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Tale of the Tile – An exhibition at The Mohatta Palace Museum
By Marjorie Hussain

It is seldom one has the opportunity to enjoy historic arts and crafts of the country assembled together. Particularly, work in clay, which is an ancient tradition universally, and the glimpses one sees of pieces from historic sites, leave one wanting more. In present times it appears that traditional potters carry on with their work, there are few contemporary potters as we see in gallery exhibitions that match the artists of past times.

An excellent tradition of the Mohatta Palace *modus operandi* is to keep exhibitions long enough for word to spread and for people to plan their visits. At present there is a stunning exhibition of the ceramic traditions of Pakistan and it would be a great pity to miss this rare experience. I cannot imagine how the organizers were able to do so much in such a short time. The exhibits covering the ground floor include the installation of an entire corridor from the Shah Jahan Mosque, Thatta. The experience of walking along the hall reminded me of the Museum in Germany, once East Berlin, where it seems they had reconstructed the walls of Babylon.

It was fascinating to view the ancient pots from Mehrgarh, Baluchistan that are older than Moenjodaro relics. Obviously used as storage utensils, the pieces were delicately decorated with very contemporary linear forms of animals. Unfortunately, there were no brochures or written materials available for visitors though the guides on duty were well informed and quick to point out the salient features of the exhibition. I particularly enjoyed the “Potter’s Atelier,” a room reproducing the timeless ambience of the potter’s tools; the seemingly lit ovens, materials and space.

Gazing at the colourful artworks, one found an entire wall covered with reproductions of the decorative panels of the Wazir Khan mosque in Lahore. An extensive collection of lattice work pieces from Hala, Thatta, Kamarro Sharif, Pir Patho and Hyderabad caught the eye – delicately worked and designed pieces. This beautiful façade of the tomb of Tahir Khan Naher from Sitpur, Muzzafargarh will, I’m sure, inspire modern designers and artists with its superlative design element and colouration. Three were arches from the shrine of Pir Mohammad Ashraf Shah Quraishi, and a globular storage pot from Naushero circa 3800-3500 BC. A collection of well rendered watercolours of historic sites and a collection of tiles for the restoration of the Lahore Fort were interesting, but what really was awe inspiring was the roof tile from Darazza, Khairpur, from the shrine of Sachal Sarmast, late 19th century. Thus it was determined to me to go again to the extraordinary exhibition, it is meant to be seen at leisure and savoured in detail. I hope all the school children of Karachi visit the exhibition even though schools are currently on holiday.

Remembering Mian Salahuddin.

An imaginative approach to the work in the field of ceramics exemplified the work of Mian Salahuddin. He was the first “studio potter” in Pakistan and a superb exponent of his chosen discipline. Mian was a contemporary of Bashir Mirza and Adil Salahuddin, with Ahmed Khan, Akhter Zuberi and others; they constituted to the first batch of students in the Design Department to graduate from the newly structured National College of Arts, Lahore, in 1962. Mian was a complex personality, respected among his peers but a loner.

Friends consider that his early traumatic experience of losing his father affected him all his life. His was from an agricultural background in Sialkot and at the age of 11, Mian witnessed the murder by shooting of his father by an antagonist.

At the NCA, Shakir Ali, who took a keen interest in his students, was delighted that, through NCA, Mian got a Fullbright scholarship for a Ph.D. in the States. Adil Salahuddin relates how when Shakir Ali suggested that Mian leave his work behind for NCA, Mian went berserk, smashing his pots in a rage until Shakir Ali and Adil stopped him. Shakir saying “Do what you like.” After that, on Mian’s return, on many occasions I dropped in on the NCA and found Mian writing notes to Shakir sahib; still holding a grudge, he refused to speak to him. We all found it a bit of a joke and even Mian laughed when I ragged him about it.

He was enormously talented and produced beautiful pieces, but as a teacher, he was a strict disciplinarian. Students complained that he refused to let them use the kiln and Mian said that it was because they were not serious about their work. Mian had his first solo exhibition when I was running The Gallery in Sindhi Muslim Housing Society in May 1970. I always found him very easy to get on with, smiling and receptive. He had produced a number of clay objects, paper-weights and small pots, as well as bigger pieces. He has also worked on wall-based metal plates covering the surfaces with colour. I was amazed one day when Nagi visited the gallery in Mian’s absence. Looking at the wall plaques, he opined, “This is a lonely man, one who feels sorry for himself.” But on that occasion, Mian was very happy. A lot of distinguished guests turned up and the artist sold a lot of his work and was well reviewed. After that there were several exhibitions, and through the years Mian’s work became more and more powerful and in demand. In the collection of the Mohatta Palace exhibition, one finds my ‘Galloping Horse’s Head,’ a unique work that I bought from the first exhibition and that reminds me of the artist constantly.

Mian became Head of the Fine Arts Department, NCA, and his work remained immaculate and totally unique. He retired some years back and in February this year, he lost a long fought battle with a brain tumour. One occasion that stands out in memory is that of an exhibition held at the VM Gallery in later years, I overheard one fledgling writer ask, “ Why are you not showing your work in Gilgit and those areas?” Mian answered promptly, “ I think they need a doctor more than they need me there!” Dear Mian, an artist irreplaceable.