

# A Qualitative Study on Advancement of Scholastic Arts and its Observances: The Perspective of Bangladesh

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## Abstract

The study has attempted to provide information how academic system has been initiated in fine art practices in Bangladesh, geographically which was a part of the greater of Bengal in Moghul era and thereafter in British colonial period, was a province of the South Asian Indian sub-continent. The history of art practices in Bangladesh eventually involves the sub continental perspective. Our cultural tradition has an admirable heritage compared to the general identity of Bangladesh in the world map as a country afflicted by poverty and crises. The artists working in various media and cultural workers of this country are earning out the responsibility to keep this honor continuing. It can be said without doubt that our fine artists are playing a visible and leading role in the contemporary world of cultural activities in this country. The tendency to experiment and to accept the context of our country is gradually beginning to be instilled within young artists through various encouraging effort. In the field of sculpture and printmaking, the desire to create has overcome the shortage of materials and is being expressed in many ways.

**Keywords:** Scholastic, Historical Integration, Practices and Scrutinizing, Arts and Culture

## 1. Prologue

Traditional art practices in the past had been mostly patronized by rulers of different era. Academic based practice was not thought of. During 1835, that time British East Indian Company set some art academies for their own necessities, like map designing, book illustration and many others administrative works. Now the question is what was the reason behind that? Did they found that institute for the development of art of this region? We will find the answer from the name of first founded institution "The School of Industrial Art". In a sense that hampered our traditional art practices. On the other hand that was like a big opportunity, which gave us an opportunity to explore our art into the global art community. Coins have played a major role throughout centuries in reflecting and telling stories of the evolving civilization. Fine art practices have a similar role. In absence of contemporary written sources for the history of Bengal, coins and fine arts play a great role to fill up the gaps. Greek philosopher Plato at first established a discipline of study in around 386 BC in Athens, named Academy. That was the first school of practicing knowledge in the whole world. So here we find academy means discipline, controlled, organized, pre-arranged and restrict pattern consequently. If we combine that logic with the meaning of art what sense does it carry out? The art which is restricted, which is well planed? As we can see more then 2400 years ago Plato himself said about art which is something like reproduction from nature. However, now a day's artist trying to get rid of that meaning, they are annoying to put concept behind art.

## 2. Surroundings on the Cram

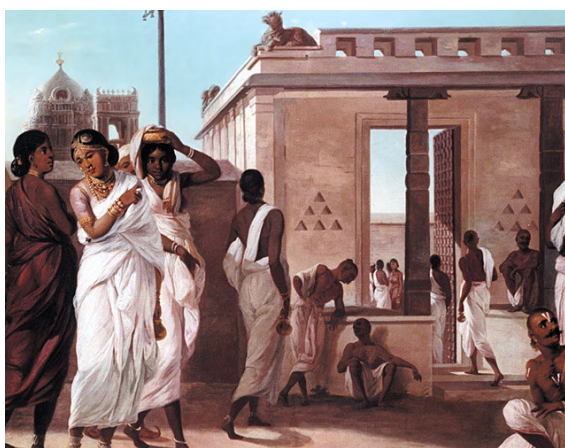
Until losing Bengal to the East Indian Company in 1757, there is little credible information about cultural interaction of Bengal with Europeans. It is generally believed that the first Indian to visit Britain and write about it was the great social reformer Raja Ram Mohun, who spent the last two years of his life at Europe (1831-33). Allison King in 1993 wrote "The one who has the knowledge and transmits the knowledge to the students who simply memories the information and later reproduce it in exam. This is the assumption that the students brain like an empty container into which the professor pours knowledge. The British colonial rule, which was established through the decisive war at Polashi in 1757, was not a mere political change. Instead, the near-200 years of British rule brought extensive transformations in not only the lifestyle and psyche of the people of the Indian subcontinent but also in the continuity of their long and traditional social systems and cultural individuality. Indian art began to lose its traditional continuity from this time onwards and western tastes and techniques started to play a significant role in the making of modern Indian art by asserting great influence on it. Bengal was first and foremost in coming into contact with the British and the influence helped create an aristocratic Bengali class equipped with English education and western tastes. These newly educated Bengalis provided leadership in two opposing activities, firstly, the imitation of western ideas and later on, an upsurge of nationalistic fervor against the former. As a result, the characteristics of a neo-Indian art started to take shape in this area. The art movements in India, within the two hundred years of British rule, developed in different historical periods. The attitudes and tastes of the English rulers in different periods of colonial rule exerted substantial influences on those developments.

### 3. Art Education at the Time of British Colonial Period

The western education was introduced to India in 1835 by the approval of Macaulay's proposals for an education policy in India. As a follow-up of this, art institutions were established in different cities and thus formal art education began in India. Although some art institutes were established in Kolkata on private initiative, the founding of 'The school of Industrial Art' in 1858 actually initiated a systematic progress of art education in Bengal. It was later known as the 'Government School of Art'. Art schools were also established in the nineteenth century, with government or private support, outside of Kolkata; in Mumbai, Chennai, Jaipur and Lahore. At the initial stage these institutions offered only technical knowledge to the art students. Later they incorporated different branches of fine arts such as creative painting and sculpture into their curricula. Thus there emerged a group of talented artists who became proficient in the western techniques of naturalistic rendering. Despite the rise of the revivalist trend of the Bengal School in line with an upsurge of a nationalistic commitment in the early twentieth century, the practice and appreciation of western naturalism remain one of the major trends in the art area of India throughout the colonial period. In fact, its practices and influences never waned. It is noteworthy here that when E.B Havell, the then principle, introduced Indian style of art education in the Calcutta art school shunning western techniques, the majority of students rebelled and there were adverse reaction among the Indian civil society in Kolkata. A large number of students left the school in 1897 under the leadership of Ranadaprasad Gupta (?-1927) and joined 'The Jubli Art Academy' funded by him. It survived for two and half decades and despite its dependence on one person, attracts a large number of students. However, Manmathanath Chakrabarty (1866-1932), another protagonist of the western style of art education, established his own art institution before Ranadaprasad, 'The Indian School of Art' in 1893 which has survived till now despite many obstacles and limitations and has lately taken over by the government.

### 4. Statement of the Study

The pioneering figures in Bengal were Annada Prasad Bagchi (1849-1905) and Shyamacharan Srimani (?-1875). Another Bengali artist of the nineteenth century, Bamapada Banerjee (1851-1932) earned great popularity by selling prints of his oil paintings on themes from the Indian myths which he got from Germany. Rohinikanta Nag (1868-95) and Shashikumar Hesh (1869-?) went to Italy and were the first Indians to go to any Western country for higher training in fine arts. Shashi Hesh stayed back and was acclaimed in England and Germany as a painter of excellence. Other artists who worked in the naturalistic tradition in the twentieth century are Jamini Prakash Ganguly (1878-1953), Hemendranath Majumdar (1894-1968), Atul Chandra Bose (1898-1953), Basanto Kumar Ganguly (1893-1968), Prohld Karmakar (?-1946) and Debiprasad Roy Chowdhury (1899-1975). Shashibushan Paul (1878-1946), Manmathanath's pupil in 'The Indian School of art', went back to his village in Maheshwarpasha in the district of Khulna and established 'Maheshwarpasha School of Art' in 1904. This school was the first of its kind in geographical area which now consists of Bangladesh and perhaps only the village oriented art school in this subcontinent. Shashibhushan thus commands pioneering role in the history of art education in Bangladesh.



Painting by John Zoffany( 1735-1810)



A painting by Sewak Ram-1820

### 4.1. Murshidabad Style

In 1576 AD Bengal became a part of the Mughal Empire during the reign of Emperor Akbar, when the ground was prepared for the arrival of the Mughal artistic style of Delhi. It is to be mentioned that Mughal miniature painting was a special achievement for its contribution to the history of the fine arts of India. Through the combined effort of Persian and Indian artists this secular form of painting derived inspiration from Persian, Indian and western artistic styles and fashioned an intellectual artistic sphere. Even when Bengal was

amalgamated into the Mughal Empire, Persian influence was naturally present in the court art of this region.

#### 4.2. Company Art in India

As the British East India Company expanded its purview in South Asia during the late 1700s, great numbers of its employees moved from England to carve out new lives for themselves in India. The rule of the Nawabs in Murshidabad became politically uncertain due to the defeat of Sirajuddowla at the hands of the British at Plassey in 1757. As prominence of Murshidabad decreased slowly, the quality of the court-patronized painting started to degenerate as well. Nevertheless, the loss of the patronization of the Nawabs was substituted by the rising Hindu capitalist society and with their sympathetic cooperation the court-painters continued to paint, the subject-matter chiefly being Hindu religious motifs. In fact, at that period, the Murshidabad style of painting became divided into two distinct types. One was inspired by local painting-styles outside the court and was manifested in manuscripts and scroll paintings. And the other was a completely different trend inspired by the British traders who were gradually exerting more and more influence.

#### 4.3. Foreign artists in India

To the Europeans of the eighteenth century, India was a country of endless mystery and wealth. After the 1757 conquest of India a good number of British and European artists started to travel to India in the hope of making their fortunes overnight. Nevertheless, some European artists came and settled in this country of their dreams even earlier to try their luck. However, the tendency gained momentum due to the establishment of colonial rule in India. We can collect the names of at least sixty foreign painters, excluding the less important ones. These artists worked principally in three techniques - a) oil color on canvas, b) miniatures in watercolor on ivory, and c) engraving prints based on watercolors on paper. Important oil painters were Tilly Kettle (1735-86), John Zoffany (1735-1810), Arthur Davis (1763-1822), Thomas Hicky (?), Francesco Rinaldi (?), Robert Home (1757-1834), William Beechy (?), Marshal Clakson (?), the Russian artist Vassily Vereschagin (1842-1904) etc. Prominent among the artists who painted watercolor miniatures on ivory were Ozias Humphrey (1742-1810), George Chinnery (1774-1852) and Charles D'Oyly (1781-1845). Among those who did watercolors on paper and then sold copies of engraving prints from them were William Hodges (1744-97), the Belgian artist Bait Solvyns (1760-1826), James Mofat (?), Colesworthy Grant (?), William Simpson (?) and the uncle-nephew duo Thomas Daniell (1749-?) and William Daniell (1769-?). The Daniells earned great fame by depicting the exquisite landscapes of India in their works. There were a number of amateur's artists who came to India as service-holders or on other assignments who took to painting as hobby or out of curiosity. Prominent among them were James B. Eraser, William Prinsep, Emily Eden, Madam Belson, G.F. Atkinson etc.

#### 4.4. Kolkata Art Style

The influence of the British traders in Bengal was, however, increasing long before the victory at Polashey in 1757, more specifically, from the time of Nawab Alivardi Khan. The British colonial rule over Bengal that is over India commenced the real expansion of the colony started around 1770. The importance of Kolkata, which was the center of administrative activities of the British colonial rulers, started to increase from this period and Murshidabad gradually became a declining city. There came a great change in the political structure of India when, after the Shipahi Mutiny in 1857, the Company rule ended and India was brought under the direct governance of the British Empire. Kolkata started to gain importance as the administrative center of India, culminating the decline of Murshidabad.



Painting by Ghulam Ali Khan (1815-16)



Patachitro-1860 (Babu Culture)

## **5. European Influence on Regional Art Practices: The western Naturalistic Trend**

In eighteenth century painting arose in a number of different cities in India. Work from each region is distinguishable by style, which grew out of and was heavily influenced by earlier local traditions. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, enterprising Indian artists had begun to create sets of standard popular subjects that could be sold to any tourist passing through the major attractions. Such sets might depict a range of monuments, festivals, castes, occupations, or costumes of the subcontinent. Calcutta was among the important early production centers, as the site of one of the oldest British trade houses. A Company-established botanical garden in Calcutta then undertook a project for the samples of plant life it had collected. Lady Impey was the patron of a number of such schemes. Other influential painting centers were in Varanasi, a major Hindu pilgrimage site that drew many tourists (who knew it as Benares), and Madras, where Lord and Lady Clive were stationed from 1798 to 1804.

### **5.1. The Kalighat Art (Patachitra)**

The demand for Company painting had begun to decline in the middle of the nineteenth century. They were, as a matter of fact, inspired by the tradition of Bengal's folk art and the art of idol-making. A particular style of painting developed around the Kalighat temple at the end of the eighteenth century and continued throughout the whole of the nineteenth century which later became celebrated as Kalighat Patachitra. With the expansion and prosperity of Kolkata as the capital city of colonial India the number of devotees and worshippers also began to rise. Colonial rule had disrupted the traditional balance of rural life in India and *patuas* (Bangla meaning of artists) started to lose their professions.

### **5.2. Raja Ravi Varma Style**

For the students of Art History and the followers of Indian Art, the name Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) has been familiar for more than one century. He was born in Kilianoor in Kerala, India. There were no immediate traditions which could inspire him to evolve. He broke new ground and left a brilliant legacy of academic realism. Born to the ruling family of Kilimanoor, a small estate in the former kingdom of Travancore, this aristocrat painter of myths became a cultural icon whose popularity acquired a pan-Indian sweep. Famous art critics E. B. Havell says "Though not trained in a school of art, all his (Ravi Varma's) methods have been based on the academic rostrums of Anglo-Indian schools". Ravi Varma had nothing to do with art schools at any point of time. The Madras Art School was founded in 1853 and the Calcutta School in 1854, and for many years both of them had taught only industrial crafts. When painting, as high art as it was introduced as an additional discipline, during the late 1870's Raja Ravi Varma was already an accomplished painter. And his paintings emerged as the first important signifiers of 'modernity' and 'nationality'.

## **6. Partition of India- Art education in Bangladesh: East Pakistan Period to Present**

In 1947, subcontinent was divided to form two countries called India and Pakistan based on the two-nation theory. The present Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan and called East Pakistan. However, the Bengalis very soon realized that they had in fact changed hands to become a colony of West Pakistan instead of Britain. The Bengali Muslim artists who had arrived from Kolkata established the first art institute in Dhaka in 1948 which evolved to become the present Institute of Fine Art of the University of Dhaka. The first generation artists of this Bengal were invariably close to life, humanistic and culturally conscious. Their works evince the inspiration of rural life and folk art of Bengal. Both folk art and folk life inspired their form and content.

### **7. Academic Art Practices during East Pakistan Period (1947-1970)**

East Pakistan (East Bengal), which is today's Bangladesh, became a part of Pakistan in 1947. It can be said that the region's struggle to gain its own cultural and artistic identity started right then. There was no opportunity for institutional practice of art in East Bengal at the time of the partition of the subcontinent. There were no facilities for art schools or art exhibitions in Dhaka or the other major cities. There was indeed an artistic movement surrounding the Maheshwarpasha School of Fine Art established by the artist Shashibhushan Paul in Khulna in 1904. However, being located in a remote rural area and Shashibhushan's individual western mimetic concept of art being the only foundation of the school and being separated from the modern ideas of art. The school did not have much of an effect on the overall art environment of East Bengal despite being active for a long time. It is to be said that the introduction of contemporary and modern art education occurred through establishing the 'Government Institute of Fine Art' in Dhaka in 1948 under the leadership of Zainul Abedin.

### **8. Academic Art Practices in the Forties**

After the partition of the Indian subcontinent, the artists who started the practice of fine art under the leadership of Zainul Abedin had borne with them the training of the European academic style from the art school of Kolkata and the contemporary types of Kolkata-centric artistic styles. Almost all of them appeared as artists in the forties.

Through their style of art and system of education, the modern practice of art started in Bangladesh, in the former East Pakistan. Among them, Zainul Abedin, Safiuddin Ahmed, Anwarul Huq (1918-80), Khwaja Shafique Ahmed (1925-?) and Quamrul Hassan (1921-88) were creative artists whose names are worth mentioning. The works of the artists in the forties is the attempt to reflect the nature of the native land and the life and livelihood of the common people. Although the Bengal School was then dominant in the Kolkata-centric practice of art, these artists did not accept its religion, mythology, and history based subject; however, they practiced some aspects of this style. The city life also did not have much attraction for them.



Struggle by Zainul Abedin-1969



Women by Qumrul Hasan -1949

### 9. Academic Art Practices in the Fifties

The fifties was also a time for Bengalis to introspect and develop progressive thinking. A great part of the intellectual and youth society was attracted to the progressive secular politics and the revival of indigenous culture. The leading artists of the fifties were also active in this sociopolitical movement. As a result, at the first stage of the respective art production of many of these artists, a political pledge, opinion against social inequity and injustice, and sympathy towards people from the lower segments can be noticed. In the fifties the first time our artists could directly experience western art through travel and opportunities to receive training. Quite a few artists received scholarships in this period and received long term training in many countries. The most appealing and popular style of art in the art world of Europe and United States of America, during the fifties, was Abstract Expressionism and semi-abstract styles in different forms. The international appearance and appeal of the abstract style naturally attracted our artists the most. Thus, among the modern European styles, abstraction was the style that was the most practiced. Influence of Cubism and Surrealism can be observed from time to time. Inspiration of individual western artists can also be noticed.



Qayyum Chowdhury-2008



Mohammad Kibria-1989

### 10. Academic Art Practices in the Sixties

From the end of the fifties and throughout the sixties, military autocracy appeared and began to develop in the political sphere of Pakistan. Military rule was in force in Pakistan during most of this period and the fundamental rights of the people and the democratic system was ruthlessly restrained. The autocratic military government was

very wrathful, particularly towards the rightful demands of the people of East Pakistan and took the policy of terming any movement as a plot against the state and applying force to deal with it was adopted by them. A large number of progressive political and cultural workers were put in prison for a long time. The activities of the cultural world became suppressed due to state obstruction and harassment. From the latter half of the sixties, public opinion against military autocracy started to become stronger and the barrenness continued in cultural activities until this public opinion created a spirit of resistance within cultural activities.

### **11. Academic Art Practices in Bangladesh: After Independence of Bangladesh**

A constant struggle against the oppression of Pakistan gradually intensified during the fifties and sixties. The mass movement of sixty eight-sixty nine logically resulted in the Liberation War. The Liberation War of seventy one is the eventual consequence of this struggle. The deprivation and discrimination was cultural just as it was political and economic. The authorities of Pakistan were active against the language, tradition and culture of Bengalis. Thus, the struggle of East Pakistanis for their rights was a national revival on the one hand, and an effort to gain freedom for their own tradition and culture, on the other. One of the key inspirations of the Liberation War was to create an environment conducive to unimpeded practice and development of language and culture. Thus, the Liberation War had a cultural dimension just as it had a political-military dimension. Writers, artists, singers, cultural workers, everyone played an important part in the struggle.

### **12. Academic Art Practices the Eighties**

The vitality that was initiated in the art world during the seventies immediately after the Liberation War sustained during the eighties as well. The appearance of a huge number of artists in painting, printmaking and sculpture was apparent in this decade too. The art of this decade is full of substantial diversity due to experimentation with new styles and manner in various branches and media of art. The appearance of a large number of women artists is also another trend of this decade. After Novera Ahmed in the fifties, we come to the seventies to find only painter Farida Zaman and sculptor Shamim Shikdar. During the eighties, many women artists are seen who established themselves by competing on a par with their male counterparts. The emotional liveliness originating from self-discovery that was observed during the seventies lost its spirit quickly due to the subsequent disappointment and the abstract style of the earlier period again began to regain prominence.

### **13. Academic Art Practices in the Nineties**

The revolutionary changes that have been taking place in the international art arena since the latter half of the twentieth century began to have a significant influence in the art world of Bangladesh beginning from the nineties. The idea of Conceptual Art has in fact completely changed the disciplines of the traditional methods of fine art that were prevalent for decades. For many years, visual art was practiced mainly in the distinct branches of three different media- painting, sculpture and printmaking. Of course, many new materials were added with the advent of the twentieth century, such as - collage or mixed media, photography, use of found or manufactured objects, addition of light and sound, or kinetic sculptures. However, although the distinction between the media became unclear at some points amidst all this, it never completely vanished.

### **14. Academic Art Practices in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh has created ample scope for art education which has been evolved through long process through different constraints and limitation of the local society. With the higher demand of the market interest in art education has now considered as an important and valued profession. At present, apart from Faculty of Fine Art Dhaka University, major public universities of the country has art institutes providing higher education on art, some private universities doing the same. At present yearly students enrollment higher education (BFA &MFA course) is about 858. This institutes also offering MFA courses for its students.

### **End Notes**

Many of the artists among those who have engaged in creating from the nineties and onwards have shown their competence and potential in various media and method. It is very much possible that the shape of art in Bangladesh in the next few decades will flourish in their hands.

The contemporary art of Bangladesh has evolved and advanced in many diverse media and styles in the course of six decades of history. In an extremely poverty struck country and within an environment of a huge uneducated population, this journey of the fine arts has naturally been hampered time and again. Artists have had to practice art amidst extremely adverse circumstances by the lack of minimum availability of materials and institutional facilities, uncertainty of employment and limitation in earning a living. Along with the practice of art, the artist had to struggle against the indifferent and often hostile social atmosphere. The artist has also had to take part in the struggle of the people against violation of political, economical and cultural rights. Although political and cultural freedom of Bengalis were achieved in the post seventy-one independent Bangladesh area

and the atmosphere of art practice became much more favorable, it was not completely smooth. The lack of institutional facility and shortage of materials did not go away, the certainty of employment and livelihood was yet to be achieved. In the new state, the artist had to be occupied with duties beyond creative pursuits: duty of establishing institutions, duty of earning the minimum of professional convenience, duty of artistic decoration in the affairs of the state and institutions and playing an advisory role in that regard etc.

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### Author's Profile



**Arafat Hosen** received MFA in Fine Art from University of Development Alternative, Bangladesh and also accomplished of his B. A. (Honors) in Fine Art from Shanto-Mariam University of creative Technology, Bangladesh. He is functioning as a Lecturer and Advisor, Department of Graphic Design & Multimedia at Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology since 2009, besides that he has done several successful solo and group painting exhibition in Bangladesh. As an artist he is very much fascinated about doing portraiture especially regional people and their expression. In 2006 he went to India Darjeeling and stayed one month long to capture the beauty of mountain (Himalayan part of India), tea garden and indigenous people and their lives. Later on in 2008, he reflected those by his first solo exhibition named "Passage to the Soul". His last exhibition "Lively Lives" in 2013 was a great expression of diverse colorful attribute of local people, where artist inspired from traditional rickshaw art. As a teacher he love to work with child art, consequently he went to Kamalapur Railway station to tech art among street children to quest their inner feeling about their life by art, as a part of research project of his Honors Dissertation. Later on from 2009 to 2012 he worked as a part time guest art teacher at American International School Dhaka Bangladesh. He conducted some art workshop with Rangpur, Dinajpur High school students- funded by CIDA education project. His present focus is on Digital Illustration which is a newly merged subject in his teaching area, experimenting with contemporary digital drawing tab to create character drawing for comic book illustration and for games industry.