

## **Emerging Art in Bangladesh**

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### **Abstract**

Bangladesh has quite some repute relating to contemporary art and artists. We examine the artistic landscape, its influences, and its evolution. The country has gone through radical changes each and every decade, and understanding the social, political, economic, and artistic fabric is crucial to understanding the contemporary art scene of Bangladesh. Heeding tradition while embracing modern artistic mediums and philosophies is a common aspect of most of the artwork in Bangladesh. It's an amalgamation of the local and the global, staying true to its roots while experimenting, evolving, and expanding. It's a tight rope between the novel and the familiar. Bangladeshi art today has been garnering global attention, and with good reasons. The output is prolific and imaginative without being facile. Dealing with the constant loss and reshaping of identity, art is where the people take refuge and feel empowered, both the creators and the consumers.

### **Keywords**

Bangladesh, art, Zainul Abedin

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Bangladesh, despite being less than 50 years old, has its own history of arts that traces its roots to Bengali culture. But that art has morphed into something completely different, influenced by the nation's own unique history and way of life.

To understand the nuances of emerging and contemporary art in Bangladesh, we have to take into account the political and social milieu in which it evolved.

The partition of the subcontinent in 1947 was a pivotal moment that shaped the subsequent social, political and artistic landscape.

The sketches of the Bengal Famine of 1943, by Zainul Abedin, made him an acclaimed artist. He, along with some of his contemporaries from West Bengal, opted to settle down in East Bengal, which later became Bangladesh. The first contemporary art school in the newly formed state, known as the Government Institute of Art, is their legacy. This institute is now the Institute of Fine Art at the University of Dhaka.

In response to the tremendous changes going on, a plethora of new artists emerged. Their depiction of social reality in their work gave birth to a whole new school of thought, philosophy, and art, and the new institute played a paramount role in training, nurturing, and supporting these new artists and giving them a voice. Qamrul Hasan, Saifuddin Ahmed, and Anwarul, contemporaries of Zainul Abedin, were some of the other famous artists who played an important role.



**Image 1: Zainul Abedin**

However, post-1950s, there was a massive shift. In the fifties, painters embraced abstraction. According to the famous art critic Manzoorul Islam, there were two reasons for the change. "First, it was an inner compulsion, an urge to express themselves through a language, through metaphors, images, sensibilities and symbolism that they thought most clearly represented their artistic, emotional and intellectual understanding of their art. The second reason can be ascribed to a social compulsion. The establishment... disapproved of any human or figurative representation as it supposedly contravened religious strictures."

Now famous artists and sculptors, such as Abu Taher, Samarjit Roy Chowdhury, and Anwar Jahan, were some of the most notable names to influence the sixties. Moving on to the seventies, there were radical changes again. East Bengal was renamed East Pakistan in 1955, and in 1971 it became Bangladesh. The creation of this separate entity, Bangladesh, molded the art of the 70s.



**Image 2: Liberation War by Zainul Abedin**

The sixties also saw artists and sculptors such as Abu Taher, Samarjit Roy Chowdhury, Anwar Jahan, and many other notable names. The creation of Bangladesh as a separate entity influenced the art of the 70s. According to author Abul Mansur, "A new generation of artists came to the scene, who adopted a more figurative language and tried to initiate an interaction between the traditional and the contemporary. A good number of artists, including sculptors and printmakers, began to work in more varied and innovative styles." Monirul Islam, Shahid Kabir, Mahmudul Haque, and Kalidas Karmarkar were some of the other notable painters and artists of the 70s.

Some of the major aspects that pervaded the new schools of art were analytical realism and a sustained satiric tone. To cope with the fragmentation and the identity change, artists went back to the mythical past for themes and symbols. To preserve some of the old cultural roots, they also found refuge in folk art.

In a country undergoing rapid changes every decade, the politics of identity has always played an important role in the life and art of Bangladesh. The impact of the politics of

identity, formed through the selection and reinvention of tradition in modern times, is quite evident. Identity, for its people and for the nation as a whole, has been formed, changed, and reformed, mostly in the face of profound political, economic, and cultural challenges. In the current postmodern state, globalization, economic opportunities and an ever-increasing exodus have affected a transnational public sphere, where the concept of identity is no longer bound to the locality but has international elements instilled in it.

The dawn of the 21st century ushered in a new era for art in Bangladesh. Artists began to focus on social justice, rampant industrialization, gentrification, and man's disconnect from nature. The medium also changes, with art, video, and audio installations and newer forms of sculpture coming to the forefront. The absence of interaction with nature motivated the creation of art installations where the viewer can have a physical interaction with the artwork.

Some of the major issues facing Bangladesh today include the Rohingya refugee crisis in its borders with Myanmar, gender inequality, social and indigenous rights, economic inequity, and labor exploitation. These challenges are finding a prominent voice in the art of Bangladesh today.

A number of institutions have been established in the last couple of decades to boost the creation of a contemporary art environment in the nation. Many Bangladeshi artists are exhibited internationally today and several prominent artists practice outside the country, on interdisciplinary media in Europe, America and Japan. Current Bangladeshi born stalwarts today are Tayeba Begum Lipi, Runa Islam, Hasan Elahi, Naeem Mohaiemen, Firoz Mahmud, Rana Begum and Mohammad Rakibul Hasan, who work on various media

including video, installation, photography, text, sound, painting, and other new art forms and who have garnered international recognition.

The contemporary art scene of Bangladesh is one that is mindful of its history, social, cultural and colonial while taking into account the current issues facing the nation. In countries like Bangladesh, tradition and modernity go hand in hand and is distinct from the more usual outlook in developed nations where tradition and modernity are considered quite different, sometimes distinctly opposed. Kapur (2000) has opined that tradition is empowered to transform routinely transmitted materials from the past into charged forms that can claim contemporary and radical effects. In this sense, the concept of tradition is inseparable from the idea and experience of modernity and that finds ample reflection in the contemporary art of Bangladesh. But we have to realize that the past is not a facile adoption in today's artistic landscape, but an intelligent adaptation of traditional signifiers. It might be rooted in the past, but it's shaped by the current winds of change, with both feet firmly placed in the present, looking towards a glorious future. Expectations are high and the collective artistic imagination of Bangladesh today is nothing if not fertile.

## References

- Images from Wikipedia

**About the Author**

Ms. Jayashree Bhattacharjee has been associated with teaching English in Schools and Colleges for two decades. For the last few years, she is busy with literary activities like publishing an Essay Book, Blogging, and writing poems, and has received many accolades for her poems.

