



Salma Arastu

Conveying Artful Messages

By TAH SIN USMANI

Salma Arastu's art tells a story. She does not plan it that way but says, "Somehow the messages start appearing as I work. These messages are of love, peace, sharing and celebration of life."

Born into a Hindu family in Rajasthan and married to a Muslim, Arastu uses an exquisite combination of painting and calligraphy to depict various aspects of social, cultural and spiritual life. For California-based Arastu, the varied tones and texture of her art are a reflection of her diverse life, seen in works like "Musical Fountains," "The Puppets," "Alone in the Crowd," "The Naming Ceremony," "Hope—the Sun," "Praying Together."

Arastu, who was born without fingers on her left hand, graduated in fine arts from M.S. University in Baroda, Gujarat in 1974 and started working in mixed media. After a while, she felt the need to move from two-dimensional to three-dimensional surfaces. She started exploring various mediums and experimented with clay and papier-mâché, ultimately adopting laser-cut aluminum expression of calligraphic characters and figures.

Elaborating on her 30-year creative journey she says, "...I used to draw abstract human figures since my fine art education days. And after marriage I was exposed to the wealth of Arabic calligraphy as we moved to Iran in 1976 and then to Kuwait in 1980. I started working as a volunteer in the Islamic art museums." She had to copy text from early manuscripts as part of her work and was charmed by the flow-

ing lines of Arabic calligraphy. Gradually the lines merged in her imagination, appeared as the flow of humanity and created designs. "My calligraphy style is free and flowing as I do not follow any particular style but work with the space and the feel of what I am writing," she says.

Arastu prefers to keep her paintings faceless because she believes that faces limit her creations in terms of their ethnicity, race and religion. "Right from the beginning...I used to believe that we are all one. We are from a common spirit. There is no identity or features as these elements create differences...The faceless figure is the universal human figure...."

Arastu and her husband, Alamdar Husain Arastu, an architect, chose to move to the United States because "we thought that we would fit well in the American way of life. I think that we were also adventurous and wanted to find greater challenges." She is impressed by the honesty of Americans, their will to enjoy life and their arts, music and other festivals. As for Indian influences she says, "It is but natural. I am a true Indian at heart, very spiritual, and believe in tolerance."

Arastu also draws on her own experiences, such as a scene that has remained in her mind since childhood. "It was when my mother, who was the energy and inspiration for the whole household, broke down...crying and uttering that she had become a widow. So many women were surrounding her, trying to console



Photographs courtesy Salma Arastu

Hope—the Sun, acrylic on canvas, 121.92 x 152.4 cm

her. I knew that I had lost my father. I was 10 years old then and had returned from school. I watched that scene from the doorstep," she says. Now it is conveyed in her work, "When She Became a Widow."

Arastu says that when she was a student in India in the early 1970s, she thought art was limited to certain groups or institutions only, not accessible or understood by common people. "But in the mid 1980s, on arriving in the U.S., I found that art was flourishing there, great importance was given to art in schools and people appreciated it," she says.

Arastu seems satisfied with the acceptance of her art in America. "...Ninety five percent of my patrons are American. People from the subcontinent...still do not invest in art so commonly."

Apart from painting and sculpture, writing is her favorite hobby. Her first book of poems in Hindi, *Dard Ki Seedhiyan*, was published in 1981. After her arrival in the United States, she started writing in English. Her recent book, *The Lyrical Line*, has about 30 short poems. "Some expressions cannot be painted and so I turn them into poems."



For more information:

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<http://www.salmaarastu.com/>