

Syed Saleem Arif Quadri MBE

Syed Saleem Arif Quadri was born in Hyderabad, India and arrived in Britain aged seventeen when his family emigrated in the 1960s. He studied at Birmingham School of Art and then the Royal College in London. On graduating in 1975, he returned to India to rediscover the country he had known as a child. In the following years, he travelled widely in North Africa, Europe and the Asian sub-continent, his work fusing and assimilating the influences of Eastern and Western cultures, including his own Indian and Islamic background. He completed his first sculpture in 1969 but it was 'Space Lattice' which won him the 'Young Sculptor of the Year Award' in 1971.

Arif describes his urge to create as inherited from his parents: from his mother, an amateur painter, the urge to express himself in visual language; from his father, a surgeon with a passion for poetry, music and literature, the sense of curiosity which drove him to observe and explore the visible world with patience, restraint and perseverance. He describes the move to England as a 'baptism of fire'. *"Arriving in England by air at Heathrow Airport on a sunny afternoon in March 1966, via a brief stopover in Moscow, where I had seen snow for the first time in my life, I held youthful hopes of fresh discoveries new opportunities and the possibility of sharing cultures. Thus I arrived in Nuneaton in Warwickshire, and soon after was enrolled at Manor Park Grammar School. Three years later I entered the sculpture department at Birmingham College of Art. It proved to be a veritable baptism of fire in more ways than one. The shock was not only a cultural one, but also a personal one."*

While at the Royal College, Arif became fascinated by Dante's *Inferno*. Focusing upon heroic figures and fabulous creatures apparently taken from some imaginary heraldic bestiary, Arif was fascinated by the common links which emerged between Dante's Christian fable and the traditional tales of Islam.

After his graduation from the Royal College, Arif travelled to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. For Arif, these travels, turned out to be a profound experience and a revelation; *"since it was there that I found a new road to my inner self. Travelling has provided a unique first-hand perception of world cultures which has nourished my inner self and my spiritual growth."*

On returning to England from the Asian sub-continent in 1976, with a broader acquaintance and a more vigorous awareness of the strengths of his cultural heritage, Arif was able to continue the exploration of the *Inferno* of Dante's 'The Divine Comedy', begun in the previous year, with refreshed insights and energy. By 1981 he had completed more than five hundred small-scale works on paper, some of which had already found their way into the Government's Art Collection in 1977. It was during this period that the visual concept of a unique shape or format for each individual composition matured into a passion of mine.

From 1982 onwards, the size and format of most of Arif's paintings grew considerably, sometimes producing new concepts and new shapes, challenging traditional formats with voids, and exploring the third dimension. Arif felt that the scale of each work often demanded different techniques to best express his visual ideas, hence the introduction, at this stage, of muslin on paper. See 'Garden of Expectation' 1985–86, 'Enchantments of Sky, Sea and Earth' 1986.

Since 1990, Arif's paintings have been on a versatile wood support, which stands half an inch away from the wall. This device articulates and enhances his concepts of 'volumetric' and of 'pregnant space', as the paintings appear to float away from the wall surface, adding a third dimension to my pictorial language. The earliest of the oil paintings on wood are 'Emblem of Ecstasy' and 'Silence before the Storm' of 1990. Both are contemplative in concept, using what Arif has termed 'pregnant space' as an iconic motif or technique. Along with his parallel concept of 'volumetric space', almost all his paintings of the 1990s make use of these two motifs or techniques, which appear central to his work of that period. In 'Birds of Breath' 1991-92, the 'cut out' birds are not represented visually, but rather through the 'pregnant' or full/empty space that their form occupies. Moreover, each bird is so carved and cut out that one sees them from different angles, thus suggesting their 'volumetric space'. For Arif, these two motifs or techniques arose out of the continuing 20th century fascination with the exploration of space, both in the framework of making contemporary works of art, and of the growing obsession with interplanetary dimensions.

Since 1999, Arif has been working mainly on paper and unique books - 'Sensual Songs' is the first series of unique works on paper. Inspired by the long avenues of New York and the extraordinary spirit of that cosmopolitan city, works in horizontal but panoramic format started to emerge called 'Sensual Songs of Sacred Space'. As with the paintings, each work on paper commands its own format and unique, textured surface. His interest in artists' books dates back to 1974, when he began work on the Inferno of Dante's 'The Divine Comedy', during which I made 5 books, containing six hand-coloured etchings and 50 manuscript pages.

The unique work's 'Sensual Songs' and 'Sensual Songs of Sacred Space' were followed by three manuscript hand-made books: 'Invocations', 'Caressing with the Constellations' and 'Geometry without Gravity'. The first consists of 50 double-page compositions on the name Allah (God) in the Arabic script, following the tradition of Islamic calligraphers elaborating the Holy Name into evocative graphic compositions for devotional contemplation. This book is dedicated to the memory of the innocent victims of 9/11, and of all victims of violence in the world. In January 2002, Arif began working on 'Caressing with the Constellations', using the technical device of 'pregnant' space, described above: 40 double-page compositions consisting of figurative and abstract forms – interacting, floating and flowering into shapes made real by their literal presence or absence, and celebrating the power of artistic fantasy. In March 2003 Arif began work on the third book, 'Geometry without Gravity', and on associated individual works on paper.