

Anna Molka's long-forgotten "Tariq's Invasion of Spain"

Anna Molka Ahmad performed an exclusive pioneering role for the development of Pakistani art, especially in 1940s to 1950s. She initiated the Department of Fine Arts at University of the Punjab in 1940, was its first female Professor Emeritus and remained its Chairperson for almost four decades. Besides a good administrator and art educationist, she was a painter of extraordinary caliber, a competent draftsman and a dynamic and energetic sculptor. She had an immense influence on her students as an artist and as an art educationist. As a result, her name became synonymous with the mainstream of progress of art in Pakistan.

Her large *oeuvre* spans half a century, dating from her student days in London, 1937 to her death in 1994. Her works include landscapes, figural compositions, portraits, and monumental paintings on the themes of war and religion. Many of these have been sold and found their way to homes and public buildings in Pakistan and abroad.

One such 'long forgotten and unnoticed' work by Anna Molka, "Tariq's Invasion of Spain" has recently drawn my attention. It is a huge canvas of 3 x 12 feet. The work was commissioned in 1958 by Sheikh Mohammad Jamil, owner of Crescent Paints Pvt. Ltd., who himself suggested its size and subject. It was executed during summer vacation by Anna Molka with the help of two former students, Anwar Afzal and Nasim Anwar. Since then, no art critic or art-lover has ever mentioned or written about it. I realized its presence by a black and white photograph of the original work in an album owned by Tahira Ayas; Anna Molka's younger daughter that she has maintained for the record of sold and commissioned works.

For the last three years, as I was hunting for Anna Molka's lost works for my Ph.D. thesis, I tried to locate this painting but to no avail. Out of the blue, last week, somebody forwarded the information that this painting has been on display for the last thirty years, now in a dilapidated state, in the foyer to Hall No. 1, the Alhamra Art Council, the Mall, Lahore. After its completion, this painting for twenty-two years hung in the residence of Sheikh Mohammad Jamil till his death in 1980. However, the painting never could be appropriately adjusted to home environment because of its huge size, and

his son, Farooq Jamil eventually decided to give it to the Alhamra Arts Council. This painting has been hung on the left-side wall near the staircase. It can not be noticed by anyone going upstairs looking ahead of them and if at all they happen to turn their heads to the left the painting would evade them as it is way beyond eye level. It neither bears the artist's name nor is executed in her signature style thus hangs there unnoticed and ignored.

The historical event depicted, refers to the conquest of Spain in 711CE. Mosa Ibn Naseer, the Governor of South Africa during the reign of the Umayyad ruler Abdul Malik Ibn Marwan sent a fleet of ships carrying soldiers with horses and camels under the command of Tariq Ibn Ziyad to conquer Spain. They disembarked in the evening at the base of a huge rock situated at the entrance of the Mediterranean Sea to the south of Spain. It was connected to Spain by a two miles long causeway. This rock was later named Jibraltar, "the Rock of Tariq", in commemoration of the first Muslim Commander who hoisted the Islamic flag in Spain. After landing on the rock, Tariq Ibn Ziyad ordered his soldiers to burn all the boats they had used to navigate their passage of the Mediterranean and gave his memorable speech, "You have no other way. The enemy is before you while the ocean is behind. The only way of survival is to advance and conquer!" Led by their valiant Commander those ten thousand North African Arab Muslims defeated the Christian army of a hundred thousand men. This victory opened an Islamic development in Europe.

In this artwork, the central area is highlighted behind the rock to emphasize the silhouetted figures mounted on three horses on top of the rock, specifically of Tariq Ibn Ziyad, the Commander-in-Chief, who is leading the other two. He is addressing his men while his right hand holding a sword is held high in an arousing gesture. After hearing the address of their leader, the boats are set on fire as the parade of an army is entering into the enemy's territory from right to the left in the foreground and merging in the far distance.

Anna Molka has very obviously consulted images from European and Islamic sources while working on vista of details; Arab costumes, war weapons, horses and camels, meaningful groups and their gestures, the rocky landscape, and above all, maintained a remarkable balance in the whole composition. This heroic work shows the

artist's efforts in synthesizing historical information about the event and her painterly skills.

By the late fifties, Anna Molka had already been practicing vigorous brushstrokes laden with thick impastos for her works in a European style. Realizing the demand of the subject, for the most part, she has chosen thin applications of colours with a fine and delicate brush to delineate all the details. But she takes freedom with the treatment of sky, flames and smoke, and tides by applying broad and agitated brushstrokes. She has used contrasting colours and dramatic light to animate the scene and its significance and to enhance the visibility of every single detail in an evening time. To appreciate its artistic details in a panoramic composition, it is worthwhile to visit Alhamra Art Gallery for a detailed personal look.



Title: Tariq Bin Ziyad
Artist: Anna Molka Ahmad
Date: 1958 Size: 3.5 x 12 Feet
Medium: Oil Colours on Canvas
Owner: Alhamra Art Gallery, Lahore