Lives of the Artists of Bangladesh

Glassie Publishes New Book on Art and Culture

Bangladesh may have its unfair share of natural disasters and economic deprivation, but its abundance of creative artists defies standard Western perceptions of that country. "To see the place as a setting for excellence, to see the people as rich in art—and not as poor in money—is to invite a destruction of prejudice and to enable comparisons helpful in self-reflective evaluation," writes Henry Glassie, College Professor of Folklore and Co-director of Turkish Studies at IU Bloomington, in his latest book, Art and Life in Bangladesh (Indiana University Press, 1997).

Glassie made his first two trips to Bangladesh in the late 1980s. In 1995, he was invited back by the director of the Bangla Academy to do for Bangladesh what he had done for Turkey (Turkish Traditional Art Today, Indiana University Press, 1994). "Now you must give Bangladesh a book," said his friend and colleague, Mohammad Harunur Rashid. Glassie took up the challenge, undaunted by having only an initial three-month period to work on the project. An indefatigable fieldworker, he spent those months traveling across the country by road, bus, rickshaw, and oxcart to listen, converse with, question, observe, and record its artists.

As he tells his readers, "I write to introduce you to the people of Bangladesh through their art, and to use their art to exemplify the study of creativity in its own contexts as part of a general inquiry into the human condition." Glassie focuses largely on potters and artists of clay to arrive at a general theory of art in Bangladesh. The country occupies the world's largest delta, a land that is green, damp, "layered with clay and free of stones," where men and women from village to city shape the clay into utilitarian pots and elaborate sculptures. "I will center this book in clay, in the very earth of the vast delta that people handle... digging, turning, burning, disfiguring nature to configure culture."

Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country, but clay art is a primarily Hindu art centered on the depiction of Hindu deities. Most of Glassie's book is devoted to in-depth portraits of potters and their many forms of clay art. But other art media abound as well, and there are studies of mat weavers, decorative painters, sculptors, bronze casters, and boat builders. Decorative painting is especially bold and exuberant on cycle-rickshaws and their motorized versions (known as "baby taxis"), where the images may be religious (especially mosques and the Taj Mahal), secular (popular movie stars), and taken from nature (landscapes, flora, and fauna).

Art and Life in Bangladesh is an intimate, reflective ethnography of the country and its artists. Glassie breaks new ground in this study of traditional arts through his compassionate appreciation of the artists whose works, faces, and daily surroundings he has captured in strikingly beautiful black and white photography, and whose lives, aesthetic visions, and philosophical convictions he has meticulously recorded and interpreted for the reader.

—RMN