

Remembering the master of the line

By Shoaib Ahmed

LAHORE: His works are part of some of the most impressive art collections in the world. The British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the collection of Queen Elizabeth II and Delhi's National Museum of Modern Arts are all proud owners of a Chughtai.

Muhammed Abdur Rahman Chughtai was born in Chabuk Sawaran, Lahore in 1897. He started out making woodblocks in Gumbi Bazaar, trained in tiles at the Wazir Khan Mosque and as a lithographer. He did everything from book jackets to curtains to jewellery to fireplaces, drawing on his study of nature and inspired by works of artists in Turkey, Iran, India, China and Japan - thus his reputation as the Artist of the East.

The man who designed the PTV logo and stamps for the Pakistan Post Office was prolific. In his lifetime, he died Jan 17 in 1975, Chughtai made some 2,000 watercolours, thousands of sketches, and nearly 300 etchings, said his son Arif Rahman Chughtai.

His lines are strong and distinct and the work is filigreed with oriental motifs and intricacy of detail. Chughtai loved painting figures, and this went well with audiences who were still coming to terms with the modernism that had taken birth in post-Great War Europe. Chughtai was not an artist unappreciated in his own time.

Allama Iqbal in 1920 congratulated Chughtai on the inaugural issue of Nairang-e-Khayal, in particular his painting, Laila. Picasso in 1937 admired the draughtsmanship of his work, his fine use of lines. Queen Elizabeth in 1962 said it had "given her much pleasure" to have Chughtais in her collection, especially the work, Spring.

The British gave him the title of Khan Bahadur. An estimated 25 million people saw his Wembley show in 1924, according to Mr Chughtai. The Pakistani government awarded him the Hilal-e-Imtiaz. Then Governor General of Pakistan Khwaja Nazimuddin inaugurated his first exhibition in the country in December 1949.

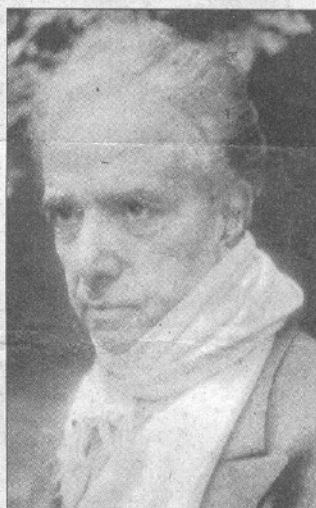
Five years later, Islamabad gave three Chughtais to the United Nations. One of the most successful UNICEF cards features a Chughtai. His works are also at the Peace Palace at The Hague, and the first UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold lavished praise on the artist and lauded his contribution to the organisation.

Artist and gallery owner Salima Hashmi deems Chughtai one of South Asia's foremost painters. "He was part of the movement that started in the early part of the 20th century to establish an identity indigenous to the subcontinent," she said. "He rejected the hegemony of the British Colonial aesthetic."

Chughtai, who knew Ms Hashmi's father, the poet Faiz



The artist as a young man



Latter-day Chughtai



Ahmed Faiz, developed a close relationship with poets and writers. This made him quite an influence in the cultural milieu of the early years. His work - a lyrical ballet of sweeping lines - is considered far superior to that of his contemporaries Allah Bakshi and Sadiquain, says author and Professor Aijaz Anwar of the National College of Arts.

Mr Chughtai, one of Chughtai's two children from his second marriage to Kishwar Iqbal, lives on the 12-kanal estate the artist purchased in the 1960s in Garden Town. Chughtai Museum, as it is known, is home to the largest collection of Chughtais in the world, some 10,000 in all, he said. A new wing is being added to display 200 pictures.

"I love my country and I love my father," said Mr Chughtai before he launched into a critique of successive governments and their growing apathy towards the arts. Chughtais have been raking in the big money at auction houses like Sotheby's, and Mr Chughtai said he has often been advised to move the collection abroad where it will be better appreciated. But Mr Chughtai is adamant. It all stays here.

The Chughtai estate has had its run-ins with Islamabad, given that

the collection is a national treasure. The former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who rode the populist wave and went about nationalising industry, wanted the family to hand over the collection to his government "or face the worst," recalled Mr Chughtai. "We were threatened of 'dire consequences' lest we didn't entertain them," he said.

With the help of friends and supporters, and with Bhutto's attention diverted to the growing opposition to his regime, the Chughtai family was able to hold on to the works. No doubt, the works would have been either smuggled out of the country or been stored away in musty warehouses, said Mr Chughtai.

There are pressures on the estate still. Property developers have been urging the family to sell off land, private collectors have been knocking down the door desperate to get their hands on off-the-market Chughtais. Mr Chughtai has been able to fend off these persistent advances. "This is where my father wanted the museum and this is where it stays," said the dutiful son. The Chughtai Museum is open to the public between 2.00pm and 5.00pm.