalees* who had flocked there in search of land with support from successive governments. Kanak saw from close quarters the dislocation and suffering of the hill people. She decided to project the true hill tracts and the true hill people, which eventually meant delineating their lifestyle, their culture and their deep reverence for nature. Kanak's style then, by necessity, became realistic. But she also improvised extensively—her realism thus veered towards the narrative-metaphorical, the evocative and, in some cases, the romantic.

Whether drawing-based or colour-based, Kanak's works take up the task of exploring cultural and psychological spaces, where time is an urgent presence. In her works of 1980s, Kanak plays with time, diffusing its urgency by going back to the timeless, cultural roots of her people and highlighting a sense of nostalgia.

Not a feminist by the definitions that are in vogue in our times, Kanak is nevertheless committed to the cause of women's emancipation from social bondage. She is also concerned about the deteriorating ecology of the hill tracts region, and actively supports conservation efforts. These concerns are reflected in her works as direct themes or as subsidiary images. The presence of

nature in her works is strongly felt. Even in her most recent drawings, which show a good deal of abstraction, the curves derive their inspiration from hills and the strong lines from trees and rivers.



## Shamsudohha

Bengal's scenic beauty, bucolic panoramic view, riverine life, metropolis, daily life in Old Dhaka, ravages of flood, working class people and more have long been remarkably depicted by the avant-garde painter Ahmed Shamsudohha. The artist portrays the moving sights around him.

A socially conscious artist, Shamsudohha paints people, capturing the diverse moments of their social bindings. He portrays both rural and urban people -- their sufferings and ecstasies.

Shamsudohha set out as a landscape painter but eventually moved to surrealism in the beginning of the '90s. He has been greatly influenced by eminent surrealist painters Salvador Dali and Boris Vallejo. He frequently uses local motifs or elements in his paintings but his style and approach are very close to surrealism. There are a few common motifs that frequently feature on Shamsudohha's canvas. He often uses the forms of Kathgolap (a local flower), wooden easel, dry twigs, broken clay pot, branches, tiny plant, crystal balls etc. Figures are missing in most of his paintings. Varied abstract images also come to his works. His paintings are fresh and provide the spectators with a sense of pleasure. His drawings and paintings are lively and demonstrate the right kind of restraint.

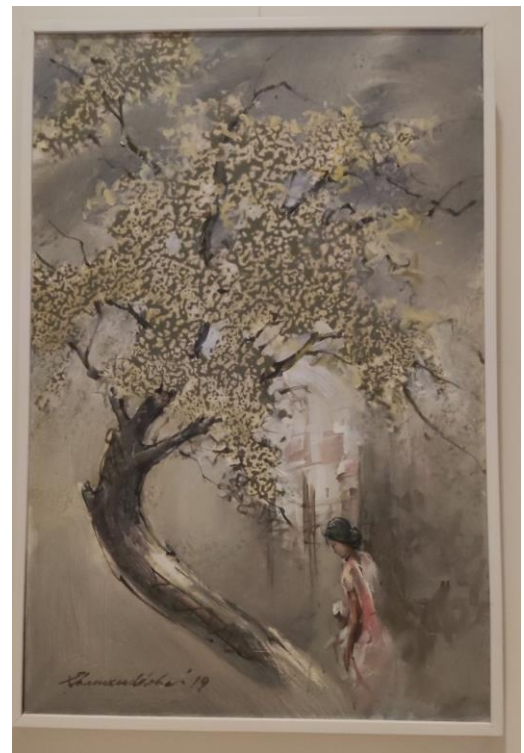
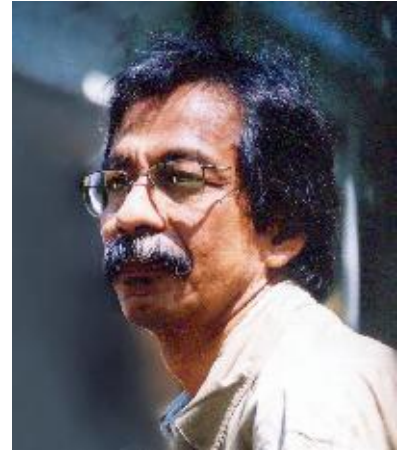
While the artist prefers oil colours for his canvas, he also works with acrylic, water colour, pastel and charcoal mediums. About his recent paintings, Shamsudohha says, "We are passing through an unpredictable time. My paintings reflect our social and political situations, which are confusing me greatly. I don't like to focus on sorrow or ongoing social turmoil; rather I want

to generate hope and happiness. As an artist I'm very optimistic and confident."

The introverted painter is fond of

classical music, like Mozart, Beethoven, when he is engrossed in painting. "I get inspiration from music when deciding on colours and forms. In my paintings, variation in colours, forms and space depend on notations of music and tone. Music simply helps me to do this," said Shamsudohha.

When Shamsudohha was a 2nd year student at the Institute of Fine Arts (now Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka), he copied the paintings of old masters like John Constable, William Turner and Van Gogh. He was engrossed with their works,





particularly their tones, textures, and use of light and shade. Afterwards, Shamsudohha brought romanticism and pure scenic beauty in his works. His colours are often muted, which can translate the significance of the themes. He mainly painted rural, riverine beauty and greenery of our rural areas.

Shamsuddoha is one of the notable painters of the early '80s who also likes to make portraits of renowned men and women representing different eras. The artist feels that portraits are one of the oldest forms of art.

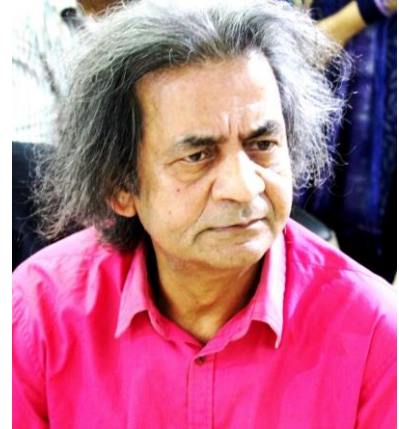
Shamsuddoha won several awards -- Grameenphone Award at the 17th National Art Biennale, Bengal Foundation Award at the 16th National Art Biennale (2005), SM Sultan Padak and more.



## Shahabuddin Ahmed

Born in September 1950, a leading exponent of contemporary Bangladesh, he was awarded the Chevalier De L'ordre Des Arts Et Des Lettres (Knight in the Order of Fine Arts and Humanities) by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and Communication of France (2014).

His paintings are displayed in galleries like Olympic Museum, Lausanne, Switzerland, Municipal Museum of Bourg-en-Bresse (France), Seoul Olympic Museum (RoK), Bulgarian National Museum (Sofia), National Taiwan Museum as well as in India, United States, and UK, Bangladesh National Museum. His works are on permanent display in Galerie Daniel Besseiche, Galerie Samagra, Galerie du Fleuve in Paris 6ème (rue Jacob, rue de Seine, sur Guénégaud) Galerie Jas de la Rimade in southern France (Carcès near to Aix-en-Provence) Galerie Daniel Besseiche in Courchevel, Deauville and Saint-Tropez. His paintings are often sold by auction in Drouot, Artcurial, Christie's, and Versailles Enchères.



He studied at Dhaka Art College (now Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka) before obtaining a scholarship to study at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris (1974–81).

Ahmed served as a Platoon Commander during the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971), before studying art. His experience in the war are clearly reflected in his artwork. He was member of guerilla team Crack Platoon. He has painted numerous scenes from the war (e.g. the Killing of the Intellectuals) as well as portraits of key figures as the Father of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Ahmed currently lives in Paris.

Ahmed's painting style is **iconic**: it stands out from the work of all his fellow Bangladeshi artists. He has a distinct oil on canvas style that is heavily influenced by European artists. It is argued that Shahabuddin is greatly inspired by European artists from the 1980s, especially that of Francis Bacon.

Ahmed's works rely on minimalism and stark realism. Despite his European style, he would always address his subject matter as something related closer to home. His works are often described as "...baroque-like figures turned towards space seeking light and energy."<sup>[4]</sup> In his work, the subject is suspended in a mass of monochrome blank space and consists of mostly earthy tones, with perhaps one pop of color. His work is also described as "... figures [that] seem to be enthralled in the cosmic dance at times merging with the ethereal forces."



In most of his notable artworks, '**motion**' is a defining feature. His subjects appear to be in motion and parts of the subject is always in a blur, gently mixing in with the background. However, some parts of the subject is always distinctively in focus, so much so that you can differentiate every muscle and sinew that is present in it in perfect proportion. This is one of the aspects of Shahabuddin's art that makes him different from his fellow contemporary artists from Bangladesh. His work is described as "The imagery of fearless human

figures, which are in the motion of running, seems to burst free from their skin with their flesh, blood, and sinew..."

Although much of his works are about the Liberation War, Shahabuddin states that he detests violence; and his art only was representative of the struggles that he had to overcome as someone directly involved in the 1971 People's War.

He also has painted many portraits of important figures such as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Mahatma Gandhi.

*Awards to date...*

- 2014 : Chevalier de l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres (Knight in the order of Art & Literature) Paris, France
  - 2000 : Independence Day Award
  - 1992 : Olympiad of Arts "50 Master Painters of Contemporary Art" Barcelona, Spain
  - 1986 : Honourable Mention Award, 3rd Asian Art Biennial, Dhaka, Bangladesh
  - 1982 : Best Award in painting, "Young Artists Art Exhibition" Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka
  - 1981 : Gold Medal, Salon du Printemps, Paris, France
  - 1980 : 1st Prize, Exhibition of Painters from 31 countries UNESCO, Paris, France
  - 1975 : Gold Medal, Salon du Printemps, Paris, France
  - Silver Medal, Salon des Artistes Français, Paris, France
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