

ALI ASGHAR PETGAR

Ali Asghar Petgar was born in 1913 in *Tabriz*. His father, *Hassan Kolahdooz*, was a hat maker and furrier, and ran a carpet workshop with his family. *Ali Asghar* and his younger brother, *Jafar*, gradually learned about the color and design and demonstrated great ability and talent in painting.

He finished elementary school in *Tabriz* and began learning painting from the master painter, *Mir Mosavar Arjangi*, an eminent painter from *Tabriz* who was influenced by Realistic Russian painters. At the recommendation of his teacher, *Ali Asghar* and his brother set out for *Tehran* in between 1932-34, to continue their studies in the *School of Fine Arts*. At the time when no universities had yet been established, *School of Fine Arts* was considered a major academic center and painters such as *Ali Mohammad Heydarian*, *Hossein Khan Sheikh*, and *Ismail Ashtiani*, were among the teachers of the school.

Ali Asghar's presence in *Tehran* was at the time that "*Kamal-ol-Molk's* style of painting was at its peak. Graduates of this school who established similar schools in other Iranian cities – modeled on the original school – followed *Kamal-ol-Molk's* notion of Realism and Naturalism and were known as painters of *classic style*. This happened at a time when at the turn of the century, the world of art was divided into the *classic* (of the past) and the *modern* (of the present).

At the *Tabriz School of Painting*, *Mir Mosavar* and others insisted that painting was not to transform or deform objects. The goal was to virtualize reality in such a way that the character - who was normally poor – could be almost heard breathing and objects came to life.

These teachings of the younger years made *Ali Asghar* an expert imitator of the outside world, so that he could find himself a job at *Jahan Nama Painting Studio* once he arrived in the capital. The studio was one of the first designers of the luxury store signs in *Tehran* and due to the presence of *Rafi Halati*, was commissioned canvases for the *Grand Hotel Theater* performances. Despite his busy schedule in the studio, *Ali Asghar* was quick to learn about painting movements in the capital. *Hossein Sheikh*, the youngest teacher at the *School of Fine Arts*, would meet young students and painters at *Lalezar Café* on a regular base. *Ali Asghar* learned photography from him – a top notch photographer.

Presence of *Petgar* in *Hossein Sheikh's* circle marks one of the important events in Iranian painting of the 1940s. *Ali Asghar* graduated from the school and despite his respect for the masters, he was critical of their conservative approach. Thus in association with his brother *Jafar*, *Ali Asghar* established the first private painting class in 1940 in *Tehran*, which later became a rendezvous place for many artists, including *Ismail Ashtiani*, *Ali Akbar Sanatzadeh*, *Hossein Khan Sheikh*, *Sadegh Choobak*, *Manochehr Vishkayi*, *Vartanian*, *Manochehr Sheibani*, *Jalil Ziapour*, *Jafar Shariatmadari (Dervish)*, *Sadegh Hedayat*, *Nooshin*, *Simin Behbahani*, *Simin Daneshvar*, *Rahi Moayeri*, *Parvin Etesami*, *Shahryar*, *Nima* and *Bozorg Alavi*.

His popularity as a teacher at the *Women's School of Fine Arts*, made a large number of women join his private classes in *Tehran*. Given the date he established his private classes (1940), *Ali Asghar Petgar* is considered to be one of the first people who served cultural activities of women in Iran.

Forough Farokhzad, *Clara Abkar*, *Shokat Shaghaghi*, *Behjat Sadr*, *Manije Mosaed*, *Jinoos Hashemi* and *Mehrbanoo Zandshahi*, are among many artists who joined his classes.

Ali Asghar and *Jafar Akbari* changed their last name to 'Petgar' in 1941 and *Ali Asghar* chose (A-Petgar) as his pen name. He had heard this *Pahlavi* word – meaning both image and painter - from his teacher, *Kasravi*, in the History of Civilization class.

In effect, his professional career began in the early 1940s. Between 1940 and 1945, *Petgar* painted watercolor and oil paintings in the style of *Kamal-ol-Molk* and his students. He was also less active in the 1940s, because he was both busy running the studio and teaching at the *Women's School of Fine Arts*. The school was a branch of the old *School of Fine Arts* and introduced to the art community major Iranian female artists of the century. (A-Petgar) was truly the most active teacher of his time with the largest number of students. Many of the teachers of later generations were once his students.

For many years, *Petgar* had a style truly inspired by the paintings of *Kamal-ol-Molk* and *Ashtiani*. At the same time, he was one of the first artists who abandoned brush style of *Kamal-ol-Molk's* students and adopted a new style, using thicker brushes. Later at the recommendation of *Jalil Ziapour*, he studied a more important division of classic painting and was fascinated by the way *Repin* applied colors. *Repin*, who was one of the prominent representatives of Russian social Realist painting, exerted a great influence on *Petgar* who, like *Repin*, used dark brown to the end of his life. He even followed *Repin* by painting portraits of models that, similar to *Dostoevsky's* characters, were overwhelmed by pain and despair.

He changed the location of his class in 1951 to finish the partnership with his brother, *Jafar*. He primarily adopted the classic style and concentrated on minute details of a work, remaining faithful to the academic principles and basic knowledge of drawing and painting. Nevertheless, his creativity and innovation in compositions, lights and canvas divisions, and the feeling he put into his work, made them unique. He then adopted Naturalism, while his objects tended to make his works appear Realistic. The second half of the 1950s was a time when there was a deluge of new art movements in *Iran* – a period of experiments in Impressionism and Expressionism for *Petgar*. This series of paintings were obviously considered innovation at the time, but *Petgar* returned to Realism.

Main characters of (A-Petgar)'s paintings were mostly hardworking lower class, including workers, craftsmen, nursemaids, servants and homeless peddlers who, according to the artist, carried the heavy burden of social services and despite living through hardships, retained a sense of serenity and communion. He never depicted them as if to appear humiliated or powerless; rather, he always endeavored to underline their content, health, and inner richness. He utilized bright, lush colors and the sweltering sun of *Tehran*, to depict their faces.

Petgar avoided modern movements. This conscious decision had its roots mostly in his personal convictions about art and the artistic mission he felt. His concept of art was different from how it was conceived in the West. He displayed some 80 artworks from his own collection in his studio in 1963, showing different periods of his career. The exhibition, which intentionally coincided with the *Fourth Iranian Biennial of Painting*, provoked some controversy in cultural circles, encouraging a number of spectators and critics to write articles and draw a comparison between his works and those of the *Biennial's*.

In 1976 he retired himself to leave his classes in the hands of his sons, *Nami* and *Nima*. Nevertheless, he continued teaching privately at home. He was writing poetry during these years and finally published his book of poetry, *Rainbow*, in 1981. He had a history of heart disease since 1988. Finally, he had to close his last painting class on 7 May 1992, at the age of 79. *Ali Asghar Petgar* died of a heart attack the same evening.

References:

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Adineh, vol. 70 (April 1992), Mohsen Ebrahim, From the Remote Past to Present and Nothing Else; *Art Quarterly*, vol. 22 (summer/autumn 1992); *Women*, first year, vol. 4 (April 1992); Ali Shahab, In the Memory of Master Ali Asghar Petgar, *Kelk*, vol. 27 (June 1992); Jalil Ziapour, From Grey Tones to Green, Blue and Purple; *Art Quarterly*, vol. 22 (summer/autumn 1992); *Keyhan Farhangi*, ninth year, vol. 4 (August 1992)

1946- Solo exhibition, private studio, Tehran
1946- Tehran Great Exposition, received gold medal
1952- Russia-Iran Cultural Forum, Tehran
1954- Solo exhibition, private studio, Tehran
1958- Warsaw Art Festival, received gold medal
(rejected the award on the grounds the quality of works was low), Poland
1966- Solo exhibition, private studio (in objection to modern art), Tehran
1975- Exhibition of Persian painting, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran
1993- Seyhoun Gallery, Tehran, in commemoration of Ali Asghar Petgar
1998- Solo exhibition, fifth commemoration of Petgar, Museum of Fine Arts, Sa'ad Abad Palace, Tehran
2006- Realist and Hyper Realist painters, Niavaran Cultural Center, Tehran