

Keeping the art alive

by SAHER NAJAM



As an artist, Syed Akhter is well known and very popular. His portraits of Quaid-e-Azam has

been treasured by everyone and he has been awarded with pride of performance by the state. He is an asset for Pakistan. He is admired as one of the greatest artist of Pakistan, but as a teacher, to which he has contributed as much as thirty five years of his life has not been given due prominence.

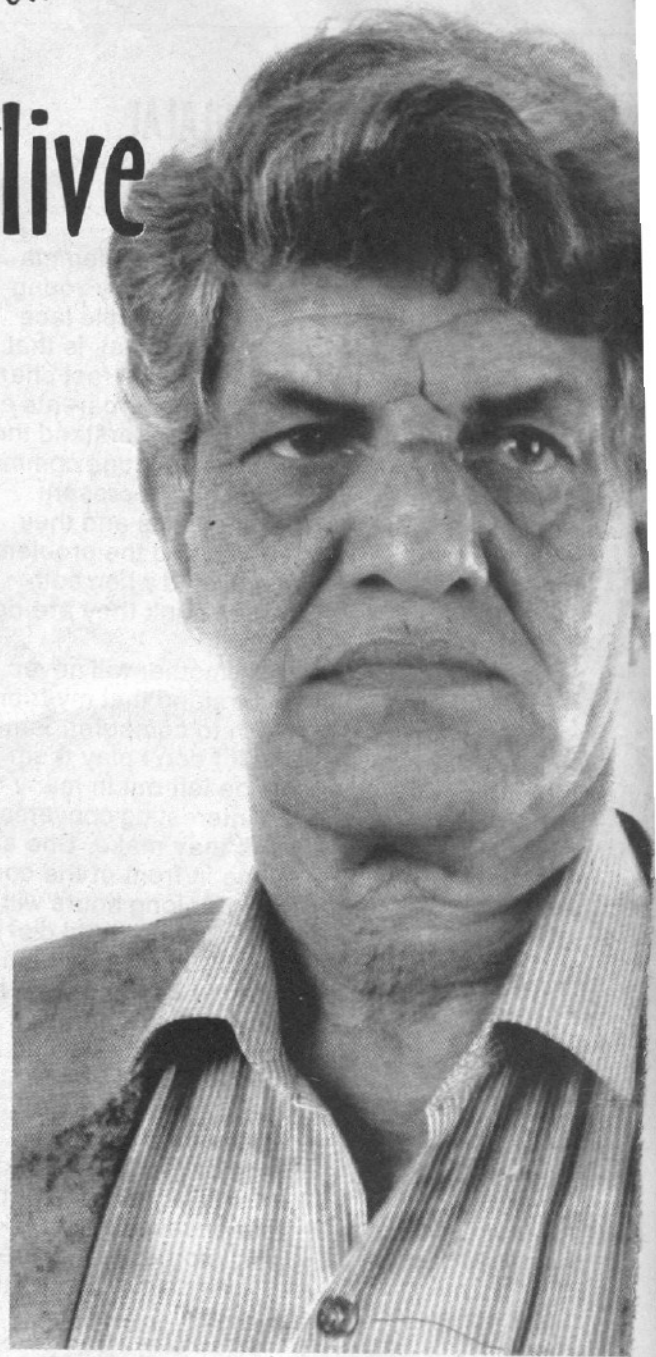
He has taught in National College of Arts, has been the head of the department and a professor in arts. He is now the principal of "Oriental college of Arts" and also runs an academy for people who wants to learn sketching basically, who wants to prepare for the entry test of national college of arts and in arts department of Punjab University. His reputation of a hard task maker is duly right.

In this interview he tells, about his career, as a teacher. As an artist, most of us know a lot about him and about his paintings, but as a teacher he has talked about his experience with life and not with a canvas and paints. It has his more human side rather than his larger than life aura as a painter.

After his immense experience as a teacher he can give valuable tricks of the trade.

He has an interesting personality, most of the people which are not into arts will also enjoy reading about his life as a teacher because, it is more life like and they can associate it with theirs. It has much intriguing aspect then his paintings.

My car stopped in front of a local market, no one can imagine that a studio is located in this vicinity. A studio of one of the most famous painter of Pakistan. Through a dirty corridor where there are shops of various different objects. A stairs curves around at the end of it. The stairs lead to his studio. After crossing a spacious terrace, I moved in another corridor on which either side's different rooms were situated and through the open doors I can see paintings and a handful of sculptures strewn around. At the end of the corridor I knock at a door, and is called in where the painter himself is sitting on the floor having his lunch. In an awkward situation, I took off my shoes and sat in front of him in his small multi purpose room, where many things were disposed here and there



including a couple of uncompleted paintings. I am politely invited to join, which I refused. He asks me to start the interview if I don't mind doing so while he is eating, which of course is perfectly fine with me. So I started

Question: As u had a field of work, then what compelled you to become a teacher?

No one compelled me. While I was in second year of my studies, my principal, shakir ali came up to me one day and said that why don't u try your hand at teaching after you graduate from here. I was ecstatic, because they usually chose students from class who are the very best to teach at National College of Arts, and to know at that time that I am the best amongst twenty five students, was a great feeling.

Question: Didn't you have any

is a profession through which you can gain honour a confidence and time for your self. At that time I needed to make myself and I had a unrest soul for which I wanted peace of mind which I knew I couldn't find in a nine to five job. So, I joined this profession on 18th October 1964.

Question: Didn't you find teaching difficult? Weren't you apprehensive of this job?

Well ofcourse at first when sir shakir used to pin point me out of the crowd during my third year at college and used to tell me that I wasn't allowed to grow my hair or listen to loud music in the college, it became a little awkward but I was honoured that he has so much trust on me that he gave me a first year class to

students to have one?

It is natural to be inspired by your teachers. In the beginning it is little healthy as it is the basics and in arts the most important thing is to get your basics right, after that then you are able to make your own style. I was inspired by my principal sir Shakir Ali. He was such a great artist, that in my paintings I copied his style so that I could also become a legend like him, and when I showed him my paintings I got one hell of a scolding. He was very harsh; he told me that with this work the only place I will end up would be in some drain. I can never become Shakir Ali no matter how much I try and people will not accept it. After that I tried my level best to do things in my own way

tion said that when a m... riped it turns yellow to me it is the colour of maturing. As the artist has matured and come to this stage that he can make his own decisions and his own idea and is not conventional. This was really a moral booster, as it was my first and appreciation of my original style really boosted my self-confidence. After that there was no stooping me. I t got my lucky break when a women from Karachi was in Lahore and asked for her self-portrait I did it for her. After a month I got a call from the Adam jee family and they wanted me to paint a self portrait of sir Adam jee, which was a great honour for me, actually the women whose portrait I did showed it to them and I made a 6 ft high portrait

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Question: Didn't you have any other job offers, after you graduated? Or

You decided not to apply anywhere else as u had this job appointment since second year?

I was chosen by the advertising agency J. Walton Thompson, one of the leading advertising agency in Pakistan at that time. He was also called by the security printing press and WAPDA printing press. All of these were offering me more money than I knew I am going to earn in N.C.A. I even started to work in the advertising agency and worked there for two and a half month but it just felt that it wasn't my field of work. It required time and my principal had told me that I was not to waste my talent, and I was to become a painter and for that I needed a lot of free time and of course a peace of mind. There was no creative work done there. I had a hectic schedule with which I couldn't cope. Teaching

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Well ofcourse at first when sir shakir used to pin point me out of the crowd during my third year at college and used to tell me that I wasn't allowed to grow my hair or listen to loud music in the college, it became a little awkward but I was honoured that he has so much trust on me that he gave me a first year class to teach while I was in my fourth year. As for being difficult telling whom to draw is very easy, I only had to guide the students there is only a technique and ofcourse hard wok. Without working hard you can never become an artist.

Question: In the beginning did the students misbehave with you?

Well, except of couple of incidents nobody did anything as most of them knew me, but I remember distinctively that there was an elder lady in my class, probably even older than me and when I used to pinpoint her mistakes she would always mumble that I didn't know anything. So one day when she said it, I told her very sternly to get up and I took the pencil and drew the life drawing in straight five minutes and told her that try and make something like this. After that nobody dared to say anything to me.

Question: Did you have inspiration when you were a student and is it healthy for

students to have one?

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Question: In this field, to make an original style is very difficult, so how do you help your students with this?

Yes, it is true that to make an original style is very difficult. Usually people as ion the critics do not help either. At that age of life when you are a student you want to do your best, but the problem is that you don't know what is right and what is wrong. When I had my first exhibition I had the colour theme of yellow and lemons, the lands of Kashmir and Rajistan inspired it. The lands and sand of this area went yellowish lemon very light due to excessive sun. I was severely criticized for this; I was called, as the coward as they said that yellow is the coulor of coward ness and of lost hope. Btu when of the member of the panel which judges the exhibi-

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Question: Do you agree that a teacher can make and break a student?

Yes, definitely...I think right encouragement and right criticism at the right moment gives life to a student. Basically it depends on the healthy criticism and praise when it is due, because if you only criticize a student all the time he will lose interest, as he would think that everything, which eh do, is incorrect. But over parsing all kills the artist in a person. As there was a student in 2nd year and he made a painting, which was marvelous, it was just perfect. At that time everyone praised it, all the teachers and students and that child thought that he has reached the stage for which he has worked. He

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stopped working hard on anything after that and till now he hasn't anything productive and is a failure. Basically the timings matters a lot, there have to be perfect timings when you encourage and discourage a student.

Question: Is teacher responsible for the performance of a class?

Of course, an A grade teacher can help a class of average students to higher standards and a D grade teacher can ruin a class of genius. A teacher is a very essential part of a class and every individual in it. I

Question: As a teacher what is your attitude towards students?

I am very strict as a teacher. Actually you have to be, especially in the first and the second year this when a student is making his base and that has to be perfect. In that era there is no compensation. But after that in third year more professional work starts and then the teacher and students spend so much time together that an atmosphere of goodwill is created between the students and teacher as well. The teacher should have trust in his students always. My actual course is sculpture so after teaching drawing for one year, ever since I have taken sculpture classes during which I have broken many sculptures of students. I have been very harsh and even beaten some of the students but when it was needed, and has always helped and very gently told them to move on. Once there was a brilliant student but he made a mistake and copied some other girl's angel whom I knew when I saw it. So I took his sculpture and broke it, and slapped him and told him to do his original work the student was so shocked that he did his work again in straight two hours and got the

highest marks. So a shock therapy is needed as well. But one should always keep in mind that if in is strict he has to compensate by being gentle to him afterwards.

Question: All of your children have studied from National College of Arts, so how did the staff feel when you taught your own children?

Well I never mingled my personal life with my professional life. When my eldest son joined I told the staff that I don't want to take that class any longer so that the other student don't feel that I am being biased, which I never was, but that could not happen and I had to take the class but all the marking was done by my assistant teacher. It has always been my rule that whenever I felt that I might not do justice with my students for example when I used to be in a very bad mood and furious then I used to tell the assistant to do the work

Question: Why did you make this academy?

It was not done by choice but by coincidence. It started some fifteen years ago when a friend's child came up and wanted to learn sketching as she wanted to join N.C.A. so after a few days she brought along a friend then after that the number of children increased.

A couple of years after that my son was to give the admission test he and his friends joined as well so it made quite a big class, so investigations started in the

college as to why I had this class at my studio and why don't I charge to guide them. That is how I started charging before that I didn't used to charge the children coming in to learn.

Question: What about Oriental College of Arts?

Well some one else made it and they wanted a learned person with experience in this field to run their college so I was offered the position as the principal of it and I agreed, and joined it in 2001.

Question: Do you think that the students of your time and students of today have a difference and is it portrayed in their work?

Yes defiantly there a huge generation gap between that era and now. I think it is because of the global media and of course it is portrayed all the work of today's children does not look like Pakistani work it seems as if we imported it from united states.

QUESTION: What do you think is it for good or for bad?

In arts there is nothing good or bad, nothing is defined. I personally think that eth children today are turning away from their heritage and culture and is very much influenced by the west, but the quality of work hasn't gone down this is a good sign.

Question: In this field, what is the key to success?

To be original. For me you have to be different from the other to be prominent. Until and unless you are not satisfied with what you have done yourself you can never make it to the top. You have to be self-confident and always try to think unconventionally, if you follow any one's style you will be a failure. It is all about having your own original style. ■