

Muhammad Asim Khan. Portrait of a Rheumatologist as a Great Artist

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Everyone knows Muhammad Asim Khan as a devoted doctor, an appreciated colleague, and a brilliant researcher. No small achievement while suffering from severe ankylosing spondylitis. But few of us are aware of his artistic gifts. Indeed, the acrylic painting shown here is a self-portrait and allegorizes several important aspects of his life; his Pakistani origin, his Muslim background, and his present American life. Modest as he is, nothing in the portrait refers to his professional career.

Asim Muhammad Khan was born in 1944 in Pakistan. After graduating as a doctor in 1965 at King Edward Medical School in Lahore, he served the Pakistan Army Medical Corps until 1967. He then left his country, first for the UK and later for the USA to do his training in internal medicine followed by a postdoctoral fellowship in Rheumatology. In 1973 he joined the faculty of Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, where he is now a Professor of Medicine with full tenure. Not completely surprisingly he developed a special interest in the spondyloarthropathies and focused his research on the role of HLA genes in disease predisposition. He has written and cowritten more than 140 scientific papers and invited reviews as well as 33 book chapters and edited 2 monographs on ankylosing spondylitis and related spondyloarthropathies. He is section editor of *Current Opinion in Rheumatology* and member or honorary member of several boards, associations, and working parties.

The arthritis started in 1956, at the age of twelve. At that time, there was no rheumatologist in Pakistan. The chief of orthopedics at the local medical school treated him with bed rest and hospitalizations. At one point he prescribed a full year of antituberculous treatment (streptomycin, isoniazid, and PAS) and later intravenous honey, imported from West Germany, both without clinical benefit. It was at the age of 18 years, during his first clinical rotation, that his professor of medicine diagnosed AS. The disease affected primarily spine and hips and to a lesser extent neck and shoulders.

Fortunately, phenylbutazone relieved some of the pain and stiffness. When doing his orthopedics as part of his surgical residency, he assisted several hip arthroplasties and realized that one day the tables would be turned and he would be the one to be operated on. Although he aimed first at becoming a cardiologist, he anticipated progressive disease with decrease of spinal mobility and chest expansion, which might one day impair his ability to resuscitate patients¹. Choosing rheumatology as a subspecialty was then easy, because he knew what arthritis felt like and had empathy for such patients.

His artistic career has the same quality as his professional career, but is much more limited in quantity. Although he liked painting since his childhood, Asim Khan never had formal training for it. He painted only 3 works, a classic portrait of his mother when she was facing breast cancer, the acrylic self-portrait (Figure 1), and an abstract, cubist painting together with his son.

The self-portrait was finished on February 21, 1987. It took him 6 months to conceptualize but only 6 weeks to complete. Three vertical parts can be distinguished, all composed by the letters of his middle name "Asim," which can also be read as "Ankylosing Spondylitis, I' aM". At the right of the central figure, Asim is written in Arabic letters, the first of which is embedded in the Pakistani flag. At the left Roman letters are used and together with the American flag they refer to his present American life and culture. In the central figure we recognize the painter himself. The "a" forms a sort of cage encircling the head to bring out the inability to turn it freely. The eye is transposed to the side, conveying the desire to compensate for the limited field of vision; the ear illustrates his ability to listen. The skeleton is the most striking part of the portrait. The ankylosed cervical (forming the S), lower lumbar spine (forming the I), and sacroiliac joints (forming the M, together with the hips) reveal the spondylitis. Several features of AS or intercurrent disease can be recognized: the use of red, the color of

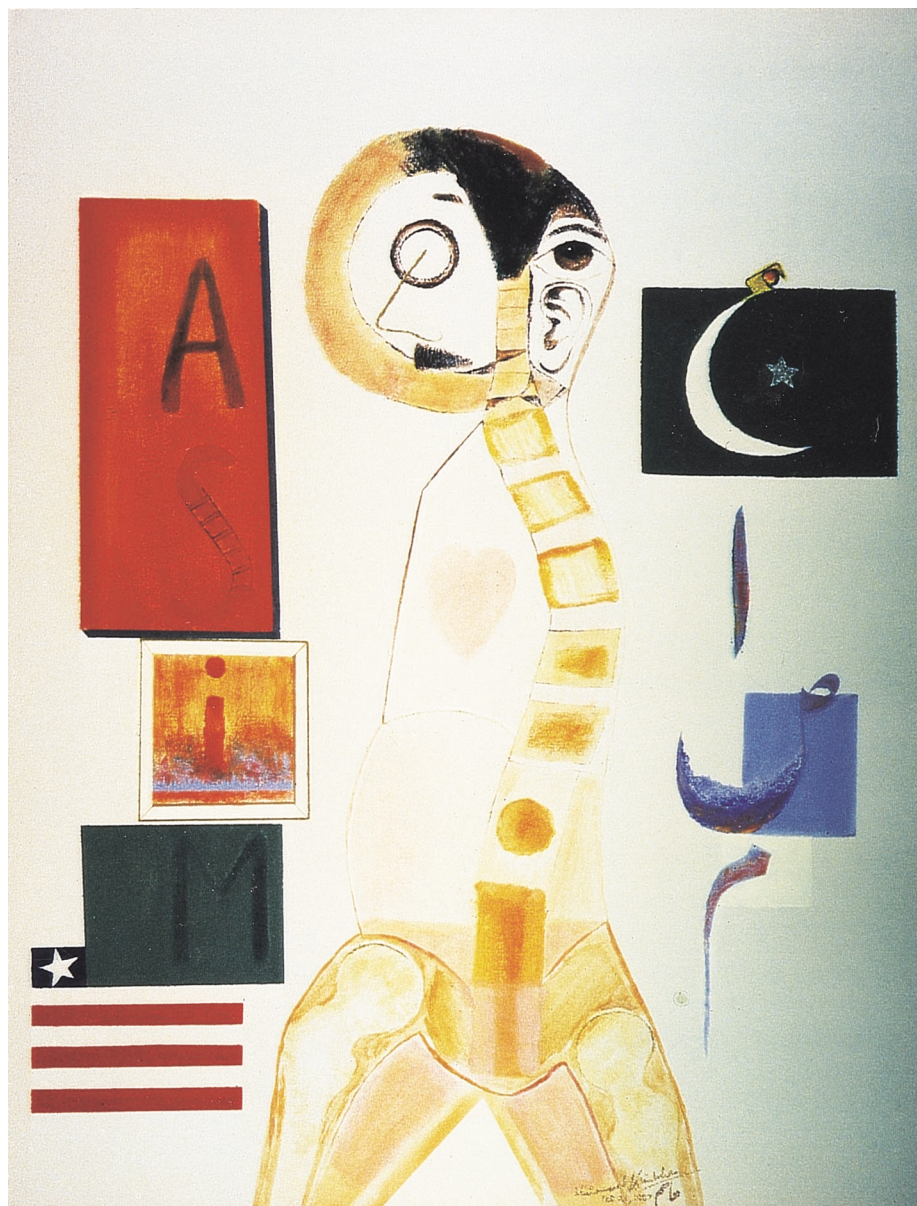


Figure 1. Muhammad Asim Khan. A self-portrait (reprinted with permission, Clin Rheumatol 2001;20:1-2).

inflammation, the squaring of the vertebrae at the thoracolumbar junction, the eye suffering from uveitis, the hip prosthesis in the Arabic “M”, and finally his heart disease. More recently, long after finishing the portrait, he underwent radical nephrectomy.

Muhammad Asim Khan’s life illustrates illness is not necessarily an obstacle to great achievements. Despite the

many health problems, he remains a warm hearted and kind person who never lost his interest in rheumatology and continues a brilliant and busy career.

REFERENCE

1. Kahn MA. On being a patient. *Ann Intern Med* 2000;133:233-4.