

Workshop Report

Master Traditional Painters of Manipur

By Dr. Kailash Kumar Mishra

Organized by

Indira Gnadhi National Centre for the Arts

Venue: Sharma Arts & Crafts House (SACH), Khongman Zone-3E, Imphal-1, Manipur

Date: March 30 – April 5, 2008

Introduction

The 7-Day Workshop on Master Traditional Painters' Meet organized by The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi in collaboration with the Manipur Film Development Corporation Limited (MFDC), Imphal and the Sharma Arts & Crafts House (SACH), Imphal commenced from March 30, 2008 at the SACH's complex located at Khongman Zone-3E, Imphal East District, Manipur.

The Inaugural function of the workshop was attended by the three living Master artists of traditional painting, scholars and art lovers of Manipur. The workshop had a different taste from the very outset wherein every little detail was highlighted. The venue was an ideal complement to the workshop and the ambience was purely reflective of the serene culture of Manipur. Artworks of different genres in every corner inspired a creative mood on everyone present at the occasion. The usual raised platform and dais of the delegates were replaced by reed mats, carpets and cushions, and the invitees too were seated on the same arrangement.

Objective

The purpose for organizing the workshop was to create awareness on the traditional paintings of Manipur and the ingenious hands behind these creations. Another task was to find a renewed path for such works through the guidance and supervision of these Master Painters with a purpose to retain and promote the tradition. Hence, the workshop foresaw discussion on the various modalities and techniques of the traditional painting through the living master artists, and in devising scope for promotion and preservation of this art form. To achieve the objective, a seven day vigorous training and execution of traditional paintings was commissioned during the workshop.

The Inaugural Function

The inaugural function commenced at 3:00 pm as scheduled. The Master Traditional Painters were seated on the cushioned mats and so were the delegates, invitees, guests and art enthusiasts. Shri A. Chitreshwor Sharma, a well reputed scholar, graced the function as Chief Guest and Shri K. Tejmani, Chairman, SACH as the function president. The dignitaries were received with respect and curtsy with impression of sandalwood tilak (mark) and presentation of drapes and flowers as a gesture of veneration and gratitude for their presence and interest.

Shri B. Banamali Sharma, Managing Director, SACH delivered the welcome address. He greeted and gave his respects to the Master Traditional Painters, the organizers - IGNCA and MFDC, participants and invitees. He honoured the presence of the esteemed dignitaries for their participation despite of their hectic schedules. He laid stress on the objective of the workshop and stated that the main purpose of the workshop was to find an improved course following the guidance of the Master Painters. These Master

Painters will leave behind the imprints of traditional paintings in this workshop as they will paint at least two paintings each of their favourite subjects. The Master Painters would be assisted by three budding artists and they will lend a hand to the Master Painters in the execution of their works. Further, these masterpieces will be included as objet d'art for the proposed museum of IGNCA, which is anticipated as the largest museum in the whole of Asia. It is an honour for such recognition and this in itself is a significant initiative towards promotion of our prestigious works, he said.

Although the realization came late, however, this will surely foster a sense of accomplishment to these Master Painters, and this is indisputably an encouragement to our young artists in their endeavour and simultaneously a prerequisite for safeguarding our legacy of traditional painting, Banamali said. It can be pointed out that in spite of being their passion these artists drew not to their desires but for their patrons and as a means to earn a living. Owing to huge constraints, support was limited and as such popularity of the traditional painting was short-lived. According to a recent survey, there are no other known artists now, who have taken forth this art, other than these three living Master Painters. With this workshop, fresh initiations can be instituted to revitalize traditional painting and scopes can be enhanced following their interest and dedication with sufficient support from authorities, he said.

Mention may be made of SACH in this connection that this institution had dedicated their time and effort to popularize not only traditional paintings but also the excellent copies of the young artists with a view to train them within the confines of traditional methods. **Two objectives set forth by SACH are:**

- It aims to transform the traditional painting into a new medium for popularization, however with the inclusion of the exact date and provenance when the original work was done, and
- The new artists would also add their date of copying and a synopsis about the original work would be written. This will serve the purpose of promotion of the traditional painting, thereby revering our ancestors through preservation of their art form, and also as a means of encouragement and recognition of the young talents.

During the process of the trainings, stipends and other necessary material would be provided to the apprentice artists. 10% of the turnout of such undertakings would be given as honorarium to the original painters. In case of demise of an artist, the said amount will be directed to the **Artists' Welfare Fund** which has already been established for such a purpose. Another 20% will be given as remuneration to the young artists from the sale of these productions. This is being done to motivate the young artists, Banamali explained.

He desired that the artists should be truthful, pure in mind and with a capability to have perseverance and commitment. This is the golden message of our *Gurus* and our aim is to carry forth this true spirit of art among our successors. We intend to give what is deserving to the young and upcoming artists and also to sustain the Trust. He inferred that SACH was established with these objectives and he called on the guests and SACH's well wishers to help them with recommendations and ideas. Banamali stated that the presence of only three living traditional painters among us today is evidence enough to show that preservers of such languishing art are less in number and he solicited patronage and support from benefactors like the IGNCA and the Department of Art & Culture, Manipur.

Shri Salam Rajesh delivered the keynote address on behalf of Dr. K. Sobita Devi, State Coordinator, IGNCA Manipur. He informed that Dr. Sobita would be arriving slightly later as she was attending another workshop. He saluted the esteemed Master traditional painters and greeted the distinguished delegates, guests and media persons. He reiterated the aims and objectives of the workshop and stated that a joint venture of both gurus and pupils has organized a training programme earlier and this is a follow-up of that workshop. He pointed out that it is the personal interest of **Dr. Kalyan Kumar Chakravarty**, I.A.S., and Member Secretary, IGNCA to trace a detailed knowledge of the traditional painting of Manipur. He had himself pursued to research and had also contemplated on something prospective for such art forms. In case of Manipur, after much consideration it was decided that depiction of three works on the favorite subjects of the three Master painters would be requested in this workshop. The canvas presented here is lesser in size as compared to the original plan; IGNCA planned a magnificent size but because of their

old age unfortunately they will barely manage one painting each on the smaller canvas, assisted by their apprentices. Guru B. Amusana Sharma, one of the three Master painters showed great confidence to the project despite his age; Guru Iboyaima was a little hesitant because of his failing eyesight and his inability to sit up for long hours, in which case the organizers plan to request him to present one of his original works for the museum.

IGNCA is planning to institute Asia's largest Museum in Delhi with different sections and allotments for each region. A range of artifacts would be on display; well-acclaimed paintings, crafts, handloom, wood-carvings etc. would be kept at the Museum. This workshop is also a significant part of the museum project. The masterpieces of these Master painters will be a special collection of the Museum. He inferred that in the subsequent programs of IGNCA, a wider platform would be focused where the venerated painters can impart their knowledge to the young and talented artists and leave behind their legacy. We hope and pray good health to our three respected gurus till then, he said.

After the keynote address was delivered, the three Master Traditional Painters – Guru Brahmacharimayum Amusana Sharma, Guru Gurumayum Iboyaima Sharma and Guru Wahengbam Irobi Singh were honored with a ceremonial ovation. A cash tribute of Rs.10,000/- each was also presented to them. The apprentice artists who will be assisting the gurus were also received with gifts and cash remunerations. To formally launch the workshop, the three gurus were handed a canvas on which each left an exquisite imprint of their skill. Just at this juncture, a traditional musician blew the traditional conch shell as a sign of formal inauguration. The Chief Guest of the inaugural function, Shri A. Chitreshwor Sharma too gave his consent and wishes.

Thereafter, the three Master painters were requested to share few words on the occasion. Guru Gurumayum Iboyaima Sharma introduced himself and began to divulge on the course of his journey. He stated that he began to paint since a very tender age amidst objections and criticisms from his family. He was often the victim of admonishment as he showed more interest in painting than on books as compared to his peers. At the age of 12-13 he began his professional practice under the tutelage of Mangsidam Kalachand and began painting on a wide range of subjects for various occasions. He continued to paint till 75 years of age but now he is compelled to stop due to his failing eyesight. He concluded lamenting on his deteriorating health and expressing his regret for his inability to work.

Speaking at the inaugural function, Guru Wahengbam Irobi Singh stated that he began to paint at an early age. He narrated that in between shifts of helping his elder brother at the field, he returned to his mentor, Mangsidam Kalachand and learned the entire technicalities of painting. He said that his association and training with his guru went on for 7 years and from the age of 22 years, he began his own course. Most of his paintings were depictions of the *Jaganath* image, illustration of *Jhulon* (traditional festival), and delineations of the epic love story of *Khamba Thoibi* besides other subjects. He further stated that his meticulous and skillful works took him to the remote corners of Manipur like Yairipok, Heirok, etc. where he painted images of *Jaganath* for the *Rathyatra* festival. *Khamba Thoibi* illustrations were most widely painted at places like Chandrakhong, Ningel, Wangjing, Keinou, Sugunu and Wabagai. His works were also displayed in most of the exhibitions held in Manipur at that time, he said. Episodes from the legends of *Khamba Thoibi* like – *Thobi loi kaba* (Thoibi's exile/extradition to Kabow), *Khamba Nongban tannaba* (Khamba, the protagonist of the tale chasing Nongban), etc. were mainly executed for the exhibition. As he narrated this he added proudly that he bagged a handsome reward of Rs.30 which definitely was a valuable amount then. He stated that depictions of *Radha Govinda* and *Khamba Thoibi* among other scenes favoured by their patrons decorated the walls of local mandops. With great conviction and delight he inferred that he is still continuing to paint at home even at his old age.

Guru Brahmacharimayum Amusana Sharma began his discourse and stated that he was well acquainted with both painting as well as sculpting and began his working at the tender age of 5. He said that his interest and enthusiasm in almost everything around him made him innovative and active. He narrated his days of childhood when he sculpted images of *Jaganath* and celebrated *Rathyatra* with friends. He also expressed his personal interest in depicting images of Gods and stated that his works always received fair admiration from people. This, he assumes, is God's blessing for all his efforts and determination.

He recounted stories of his early days when his hard work and sincerity were appreciated by renowned personalities of the time. He proudly stated that his works were popular and like his colleague, he too painted various images of God, episodes of great sagas, etc. Further, he inferred that he worked maximum hours of his life, ate less and slept even lesser which is why he was very devoted in his work. His dedication and commitment in his works earned many accolades that sometimes it aroused jealousy among his contemporaries and they often rebuked him, he said. He inferred that a true painter has every creative imagination on his mind and stated that he painted images of *Pakhangba* (local Supreme deity) in the *Lamitlon*, a text dealing with the geographical identification of Manipur, pictures of Lai Haraoba, etc. simply from his mind's creation. Like a true painter he stated his wish that he would love to paint more such images and also that of mythical horses and several other subjects.

Addressing the function, the Chief Guest, Shri Aribam Chitreswor Sharma, gave his respect and saluted the Master Traditional Painters and greeted the organizers, IGNC, MFDC and SACH. He also greeted other dignified guests and invitees and the participants as well as the media. He expressed his gratitude to the organisers for inviting him and stated that his views are well reminded in the welcome message and the key note address and he undoubtedly agreed with the deliverances. However, he placed certain essentially related views. He stated that he had given up painting and crafting but nonetheless continues to read books on art history. His passion in these art forms led to his acquaintance with the art guru, Mangsidam Kalachand and thereafter he began consulting with other art veteran on the techniques, colours, designs, etc. of traditional painting, he said. This was not an easy task. On the use of colour, Chitreswor stated that, as has been given in the *Laiyrol*, (a historical text) there were initially seven primary colours used in traditional painting. These seven colours were inspired by the shades of rainbow. Further, on the question of precedence of the two art forms of painting and sculpting, he reiterated the statement of the Master artists that sculpture was a natural inspiration of painting; to carve and mould images, it was painted first.

Highlighting these facts, he strongly recommended that while these Master traditional painters are among us, we should make earnest efforts to gather such priceless knowledge if we intend to preserve and promote the traditional painting. He further shared knowledge on the use of painting brush made of horse's tail, etc. As stated by his mentor, Hanjabam Shyamo, horse tail and cat tail were commonly used but the technique is to trim the hair according to the quality of the brush desired. There are differences in the texture and quality of the fuzz/hair obtained while the animals are resting, running or standing. He expressed his regrets on our lack of knowledge of the indigenous products resulting from the easy accessibility of modern replacements. This, he stated will outroot authentic production. He therefore stressed that while the gurus live among us, let us strive to keep these traditions alive.

He also reminded that there had been similar workshops held in Manipur with the three gurus; the first workshop around 2002 at the palatial premise of the Maharajah of Manipur, jointly organized by the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Shangralaya, Bhopal and the Department of Art & Culture, Manipur; the second one on May 10-12, 2007 at the State Museum, organised by Manipur State Museum and the Allahabad Museum, and the third being the present workshop. He inferred that these workshops are crucial developments and it can be oriented towards a practical end, gathering historic knowledge from these legends. He concluded with hopes for support and encouragement from the relevant authorities and anticipated a major success in this endeavor.

Delivering her speech, Dr. K. Sobita Devi, Managing Director, MFDC gave her respects to the three Master Traditional Painters and the dignitaries present in the function. As she began her discourse she emphasized the momentous role of painting in the material culture of Manipur. She stated that painting serves as the only medium for the portrayal of one's thoughts and ideology. She reflected on our glorious past of art culture; the wide spectrum of knowledge in traditional painting among our ancestors like – the illustration of basic structures of human anatomy, the diverse theories on the extraction of colourful palette from different herbs and shrubs. She expressed immense joy over the varied knowledge of traditional painting and stated that it is a pride to realize our great wisdom in this work. At the same time, she also expressed her regrets on our weakness of losing this existing traditional works owing to absence of any written works or records amidst the complex intricacies of modernity. She reminded that losing this tradition is a great loss of our cultural heritage. Fearing this, IGNC and MFDC reflected on the questions

of preservation and diffusion of these indigenous works and how to gather knowledge with a strict discipline on these traditions.

She further inferred that our motive of engaging these living Master Traditional Painters often is to make people realize that they are our heritage. She stressed that we are looking for institutions where these gurus can impart knowledge and preserve this legacy for future generation. As a mark of honouring and acknowledging these great legends, she presented a cash incentive of Rs.10,000/- each to the three master painters and also announced material aid to the young artists.

She concluded stating the intentions and objectives of the workshop and placed before the august gathering that the age old tradition of wall painting at assembly halls/gazeboes is severely declining and it is inevitable to revive this culture. It is an earnest effort on our part to achieve this goal of restoring traditional painting, she said.

Delivering the presidential speech, Shri K. Tejmani Sharma, Chairman, SACH expressed his regrets on his poor health condition and pleaded forgiveness on his position. He gave his respects and greetings to the dignitaries and placed his opinions and views briefly. He stated matter of fact that there is no work on the art history of Manipur; nevertheless it is evident that people are aware of it. What is absent is the practical implementation on the various objectives. Unless this is put to effect, Manipur still will not have any art history, he stated clearly. He placed certain straightforward recommendations like documentation of the oral tradition on traditional painting as a significant part of art history from these Master Traditional Painters. Their testimonials can be recorded thereof as authentic substances of art history, he said. He requested our gurus to give us the privilege and contribute what they can to preserve our own culture and simultaneously he invited and encouraged eminent scholars to inscribe their narrations. He concluded with a strong recommendation that if we can institute a library equipped with rare collections of art history such as the one envisaged in today's workshop, we need not go outside the state to learn our culture.

The vote of thanks for the function was delivered by Shri N. C. Sharma who is an honorable Trustee of SACH. Shri Sharma thanked the Chief Guest, Shri A. Chitreshwor Sharma for his participation despite his busy schedules. He thanked the president, Shri K. Tejmani Sharma for projecting a systematic prospect and the State Coordinator, Dr. K. Sobita Devi for her dedication to preserve and promote the languishing traditional painting. He gave his thanks to the Master Traditional Painters, Guru Gurumayum Iboyaima Sharma, Guru Wahengbam Ibohi Singh and Guru Brahmacharimayum Amusana Sharma for their cooperation and interest shown towards SACH. He expressed his gratitude and appreciation to all the dignitaries, invitees, guests, media persons and all art enthusiasts. On behalf of SACH, he saluted the three gurus and to honour their presence, he pleaded and prayed from the gurus any old and tattered brush, easel, or any piece of their belonging for the collection of SACH, for which SACH shall honour and treasure the items till eternity, he said.

The inaugural function came to an end with renewed hopes and keen interest among both organizers and participants alike. Mutual interest was unanimously agreed among the organizers and art enthusiasts to jointly work upon achieving new goals. During the seven days of the workshop, the main focus was on production of the masterpieces and the workshop observers shall interact and note on significant information and progress of their works.

Recommendations

1. To approach relevant authorities for the establishment of an institution focusing on in-depth research of traditional painting including the various techniques, designs, colours, etc.
2. To solicit support from concerned authorities for reviving the art of Traditional Painting and wall-painting of *Mandops* (local assembly halls).
3. To interact with the three Master Traditional Painters and gather information on traditional painting and simultaneously consult and converse with eminent scholars and document the oral tradition of art history for production of written records and books on the art history of Manipur.
4. To institute a library completely showcasing works of art and books on art history of Manipur.
5. To organize more such programs in future too that shall focus on revival of this languishing art form.
6. To implement and execute the aims and objectives as envisioned in this workshop.

List of the Master Traditional Painters

1. Guru Gurumayum Iboyaima Sharma, Kongba, Imphal East District.
2. Guru Wahengbam Iboi Singh, Khongman, Imphal East District.
3. Guru Brahmacharimayum Amusana Sharma, Khongman, Zone 3E, Imphal East District, Manipur.

Assistants to Master Traditional Painters

1. Shri Dhoroni, SACH, Khongman Zone 3E, Imphal East District.
2. Shri Ibotombi, SACH, Khongman Zone 3E, Imphal East District
3. Shri B.Mahendra Sharma, SACH, Khongman Zone 3E, Imphal East District.