

In Remembrance

A Painter of our Times

Pran Nath Mago
1923 – 2006



Pran Nath Mago. circa 1988

On the morning of 31st July, 2006, I got a telephone call from my artist friend Yuriko Lochan that Professor Pran Nath Mago is no more. It was hard to believe as he maintained such a good health throughout his life. He was 83 years old.

For me he was 'Mago Sahib'. Sahib here is used in the reverential sense of the Orient. He was a true friend and guide who enlightened this writer in his artistic journey in more ways than one. He was an epitome of hope and wisdom. His passing away for me is like that of a person who is watching the rainbow in all its sparkling glory and suddenly the colours of which are eclipsed by the monstrous dark clouds amidst the crying of the birds.

Vipan Chandra who is a Professor of History at Wheaton College, Norton, Mass. (USA) in his 'A Memoir of Childhood, Terror and Grace', a special to *The Daily Yomiuri*, Japan, September 8, 2006 writes about Pran Nath Mago:

Summer was also the time when my young uncle, Pran Nath, with movie-star good looks and a lady-killer smile, would visit from Sir JJ School of Art in Bombay (now Mumbai) where he was a student. Sometimes he would sit on a stool in our verandah and magically transform the easel in front of him into portraits,

domestic and street scenes, or landscapes as I looked with fascination over his shoulders. This beloved uncle, who recently passed away after a distinguished career as artist, teacher and art critic never felt bothered by my intrusive presence. That was the way he was. He loved being surrounded by people, big or small, no matter what he was doing.

Mago was born on 22 August 1923 in Gujarkhan - a small town near Rawalpindi in western Punjab. His parents Ram Lal Mago and Parvati along with the family lived in a large walled-house, with tangerine, lime, guava, *jamun* plum, pomegranate, and *neem* margosa trees in its enclosed orchid. The home was located in Nai Burki, a neighbourhood not far away from the courthouse. His father practiced civil law mostly in the land-related-feuds in this agricultural region.

Mago's parents instilled in him the spirit of appreciation of beauty and encouraged him to pursue his artistic interests and his wife Prema patiently and devotedly stood by him in his creative endeavours.

Whereas, Tarlok Singh Chadha, his school teacher inspired him to practice art, and JM Ahiwasi, his mentor at the Sir JJ School of Art, Bombay, provided him invaluable insights in the realm of art.

The family suffered during the communal frenzy that suddenly erupted like a volcano at the time of the 1947 partition of the Punjab. Writing about this 'lethal explosion of religious strife and violence' Vipin Chandra records,

As we later climbed into the army vehicles, with each family allowed to take along only a small number of suitcases or steel trunks due to limited space, we know we would not be able to see our homes again. With armed soldiers standing on the outboards of our trucks, the convoy was to make its way via Jhelum and Lahore to the safe haven of Amritsar. On the way to, and passing through Lahore, we saw signs of extraordinary carnage everywhere: huge plumes of thick black smoke billowing out of burned villages on the edges of wheat and mustard fields, market areas deserted, with no human beings visible anywhere except those in our convoy. Gutted houses and shops, streets littered with bricks that had been hurled in some ignoble dance of death, and rotting human corpses that had not yet been taken away for disposal. Lahore, which my artist uncle told me later was a beautiful city of poetry and grace, exquisite palaces, forts, gardens, temples, mosques, and modern colleges where my grandpa, my father and two other uncles got their higher education, had been reduced to a ghost town during that dance.

Mago was a pious, kind and noble person who invented in himself an artist, teacher and art critic, and performed each role with utmost integrity, dignity and

distinction. And for this he had evolved his vision and drew his strength from the rich heritage of man and nature by remaining firmly rooted to his *janambhoomi* - birthplace - which greatly broadened, enriched and refined his outlook. His continuous interaction with the artistic expressions registered by folk, tribal and contemporary artists all over the globe inculcated in him a sense of objectivity for their appreciation and critical appraisal.

He was a fine human being in whose company you not only felt comfortable but elevated as well. I had the privilege of his company in which matters relating to life and art were shared, discussed and debated upon. Many a time we differed but seldom I found him losing his temper or exercising his authority to force upon his views on you. We had great respect for each other's views irrespective of our generational gap. He never made you feel small in his company.

He was an artist-teacher to the core and upheld its sanctity with all his passion and commitment. Ideals of his long years teaching at the Delhi College of Art can be observed in many of his students who are now well-known names on the Indian contemporary art scene. His academicism was not of a rigorous nature as he had undergone while he was a student of Sir JJ School of Art in the pre-1947 India but of a different nature which provided his students enough freedom to express their feelings in tune with the space and time in which they lived. It is this quality of his approach which earned him great reverence and response from his pupils and associates.

Mago was an artist of recognised eminence and created several significant works of art such as *The Bengal Famine*, *Catching Fish*, *Rumours*, *Siesta*, *Mourners*. His painting *Farewell* (Collection Punjabi University, Patiala) is a fine document on art and life. It captures the tragedy of thousands of Punjabi soldiers who laid down their lives in the first and second world wars on foreign battle fronts. Poet Amarjit Chandan has written a moving essay on the painting in his book *Nishani* (Navyug. 1997). Though Mago spoke Punjabi fluently but could not read or write it, he took the book to a Punjabi writer and requested him to read it for him. He was moved to tears hearing the words Chandan had written. Many a time he expressed his immense praise for Chandan's writing to me. In my knowledge both of them never met each other.



Farewell. 1945

About this painting Vipin Chandra writes in his memoir:

As I look back on his career, it is no surprise to me that most of his work that early on won him nationwide fame showed human action and interaction young soldiers, boarding trains for war duty, women hugging each other and shedding tears in moments of

shared grief., children playing and adults exchanging gossip in the streets, fishermen aiming with baskets for a catch in a stream, rickshaw pullers having a siesta on a sidewalk between hours of hard labor, and the like. His drawings and paintings have thus become a veritable record of the society and culture of Punjab and nearby Kashmir in the 40s and 50s. How I wished, and still wish, I could have had his talent.

KB Goel in his article, 'Mago's Version of a Massacre' published in the *Patriot*, on 19 April, 1987 gave a detailed account on an incident which gives an insight into him as a person and as an artist. Reproduced below are a few lines from this article to highlight his version of a massacre of the innocents perpetrated by the British regime at the Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar in 1919.

In 1957, the Lok Sabha House Decoration Committee asked Mago to design a panel on the theme of Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. It was a pencil sketch depicting the spirit of 'meeting violence by non-violent means, to face the bullets fearlessly with a death-in-life attitude of detachment, to stand at one's post rock-like. Such was Mago's conception of the field of encounter, the lyrical expanse of which was deeper than the perspectival field would admit.'

However the Committee found his sketch unsuitable for the Jallianwala Bagh panel in spite of the fact that Mago did everything within the limits of his style to accommodate the whims of his patrons. In 1969, when the world was celebrating the Mahatma's Centenary and the 50th anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, Mago was asked for the permission to use his sketch, and he agreed: such stuff is courtesy in his world. The sketch was blown up 24 feet x 8 feet and displayed at Ramlila Grounds as well as at the commemorative *mela* at Jallianwala Bagh.

Mago, a contemporary of MF Husain, FN Souza, Dhan Raj Bhagat, Harkrishan Lall, was a founder member of the Delhi Silpi Chakra formed in March, 1949. Other members of the Chakra were Kanwal Krishna, KS Kulkarni, BC Sanyal (See Obituary *IJPS*: 10 1&2) and Dhanraj Bhagat. Many more joined the Chakra later to give a fillip to the art activities in Delhi.

He had varied experience as a Professor in Painting, College of Art, New Delhi; Advisor to the Government of Malta on setting up an Art and Crafts School; and Director of Design Development Centre, All India Handicrafts Board, New Delhi.

His works, exhibited in India and abroad since 1946, were critically acclaimed and are in prestigious national and private collections. He was a recipient of a Ford Foundation Grant and honoured as Eminent Artist by the Punjab Art Heritage Society, Jalandhar, Punjab. The Department of Culture, Government of India awarded an Emeritus Fellowship to him. He travelled extensively and delivered lectures in reputed universities, art colleges and museums in India and abroad.

He curated some important exhibitions for the National Gallery of Modern Art, Lalit Kala Akademi (Indian National Academy of Fine Arts), Indian

Council for Cultural Relations, British Council and the Indira Gandhi Centre for the Arts. He had also written monographs on sculptor Amar Nath Sehgal and potter Gurcharan Singh published by the Lalit Kala Akademi. He was on the design committee of the Time Capsule embedded in the *samadhi* - tomb - of Jawahar Lal Nehru in 1972.

His book *Contemporary Art In India: a Perspective* (National Book Trust, India. 2001) is an honest attempt to trace the history that brought about an awareness of modernity in art in our country, and the directions it has taken during the last 150 years or so. Drawing the conclusion in his book on an optimistic note Mago writes:

Like all creative activity it is highly appropriate that contemporary art in India has developed by drawing together the many threads of both the Indian and European art traditions. We are hopefully reaching a stage when India art will reveal a dignified unity of purpose, Contemporary Indian art is, indeed, destined for great achievements as the artist looks back to a glorious past in an attempt to recreate it on a grand scale.

Mago's two daughters Punam and Chandrika survive him.

Prem Singh

Pran Nath Mago, painter, art teacher born 22 August 1923 Gujarkhan, Punjab; died 31 July 2006 New Delhi

[Prem Singh, painter, won Triennale International Award in 1994. – Ed.]

Harold Lee

1933- 2006

Harold came late in life to Punjab Studies, after a distinguished academic career in the field of English Literature. He obtained his Ph.D from Harvard in 1967 and taught English at Boston University for six years. He moved to London with his wife Antonia ("Tosh") initially to research at the British Library. His stay was to be prolonged when he joined the faculty of Grinnell College and served from 1974-1992 on its Grinnell-in-London programme. When he retired in 1992 he was the programme director. While in London, he became interested in the career of the Lawrence Brothers. This was to open a new avenue in his academic pursuits.

By the mid-1990s Harold was closely involved in the activities of the Punjab Research Group and the then *International Journal of Punjab Studies*. He was a meticulous reviewer and proof reader for the latter publication. While he diligently attended Punjab Research Group meetings driving from his London home to the Coventry venue of the research gatherings. He was much taken with

the large public car park adjacent to Coventry University at Pool Meadow remarking once that it was the best 'parking lot' in the UK. Harold's contribution at this time was publicly demonstrated in papers, reviews and publications. He published an article on the Lawrences in Volume 2, 1 (1995) and one on the Treaty of Bhyrowal in Vol. 4 No. 2 (1997). His work behind the scenes was however equally significant. Most valued of all was his warm enthusiasm, unaffected modesty and playful humour. It was a real pleasure to collaborate and spend time with such a genuinely nice man.

Harold's work on the mid nineteenth century Punjab bureaucrats John and Henry Lawrence led him to Lahore and Delhi where he researched on their careers. He stayed for a while at *Falettis*, a hotel dating from the colonial era and was impressed with the city of Lahore. The resulting biography, his second major publication, was entitled *Brothers in the Raj*. The work published by Oxford University Press in Karachi in 2002 was well received. It was an especially impressive scholarly achievement given the fact that Harold was a newcomer to the specialised field of colonial Indian History.

Harold's wide interests and gregarious outlook were reflected in his work in recent years as a guide at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He was in Morocco learning about Islamic Art at the time of his sudden death on 30 October 2006. He is survived by his wife of 48 years 'Tosh' Garst Lee and by family members in his native California and Iowa and Illinois. Harold will be missed by a much wider family drawn from many religious backgrounds who will remember him for his gentleness, good humour and love of life.

Ian Talbot

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