

Afghan Artists Paint Hopeful Picture in Kandahar

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Sales of artwork rise in southern city, where buyers seem more discerning than in Kabul.

Amateur art collector Mohammad Idris, who lives in the southern Afghanistan city of Kandahar, emerged from a gallery delighted with his latest purchase.

With the painting, a natural landscape scene, tucked under his arm, he told IWPR, "I've loved paintings since childhood. I liked this picture, and although it was difficult to agree on price with the shopkeeper, I finally bought it from him.

"I have a room at home for various kinds of paintings," he continued. "It's my passion."

There is a long tradition of visual art in Afghanistan, but more than three decades of conflict have affected traditional disciplines like painting and calligraphy. During the Taleban era, in particular, many artworks were destroyed and artists were banned from depicting human or animal figures.

Both artists and sellers say the market in Kandahar is experiencing a sharp upturn after years of stagnation.

Sarajuddin Roshan, who owns an art shop in Kandahar, now sells five to ten paintings a day, compared with just one or two a year ago. Many of the pieces go abroad as gifts or for resale.

"People who live abroad or travel for business buy the most paintings," he said. "They take paintings to their friends as a souvenir from here. Many people also take them to sell them abroad. I think people buy them for high prices over there."

Domestic interest was also growing, he said, adding, "People who love the arts or who are wealthy buy paintings from us."

Roshan said the improved security situation in Kandahar had helped sales, as well as the increasing number of exhibitions held to promote local artists.

"A year ago, I would make a profit of up to 500 dollars a month, but now I'm making up to 1,000 dollars," he said, explaining that he maintained a stock of between 1,000 and 5,000 artworks.

Local artists are delighted by the trend. Painter Amanullah Dorukhshan said exhibitions organised to promote painting and calligraphy, as well as greater arts coverage on Afghan television, had helped revive the scene.

A couple of years ago, he was going from shop to shop in a fruitless attempt to sell his paintings, until he came up with the idea of holding his own exhibitions.

"Now the shopkeepers come after me. They give me ideas, [or] sometimes I do paintings out of my own imagination. I create up to 20 paintings a month and I sell them," he said.

"I used to have a few students, but now up to four people a day come to me and register to learn painting," he added.

Aziz Ahmad Aziz, the head of art and culture in Kandahar's provincial administration, agreed that exhibitions were a very effective promotional tool. He said his department had held at least ten events, including one at the presidential palace in Kabul.

"We showed paintings by Kandahar artists at an exhibition organised to mark [new year festival] Nowruz at the presidential palace this year, which foreign presidents also attended. Afghan president Hamed Karzai purchased all the paintings from Kandahar, to a value of almost 8,000 dollars. That was a major motivation for painters in Kandahar."

Aziz said officials tried to encourage emerging talent by presenting awards and certificates to calligraphers and painters.

"I have created an association of fine arts at the information and culture department," he said. "People interested in the arts can train there. It was under the auspices of this association that our paintings reached the presidential palace."

The association's chairman, Amanullah, said 47 students, including women, had received training so far, with more enrolling on a daily basis.

"The arts in general, and painting and calligraphy in particular, are a mirror to a country's culture," Amanullah said. "We learn about human culture and history from thousands of years ago by studying their art. We must try not to lose these things, as a matter of national pride."

Kandahar's thriving art market is not replicated across the country. In the capital Kabul, Mohammad Hashem Shareq, head of arts at the information and culture ministry, suggested that the monied elite had philistine tastes.

"Our high-ranking officials and businessmen spend a lot of money on fripperies, but when it comes to calligraphy and painting exhibitions, they don't buy anything, not even to give the artists a boost. We don't have this ethos," he said. "To ignore art is really to ignore one's own history, culture and values."

Rahraw Omarzad, an expert on modern Afghan art who lectures at Kabul university, said the environment was not arts-friendly.

"In general, the government has done nothing for artists, particularly painters. We don't have exhibitions and we don't have a gallery for paintings. The media doesn't do good arts programmes. So we can't say that painting is in a good place," Omarzad said. "After our students graduate from university, there's no work for them so they have to do something else. They forget their expertise and lose it."

Mohammad Alem Farhad, dean of the faculty of fine arts at Kabul university, said the decline dated to the civil war that followed the fall of President Najibullah's government in 1992, and accelerated with the Taliban's arrival in the capital in 1996.

"Taliban banned the depiction of living creatures, so our painters' hands were tied," he said.

Calligraphers able to produce elaborate pieces in the flowing Pashto and Dari scripts were formerly able to pick up used to get piecemeal work as sign-writers. But Nur Mohammad, a trained calligrapher, said the commercial value of such work had been eroded by the modern world.

"The work has become computerised. Signs, advertisements and everything else are done on computers. People don't give us work," he said. "Now I have a small booth selling burgers. I don't do calligraphy any more."

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