

## **THE ART OF SELF DISCOVERY**

The announcement of an exhibition at Alhamra of work done by students at the National College of Arts during a six-week workshop, was received with considerable scepticism.

Of course, student art is regularly displayed in Lahore but only in the form of a thesis exhibition and that too, on the premises of the NCA and the Punjab University's art department.

Quite a few among Lahore's art lovers/critics thought the NCA was getting overly ambitious by offering these exercises for public viewing and scrutiny.

They were, however, happily proved wrong, for the work on display was a tribute to academic initiative and the students' ability to respond to the call of innovation.

The workshop was the brainchild of a young NCA teacher, Sumaya Durrani who has returned home after post-graduate studies from abroad.

Her own work puts her in the vanguard of the country's modern painters. She invited students from all classes (but mainly the first and second year classes) to join her in the workshop, after normal study hours, and explore different forms of artistic expression.

These exercises were not primarily related to the curriculum for examinations.

The eagerness with which the students, particularly those of the first year, many of whom had not received any art education before joining the NCA was very encouraging. Among other things, it revealed the students' healthy response to any appeal to their ingenuity and their readiness to join in a journey of discovery of art as well as themselves.

In a sense, it also confirmed the thesis that, to some extent at least, the indifference of students to their disciplines is due to unimaginatively planned curricula and the failure of teachers to convey to their pupil that acquisition of knowledge is a very personal adventure with all its thrills and triumphs.

The objective of the workshop, as explained by Sumaya Durrani, was to pull the students out of the narrow concept of design, drawing, painting, and sculpture and rid them of the tendency to draw or model the drawings on what is visible and definite. Also, the idea was to encourage students to experiment with designs, create new images, bring out whatever lies in their subconscious and then move from the verbal narrative to the visual narrative, discover in images a multiplicity of meaning and sustain the artistic gesture.

The exhibition, a large one, comprising about 500 drawings, fell into several categories.

The first exercise was aimed at creating shapes from forms made by free line drawing. Out of the 100 or so forms made on a sheet, each student selected certain forms and tried to develop them into multidimensional shapes, exploring, in the process, possibilities of utilising space and depth for visual effect.

The second category of exercises was far more interesting.

The students were asked to draw their immediate surrounding, interpret it through a process similar to free association of images and ideas, and to reconstruct their environment.

The exercise obviously inspired the students to think about themselves and their environment, to make free comments, and to visualise their future. This involved a series of drawings ending in sculpture.

The work showed delightful variety.

A first year student, for instance, visualised life as a process towards a mature comprehension of objects and events.

Another student reflected on the radio cassette in his room, moved on to music and ended up with a grave of music.

A similar comment on the place of music in contemporary society was made by another student who transformed the flute into a buffalo.

A young Karachi girl explored the different layers of appearance and reality and explored the correlation between symbols of sweetness (honey) and bitterness (gallows).

A young man found the pursuit of worldly goods meaningless.

Another boy concentrated on the electric bulb and the different shapes it suggested posed the question as to why the bulb could not be square and answered it by becoming a square bulb himself.

Perhaps most of these drawings lacked in terms of technique but it would have been unfair to expect perfect drawings. However, what impressed everyone was the narrow range of allowance sought for youthful exuberance and the quality of awareness of social reality and reactions to it. For instance, one student produced a sculpture in the form of a lament on his condition as a passive witness to the disintegration of the indigenous values, arts and crafts, and the raising of western superstructures over decaying indigenous bases. Another boy created a sculpture depicting his longing for solitude at a point in space higher than the flight of sturdy birds and made a special point that one could walk through his sculpture. A young girl traced her journey in time and indicated the alternatives available to the courageous.

All this was good material to think over not only for the art teacher but also for the sociologist, for most students indicated dissatisfaction with their environment, visualised life as an alley leading to emptiness, and seemed devoid of any definite, positive goals.

The third category showed drawings, paintings and collages made as a deliberate effort to identify objects through images other than their traditional ones, to discover meanings in forms and experience the delight offered by free juxtaposition of colours, lines, and forms.

An essential part of the exhibition was the exposure of the young students to the public.

It was heartening to find some extremely articulate students who could discuss their ideas and their work with confidence, and even those who had to struggle for words impressed us, at least, they realised the role of the artist as a conscious experimenter with ideas and not merely with lines drawn on a sheet of paper.



**Ibn Abdur Rehman**, also known as **I.A. Rehman** (1 September 1930 - 12 April 2021) was a prominent Pakistani journalist and a [peace](#) and human rights activist. He was Director of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) since 1990. He served as Editor in Chief of the Pakistan Times, the national English daily from 1988 -1990 and was the founding chair of the *Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy*. I.A. Rehman was the recipient of the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Peace and International Understanding in 2004 and the Nuremberg International Human Rights Award in 2003. In addition to his prolific journalistic contributions in the form of numerous columns and papers, his published works include 'Art and Crafts of Pakistan' (1994), 'Jinnah as a Parliamentarian' (*co-editor* 1977) and a collection of his columns entitled 'Pakistan Under Siege' (1990).