

## Painting God's Words: An Interview With Amar Raza, Founder of the Quran Art Foundation and Research Centre, Islamabad, Pakistan

By Masood Ashraf Raja

I have known Amar Raza since 1978 when we both joined Military College Jhelum in eighth grade. Military College Jhelum was originally King George Royal Military School, one of the institutions built by the British in 1922 to educate the sons of Indian military personnel. By the time we got to the college, it had transformed itself into a premier military "farm school" and almost all the cadets were accepted with an understanding that they all will, in return for a highly subsidized education, at least apply to the Pakistan Military Academy. The students came from diverse regions and classes of Pakistani society and though the Pakistan Army ran the college, the college also had a small cadre of civilian professors who provided the best possible academic and cultural education to this diverse body of students.

Amar had a natural talent for art: in eighth grade he could sketch a portrait in ten to fifteen minutes. His talents were further polished as an active member of the Fine Arts Club, which was housed in an old cavernous building and was run by our highly talented and eccentric art professor, Mr. Muhammad Latif. While most of us wasted our time in playing our silly pranks in the art classes, Amar explored and mastered pretty much all areas of art. By the time we graduated from college and joined the Military Academy Amar had branched out into all media of Art including oils, watercolors, mosaics, collages, and sculpture.

Eventually, we both joined the army, fought a war together, and while I served as an infantry officer, Amar became one of the best gunship helicopter pilots. This brief interview has nothing to do with gunships and wars; it is rather an attempt at presenting the views, successes, and trials of Amar the artist. In the last twenty years, Amar has painted the whole text of the Qur'an, established the Quran Art Foundation, held exhibitions in Makkah and London, and offered hundreds of community workshops for Pakistani children. A copy of his rendition of the Qur'an is now included in the collection of the Prophet's Mosque in Medinah. Considering that over the last fifteen hundred years the mosque has only collected twenty-one such renditions of the Qur'an, Amar's being the twenty-first, one could say that Amar's work is worth our time and attention.<sup>1</sup>

**MR:** Can you briefly tell us about your early years, your place of birth and some information about your childhood?

**AR:** I was born in 1965 at Lahore, Till grade 8th I got my initial education from Junior Model and Central Model school respectively. In grade 8<sup>th</sup> I joined Military College Jhelum. I was the youngest of my brothers. In my family art was the least liked subject, but I used to make drawing for my friends who were in art and drawing classes during my school hours while sitting in my Arabic language class.

**MR:** At what age did you start to paint, and what kind of painting were you interested in then?

**AR:** I started painting regularly when I joined Military College Jhelum in 1978. I got this opportunity through the Fine Arts Club, which was one of the clubs a student could join to fulfill the requirement for extracurricular activities. In the club, guided by Mr. M. Latif, our Art teacher, I got a chance to further explore my passion for art. Pretty soon I found myself working in different media including pencil sketching, water based portraits, landscapes and abstract art. Eventually, I started working in oil and tried my hand at collages and sculpture as well.

**MR:** What prompted you to start painting the Qur'anic verses?

**AR:** Around age of about 25 I used to think that art was inside me with all its purities and I could draw and paint whatever I wished. But the big question for me was to figure out the real purpose of this talent that God had given me. I wanted to use this exceptional gift for some better and higher purpose. And then, it seems, Allah gave me the idea of translating Qur'an into the language of colors. That one inspiration, to render Qur'an in colors, took a journey of 18 years. After eighteen years of work, I feel I was able to use my God-given gift in visually translating the Qur'an and in establishing a link of colors to the meaning of the text. I further added in it the techniques to give shapes to construction of words to make translation more easy and comprehensive.

**MR:** How is your technique different from the classical tradition of Islamic calligraphy?

**AR:** In classical tradition of calligraphy, emphasis is on graphic designs for beautification, whereas in my work meanings and their related colors along with construction of words is focused. Another major difference is that in my paintings complete chapters are at one place in one painting whether there are 3 verses or 286 verses, which enables the reader to view a whole chapter in continuity rather than experiencing it in fragments.

**MR:** How long did it take you to paint the whole Qur'an?

**AR:** It took 18 years to completely transcribe the Qur'an.

**MR:** When did you start the Qur'an Art Foundation, and how and why did you come with this idea?

**AR:** In the beginning I used to give my paintings to people to conduct exhibitions. After a few years, however, the sheer quantity of work made it difficult to handle exhibitions in such a way. That is when I started thinking of giving my whole work to some institution for its safe custody and also for making it available to the public. Unfortunately, not many institutions showed any interest in the project, except the Art Department of University of Tennessee. I then discussed the project with a few of my friends and thus launched the, then, Art Quran Foundation in 1998 at Quetta. Then, during a display in Makkah, Saudi Arabia through Rabita al Islami after a discussion with the religious scholars, we decided that the name should be the other way round and so we changed the name to the Quran Art Foundation. In 2004 in order to add a research component to the work of the foundation, we readjusted its name to its current designation, the Quran Art Foundation and Research Centre.

**MR:** Were there any problems, personal or institutional, in starting, sustaining, and creating the Qur'an Art Foundation? Did you get any kind of support from the Pakistani government or other institutions in Pakistan in launching and maintaining the Qur'an Art Foundation?

**AR:** Yes, there were and are a series of problems both personal and institutional. I had to do everything at my own. Many people at individual and institutional level promised help, but except for a few exceptional cases, none of that help ever materialized. The State Minister of Religious Affairs in 1996 did nothing for us after promising government help for the foundation in front of the media.

**MR:** Then how, if you don't mind my asking, do you support the whole project?

**AR:** In last 10 years we were given US\$1,200 by the President of Azad Jammu Kashmir, US\$ 2,000 US\$ by Haji Bashir of Padana Garments, Sialkot, and a donation of US\$100.00 by my mother. It costs more than US\$ 1800/month just to keep the center running, which I have been paying from whatever was left to me by my father.

**MR:** At this rate, how long do you think you can keep the Foundation afloat?

**AR:** I am currently trying to sustain it with my share of my inheritance and the current rate with the given resources I can sustain it only for another four to five months.

**MR:** In what way can the expatriate Pakistanis assist you in your endeavors? Are there any Internet tools available on your website for them to donate to the Foundation?

**AR:** They can help to sustain and expand this research, because it is useful for the future generations. They can help us in creating innovative techniques of teaching the Qur'an. We have recently developed a pedagogical CD on Chapter 30 of the Qur'an, which provides an animated, artistic rendition of the chapter. This CD is available on **youtube.com** under **Quaranartresearch**. Making such work is extremely costly and the expatriate Pakistanis can help us in developing CDs for the other 29 chapters of the Qur'an.

They can also help this cause and research by contributing in printing our materials and by placing it in libraries, schools, and madrassas. They can donate through our website or through your journal. They can also help in sponsoring certain segments of our research by contributing printing costs like printing 100 copies of any of our works and giving it to schools in their own communities. If they belong to an organization or have personal funds, they can sponsor media workshops to present a more humane and compassionate view of Islam and the Islamic world.

**MR:** would you consider exhibiting your work in the United States, or loaning some of your work to any US museums or Universities?

**AR:** Surely, I would like to share this work with all anywhere in the world so that people can see the soft side of Islamic culture and civilization; this would be really important in the United States. In Europe during exhibitions and workshops there were comments like "it's amazing to know that Muslims have art in their culture!" Since my work is research oriented I would prefer if university students and museum patrons use it. We will be happy to work with any university and museum in making this kind of cooperation possible.

**MR:** In what way do you think your work and the foundation serve the greater purpose of cross cultural and cross-faith understanding in Pakistan and elsewhere in the world?

**AR:** Our work is manifold and we have experienced its utility in different areas. For example: We conducted **art workshops with drug addicted persons** in a program called "**spiritual therapy workshops**" in efforts to bring them back to a drug-free life and received a tremendous positive response. Quran Art in collaboration with Art Council England conducted workshops with more than 200 children on the subject of diversity with participants from several religions. The diversity ideas developed in these workshops were selected and displayed at the House of Commons, U.K. We also conducted Art Workshops with Disabled Children in England

to explain the importance of colors in interpersonal communication. In Pakistan we are also working on interfaith activities that display the important role of art in bringing people from different faiths together.

**MR:** Is there any message you would like to leave for our readers on behalf of the Qur'an Art Foundation?

**AR:** I would like to give only one message that we should derive a lesson about time management from the life of the Holy Prophet and try to implement it in our lives. If we use our time wisely, we can come out of our intellectual slumber and stand equal to other nations as proud Pakistanis.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> We have included a supplementary file about Amar's work that you can access through the reading tools links provided on the right, but those interested in a detailed look at Amar's work can easily find it on the website for Quran Art Foundation and Research Centre <<http://www.quranartfoundation.org>>.