

# A Modernist in Motion: How Hamiduzzaman Khan Redefined Bangladeshi Art

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## Abstract

This paper addresses the revolutionary contributions of Hamiduzzaman Khan, a modernist pioneer in Bangladeshi art whose avant-garde methods of painting and sculpture reshaped the country's aesthetic identity. As a post-independence artist, Khan combined international modernist methods with concepts that were fundamental to Bangladeshi culture, like freedom, resiliency, and harmony with nature. The study explores Khan's artistic development, from his early influences at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris to his ground-breaking pieces like Steps, Bird Family, Shangshaptak (The Loyal Soldier), and landscapes. The study examines his abstract paintings, sculptures, and material experiments with steel and bronze to show how important he was in bringing sculpture to Bangladeshi art, which had previously been dominated by painting and folk traditions.

According to the article, Khan's art reflects Bangladesh's cultural and historical ethos while bridging the gap between the local and the universal, resulting in a distinctive artistic language that appeals to audiences around the world. Hamiduzzaman Khan's legacy is a monument to the ability of art to inspire, innovate, and endure because he redefined the parameters of modernist expression in Bangladesh.

The study contends that Khan's art reflects Bangladesh's cultural and historical ethos while bridging the gap between the local and the universal, resulting in a distinctive artistic language that appeals to audiences around the world. Hamiduzzaman Khan's legacy serves as a monument to the ability of art to inspire, create, and survive by broadening the parameters of modernist expression in Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Modernism, Abstraction, Bangladeshi Art, Sculpture, Global Modernism, Artistic Philosophy

## I. Introduction

Following attaining independence in 1971, Bangladesh had significant cultural, sociopolitical, and artistic changes that had a significant impact on the nation's creative scene. Art became essential as a

new country tried to forge its identity on the international scene, serving as a vehicle for both expressing its hopes for the future and reflecting its past. Bangladeshi artists started challenging conventional artistic methods during these tumultuous times, investigating novel forms, media, and concepts that would come to characterize the rising modernist movement. Hamiduzzaman Khan was one such artist who helped to shape the direction of Bangladeshi art in the future. Through his innovative paintings and sculptures, Khan emerged as a key player in the nation's artistic shift from traditionalism to modernity.

Hamiduzzaman Khan's ability to skillfully combine topics with a strong local context with foreign modernist inspirations makes his contribution to Bangladeshi art exceptional. He maintained close relationships with prominent modern Indian painters, like Raghav Kaneria, Shankho Chowdhury, K.G.

Subramanyam, and Golam Mohammad Sheikh, as well as talented new artists. (Islam, N.2018) For him, Baroda was particularly important because it was there that he produced a number of sculptures that depicted the negative consequences of the Bangladesh War, earning the admiration of prominent figures like M. F. Husain. (Bangladesh Art Week. 2021)

In addition to being beautiful works, Khan's creations serve as representations of the nation's spirit, resiliency, and hardships. His sculptures tell intricate stories about identity, independence, and the human condition; they are frequently enormous in scale. Through his unique use of industrial materials like concrete, bronze, and stainless steel, Khan produced sculptures that questioned the function of public art in forming national identity in addition to challenging conventional art forms. (Ahmed, K. 2017) In addition to reflecting the sociopolitical turmoil of the post-independence era, his paintings stand as testaments to Bangladesh's future, resiliency, and optimism.

Understanding the development of contemporary Bangladeshi art requires an examination of Hamiduzzaman Khan's creative path. His creations represent a break from the figurative

and folkloric traditions that dominated the nation's artistic expression before independence. Khan was instrumental in the growth of modern Bangladeshi art, especially in the field of sculpture, by adopting modernist and abstract ideas. His work paved the way for the following generation of Bangladeshi artists by redefining how they handle issues of nationalism, identity, and culture.

This essay seeks to present a thorough analysis of Hamiduzzaman Khan's life and contributions, examining how his creative breakthroughs contributed to the redefining of modernism's parameters in Bangladesh. In order to create a body of work that appeals to both domestic and foreign audiences, Khan managed the conflict between local traditions and global modernism, as will be examined through an analysis of his key works and creative philosophy. By examining how abstraction, symbolism, and materiality intersect in his work, this study will highlight Khan's important contribution to the conversation around contemporary Bangladeshi art as well as his enduring influence on the worldwide modernist movement.

The study concludes by presenting Hamiduzzaman Khan as a revolutionary whose creations not only capture the spirit of Bangladeshi culture but also add to the worldwide discourse on modern art. This study looks more closely at Khan's contributions to the art world in order to confirm his place in South Asian art history and show how important he was in forming the modernist movement in Bangladesh. Based on this investigation, the study concludes that Khan's work is still a striking illustration of how art has the capacity to inspire, confront, and reshape cultural boundaries.

## II. Objectives of the Paper

The main goal of this study is to explore and evaluate Hamiduzzaman Khan's contributions to Bangladesh's modernist art movement. The study seeks to demonstrate his significance as a pivotal character in the development of Bangladeshi art by analyzing his biography, artistic philosophies, and body of work. The specific objectives are:

- i. Analyze Hamiduzzaman Khan's Role in Modernizing Bangladeshi Art
- ii. Highlight Khan's artistic philosophy and techniques
- iii. Assess the Cultural and Symbolic Significance of His Works
- iv. Bridge Local and Global Artistic Narratives

## III. Literature Review

### 3.1 Modernism in Bangladeshi Art

Scholars such as Rakibul Hasan (The Evolution of Art in Bangladesh, 2010) and Firdous Alam (Modernism in Bangladeshi Art, 2015) offer a

thorough analysis of the evolution of modern art in Bangladesh. They follow the development of modernism in the middle of the 20th century, propelled by individuals like Quamrul Hassan and Zainul Abedin, from traditional traditions based on Islamic inspirations and folk art.

- These pieces illustrate the challenges of striking a balance between cultural identity and international creative trends by placing the sociopolitical backdrop that shaped modernist art in Bangladesh after independence in perspective.
- Though these sources cover the early forerunners of Bangladeshi modernism, they don't go into great detail about later-rising artists like Hamiduzzaman Khan who concentrated on sculpture and abstraction.

### 3.2 The Role of Sculpture in Bangladeshi Art

In Bangladeshi art history, sculpture as a medium has gotten relatively less scholarly attention. Books like The Art of Sculpture in South Asia by Niharika Bose (2018) and articles in Asian Art Review (2019) briefly touch on Hamiduzzaman Khan's contributions. They recognize his groundbreaking work in bringing modernist methods to Bangladeshi sculpture, but they fall short in offering a thorough examination of his methods, themes, and material breakthroughs.

### 3.3 Abstraction and Materiality in Modern Art

Khan's exploration of abstraction and materiality can be analyzed within the framework of the widely researched works of international modernist artists such as Henry Moore, Alberto Giacometti, and Constantin Brâncuși. For instance:

- Khan's sculptures, which use minimalism and abstraction to elicit symbolic and emotional resonance, might be compared to Rosalind Krauss's 1977 book *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, which emphasizes the shift from representational to abstract forms.
- Khan's use of industrial materials like bronze and stainless steel is consistent with the modernist philosophy of experimenting with unusual media, which is a subject that is usually discussed in art history worldwide but infrequently in South Asia.

#### IV. Methodology

In order to analyze Hamiduzzaman Khan's contributions to Bangladeshi modernism, this study takes a qualitative and interpretive method. Interviews with art professionals and academics, visual analysis, and archival research are all included in the technique. The goal is to comprehend how, in the framework of modernist discourse, Khan's artistic philosophy, methods, and creations both reflect and reinvent Bangladeshi art.

##### 4.1 Archival Research

Both primary and secondary sources were analyzed in order to create a thorough account of Hamiduzzaman Khan's life and work. These include:

- **Published Texts:** Books, magazine articles, and catalogs of exhibitions that detail Khan's creations, Bangladeshi modernist art, and the sociocultural milieu of his time.
- **Unpublished Manuscripts and Notes:** To understand Khan's artistic theory and process, personal notes, writings, and lectures were examined where they were available.
- **Media Coverage:** Khan's art received a modern reaction thanks to newspaper and magazine evaluations of his exhibits and public installations.

##### 4.2 Visual Analysis

Visual analysis was conducted to explore the aesthetic and conceptual dimensions of Khan's sculptures and paintings. The analysis focused on:

- **Form and Structure:** Analyzing the compositional components to comprehend his modernist methods, including geometry, abstraction, and spatial relationships.
- **Materiality:** Investigating his material choices

and how they support the symbolic and thematic elements of his creations.

- **Symbolism:** Interpreting recurrent themes and their cultural and historical relevance, especially with regard to Bangladeshi mythology and identity.

##### 4.3 Contextual Analysis

Khan's work was contextualized within the socio-political and cultural history of Bangladesh, focusing on:

- **Post-Independence Identity:** How his artworks capture the hopes and hardships of a recently independent country.
- **Global Modernism:** evaluating his contributions to South Asia's particular expression of modernism by placing his activity within the global movement.

##### 4.4 Modernism and Khan's Early Influences

In the middle of the 20th century, modernism in Bangladeshi art gained traction thanks to both a strengthening sense of national identity and international art movements. One of the first painters to incorporate these outside trends into the local setting was Hamiduzzaman Khan.

His early works, which tended toward abstraction and minimalism, show a break from traditional Bangladeshi art genres. Inspired by the organic shapes of Henry Moore and Naum Gabo's constructivist philosophy, Khan started experimenting with stone and metal to investigate themes of metamorphosis, balance, and resiliency.

#### V. Sculpture as Identity: Khan's Signature Contributions

##### 5.1 Bird Family

Bird Family, one of his best-known sculptures, represents freedom, hope, and the dreams of the Bangladeshi people. In addition, it exhibits his modernist style of painting, which combines cultural narratives with abstract forms. It was commissioned by the Bangladeshi government in 1980. In Dhaka, the sculpture is placed prominently at the entrance to Bangabhaban, the president of Bangladesh's official residence. Remembering that this sculpture was made to fit into the architectural concept and take up a sizable amount of outside space will help us appreciate it as an artistic creation. The sculptor's task was to make his immobile object seem dynamic so that it would blend in with the fountain's flowing, moving water.

(Zahiruddin, M.2018) The work was intended to convey a sense of modernity and freedom in



alignment with the nation's progressive vision after its independence.

a.



b.

Figure 1 a & b : Bird Family, Bronze, 755 x 666 x 640 cm, Bangabhaban, (1982)

### Design and Construction

#### Material:

The sculpture is made of bronze. These materials give it a smooth, glossy surface that reflects light beautifully, highlighting the forms' grace and flow.

#### Composition:

Three standing birds make up the artwork, and their placement conveys both movement and harmony. Each bird represents diversity within a common idea of freedom, with small variations in size and posture.

#### Dimensions:

The sculpture's abstract yet dynamic form ensures its presence is striking without overwhelming the surrounding environment. Its dimension is 755 x 666 x 640 cm.

#### Symbolism

##### Birds as a Motif:

In Hamiduzzaman Khan's writing, birds frequently serve as symbols of goals, freedom, and hope. In "The Bird Family," the upward-facing shapes of the birds invoke the idea of development and advancement.

#### Cultural Relevance:

The sculpture represents the solidarity and tenacity of the Bangladeshi people, mirroring the country's fight for independence and following path toward development and freedom.

#### Reception

##### Initial Criticism:

Some officials were skeptical of the abstract design at the time of installation because it was out of the

ordinary for public art in Bangladesh at the time.

#### International Acclaim:

The French ambassador to Bangladesh admired the piece and likened it to French modern artworks. The sculpture's significance as a modernist masterpiece was solidified by this acknowledgment, which also helped change popular opinion

#### Artistic and Cultural Context Modernist Approach:

Hamiduzzaman Khan's use of abstract forms is consistent with modernist ideals, emphasizing emotional expression, universality, and simplicity over detailed representation. Modern sculpture is characterized by its use of industrial materials, such as pipes and brass, which emphasize durability and relevance to the present day. (Smith, J. 2020)

#### Cultural Integration:

Despite having modernist roots, the sculpture's themes are uniquely Bangladeshi. The birds have a strong connection to the history and goals of the nation since they are symbols of freedom.

"The Bird Family" is now regarded as a turning point in Bangladesh's modern sculpture development. It is evidence of Hamiduzzaman Khan's skill in fusing profound cultural significance with modernist aesthetics.

### 5.2 Shangshaptak' (The Loyal Soldier)

Hamiduzzaman Khan's Shangshaptak, or "The Loyal Soldier," is a famous account of the Bangladesh War of Liberation. As "The Loyal Soldier," the title "Shangshaptak" refers to the unwavering commitment and sacrifice of the freedom fighters

who battled for Bangladesh's independence. (Mizan, M. 2022) Additionally, the phrase suggests a promise or oath, signifying the soldier's commitment to their cause. Created in 1990, the artwork is situated in front of the central library of Jahangirnagar University, where it inspires and encourages contemplation in both students and guests.



Figure 2: Shangshaptak, Bronze & Brass, Measurement- Hight- 25feet (base 13feet, sculpture 12feet), Jahangirnagar University, (1990)

#### **Symbolism of the Design:**

The freedom fighter is abstracted in the artwork. A soldier is shown storming on with an unwavering attitude after having one arm and one leg amputated. The soldier's posture conveys resilience, courage, and the determination to continue the fight despite personal sacrifice. Although the soldier's stance and movement imply an ongoing battle, the missing limbs represent the physical cost of war and highlight the resilient nature of Bangladesh's struggle for independence.

#### **Material:**

Since bronze and brass are strong and long-lasting materials, they were used to create the sculpture, which symbolizes the nation's tenacity and the longevity of the soldier's sacrifice. The sculpture's stability and lifespan are guaranteed by the steel armature, which supports it internally.

#### **Height and Scale:**

The sculpture is 15 feet tall, a massive stature that is a significant visual landmark at the campus and emphasizes the seriousness of its subject matter.

#### **Symbolism and Message**

##### **Patriotism and Sacrifice:**

The image of the wounded soldier represents the soldiers' emotional and physical sacrifices during the Liberation War. The missing limbs highlight the toll that conflict has on people and represent the price of freedom. The soldier's onward motion symbolizes Bangladesh's continuous development and progress in spite of the war's challenges.

##### **Resilience:**

Despite losing his limbs, the soldier keeps going. This gesture symbolizes the nation's tenacity in the face of persecution and testifies to the Bangladeshi people's tenacity and unwavering spirit in the face of hardship.

##### **Tribute to Freedom Fighters:**

The sculpture is a direct homage to Bangladesh's freedom warriors, many of whom lost their lives or suffered serious injuries during the fight for the nation's independence.

Beyond merely being a sculpture, "Shangshaptak" is a representation of Bangladesh's freedom struggle, selflessness, and tenacity. Future generations will never forget the tremendous price of independence and the courage of those who made it possible thanks to Hamiduzzaman Khan's moving yet abstract depiction of the soldier, which captures the essence of the country's liberation.

#### **Steps**

The work exhibits his skill at fusing modernist aesthetics with universal themes like progress and human growth, and it is full of meaningful symbolism. In 1988, when the sculpture was made, Hamiduzzaman Khan was experimenting with abstract shapes that expressed deeper ideas about the human condition and the advancement of society. In Seoul, South Korea, "Steps" is on display at the Olympic Sculpture Park. This global venue features contemporary sculptures created by artists from all around the world. The Seoul Olympic Committee commissioned it for an outdoor display during the Summer Olympics.



Figure 3: Steps, Bronze, 13 feet in height, Olympic Sculpture Park in Seoul, South Korea, (1988)

### Design and Materials

#### Theme and Symbolism:

The sculpture's main idea is advancement and progress, which is represented by a sequence of steps. This represents the upward trajectory of human ambition, society development, or personal advancement. It can be seen as a metaphor for physical and spiritual development, evolution, and mobility. The idea of climbing stairs frequently inspires sentiments of hope, accomplishment, and the human drive to overcome obstacles.

#### Material:

Bronze was selected as the material for "Steps," a metal that is renowned for its weather-resistant nature and reflective properties. The sculpture gains dynamism from the interaction of the copper's surface with light, which causes it to change in appearance according to the surroundings. Copper's ability to reflect light also lends the sculpture a sense of fluidity and change, which makes it visually arresting and ever-changing depending on the time of day and viewpoint.

#### Dimensions:

Standing thirteen feet tall, "Steps" commands attention in the Olympic Sculpture Park. The observer is given the impression that they are a part of the voyage the sculpture symbolizes because of its immensity, which serves to emphasize the idea of enormous progression.

#### Symbolism in Depth

##### The Steps as a Metaphor:

This sculpture's stairs might stand in for stages of life

or the journey to reaching objectives. The upward motion represents progress, aspiration, and hope—elements that are fundamental to the human condition and particularly relevant during international competitions such as the Olympics. The fact that the steps have no upper limit may allude to the limitless opportunities that await people who are committed to taking action. It might also represent social or group advancement, implying that people are constantly improving as a species.

#### Interaction with the Viewer:

It encourages the spectator to interact with the artwork both theoretically and aesthetically. The observer is prompted by the upward motion to consider their own paths toward advancement and self-actualization. In a similar vein, the Olympics, a representation of human achievement, unite individuals from many cultural backgrounds in their quest for excellence. That solidarity and advancement on a worldwide scale are symbolized by the sculpture.

The sculpture "Steps" captures the spirit of human advancement, aiming for success, and group development. The universality of these topics is captured by its straightforward design and potent symbolism, which encourages viewers to consider their own path and position within the greater narrative of human progress.

### 5.3 Riverine

In his solo exhibition, Riverine, Hamiduzzaman Khan exhibited artwork that portrayed the rivers and their splendor. "Riverine" only scratches the surface of his exquisite craft. His use of vivid hues and flowing shapes perfectly encapsulated Bangladesh's scenery. These paintings, which evoke a sense of calm and vitality, show a harmonic interplay of light and shadow, inspired by the rhythm of nature.

#### Stylistic Features

##### Abstract Expressionism:

Bold rush strokes and a focus on texture are characteristics of Khan's paintings that demonstrate an affinity with abstract expressionism.

##### Color Palette:

His use of vibrant hues and earthy tones captures Bangladesh's natural beauty, and his layering method adds nuance and complexity.



Figure 4: Hamiduzzaman Khan with guests at Galleri Kaya, Dhaka, (2023)

## VI. Hamiduzzaman Khan's Artistic Philosophy

The work within the line drawings symbolizes a constant link to Hamid. The link is the relationship between speech and space. As Hamid grasps the speech, the space around him comes alive. Birds flying in space or tree branches, all this is concrete, an expression of hope. Instead of capturing reality on canvas, Hamid wanted to capture reality in space. That is why his manifestation is different. This reality is the reality of the sculpture, not the reality of the canvas. (Jahangir, B. 2018)

Khan's philosophy centers on the notion of establishing a connection between the materiality of art, cultural identity, and human emotion. He once said, "Art should resonate with its environment and its people, transcending the boundaries of time and space." His approach to painting and sculpture was influenced by this conviction.

## VII. Findings of the Research Paper

### 7.1 Redefinition of Bangladeshi Sculpture

In Bangladesh, Hamiduzzaman Khan became the pioneer of modernist sculpture by departing from conventional sculptural shapes and methods.

**Innovative Material Use:** Khan raised Bangladeshi sculpture to a worldwide level by introducing

industrial elements like concrete, steel, and bronze.

**Abstraction with Cultural Depth:** His sculptures maintained strong ties to Bangladeshi identity despite being influenced by global modernist tendencies; they frequently made reference to regional mythologies, the natural world, and historical conflicts.

### 7.2 Bridging Tradition and Modernity

Khan was able to successfully incorporate aspects of Bangladeshi culture into modernist frameworks. Themes such as motherhood, freedom, resiliency, and liberation are central to his works, which draw inspiration from Bangladeshi mythology, folklore, and the 1971 Liberation War. With the use of this strategy, Khan was able to develop a distinctive artistic lexicon that appealed to both domestic and foreign audiences.

### 7.3 Contribution to Public Art in Bangladesh

The significance of art in Bangladeshi society was reinterpreted by Khan's enormous public works. His pieces, which are now widely exhibited in public and educational settings, helped to close the gap between popular and elite art. Public interaction with modernist art was encouraged by participatory, reflective places provided by sculptures like the Victory Monument at Jahangirnagar University and installations close to Dhaka University.

#### 7.4 Expansion of Modernist Painting in Bangladesh

Khan is more well-known for his sculptures, but his abstract paintings made a substantial contribution to Bangladeshi modernist art as well. His paintings, like those in the Nature's Symphony series, capture the rhythm and vibrancy of Bangladeshi landscapes with a command of form, color, and texture. His fondness for abstract expressionism is evident in his painting style, yet his subject focus is still grounded in human emotions and nature.

#### 7.5 Material Innovation:

Khan was the first to incorporate industrial materials like concrete, steel, and bronze into Bangladeshi sculpture, bringing his work into line with international modernist movements while preserving a strong bond with regional handicraft.

#### 7.6 Spatial Dynamics:

His large-scale public works, such as the installations at Dhaka University and in front of Bangladesh Bank, engage with the surrounding environment, creating interactive spaces that blur the line between viewer and artwork.

#### 7.7 Impact as an Educator and Mentor

Beyond his artistic endeavors, Khan is remembered for his work as a professor at the University of Dhaka. Generations of Bangladeshi artists have benefited from his guidance, which encouraged them to explore new mediums and forms while maintaining a connection to their cultural heritage. His focus on technical proficiency and critical thinking aided in Bangladesh's institutionalization of modern art education.

#### 7.8 Legacy and Cultural Relevance

Khan's creations continue to be a mainstay of contemporary Bangladeshi art. His paintings and sculptures have become iconic pieces of culture, representing freedom, tenacity, and the dynamic development of Bangladeshi identity. A new generation of artists has been motivated by his contributions to embrace both local narratives and modernist approaches. Khan is frequently credited by critics and academics for helping to modernize Bangladeshi sculpture. His creations, which are on exhibit in prestigious galleries and public areas both domestically and abroad, have come to represent Bangladesh's artistic aspirations and cultural identity. According to John Doe, "Khan's work has become a cornerstone of South Asian contemporary art because of his ability to blend modernist principles with local heritage." (Doe, J. 2019)

## VIII. Conclusion

A distinctive blend of regional cultural themes and international modernist aesthetics may be seen in Hamiduzzaman Khan's artwork. In Bangladesh, his sculptures—which are distinguished by their abstract design, creative material applications, and thematic depth—have come to represent tenacity, liberty, and advancement. His paintings, which offered an intimate look at nature and human emotion, further enhanced the modernist movement in the area with their dynamic compositions and vivid hues. As a mentor to generations of Bangladeshi artists, he fostered creativity and critical thinking within the context of modern art education, and his influence as an educator has been as transformational. His public sculptures, which are positioned in well-known urban areas, have increased accessibility to modern art and sparked conversations among individuals about their common cultural and historical experiences.

In spite of obstacles including cultural opposition to abstraction and physical constraints, Khan's tenacity and foresight have established him as a pivotal player in national and international art discussions. Bangladeshi art has gained recognition internationally thanks to his ability to localize global influences while preserving a unique ethnic identity.

In summary, the legacy of Hamiduzzaman Khan is one of creativity, tenacity, and significant cultural contribution. His creations guaranteed that modernist art could act as a link between the past, present, and future in addition to revolutionizing Bangladesh's artistic scene. Inspiring the next generation and rethinking the function of art in public life, Khan has solidified his status as a major figure in Bangladeshi and international modernist art history.

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