

# Zubeida Agha

By Waliullah

Technically speaking, Zubeida Agha's early works are unmistakably imitative and no effort is made by her to hide this fact which immediately establishes her as an honest artist. For there is absolutely nothing wrong in that as no artist or writer can escape this phase of his development. The urge to express oneself comes before one has mastered his individual, independent style of self-expression. At this stage, one cannot help speaking in a borrowed language.

But it happens during this period — that a certain work is suddenly produced which is distinctively his own. This is usually the single picture to announce the arrival of a talented artist.

This work, in the case of Zubeida Agha, is undoubtedly her **Cotton-pickers**. For the first time she seems to be able here to reduce her vision to a comprehensible size. The details are no longer too complicated or bewildering to prevent understanding of the form in its entirety. She also seems to have learnt to discard them so as to be able to concentrate on the discovery of the basic, simple beauty.

## Other works

Most of her other works of the same year (1945) such as **The Living Room**, **The Riders**, **Dances**, cannot be treated as anything more than scrap-book experiments, mostly imitative. Her vision has yet to become clear; she has yet to get rid of the fear of colour which is noticeable in the tendency to use it compartmentally by putting thick, dividing lines. Philosophically, she is still lost in the labyrinthine complexities of it, not knowing clearly what is it that she must seek. Her inner sensibility is often dulled by this baffling entanglement with the result that patterns are left half-developed before they could arrive at their final logical conclusion. **The Riders**, the theme of which is that man can conquer Time, is an example of this.

Besides, one cannot but notice a dark and dominant mood that hangs heavy over her early painting which may easily be mistaken for a note of frustration.

Zubeida Agha's painting of the following year shows no remarkable change except for one solitary piece of work which like **Cotton-pickers** of the previous year, once again forces our attention. Done in light colours with straight lines supporting the pattern, it is a happy exception, since during this period, still unable to gain deeper insight into her subject, she is always too much troubled by a sense of discipline and loyalty to the academic experience in preference to emotional experience. We see works like **Wisdom** which has an egg in the centre and a Picasso face and **The Landscape With Stones**. In all these we find her vision obstructed by visions of others.

## "The Wind" & "The Bridge"

Among other paintings of 1946 perhaps **The Wind** and **The Bridge** deserve special mention, the first one because of the way equilibrium between the strongly blowing wind and the solid mass is maintained and the second one for its composition which would have been perfect had not the artist used cross bars demarcated by almost parabolic lines, thereby weakening the structure.

In **The Horses**, which came in the year of partition, we see two horses, one galloping and the other pulling back as if about to halt. The contrast between the emotions, one seemingly arrested and the other in full swing, is the main point of the painting. The swab of a vague, draped human figure in one corner (the horses face him), the angular walls, the contrasting positions of the two animals, the preponderance of red with green used at the base combine to give it the lightness of an idea which transforms the physical conflict as revealed in the behaviour two horses into something more than what is actually one is supposed to see. The friction of opposite forces are seen to vanish; they almost meet in harmony.

That Zubeida Agha is a sensitive artist becomes apparent when one sees her self-portrait, also done in 1947. Extremely analytical, it reveals a searching mind which is beautiful because it is honest, though perhaps slightly pathetically so. Her self-criticism draws strength from angular, sharp lines: there is no trace whatever of self-satisfaction which is avoided by refraining from using rounded lines. The use of diagonal, horizontal and vertical lines are



Self-portrait

brought into play with decisive forthrightness not for the sake of style but to underline the inner strength an artist needs in his lonely battle. The straight lines in the self-portrait flow into one another in a pattern which also reveals a sense of inner modesty without which no artist can achieve anything. Here Zubeida Agha gazes at herself with remarkable simplicity. The eyes are beautiful because they seek beauty not within herself but outside, through her intellect.

The use of grey and white is generally rare in the artist's works but when they are handled, they show a sense of balance and extreme delicacy that is remarkable. One notices this in her **Metamorphosis** which is based on as abstruse a theme as that of **The Creation**, here her grey and white also create an effect of decorative design which reveals her faint link with the past, though now considerably filtered through her modernised sensibility.

**Her Life** is supposed to depict the birth and its subsequent progress through various stages. Drawn in sections, she herself describes it as a symphony in painting. But this symphony does not lie in the arrangement of pattern and colour but in the very abstracted idea reached through a process of intellectual analysis that is highly individualised for any attempt at explanation. Anyway, it is an abiding creation which again shows that when the artist can free herself from the overbearing sense of the need to adhere to what she had learnt during her academic period, she can bring out simply the salient, underlying features with fluidity that only goes to illustrate her talent.

**Her Life** also reminds one of Henry Moore's sketches for sculptures which are simple, casual and yet so substantial. The same influence is noticeable also in some of her later works such as **Seated Woman**.

**Life** and **Metamorphosis** were both done in 1948. The following year was almost empty and she produced nothing much during this period except **Life** symphony mentioned already. During the subsequent two years she subjected herself to a vigorous but scientific training abroad, all the time, however, producing sketches, small but quite large in numbers.

## Clifton Lights

Back home, Zubeida Agha came out with **Clifton Lights** in 1953 which is a sparkling production and where night is gay as if the spirit has conquered "the forest of the night."

However, the beneficial results of the tour abroad and the experience accumulated there did not begin to show fully until the year after when for the first time she appears to have finally evolved a definite style. She suddenly begins to reveal natural confidence and spontaneity and also

seems to have mastered her technique as also the art of treating her subjects exactly the way she needs to treat them. Another remarkable improvement is apparent in the way she handles her colour. The areas of colours do no longer stand demarcated; the integral quality of each colour is understood so that even when they are placed in contrasting positions they do not clash with one another. Her **Still Life** with dancing figures and a relieving window on the top left corner opening on to a blue sky is an excellent example of her new confidence in the use of colour. She has become almost superb as a colourist.

## "House with Flowers"

Then comes something which is really startling: it is her **House with Flowers**. A definite digression in style and mode of expression from whatever she has produced before, the work in my opinion, may be the foundation of her future artistic expression.

In **House with Flowers**, the arrangement of lines show that she excels when she employs cubistic and not circular, womb-like patterns to express her idea. However, what attracts one most in this painting is the feeling of condensation it gives. This condensation is achieved with remarkable ease. The emotion condensed is rich in spatial quality which is neither perpendicular nor horizontal. The bright colours are held together closely in excellent dynamic equilibrium: the patterns and colours show no weak link in the chain which ends in a compact, wholesome design. There is no sudden gasping sigh to disturb the intense emotion held by a hundred strings and yet so effortlessly.

**Kite** is another similar type of work, recently finished, which reveals the same qualities that characterise the former one. Both show her newly revealed ability to transmit her feelings to others. Though her art will remain abstract and individual, she is no longer alone.

A visit to East Pakistan last year resulted in the production of some casual, simple, yet good works, of which **Sylhet Tea Garden**, **A Scene from Sylhet**, **Moharram Procession** and **Chittagong Hill Tracts** deserve mention.

## "Trees & Human Figures"

But perhaps these casual sketches have led to yet another remarkable painting which was still wet when I saw it. This is her **Trees and Human Figures**. In this, human figures and trees are strewn all over apparently asymmetrically against a flat, buff-coloured background. The figures retain the expressionable simplicity and mobility of the **Cotton-pickers** painted nearly ten years ago but unlike the figures of the previous one, they are placed in a disorganised fashion without any sense of continuity.

Yet the figures seem to move in unison: lack of imbrication does not affect the basic, almost lyrical movement of the figures because they are not bound by any mundane, descriptive explanation of causality. The beauty of a flowing river lies in its movement abstract and timeless; not in its purpose which is precisely to flow towards the sea. The movement of the limb of a man going to shop is in itself complete; it is not essential to know whether he is going East or West or whether he is going to buy a pair of shoes. On the other hand, when detached from the immediate reality of surroundings the form of a movement is immediately thrown into timeless space.

This work definitely shows that after traversing a labyrinthine path where the artist often found herself inextricably lost, she has come out in the open with her emotion weed-free, clear and direct. She is now on her own.



Human Figures and Trees.