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Zuhairah first started her craft by making cards

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Recently, the brilliant artwork of Zuhairah Datuk Shuaib, 76, began making its rounds on social media. At first glance, her depictions of pastoral scenery, underwater landscapes and verdant jungles are captivating in their lively use of colour and evocative imagery. However, it is upon closer inspection that they truly take one's breath away.

What sets Zuhairah's creations apart is her medium of choice: The collages consist of leftover fabric trimmed to the finest measurements along with varying lengths of thread, pasted with starch onto mounting boards or canvas. None of her pictures are sketched beforehand and she doesn't use a single drop of ink or paint, not even for incredibly minute details.

Under her patient, expert hands, textured cherry blossoms of pale pink and crimson thrive across sunshine-filled grassy fields; harmonious hues of vanilla and chocolate melt into the shadowy bark of forest trees heavy with emerald and jade leaves; and gangly water birds forage for kaleidoscopic fish among lush lotuses in a lake of dreams.

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Her pièce de résistance, with which she refuses to part, shows a rice farmer in a field of golden paddy, diamond shapes cut from a sari, with a classic kampung house standing quietly in the cool background surrounded by towering coconut palms. Each piece takes months to create.

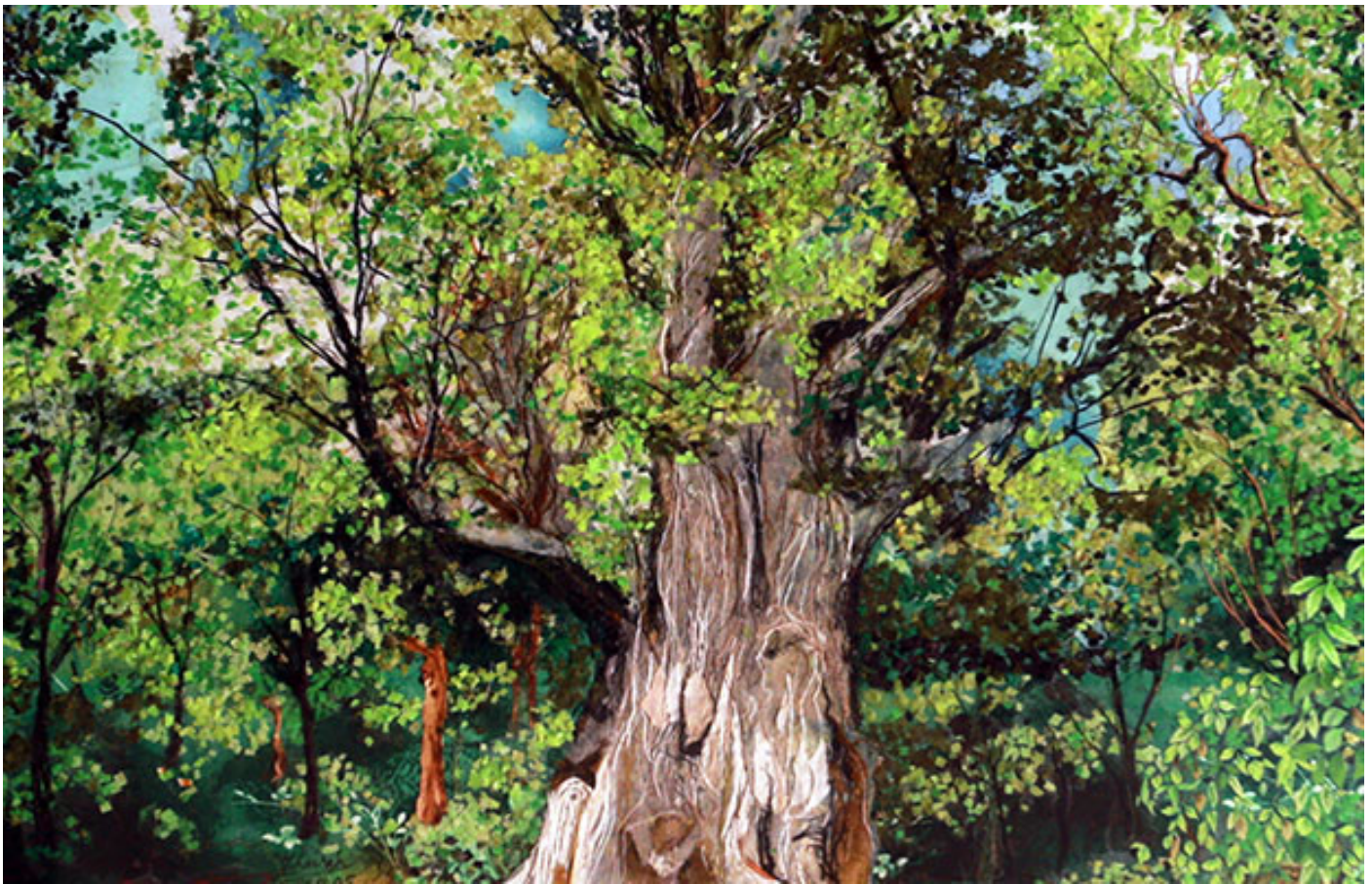
Initially nothing more than a casual hobby, she first started her craft about 14 years ago. "One night, my granddaughter was up late and I asked her why she had not gone to bed," recalls the soft-spoken artist from Alor Setar. "She said she was making a card for Teacher's Day."

Zuhairah told her to go to sleep and took it upon herself to complete the aforementioned card. As she also sews, Zuhairah had plenty of leftover fabric at her disposal. "I saw a vase of flowers on the table and began patching together pieces in the shape of blossoms. There was a polka-dotted material that I used to create mushrooms, some green cloth for trees and plants – just like that. It was all very simple at the start."

The teacher who received the gift praised it for its beauty and her granddaughter's friends requested similar cards, to which Zuhairah gladly obliged. "Just to make them happy," she smiles.



These 'paintings' are created not with water colours but textile fabrics



Flowers were her favoured sources of inspiration, particularly romantic roses and artistic table arrangements. Then one day, another granddaughter suggested she make a waterfall. She claims that her first attempt at this was not so beautiful as it appeared “very stiff”. Happily, she has since perfected her technique and during the interview proudly gestures towards a stunning image of cascading waters framed by bold ferns and swinging branches.

These days, she brings to life on her canvas anything that comes to mind. As years passed, her lovingly-made artwork caught the attention of numerous friends, all of whom wanted to buy her unique pieces. “I didn’t want to sell at first but they insisted,” she laughs. “So I did and later I was quite happy to earn some extra money. Whatever they want, I make for them.”

Apart from nature, more recent pieces have also included those with spiritual themes, such as religious pilgrims at the holy Kaabah in Mecca as well as children performing the call to prayer. As one might have guessed, she donates part of her profits to charity.

She has also made a portrait of the late Sultan Abdul Halim Mu’adzam Shah of Kedah, who at the time was Malaysia’s 14th Yang di-Pertuan Agong. “It was commissioned by a friend. At first, I didn’t say anything but I asked my cousin what she thought of the project. She told me I could not do it and advised me not to attempt it. And since she told me not to do it, I gave it a go. I’m that kind of person; if you tell me I can’t do it, I will do it!”

Her rebellious spirit paid off. The portrait turned out so well that the state of Kedah acquired it from her for RM15,000 – not bad for an artist who was not professionally trained. Portraits, she admits, are probably the most difficult to produce as they require extremely fine threads cut to the softness of dust to replicate the gradient tones of faces

For the most part, Zuhairah's work is impromptu and depends on the availability of materials. "If I cannot get certain colours then I won't do it. Usually, I obtain scraps of cloth from tailors although a great number of my friends are so excited to get involved that they provide me with plenty of fabric."

As with her first time, she works best at night. "That's when my mind is calm. During the day, I enjoy gardening," she shares.

To date, she has over 40 creations under her belt. Each one brings joy to her heart and those around her. "I'm pleased when they turn out so nicely. They also reflect my mood. If I'm not happy, the pictures won't look good."

While none of her own family members are keen to learn the art from her as it is too time-consuming, there are some in her fan base who have signed up for lessons, if only to pick up the basic technique. "It looks easy but while you're making it, you can't really tell how it will turn out. Only those who appreciate art will understand its value," she muses.

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