

# Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin

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**SHILPACHARYA** Zainul Abedin—today this name has become a legend in the world of art and especially among the artists and art lovers of Bangladesh.

He is no more, but still he lives, for his immortal soul lies both in the hearts of all those who had loved him and also in the world of paintings which he has so happily left behind for us to remember him.

Two years ago on May 28, the cold hands of death had cruelly snatched him away from us. He died an agonizing death, being fully conscious of his suffering and knowing that his end was near since the deadly cancer would never let his old self stay again. Yet he maintained a calm composure and like the brave struggling soldier that he was, he battled till the last against death with a smiling face. Even at this last stage of life, his urge for creation was so compelling in him, that lying on his death bed, he sketched on May 7, 1976, two faces, serene and calm, symbolizing life, though his feeble hand was not strong enough to hold his brush. His attempted signature too was hazy and illegible.

The name Zainul Abedin will always remain in gold letters in the hearts of all beloved ones, for it represented a struggle in itself, not only for himself, but also for the down trodden and poor, the neglected artists and the unknown, rejected field of art, in Bangladesh.

Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin was a living symbol of strength

and will always be the guiding star for the Bengali people, Bengali nationalism and the innocent Bengali rural mass whom he loved.

Born in 1914 in Kishoreganj, in Bangladesh's pastoral and paddy-growing district of Mymensingh, Zainul Abedin grew up in an atmosphere of unsophisticated life and landscape, enlivened by the quiet flowing Brahmaputra river, majestically winding its way through the countryside. The quiet natural beauty so attracted him, that when other artists of the world were busy creating new 'isms' he was enraptured with the romantic rural landscape, simple santhal and tribal beauty, muscled boatmen, graceful village girls and fisherman's nestled among coconut groves.

Shilpacharya has literally painted his way through poverty and suffering which came to him in the wake of an early rebellion from the family tradition and aspirations, where his father wanted him to shape Describing his struggling life as a police officer:

Zainul Abedin said to me one day, that his family greatly discouraged his admission to the Calcutta Art Institute on financial and religious grounds. Since there existed no environment for art, his family felt his career as an artist would not pay. But his undaunted spirit led him to revolt against his family and with greater determination he set foot to establish art in the society of rigid and superstitious, age-old misinterpreted Muslim beliefs.

He found his way with remarkable perseverance and steadfastness to the Calcutta School of Art and completed his six-year Diploma Course in Fine Arts with distinction in 1938. His struggles were not unrewarded for he was first Muslim to win the governor's gold medal, and also to stand first class first in the final examinations. While still in the years, he was appointed on the teaching staff.

Recognition as a remarkable painter came early in his life, at the age of 26, through his famous 1943 Bengal Famine Sketches, especially Madonna 1943. It was the year of the big rice famine in Bengal when nearly three million people suffered the agony of starvation and death, fighting for a morsel of food. He was horror-stricken and the human feelings inside him urged him to portray the suffering of these people in his famine sketches, which numbered about 2000 in all.

While interviewing him for my thesis he said, I was unconscious of what I was doing for I never felt or wanted to feel how my works would react on

people. My only thought was how to portray the sufferings of the unfortunate starving people, the agonies of starvation, horrifying and morsels of food with growling street dogs and cows.

His sketches had powerful drawings, and were immortal creations in which he used minimum possible details and barest possible lines and strokes but with greatest possible success executed with astounding speed. The materials also used were only Indian Ink, brushes, and ordinary pieces of brown wrapping paper or strawboard.

Lost in his thoughts he remarked 'you know Saima, I used to live in a small room below the stairs. Seeing all those horrifying scenes in the day time, I used to run to my little abode and spend the whole night sketching those scenes till I could lessen my grief. It was the critics who helped me to realize myself. I was engrossed in works and had no time to think of what style I was following or creating.

His drawings began to be printed in newspapers 'Peoples war' Mohammadi and others. Eventually the sketches brought him international acclaim and the world came to know of the devastating famine. Thus his art had helped him bring relief to those people of this land, where the career of an artist was looked upon at one time with disgrace.

In 1947, he came to Dacca

from Calcutta and with the help of his fellow artists, draw up plans for an Art Institute in Dacca, which has since its establishment in 1949, grown up to be one of the finest art colleges in the Indian Sub-continent, and has produced many well-known artists from among the students.

The negative attitude of the Pakistan Government towards the development of art together with the rigid belief of the elderly Muslims, created obstacles for Zainul in his efforts to establish art in Bangladesh. Even when he had finally managed to establish the art institute with the greatest of difficulties and harassments, he found it more difficult to attract students to this college. It took months of perseverance and patient work in order to convince the general people about the bright prospects of art and to guarantee the stable future of the artists. For nearly 20 years he was the Principal of the Dacca College of Arts and Craft, which from 1966 conferred the degree of bachelor of Fine Arts. Later he was appointed Dean of Faculty of Fine Arts in the Dacca University.

Remembering those days of the late forties, he remarked one day, 'It is like a dream come true. With all these rigid thinking people, I don't know how I finally managed to establish the art college