

An exhibition revisits six decades of artist Jogen Chowdhury's body of work

◆ *The Indian* EXPRESS

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The Indian Express 10 November 2019



Jogen Chowdhury at his exhibition at the Kolkata gallery. (Source: Emami Art, Kolkata Centre for Creativity)

The ongoing exhibition 'Reverie & Reality' at Emami Art, Kolkata Centre for Creativity, brings together your work of over six decades. How do you look at the evolution? You had earlier mentioned how you would look at the larger picture but it seems that now details interest you more.

It is interesting for me to look at so many years of my work. Every exhibition is of interest to the artist. In my career, I would have made over 2,000 works and this show brings together 125 from my personal collection, and 75 more. It is around 1/10th of what I might have done. The display includes life studies and portraits I made as a college student, that tell curious visitors how I started my work. The later works include oils, watercolours and, also, more intricate lines in my cross-hatchings that depicted intense expressions. I also started using more colour.

Do memories of your early childhood, from Faridpur in Bangladesh, colour your work?

We used to live in a village that had trees and temples all around. My father was a zamindar with a lot of land. There was a community hall, outside which the Durga Puja mandap would be set up. We would have community theatre performances, where the villagers would participate. During the festive season, I used to observe the kumbharas (artisans) create statues of Durga and Saraswati. I would pick up the natural colours left by artisans and paint with them. I was extremely influenced by the manner in which they depicted Durga's eyes. This influence reflects in my work as well. I often draw larger-than-life eyes of women.

During Partition, you were eight or nine years old. In what way did your trauma leave a lasting impact on your work?

That was a hard time for us. Initially we stayed with my uncle. My father got a job but he was not interested, so the onus of looking after the family fell on my elder brother. The refugees played a major role in the Left movement at the time and my two elder brothers also joined the Communist party. I was not directly involved in politics and disagreed with some of their ideologies but the situation did make me socially and politically more conscious. I began reading a lot of magazines and writing poetry.

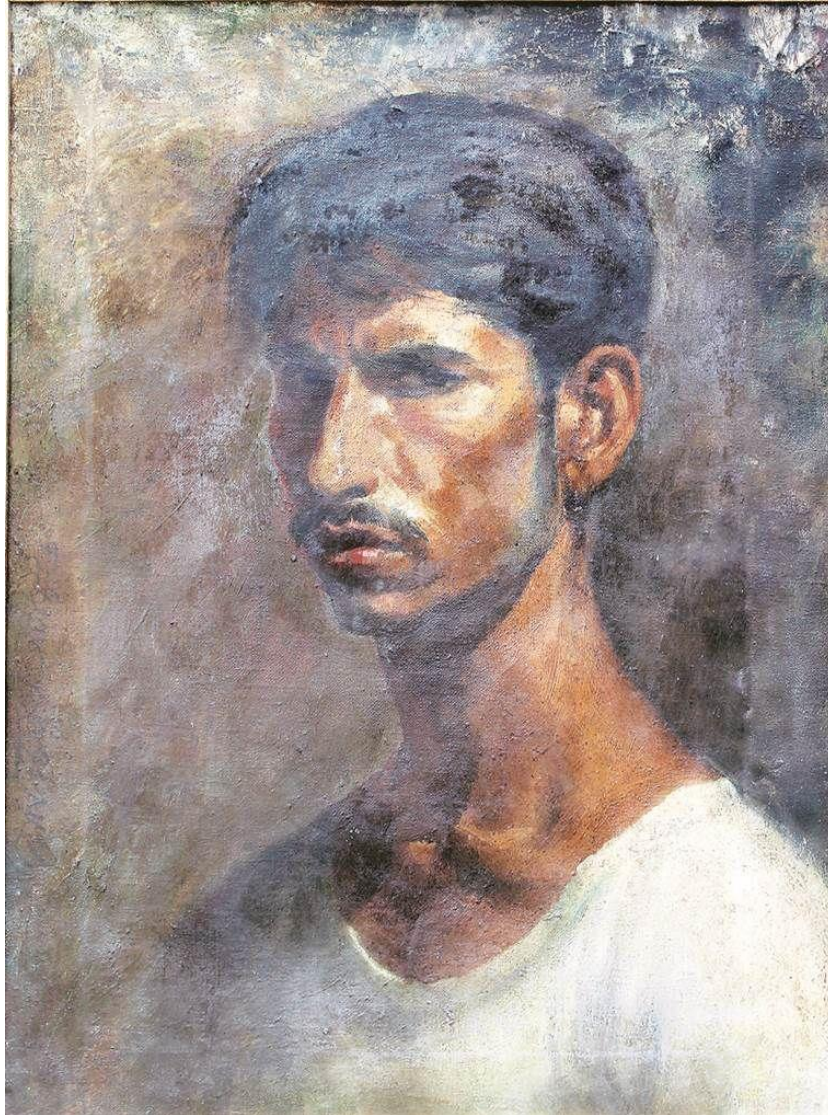
In the past, you've lamented how back then there was no formal teaching of art history. When did you join art college?

I used to draw a lot. My father used to draw often and my mother did alpona (floor art) and was good at stitching. Perhaps, I got my artistic talent from them. My family was very supportive when I decided to pursue art. I did well in art college. Our college (Government College of Art & Craft, Kolkata) was established by the British and so was the academic course. There was emphasis on technique, with still life, nature studies, portraits, life studies and realism. Our exposure to art history was through visiting lectures by historians and the likes of filmmaker Bimal Roy. There was a very good library that had journals with writings of the Tagores, Nandalal Bose and several art critics.

Several of your earlier works were dark. Is it true that you sold your first work for Rs 125?

When I was in art school, it was all very realistic and academic. When I graduated from college, I started thinking about experimenting, how I should approach art in a way different from others.

In those years, I was an art teacher in a school in Howrah. My art was rooted in the social situation. I started representing people around me. There was also satire in my work. I was still in college when a visiting foreigner purchased a street scene I painted. At my first solo at Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata (in 1963), I sold only one work, for Rs 125. The exhibition was visited by several of my friends, including (poet) Shakti Chattopadhyay, (artist) Gopal Ghose. We went to a cafeteria to celebrate. Earlier, when we made art, the idea was not to sell. We were doing artwork like a poet writes poetry.



Deft Strokes: Self Portrait, 1963

For a long time after you returned to India from Paris — where you went in the 1960s, on a scholarship, to the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts — you did not produce much work.

International exposure disturbed the continuation of the work that I had been doing. In Paris, I saw several works by artists who have contributed to the development of modern art, and I was left wondering what should I do. I could not do what people in Europe were doing; that was based on their ideas. I was restless and continued to make drawings that were expressive. Finally, when I returned, I joined the Handloom Board in Madras (now Chennai). I wrote around 100 pages to understand what I should do. These writings were later published. I developed my own visual language. I was looking at our own country, the society, poverty and illiteracy. All along, my main subjects have been the people.

In your work, you have also commented on the politics of the times. One of your seminal works, Tiger in Moonlit Night criticised the Emergency. At the same time, you admired Indira Gandhi.

I was a curator at the Rashtrapati Bhavan when Emergency was declared, so I found myself in the middle of what was happening. Tiger in Moonlit Night showed a dead lady being attacked by a tiger in a moonlit sky. It depicted the fake emergency, and was an interplay between the real and the unreal. I admired Indira for several reasons, including her ability to take immediate decisions. She was in Santiniketan when Rabindranath Tagore was still there. During her time, art and culture were flourishing in India. Now, I don't think that is continuing.

How has it been to see politics more closely as a member of the Rajya Sabha? You have been sketching portraits of politicians in the House.

When I entered Rajya Sabha, I found it interesting to see several people whom I had only seen in newspapers till then. I started drawing portraits, and have completed almost 50 pages, with five-six people on each page. This includes portraits of politicians such as Ghulam Nabi Azad, Manmohan Singh, Sushma Swaraj and Smriti Irani. I hope to bring out a book before my term ends in April. I was always socially conscious, so when I entered Rajya Sabha in 2014, I was able to follow what people were talking about but I felt that for several people, politics is a profession. Not everyone is thinking about the nation. Some of the good ideas are not understood by everyone. After my tenure ends, I will concentrate more on my art. I am hungry to work more. I am old now and whatever time is left, I want to spend working for the sake of art.

You've been buying works by young artists. And, this year, you opened the Jogen Chowdhury Centre for Arts in Kolkata.

I began by buying works of my students when I was a teacher at Santiniketan, which I joined in 1987. That encouraged young students. Through the centre, I want to generate more interest in visual art and cultural activities; involve the people. It has space for residencies and showcases several of my own works from my personal collection.

This article appeared in the print edition with the headline 'All along, my main subjects have been the people'

<https://in.news.yahoo.com/exhibition-revisits-six-decades-artist-014735071.html>