

Romanticising Allah Bukhsh

Bashiruddin Siddiqui

incorporates almost all subjects and compositions of Allah Bukhsh — on hardboard

By Quddus Mirza

Bashiruddin Siddiqui's work at Alhamra Art Gallery, Lahore reminds an onlooker of various neglected aspects of our art. The exhibition of 60 works, comprising oil paintings, watercolours, sketches and drawings in coloured pencils and crayons, opened on January 22.

It may appear odd but the use of surfaces in the paintings of Bashiruddin (a student of veteran artist Ustad Allah Bukhsh from 1947 till 1960) holds an important clue to his aesthetics. Several of his paintings are executed on the back of hardboard which has a strong texture — grains that are retained after it is painted over. To work on this surface was fashionable once in Pakistan, but coming across such a work now is rather rare.

The selection of the surface of painting relates to the preferences of artists, and indicates their aesthetics, values and concerns. At the same time, the usage of different surfaces is connected to the concepts other than pure artistic. Artists now employ all types of materials — as a consequence of invasions by conquerors who introduced new substances and techniques. For example, in the subcontinent diverse materials were traditionally utilised for painting; like paper, leather, leaves, cloth and wood (with paper being the most fashionable due to the custom of the miniature painting) which was replaced by canvas (stretched on a wooden frame/support) as a painting surface during the British Raj.

Industrially manufactured or compressed board — normally referred as hard board here — was also introduced to us probably after the First World War. The artists of this region responded to the new material differently: some adopted canvases, others preferred hard board, depending on their approach towards art. Hence two materials not only denote the users of two kinds, but also signify two categories of creative personalities. While canvas represents art/artist mostly coming out of art schools that are modeled after western system of education, hard board is an option for those not trained in any institutions.

Artists who work on hardboard, especially its rough side, are defined as 'commercial artists'. Unlike others, they do not operate via the network of gallery or through any public relation tactics. These painters, humble in their ways and practices, are not rated highly and so their work is under priced. Except Ustad Allah Bukhsh, who undoubtedly was the most acknowledged and elevated person in this league. It is not surprising to find many of his works painted on the rough side of hardboards.

This divide between the two surfaces extends to the usage of imagery as well. Although canvas and hardboard are no more imported materials, interestingly canvas is considered imported (and to many stands for the artists working with derived ideas) and hardboard with its textured side is associated with practitioners of local art. Users of hardboard, including a large number of commercial/untrained painters, paint native scenes and rural imagery as main themes, and in more than one ways, the textured side of the board is treated as an indigenous substitute for canvas.

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Art produced on hardboard that was initially imported but now is manufactured locally suggests the aesthetics, borrowed from the West and appropriated in this culture. The painters who work on this type of surface have a certain style. It is the vernacular version of the eighteenth century Romantic and Academic European art. The practice of presenting 'foreign' substance as 'local' material was fully manifested in the works of Allah Bukhsh and others of his school (Mohammad Hussain Hanjara, a forgotten name).

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Similar themes can be observed in the current exhibition of Siddiqui, an ardent follower of his master, lacking in his skill and craft. Like Allah Bukhsh, the painter also depicts the harvest scenes, peasants, characters from the folklore and the landscape of Punjab. In his work, people are shown engaged in tilling soil, sowing seeds or relaxing in the fields. There are women and children next to adobe houses or near trees. A range of activities is also portrayed, such as working on sugarcane, harvesting and the Persian wheel. Along with these natural scenes, a few works on paper depict phantasmagoric imagery as well.

The work of Siddiqui and others is classified as traditionalistic art, but in its essence it is close to the idealized depiction of pastoral topics. This can be glimpsed through figures, rendering of light and shade, and an approach towards natural elements. It seems that a certain formula is followed for painting human figures. Women are normally shown young and beautiful, while as male figures are often drawn wearing traditional dresses. Similarly cows and bulls are depicted in a idealized manner. The perfect and ideal representation of living beings is in contrast with the depiction of poverty in the surrounding villages. Houses and general environment of the paintings reflect a humble set up. This scheme of contrast in visuals has become a popular device for many painters, who desire to create attractive pictures (Probably on another level, to make the poor feel that the exotic entity is a form/way of compensation for their terrible living conditions).

Bashiruddin's method of painting these scenes turns them into alluring pieces. The transposition from the real to the world of imagination takes place through the depiction of light and the technique of applying color. In each work, there is a constant light, which is in contrast to the harsh sunshine of Punjab plains that scorches every thing under it. The pleasant atmosphere of these paintings echoes the European climate in contrast to the severe local weather.

Likewise, in an attempt to concoct an artificial landscape, everything, which may record the passage of time, is avoided. The paintings of Siddiqui do not show any mechanical modes of transportation, for example cycle, motor bike, tractor or trolley — all the modern vehicles in the present day villages. Neither evidence can be gathered about the presence of electricity, TV antennas and dishes in these rural areas.

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Interestingly, these facilities (vices?) were not present in the works of Allah Bukhsh as they weren't invented then. Perhaps conforming to his masters imagery, Siddiqui too eliminates these visual elements. (Even the landscape painters of Punjab, who are inspired from the Impressionism and claim to represent the reality of Punjab, try to fabricate a pre-mechanical scenario in their canvases).

Bashiruddin Siddiqui has incorporated almost all the subjects and compositions of Allah Bukhsh. However, the pupil has not been able to match the command of anatomy and painterly ability of his mentor. In fact, there is no comparison between the two in terms of skill. But as the work of art is not limited to the craft only, while looking at the work, a viewer may speculate (deviating once from our habit of hero worship) about the artistic worth of Ustad Allah Bukhsh too — since the visual ingredients and the treatment of the theme are not much different in the works of the master and his disciple.