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# Meaningful art work at Rohtas-2

ART is not only about creating beauty — its more profound aspect lies in honest self-expression that mirrors an artist's outlook on life and his responses to what goes on in his environment. This philosophy continues to be reaffirmed at the Rohtas-2 gallery, the brainchild of Salima Hashmi who makes it a point to emphasize the deeply personal as well as socio-political aspects of art.

An exhibition that has just opened at Rohtas-2 involves recent graduates of the NCA (the class of 2001) who have displayed selected work which encompasses a variety of mediums and ideas.

Among the highly personal work is that displayed by Zunaira Sardar, Tasmia Qasuri, Sadaf Naureen and Sabina Zafar. Zunaira's work has an unusual textured quality created by the technique of collograph (a kind of printmaking), that is further embellished by embroidered stitches.

The imagery — baby shoes and dresses, a family sitting at a table and other symbols, are related to the artist's personal fantasies regarding the fulfilment of the needs of wholesome childhood which somehow remained unsatisfied because of unfortunate circumstances.

Tasmia Qasuri is another such

artist whose inner dilemmas find expression in her mixed media work.

Varied materials like metal and flowers wrapped in gauze have been used to create an imagery that is visually fascinating but also remarkably poignant, as in *Healing Process*.

While Sadaf Naureen is repre-

sented by only one eye-catching and colourful oil painting that expresses her sense of being 'divided' and displaced in the process of marriage, Sabina Zafar has displayed seven mixed media miniatures, all titled, *Unsketched memories*. The theme is her father, his illness and his passing away — all conveyed

through a highly delicate and sensitively rendered imagery that is both real and surreal, earthbound and yet celestial.

Then there is the social as well as political commentary in the works of Yasna Sarwar, Hasnat Mahmood and Asad Hayee. From afar, Yasna's large canvasses, painted with acrylics, look like intricate repetitive patterns, but closer inspection reveals a swarm of bomber aeroplanes in the backdrop with interlocked crosses and crescent shapes splattered all over the foreground — a symbolic way of depicting the current political conflicts in the world.

Hasnat's miniature work is again about social conflicts. He renders objects in a symbolic way — guns, lotus flowers and the image of the Bahai temple in Delhi. He uses the surface of the paper as if it was a letter or a sheet of stamps and it is within this format that he arranges his various symbols with titles like, *A letter to all* and *To whom it may concern*.

Asad Hayee uses a variety of materials including gouache, acrylic and screen print. The symbolism which relates to the life of women in general is not obvious but can be interpreted in various ways depending on the viewer.

There are a couple of young artists whose preoccupation is

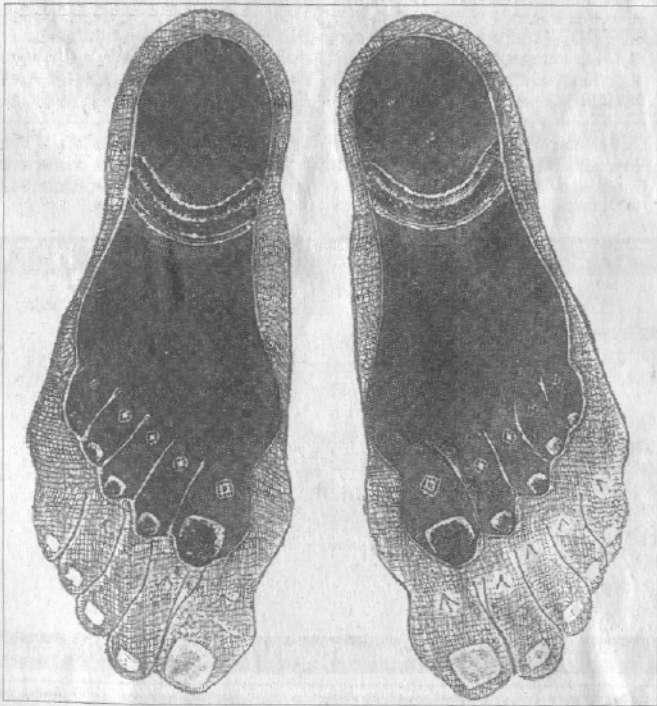
with a universal but spiritual nature. Hasan Ali with his three dimensional works in wood, metal and plaster of Paris explores the philosophy of sufism in a contemporary way, bringing forth the dilemmas of reality versus illusion.

Zainab Jawad also seems to question reality and illusions in her two large paintings which show a phantom like female figure; in one painting the figure looks out a door that opens into some celestial realm. In the other she reaches out to her shadow.

Aqueela Shirazi's work is more subtle — her monotone earth coloured miniatures highlighted with gold leaf, employs an 'oriental' dancing female figure as the centre of interest. The theme of movements involved in classical dance has been used to represent time and rhythm in a cosmic sense.

Last but not least, the viewer can interact with the wooden sculptures of Saleem Raza — these unusual figures in which the human form has been simplified into geometrical shapes that are screwed together have an element of subtle humour and wit.

The exhibits at Rohtas-2 make for thought-provoking and evocative viewing. They are likely to serve as catalysts for other artists who want to express their views in an original and meaningful manner. —SAIRA DAR



work carried out at various Punjab cities.

# A battle of survival

Art The News 10-3-82

Craftsmen doing jandi or lacquer work need to be liberated from the clutches of middlemen. Will the government rescue them?

By Zulfiqar Shah

**K**hanoth, a small village on the left bank of River Indus near Hala in district Hyderabad, is a centre of centuries old *jandi* (lacquer) handicraft. Almost 90 per cent population of this small Sindh village, directly or indirectly, depends on handicrafts for their livelihood.

Civilisations show that artisans preferred to live along the rivers because they found natural elements near them which they would use in their work. Carpenters, potters and weavers among them brought the elements of earth to life. They created hand-crafted utility items to meet needs of the locals. Each piece they made reflected their love for nature.

Today, these *jandi* workers are fighting a battle of survival against contractors and middlemen. Also called *sethias*, these middlemen are accused of depriving the local craftsmen of their due share.

Almost all the *jandi* workers

Qambrani says the workers are compelled to contact the handicraft shopkeepers (*sethias*) in Hala for raw material as they are very poor and the government gives them no incentive. *Sethias* not only provide them with raw material but also give them loans against their work at very cheap rates.

Once a worker gets a loan, he can never get rid of it. According to the procedure the worker is bound to sell the work to the *seth* from whom he borrowed the money. Here the *seth* will fix the price of his work which is often several times less than that of the market.

Most of the craftsmen love their work. "This is what our forefathers left for us and we love *jandi* work, we know it's worth. I feel proud doing lacquer, as it is our recognition," says Riaz Khanothi, a young *jandi* worker. "We are doing this work just to keep the old culture of Mehran valley alive. But it is dying."

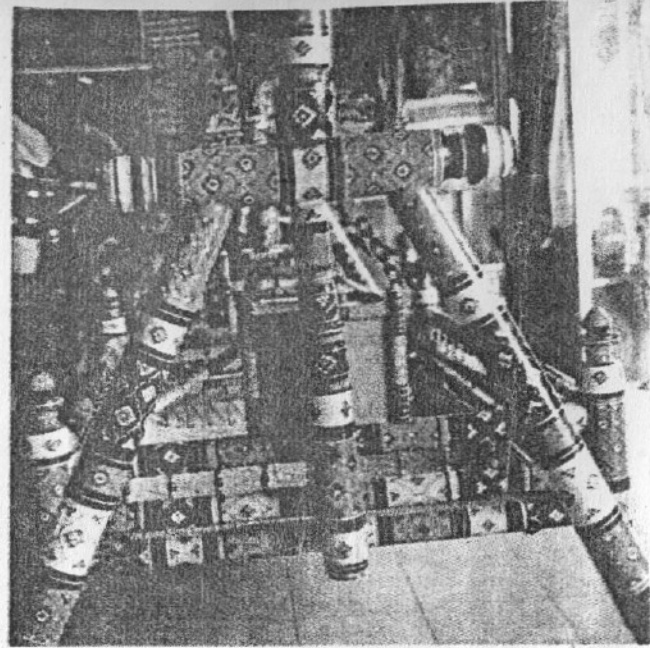
Almost all the handicrafts including *jandi* are under great

workers depend for wood have drastically reduced. Cutting of hundreds of acres of forests in the recent years with and without government permission is not only creating environmental degradation but also taking toll on the livelihood of these indigenous handicrafts workers. *Jandi* workers say that Banhan, a special kind of wood, is required for the furniture items they make, which is now a rare commodity. "There used to be big forests of Banhan just at walking distance inside the nearby forest but now we buy it from Sukkur — four hundred miles away with the help of *sethias*," says another worker.

"We can't afford to buy a truck of wood so we have to seek the help of a *seth*, who would pay for the wood on condition of selling the work only to him at his rates."

The price of Banhan wood has multiplied during the last few years. "If the situation remains the same none of us can sustain ourselves through this craft," adds Riaz.

The entire raw material needed for *jandi* work comes from the forests. Besides wood, they need *lakh*, a natural item found in trees to make the colours shine. But due to the deforestation, *lakh* has also become a rare commodity so the price of raw material is increasing day by day.



goes through several hands before the final touch. The process of colour on fire often takes a heavy toll on the workers' hands. Mostly, the hands of *jandi* workers are changing their original shape over the years. The shopkeepers sell the products at eight times more price than they buy from these workers. "Our work is in demand but the advantage of that demand does not filter down to us. It goes to the *seth*," added Qambrani. In fact, this is true in all such businesses as the middlemen have become the *thekedar* or contractor of craft and the producer has become increasingly dependant on them.



(above) Artisan at work and (top) Hala's jandi masterpiece.

work, cheating the customers who spend huge amount for the love of the handicraft. This way they damage the image of the traditional craftsmen who claim with pride that machine cannot

As for the allegation that he was guilty of keeping unauthorised cash instead of sending it to the treasury, he said LAC's income should remain with LAC and asked "Why should it go into the government account?"

About the record that has been reported as missing,

which is supposed to take care of handicrafts, has been negligent of the craftsmen and has done nothing sustainable for them. "No matter they arrange shows in foreign countries crafts are being buried alive in the country of their origin," comments Manzoor Memon, a social worker in Hala.

Sindh Small Industries Corporation is also responsible for helping the handicrafts but many of its vocational schools and workshops throughout the province are locked. The Corporation at once set up artisan colonies in different cities with an idea to take the artisans to places that are close to the market and to connect them with main routes where they can carve a respectable life out of their trade. But most of these colonies are abandoned now or occupied by irrelevant people in collusion with corrupt officers.

Artisan colony in Bhit Shah is just an instance. The colony was set up to promote the handicrafts; *jandi* (lacquer) work, *ajrak* (printing), *susi* (weaving), *kashikari* (pottery). The artisans of these crafts from Hala, Khanoth, old Hala and Bhit Shah were provided with houses and a workshop there on soft loans. Interestingly, the *jandi* workshop was designed in a manner that it did not suit the workers and lies abandoned for years. The workers blame that they were not consulted before building the workshop. Some people in collusion with government officers embezzled the heavy loans taken under the umbrella of the cooperative society in the name of *jandi* work-

ment account?"

About the record that has been reported as missing, Chaudhry Nazir maintained it was not possible that such important details would disappear like this. "The record will be provided when a proper inquiry into the matter is held," he said and then added: "When I joined the LAC there were no funds available apart from those which went into paying the salaries of the staff. When I left there was an amount of Rs 75 million in its accounts."

merchants are accused of depriving the local craftsmen of their due share.

Almost all the *jandi* workers have taken loans from *sethias* who run handicraft shops in a nearby town Hala. They buy handmade furniture directly from artisans at nominal prices and sell them at sky high rates. "Sethias have made our life miserable. In fact, they are sucking the poor artisans' blood who have major contribution in building the name of our country in the field of handicrafts," complains Nazir Ahmed Qambrani, a *jandi* worker from Khanoth.

of Mehran valley alive. But it is dying."

Almost all the handicrafts including *jandi* are under great threat for various reasons; pressure on natural resources is increasing the cost of raw materials, moreover the government negligence has brought the handicrafts at the verge of collapse. Despite worldwide demand and high regards for handicrafts the government has failed to provide professional help in marketing the work of these artisans internationally.

On the other hand the riverine forests on which the *jandi*

tion, *lakh* has also become a rare commodity so the price of raw material is increasing day by day.

More and more poor *jandi* workers are getting entrapped in the loan net. Those who cannot afford to buy the raw material usually take loan from a middleman or *seth*, who buys their wares at nominal price and sells them at exorbitant rates. *Jandi* is mainly done on furniture items like sofa sets, *jhoolas*, beds and several other decoration items.

Entirely hand work, it is quite painstaking as the workers colour on fire and a single item

as such businessmen as the middlemen have become the *thekedar* or contractor of craft and the producer has become increasingly dependant on them. *Jandi* workers are the worst victims of that system. Sometimes there are as many as four middlemen between the artisans and the city consumer, depriving them of their due share of indigenous work.

Many craftsmen complain that new entrants copying their work, are producing second class products. They say the non-traditional craftsmen use ordinary wood, paint it on motor machines and sell it as *jandi*

work, cheating the customers who spend huge amount for the love of the handicraft. This way they damage the image of the traditional craftsmen who claim with pride that machine cannot capture the spirit that is the hallmark of the handicrafts. "We would not lose the knowledge that was handed down to us by our forefathers," says a worker. "We know that those who produce second class work cannot replace ours. Their work is not long lasting."

Unfortunately, successive governments have failed to promote the handicrafts and help the workers. Ministry of Culture

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for years. The workers blame that they were not consulted before building the workshop. Some people in collusion with government officers embezzled the heavy loans taken under the umbrella of the cooperative society in the name of *jandi* workers.

Most of the craftsmen complain that government does not give them any incentive and they have been unable to get out of the clutches of middlemen. The pressing need of the hour is to liberate the craftsmen from the clutches of the middlemen and sethias and give them the dignity which craftsmen deserve in a society.