

Ameena Ahuja's Recent Paintings

An Indian artist, who is better known abroad than in her homeland, paints against diverse backgrounds and interprets a variety of unusual themes.

by QURRATULAIN HYDER

AS young girls in Delhi, we had once resolved to devote ourselves to the cause of Art and Literature. We would live in quiet, picturesque villas (preferably in the South of France) and do nothing but paint and write. Being modest and unambitious by nature, we had also decided that, even if the world so desired, we would not exhibit or publish our masterpieces. Our work was for posterity.

As it transpired, since then, Ameena has mostly lived abroad—first as a student and then as the wife of an Indian diplomat. Many of her paintings are now in private collections. She has held exhibitions in New York, Moscow and London, and has painted in such diverse places as Shiraz (Iran) and Christchurch (New Zealand). She is more known abroad than in her homeland, India. Many art critics here perhaps would not know that, while she was still a schoolgirl, a leading art magazine of India had heralded Ameena Ahmed as a child prodigy. (She should not be confused with her namesake, artist Amina Ahmed of Calcutta, now Mrs Chintamani Kar.)

—Continued

SHIRAZ CYCLE II



SHIRAZ CYCLE III



THE ARTIST, AMEENA AHUJA, at the exhibition of her paintings held recently in the Lesnik-Kuhlik Gallery, New York. Mrs Ahuja says she is against such labels as 'woman artist', 'sculptress', 'poetess'... "Art transcends sex," she maintains.

The paintings of Ameena Ahuja (nee Ahmed) depict the drab greys of London, the golden blues of Samarkand and the greens and crimson of the rose-gardens of Hafiz. Her themes include Russian and Persian poetry, Indian ragas and raginis. Marc Chagall and Kandinsky, as well as the Indo-Mughals, have been her sources of inspiration.

All of which sounds pretty formidable. Any self-respecting critic would at once dive into such esoteric jargon as "the artist's interpretation of the Persian soul and the Slavic ethos and the Indic Weltanschauung; her substantial grasp of the basic motifs and the self-sufficiency of the non-representational pictorial values..." etc, etc.

A few months ago, an exhibition of Ameena's recent work was held at the Lesnik-Kuhlik Gallery, New York. The paintings included 27 collages of her Ragmala series, 9 based on the love poems of the Russian poet Yesinin. The Ragmala paintings attracted special attention.

We Indians know our Ragmalas—decorated with borders of Persian or Sanskrit inscriptions, showing delicate ladies under flowering trees, talking to deer or watching the monsoon clouds... The Ragmala artists depicted through these miniatures—which were the medium of their age—the personality of each raga or ragini, the mood, ras, atmosphere, season and colour associated with it. Many modern Indian artists have also taken up the theme.

"Sound Into Sight"

Ameena's Ragmala intrigued the foreign art critics. Going through the press clippings, I came across a rather startling statement: "Ameena Ahuja is racing ahead of nuclear physics: she has transformed sound into sight."

How on earth did she do that?

Another critic explained to his readers: "Ameena says she is endeavouring to interpret the Sanskrit theme: *dhvanim pasyat, rangam srusyetam!* ("Sound must be seen, colour must be heard.")

David L. Shirey of *The New York Times* was more lucid. He said: "The buffs of Indian music are most familiar with the eldritch whines and insistent twangs of *sitar*, *tabla* and *shehnai*. But do they have any idea what the sounds and rhythms of these instruments would look like translated into paintings? Ameena Ahuja, part Indian, has tried to explain the Indian ragas as visual experiences." (This unintentionally side-lighted an interesting fact: For an average sophisticated Westerner, our much-boosted Indian music abroad merely means "eldritch whines" and "insistent twangs"!)

The art critic further explained: "Ameena has addressed herself to this problem by creating paintings—collages that are intensely bright and bold in colour and sweepy in form, a mixture of figuration and abstraction."

Thank God for that. Ameena has mercifully not addressed herself to the problem through such abstractions as would baffle the uninitiated like yours truly.



TEEN-TAL (16 BEATS) ON THE TABLA

A leading modern artist of Pakistan once painted something immensely profound. She called it "The Fifth Symphony".

"I would have called it 'The Ninth Symphony'," remarked a Smart Alec.

Then a mere philistine timidly asked his erudite wife: "My dear, do you see that big pumpkin with a huge ear jutting out of an upturned chair? What is that?"

"Shh—stupid! That is the celebrated 'Fifth Symphony'. And the style is *Sur*... something."

"*Sur* nothing... It reveals the wholeness of the musical statement and fragmentation of the human psyche as could have also been seen by Camille Pissaro. It is intensely relevant to the human situation today, and yet it is not *pompier de gauche*..." a Knowing One held forth as the poor viewers stood around looking soulful, profound or plain ignorant...

Powerful And Dramatic

Luckily, Ameena's work can be understood not only by posterity—as we had once hoped—but also by people today. The Ragmala includes some of Ameena's favourite melodies, like Bageshri in *dhrupad* style. Like many of us, Ameena is a Ghalib fiend. She has painted Chhayana again and again—because Ghalib can be sung very effectively in that particular melody.

In her colourful "Raga Kafi", the collage is composed of a dancing peacock made up of real peacock feathers and an Indian miniature showing a woman playing *Holi*.

Ameena uses bits of terracotta, mica, old miniatures, pieces of embroidered or tie-and-dye silk. Her flaming colours and her symbolism are powerful and dramatic.

In her Shiraz Cycle, Ameena has employed calligraphy, miniatures and the Isfahan blue of the exquisite Iranian ceramics.

Ameena's involvement with India, Iran and Europe, especially Slavic Europe, is not accidental. It is partly due to her mixed parentage. Her father is the eminent barrister Nuruddin Ahmed, who has also served with distinction as Mayor of Delhi. Mrs

Ahmed was daughter of an English rabbi. Ameena was born in London and brought up in her father's tradition-loving family, which lived in the heart of Old Delhi. The family took great pride in its Mughal culture. Ameena started painting at a young age. Later, she joined the Slade School of Art, London. She did her B.A. with Russian from the University of London and broadcast from the Urdu Section of the BBC.

Ameena has a flair for languages. She speaks fluent Russian, Persian, Spanish and French. She may have also picked up Japanese, Thai and Maori since I met her last. Her Urdu is impeccable. I remember, in London, whenever some Indian or Pakistani students made off-colour remarks in her presence, taking her to be an English girl who would not understand, they were shocked into silence as Ameena lashed out at them in the most caustic Urdu of Old Delhi.

In 1955, Ameena returned home and joined the External Services of AIR. Jawaharlal Nehru appointed her the Government of India's official interpreter when Khrushchev and Bulganin visited this country. During the same year, she married Vishnu Ahuja of the IFS and went to Moscow.

Ganga To Volga

As a student, Ameena had studied Byzantine art. The three-year stay in Russia gave her a chance to have a closer look at the Slavic background—which is one-fourth her own, since her maternal grandmother was Russian.

South-east of the Volga lay the ancestral homeland of Mirza Ghalib. Ameena could also discover her affinity with Middle Asia and Iran because of their lasting cultural and racial links with her native India.

Ameena painted it all in retrospect. When she went to Bangkok, she painted Moscow. Delhi, of course, is all nostalgia. She painted Indian themes in the US.

Ameena was deeply attached to her mother who died a few years ago. After Mrs Nuruddin Ahmed's death in Delhi in 1969, Ameena tried to find some solace in her work. She visited Iran and painted the massive Shiraz Cycle. Now that she is in Bucharest, where her husband is posted as India's Ambassador to Rumania, she may be imbibing the hauntingly beautiful Rumanian-Turkish *mystique*. She will try to recapture the Moldavian spirit only when she is in some totally different land.

Ameena has not acquired the mannerisms, airs, self importance, etc, usually associated with artists and writers—especially those who have achieved a measure of fame and recognition. The moment importance arrives, sense of humour takes one's leave. Fortunately, this has not happened with Ameena Ahuja.

Ameena has been Associate Professor in Russian at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and has taught Russian verbs at Queen's College, New York. She has translated Chekov into Urdu and has written on Ghalib and Iqbal. She has also done ceramics, which she has decorated with Ghalib's couplets.

New York Television are making a film of Ameena's paintings for their educational services. Good for New York Television.