

Translated from Urdu by Inayat Husain

# My Art: How I See It

Abdul Rahman Chughtai (1899 - 1975)

Parents view all their offspring as the legendary prince or princess out of the Arabian Nights. All my paintings may not be the Princess Shehrezad or Badar-el-Budur, but each of them represents my aims, intellectual inclinations and thoughts. Each is a creation which identifies its creator's thought process, cultural awareness, ecstasy and discernment. Alladin's magic lamp could produce palaces, royal chambers and metropolises, but it could not create the "moon among moons" which in its form and appearance could present the higher and nobler aesthetic feelings. In my works I have produced Shehrezads, Badar-el-Budurs, Sindbads, Haroon-el-Rashids, Zubeda Khatoons and Abul Hassans as well as beautiful dancers, slave girls, soldiers and marshals, princes, princesses, masters and servants, ladies of the palaces and bedouin maidens. I have paraphrased the poetry of Rumi, Saadi, Khayyam, Hafiz and Iqbal. I have personified characters which have been the custodians of our past glory, tradition, affluence, nobility and grandeur. My paintings go with human desires and ambitions. They create immortal impressions of man's heart and mind. They say all that needs to be said through metaphors about our culture, greatness, and standards of aesthetics which are the marks of distinction of living nations and their arts.

My paintings talk and converse. Their silence gives eloquence to the intellect and perception. But whatever their message,

one needs to have the insight, vision and passion and only he, who possesses the aesthetic sense and can relate it to the eternal values, can enjoy and appreciate them. My art not only interprets my own creative abilities and aesthetic values, it has also given birth to a new movement and a new set of values. It has thus augmented the national heritage.

Every movement gives birth to a response. If one does not have ability and strength to face opposition, the movement soon fades into oblivion. My paintings have given birth to new techniques, discipline, shape, form and meaning and a totally new style of art and a radically different school of thought. To me something that is not the bearer of revelation and courage, and does not allow differences of opinion and criticism, is not art. If there is no inter-relationship of imagery, creativity and reality, there is a lack of an individual and distinct style.

Cultural values and capabilities are recognized only through shape and form. I have therefore, at every stage and at every turn in my artistic life tried to highlight our cultural values and traditions, so that my work may establish its Oriental authenticity. Only the ones with attachments to their past can ensure complete stability and permanence for their future.

Copying western styles and schools of thought based on vanity are nothing to be proud of. Copying and imitating are frauds perpetrated on the society, because they are devoid



of revolutionary forces. Innovation, originality and courage cannot be achieved by imitating and copying. Because truthfulness is the outcome of being realistic, it cannot be accessed by blindly following the Western thought and style.

My creative instincts and natural talents would not permit of my evading the cultural ties and traditions of the past, and have made me actively promote them through my art. This act and attitude of mine has unwittingly been the cause of opposition and criticism. The more my work has been the target of criticism, the more it has matured and flourished, and the closer I have come to the fulfillment of my ambitions. When as an artist, I put the lines and colors of my painting on paper or canvas, I am fully conscious that art is not merely lines and colors, it is also a part of traditions and past glories. A true artist is the inheritor of vital human values, and is duty-bound to lead in the right direction. It is for the man of intellect and discernment to benefit from the importance and usefulness of the creative image of the master-artist or the master-craftsman. Colors and lines have a vernacular of their own. Their individuality, utility and rhythm are the truth that imparts luster and polish to human understanding.

Our artists are scared of the classical idiom, just as atheism and materialism would be scared of religious beliefs. I have firm faith in the classical art, although, as art goes, mine has not achieved the ultimate degree of classical purity. However, I believe that there would be a day when it will reach that stage of excellence, and will be judged in comparison with the European and other Western or Japanese art. My art is as modern or even supra modern as the art of the most modern nations of the world today. In the matter of form and the combination of tints and technique, my art has its own place among the classical. Let not the masters like Behzad, Mirak, Sultan Mohammad, Raza Abbas, Mir Ali Tabrezi, Abdul Sarmad Shirazi, Farrukh Beg Qalmaq, Ustad Mansoor or Nadiruzzaman look at my work and exclaim that art has not progressed beyond where they had left off, or that its creator has shunned the society's needs or overlooked the demand and value of art. Be it an Orientalist or a Westerner, whoever has looked at my art, has had to admit that it is vibrant and passionate, and the torch-bearer of the intellect and enlightenment of the Eastern values.

Paintings are the manifestations of their own existence. This munificence cannot be acquired through copying or blindly

following others. The perception, intellect, passion and endeavor that go into the creation of a work of art, give out a message under highly noble motives. For the understanding and judging of this message, one needs the acumen and depth of feeling which are not available to a novice, who is all the time engaged in confusing and confounding his audience for the sake of cheap popularity and who unhesitatingly makes use of terms such as modernism and neo-modernism, that too, at the risk of being disloyal and unfaithful to his own community and society. My art, on the other hand has attracted the attentions of all religions and faiths.

It is a fact that when I set foot in the world of art, the Bengal School which had been flourishing for nearly a half century, was dominant all over the sub-continent, and also enjoyed the exclusive official patronage. The disciples of the Tagore dynasty could be found all over India as well as abroad.

Under the circumstances there was little room for any new school or style of art. I was the first Muslim to enter the realms of art. The Bengal School was confined to depicting the legends and commands of gods and goddesses: Shiva and Parvati, Rama and Laxman and Radha and Krishna. It was full of pessimistic thought, dominated by monasticism. My art, on the other hand, attracted the attention of other religions and faiths also and without the benefit of any propaganda and assistance, turned the course of the tide which had submerged the whole of the Indian Sub-continent.

My first work of art was published in 1919 in *Modern Review* of Calcutta. My elder brother Dr. Abdullah Chughtai had a great deal to do in getting my work published. *Modern Review* was in the forefront in promoting the Bengal School, and was instrumental in getting the Nobel Prize for Rabindranath Tagore, the primary reason being that it was quite influential in contemporary politics. My art got formal recognition in 1920, when the first art exhibition was held under the auspices of the Punjab Fine Art Society. Tagore's and all his disciples' works were also represented on this occasion, which was the first-time that I had the opportunity to see their paintings, because until then, I had seen them only in print. Their paintings were all of very ordinary dimensions whereas mine were much larger. Even Tagore's famous *Emancipation of Buddha* was just three inches by three inches. This painting was acquired by the Lahore Museum where it is on display even today.



Abdul Rahman Chughtai, *Potter's Daughter*, watercolour wash on paper, 62x48cms, 1954

In the beginning when I started with my art, I used to think up unusual topics. One of my earliest paintings showed a woman going to fetch water from the stream, by chance she drops the vessel and her heart misses a beat. Later I made *Sham-e-Oudb* (Evening in Lucknow) and *Subb-e-Banaras* (Dawn in Banaras). Another painting depicted a woman with a lamp in her hand which she put afloat in the river, to fulfill a vow. These and several other paintings that I made then did not, however, come to the standard of art that I had set for myself, and I destroyed them all. Then my art took a turn, and I made Iqbal's verses and other literary works the topic of my painting. My very first painting of this type which is still intact in my possession shows a woman going towards the shrine, one hand holding a lamp and the other shielding it from the wind and the moths hovering around it. Another painting was *Saqi* (the wine-server) which became quite well-known. It represented the poet with a unique admixture and blend of colors and hues and was first published in *Hazaar Dastan* (A Thousand Tales). The idea of illustrating the poetry of Ghalib and Khayyam had not till then occurred to me.

One cannot turn oneself away from the call of the time and its trends. A new movement and style of painting was slowly but surely coming out in my first works. Feelings and emotions

were gushing out with great passion, and in the matter of colors and techniques, my work was acquiring an individual posture. After *Saqi*, I made another painting entitled *Fame*, this showed a woman, reclining in a semi-nude posture, holding a lamp above her head, her delicate arms and voluptuous bosom drawing unreserved attention. This painting appeared at various exhibitions all over India and drew equal praise and criticism. It won awards, was published in *Modern Review* and abundantly copied. Ultimately it found place, in its revised and completed form, in my work *Amal-e-Chughtai*, the illustrated edition of Iqbal's verses.

When I was drawn to the rural life of the Punjab and its tales of romance, many aspects of my creative and artistic talents began to develop. I made unforgettable priceless paintings on these topics. I was not merely influenced by the legends of the land, but had begun to cultivate much stronger and deeper relationships with it. My paintings of that period point to the growth and development of my art and temperament. A painting of *Heer and Ranjha* which I had then made, acquired great acclaim. It depicted the episode of Ranjha, plodding all the way from Takht Hazara to Jhang Sayal, and encountering Laddan, the care-taker of Heer's barge moored on the bank of the Chenab. In the barge was

a sumptuously embellished couch for Heer's pleasure. Ranjha, all tired and exhausted, without a moment's hesitation stretched himself on the couch to the great consternation of Laddan. It was then that Heer arrived at the scene. First she was furious at Ranjha's insolence, when her eyes fell on the handsome youth in repose, there arose the unmistakable "love at first sight", and the two became one body and soul. This immortal moment was captured in all its glory in my painting, which even today arouses the old feelings of ecstasy in me. I have never parted with this and several similar paintings. One of these shows yet another legend of the Punjab, *Sohni*, walking along the river bank, with an unbaked water pitcher in her arms. Another painting shows *Sassi* being forcibly separated from *Pannu*. Besides these romantic themes, I illustrated the legendary personalities of Waris Shah, Bulleh-Shah, Shah Husain and Punjabi warriors and the equally glamorous sons of the soil. As a huntsman, I have traveled widely in the Punjab and developed a natural affinity with this Land of the Five Rivers. My soul is indebted to this land of romance and I am proud to be a son of the soil.

During this period of my artistic endeavors, I also painted numerous characters of Hindu Mythology. This was intended as an exercise in self assessment. The topics used to be the favorite of the Bengal School, as also its foundation. I however, presented them in my own style. My paintings of Radha and Krishna, Rama and Laxman, Vishwamitra, Tulsidas, Shiva and Parvati and Buddha and Ambapali were totally different from those belonging to the Bengal School. There was a vast measure of relish, delicateness and aesthetics in them. Not only the lives and colors but also the features, the visages, the attires of the characters were all different, and reflected my own individuality. There was none of the pessimism, grief and sense of decay which were the hallmark of the mythological paintings of those times. Instead, there was a vibrancy, freshness and a sense of strength. Even Hindu art critics had nothing but praise for them. These paintings, including one of *Arjuna the Conqueror* (which is still in my possession) were widely exhibited throughout India and won awards and laurels from such patrons as the rulers of Baroda, Cooch Behar, Mysore, Gwalior, Patiala as also from other Indian dignitaries.

When I put on canvas and paper the characters of the Caliph Haroon-al-Rashid, Zubeda Khatoon, Ishaq Mosuli and Al-Barmaki, Firdausi, Saadi, Hafiz, Rumi and Omar Khayyam,

Mahmood and Ayaz, Tariq and Tipu Sultan and other great names of Muslim history, I experienced a unique sense of fulfillment and felt that by representing them in lines and colors, I had truly responded to the calls of our cultural heritage. This was the time when my art neared its climax.

I was induced to picturize Khayyam's *Rubaiyyat* and verses from *Devan-e-Ghalib*. People often think that I first went into the poetry of Khayyam and Ghalib, whereas these works were more or less incidental.

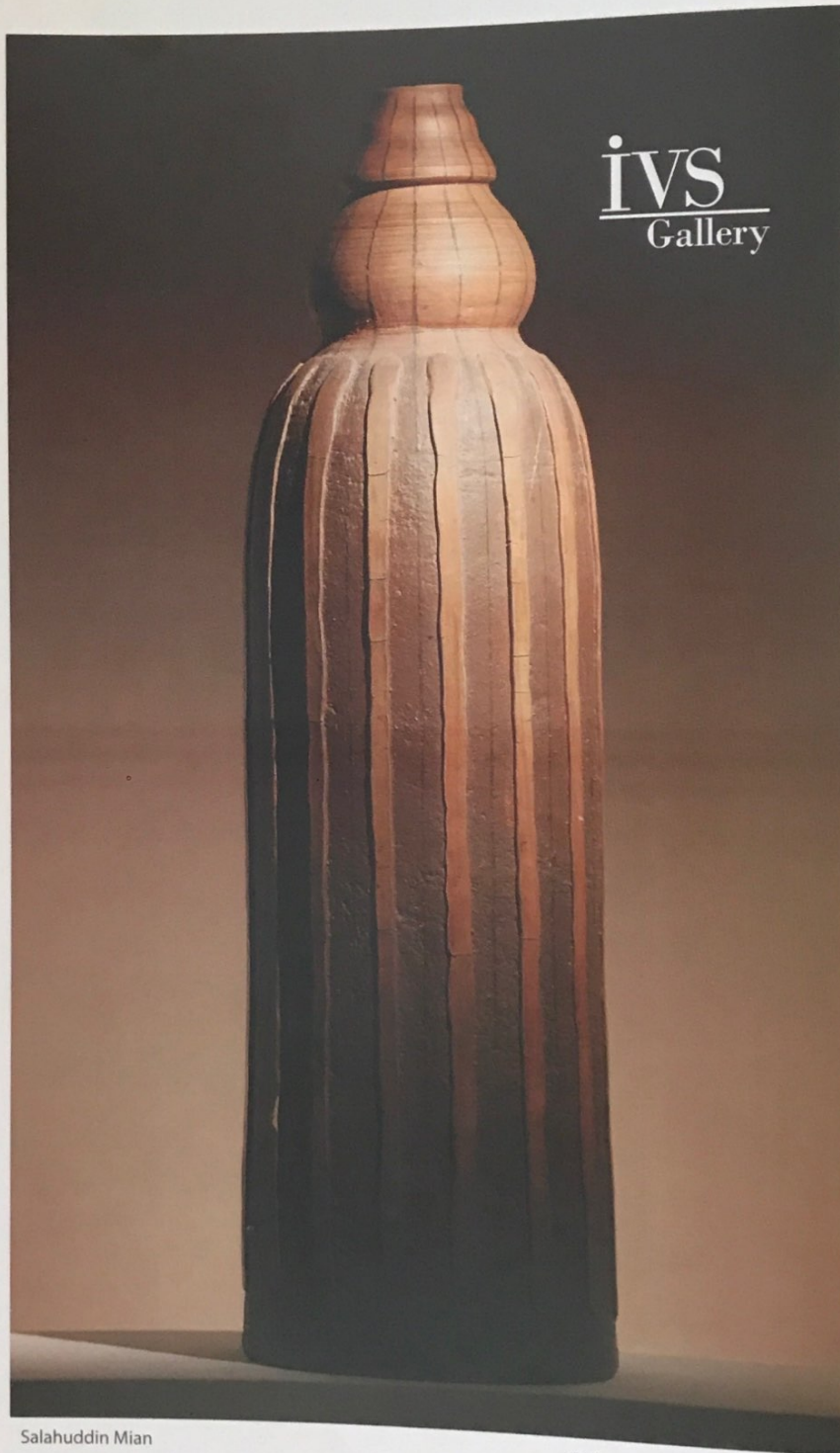
My technique, color combinations structuring and line-work are all mine. I have spent a lifetime in giving them maturity in individuality, and in this respect my work can easily be placed side by side with the European masterpieces. Because of their beauty and freshness and delicacy they will last for centuries. They are made in watercolor, which as a medium of artistic expression has been prevalent in the Orient and even after lapse of centuries they have not undergone the least bit of change or deterioration. The watercolors of the Orient are here to stay. They are not the least bit behind the oil paintings of the European Masters in the matter of withstanding the vagaries of climate and weather.

Calling my paintings mere 'wash technique' is gross narrow-mindedness and ignorance. These superficial 'admirers' should know that 'wash' technique has been developed by me and not borrowed from anywhere. For its elegance, durability and maturity, I have toiled day and night literally with blood and tears. I tried and tested hundreds of substances before getting the desired effects. People looking at the brilliant colorfulness and beauty of my paintings are often inclined to observe that I prepare these colors indigenously from some mysterious process. The truth is that these colors and materials have been imported like all other painting material, but their brilliance and individuality is entirely due to my own technique of using them. They will not lose color or fade away even if immersed in water for extended periods.

Looking at my paintings which depict the Moghul, the Iranian, the Rajput, the Hindu, the Punjabi and the Kashmiri cultures, a Western art critic had observed that merely enshrining one's subject, with all its invocations into a painting, cannot be called true art, however intelligently and skillfully it may have been done. A master artist is obligated to his techniques and skills, to shun, bias, religious prejudices and bigotry. He is expected to rise above petty politics, and to represent his art

Abdul Rahman Chughtai, *The Slave Girl*,  
watercolour wash on paper, 65x55cms,  
circa 1950





Salahuddin Mian

Collection: Akhtar Abbasi Abidi

The IVS Gallery is located at the Indus Valley school of Art and Architecture, Karachi. It is a dedicated, professionally designed and spacious gallery that showcases work of eminent artists as well as promising young talent.

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and art alone. This should be his goal and responsibility which alone would gain him a place in eternity.

The Modern Bengal School, founded on defeatism, frustration and negativism could not produce a single artist who could truly redirect the School's countenance towards the traditions of the Moghul and the Persian art. Modern Indian art is concerned primarily with murals in the temples and cave paintings which present a grim picture of despair and depression and not the throbbing and vibrancy of life. My technique, almost from day one prevailed and became popular among all communities and societies, among friends and foes alike. Even the Bengal School stalwarts had to concede, perhaps reluctantly, the superiority of my up and coming style of art. My style has become an idiom, almost proverbial, and has come to be known as "*Chughtai Art*", which will always be called and referred to as such.

When the Punjab Fine Art Society first put on display the works of Tagore and his disciples, the Bengal School paintings were acquired by the Lahore Museum in sizeable quantity. However, my paintings had attracted the largest number of buyers notably such well-known patrons of art as the rulers of Patiala and Kapurthala and personalities such as Lala Krishan Lal and other Indian and European dignitaries. The late Nawab of Bahawalpur was foremost in encouraging me. This exhibition had really sparked the artist in me. Exhibitions were being held in other cities of India, such as Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Simla, at best once a year and I made it a point to participate in them regularly, where I could compete with the products of the Bengal School. I had, from

the very beginning concentrated in illustrating verses of the well-known poets. In 1927 - '28, my now well-known *Muraqqa-e-Chughtai* had come out, and people had gone to the extent of observing that my art surpassed the impact of the verses themselves. Some of my paintings depicting verses of Ghalib do create this impression. *Naqsb-e-Chughtai*, also based on Ghalib's poetry cum art subsequently employed for the first time until then - unknown photo gravure process-libraries the world over keep on their shelves these compilations which have since been published in several editions.

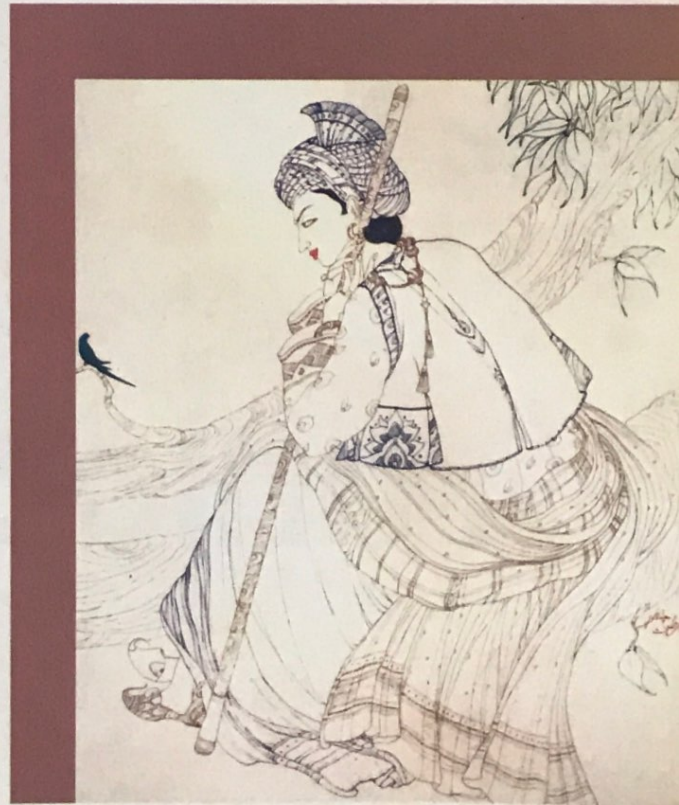
To date, some five or six of my books have been published. These include the *Muraqqa*, the *Naqsb*, *Chughtai Paintings*, *Chughtai's Hindu Paintings*, *Amal-e-Chughtai* (on Iqbal's verses) and the *Kar-e-Chughtai*. I plan to publish another illustrative work on Ghalib and yet another to be titled as *Chughtai Art*. These projects unfortunately have been held up and not gone through because of the onset of the World War and the Partition of the subcontinent.

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Abdul Rahman Chughtai, *Ranjha*, watercolour, circa 1950