

Telling the Story of a Legend

Sarudhaaru Dhon Manik

by Rae Munavvar

As children, we are told stories of men who defied the odds, ventured far into the unknown and became legends. It was this writer's great privilege to grow up knowing a true hero, and I am blessed once more with the honour of telling the world about him.

Mesmerising though our shimmering azure waters may be, it took Sarudhaaru Dhon Manik (or Dhombe as we affectionately call him), becoming the first diver in the Maldives in 1964 - for any of us to truly call the turquoise that surrounds us 'home'.

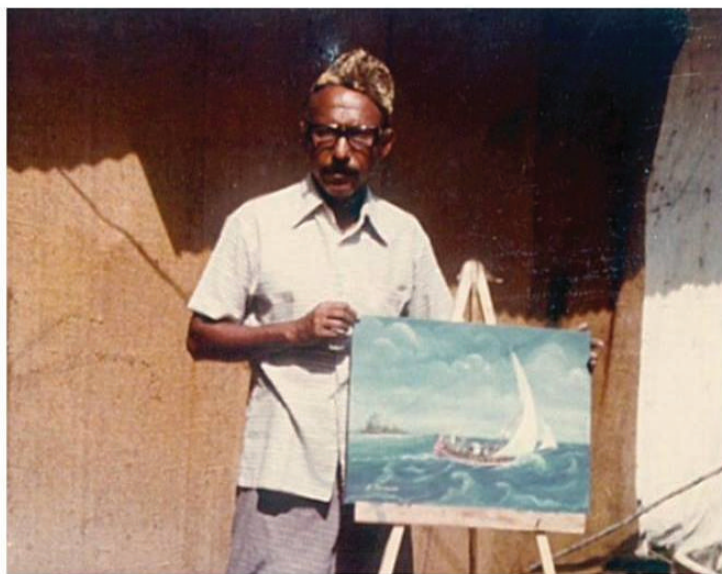
In 1926, the year infamous French Impressionist Painter Claud Monet died, our Maldivian virtuoso was born.

He began gaining recognition for his talent as early as the 1940's during Mohamed Ameen's presidency, a time heralded as one of aliterary and cultural renaissance.

As I write, nostalgia floods my mind with memories of my grandfather (the Late Sikkagey Hussain Manikfaanu) sitting with his dearest friend, Sarudhaaru Dhon Manik, on an 'undhoali' (traditional Maldivian swing), whilst Dhombe told us tales of his amazing adventures that were illustrated by his latest paintings. Truly every conversation was animated with

colour and by his spontaneous drawings.

From an artist's perspective, Dhombe's style varies depending on the time period you're studying, but he is always as



precise as he is fantastical, his palette vibrant yet, dreamlike and his depiction always powerful whether it is in its simplicity or by the intricacy of its detail.

There must have been more than a trickle of destiny in the waters of Dhombe's momentous first dive, leading to the birth of one of the most celebrated artists in the nation. He was the beginning of a conscious movement that bred integral curiosity about the phenomena that lay beneath our seas. His depictions of oceanic beauty inspired many Maldivians to venture into the blue, and his artistic

integrity led to many artists filling their own canvases.

"This home was built purely from art", he tells me filled with pride, gesturing

towards the interiors of his house. "Don't ever let anyone discourage you from creating your art, and being successful at it."

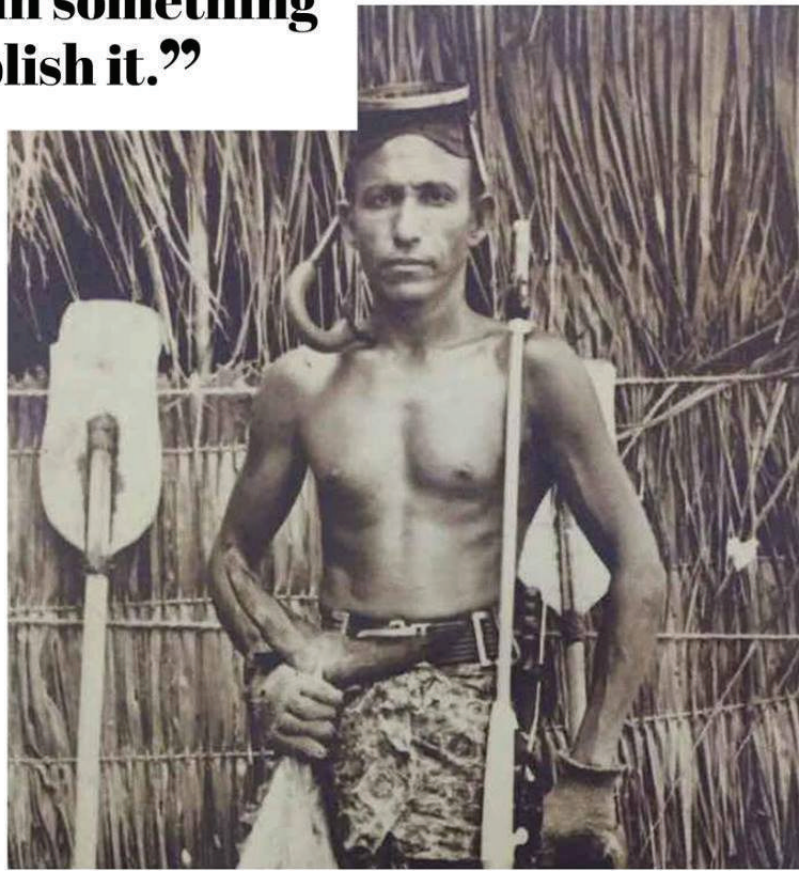
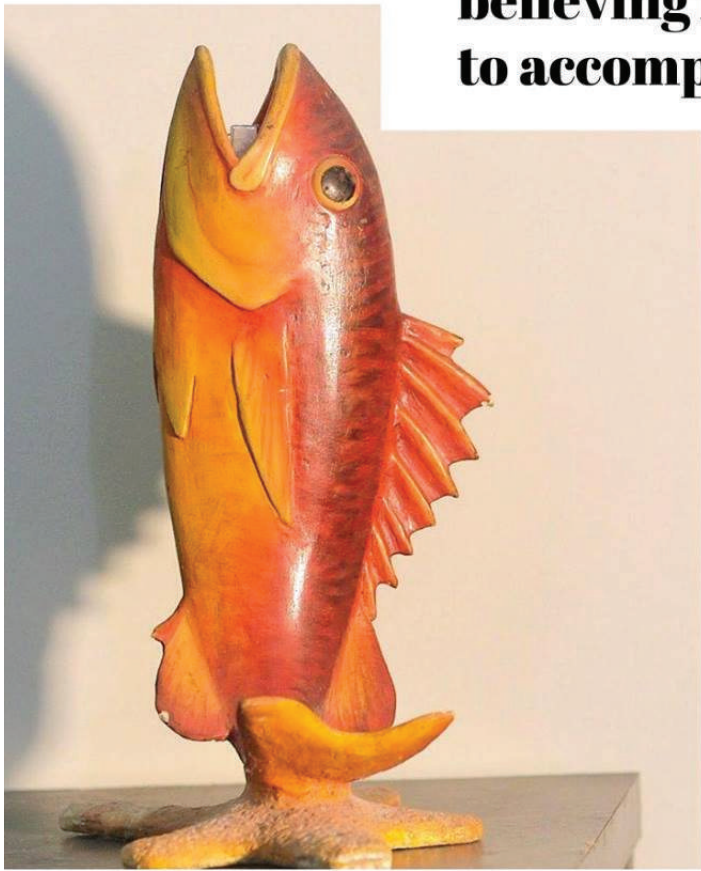
In a time where art was disregarded by many, and the boom of tourism overtook any differentiating discourse, it takes a true innovator to marry the possibilities of both industries. Commissioned first by friends like my grandfather (a diplomat) and many others, SDM initially produced art and

crafts to be gifted to foreign emissaries and the like. As his work gained momentum, he created portraits and copy printed images by the Indian traders stationed in Malé.

In his prime, armed only with his handmade scuba mask, copied from the one he saw from Hans Hass (world-renowned Austrian biologist and diving pioneer) and a handmade spear gun, he free-dived 20 meters a day - discovering the wonder of flora and fauna under



“It only takes you believing in something to accomplish it.”



the sea wherever they may be found, hidden in caves or swimming in majestic schools. Though the story of an untrained diver exploring unknown territory is impressive enough, his handmade dive mask, produced by what he describes as a stream of “trial and error”, worked so well that even the Maldivian Army immediately pushed for orders.

SDM also documented various fish commonly found in the Maldives, creating some of the first posters depicting the shells and fish in the Maldives, still in print and published by Novelty Printers and Publishers Maldives. He was also part of the team that produced the first Maldivian currency notes. Even the first souvenir t-shirt ever produced in the Maldives, displaying a shark’s head, was designed and illustrated by Sarudhaaru Dhon Manik.

From lead and charcoal to acrylic and oil, watercolour, Papier-mâché, carving wood and sculpting clay – there really isn’t a medium that Dhombe hasn’t conquered. His creativity lies not only in the work he produces. He demonstrates his inventive skill by experimenting across mediums and building something entirely new.

“People have told me to draw abstract things, to draw what is in my mind. But my art was driven by a need to show people the spectacular things I saw diving under the sea, and that is where my heart is still.”

Nearly a century young today, SDM picks up his paintbrush without a quiver in his hand.

“It only takes you believing in something to accomplish it.”

Sitting with him today, it is hard to not drown reminiscing over the glorious era that he represents, days of boundless hope and dreams in a Maldives at the cusp of being discovered by the rest of the world, whilst ever so slightly opening its own eyes.

Through Dhombe’s eyes, I see glimmers of my grandfather and a man that made me smile every day that I’ve known him. To the rest of the Maldives however, it is the steely determined eyes of a man that ‘parted the waters’ for every artist that followed him, with every stroke of his ever-steady brush.

Thank you Dhombe, for teaching me how to believe in the impossible – I’m forever in awe of you. ♦

