

Evolution and Influence of Contemporary Art in India

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Abstract: *Contemporary Art in India, a perspective attempts to trace the history that brought about an awareness of contemporaneity or modernity in art in our country, and the directions it has taken during the last 150 years or so. Historically speaking, we have been exposed to western influences since 1600, the year the British East India Company was set up. But we became very dependent on the achievements in European art since 1900. The influence spread with increasing British political power, particularly when Schools of Art were established in Madras, Calcutta and Bombay during 1850s to impart training in western techniques in an organized manner.*

Keywords: Contemporary art, India, western influence, art history, British East India Company.

1. Introduction

The terms contemporary and modern are synonymous, especially with reference to the present styles and trends in art. The concept contemporary or modern is not geographical, it does not mean mechanization, it is not fashion, it is neither materialism nor a theory of social reconstruction. It cannot even completely circumscribe what is existing in the present. What is it then, that is modern in art, or literature or other creative activity? It is a teasing question and provokes a gamut of varied reactions. To some, modern is synonymous with the machine and, therefore, something decadent and indecent. To yet others, modern stand for material civilization of the west and are therefore to be looked down upon from the spiritual heights of India. To the young, the radical theory of social organization is what is modern, which advocates jettisoning, with impunity, the existing and the traditional in their own society. And these are just a few viewpoints. The element of the modern is a character of consciousness. It is a particular state of tension or concentration which accompanies human will and effort when it grapples with the changed aspect of form, when it battles and strains to grasp the new. It is that which gives a passionate and direction to the human activity of a period. The operation of this character of consciousness is like the undying force of the universe itself which surges forth at every fresh creation of civilization. The course of its working has been well envisaged by the conception of Lila, the form that is eternally integrating and disintegrating.

Contemporary Art in the Present Century

Contemporary or modern art indeed signifies the bubbling, exciting state of activity in the arts in the twentieth century. Some have called this art the mouthpiece of the present century's incoherence. They say that behind this outburst of activity there is no feeling or faith. Modern artists seem to see the reality of life only in parts. But consider what Cezanne is said to have told his friend Villard, "It is easy to paint a vision; it is most painful to paint sensations." Most of the modern artists were searching to realize sensations and not to paint visions. There have been protests against the analysis of forms undertaken by contemporary artists. The criticism is that modern artists seem to think one has to kill before he can dissect. It is felt that in contemporary art

humanity has been sacrificed for the sake of scientific dogmas.

Some critics hold that the painters of the twentieth century have regarded art from an angle that is too exclusively technical. Formal problems have engaged attentions so much that art works remain laboratory experiments. The highly intellectualized aspects of contemporary art which are responsible for withholding active participation in its experiences by a larger audience, have also met with disapproval. The surrealists, who delight in psychological adventure in their paintings, have also failed to find favour with audiences who love art. Pictorial representations of what are in depth experiments of the human soul do not seem to evoke a positive response. Similarly, visual expressions of the fantastic and supernatural world do not find their vivid realization in the work of the contemporary artists. However, one cannot deny the extraordinary variety of modern art and its intense search for new directions. It has brought about the functional coexistence of the major arts of painting, sculpture and architecture. Quite a few twentieth century painters have been accomplished architects and sculptors and vice versa. The evolution of all three arts has, in fact, remarkable potenparallels. All three have common aims-simplification; study of the potential of various materials, old and new; concentration on formal problems, in particular the organization of space. The technological developments, giving rise to a fearsome mechanical imposition on our lives, cannot be rejected outright as inappropriate environments for the arts. The new media processes and engineered efficiency possess a beauty of their own. The recognition of needs is calculated against the conditions in the environment and the social mood. Subjected to men's analytical and creative attributes, it results in a product that answers certain individual needs, and at the same time conforms to the spiritual and economic needs of a culture. The applied or accompanying arts of advertising and design provide intriguing challenge to mobilize the aesthetic instincts in modern man with his trading, manufacturing and social inclinations. Technology today is not only a source for products and wealth; it is also a fundamental source of philosophical understanding as well as a generator of creative visual forms. There is a genuine and fundamental belief in the limitless possibilities of technology and the ability to shape its products within

acceptable and pleasing aesthetics. There is a general line of evolution from realism through a modified naturalism to abstraction and non-objectivity. There is a break with the older traditions and they have cast off all the shackles of romanticism, eclecticism and formlessness.

There is a forthright directness of approach and an effort to get to the fundamentals. This has resulted in clear, precise forms which bear direct and indirect relation to science and technology. The contemporary movement in arts, indeed, has broadened the scope of the artist and provided him a wider outlook. The modern art movement ended in the 1970s, and that now we are in the post-modern period. However, the relevance of this development in Europe to the Indian scene has yet to be studied and clarified. It may be that the function of the contemporary movement in art has been to cleanse the traditional styles of their overly great emphasis on verisimilitude and eclecticism, and to revivify and revitalize the older traditions of art. The significance of the contemporary art movement, perhaps, lies in its dynamics. Sensitivity to surface, colour, texture, line, and shape, and the evocation of images deeply embedded within us, has made life more enjoyable. For, whenever men have turned their eyes inward, beauty has been poignantly revealed.

World Wide Impact

Though contemporary art has grown out of a mental environment which is entirely European, and though the focal centre of this art movement was initially in Paris (and more lately in New York), yet its influence has spread to all parts of the world, both the East and the West. This spread reminds one of the great cultural migrations that took place in the early history of India when Indian civilization spread to Central Asia, China, Japan, and the countries of south-east Asia. Similarly, the influence of contemporary art has spanned oceans and continents and come in grappling contact with the regional arts everywhere. Its expressive forms and the implications of the forces that it has released are of immense significance in the development of. Present-day art and the direction it is taking throughout the world, India being no exception. It is not only in India that there is an indecisive approach to contemporary art. Everywhere, even in Europe, contemporary art has piqued and intrigued people. It has aroused passions for and against it, leading sometimes to panegyric, sometimes to abuse and sometimes to caricature. This has happened, in all probability, because contemporary art is very different from all earlier art, and the new forms of expression are less easy to understand. The critics have not made its understanding easy either. In their painstaking efforts to explain the intricacies of contemporary art, they have made it more mystifying, and perhaps brought the enjoyment of art to a halt. Critiques and manifestos were written by the artists themselves or by writers and public relation people engaged by them. They have not, in all propa cases, been more elucidating, perhaps, because they were intended to gate merely their views. To add to the confusion, a popular prejudice against the newer forms of art has been aroused by the whimsicalities of the modern artist himself, both in his life and in his work.

It is also unfortunate that in spite of experimenting with new forms, new tools and depicting new sensations,

contemporary art has not so far been able to become a part of the life of the people as art did in a society where it had a definite function. The lack of an understanding audience has, perhaps, stood in the way of a general acceptance of contemporary art and, therefore, there has been an absence of participation of the people at large in this art experience. However, it cannot be denied that contemporary art has practical bearings on our times. For instance, we are so accustomed to seeing the shapes of modern architecture that we no longer see them as geometrical forms and these shapes, as we know, go back to the modern painters. Typography without capital letters was the Italian Futurists' way of protesting against the accepted good taste of 1912. Cubism worked its way through our pattern of life from advertising to the displays in the world fairs and exhibitions. Magazine covers are the kind of paste ups Braque and Picasso made. The international reach of the contemporary art movement has brought it in grappling contact with regional styles of painting in different parts of the world. To review the results of these contacts would be a formidable task. But it can safely be said that contemporary art has affected deeply and completely the regional arts of America and all other countries where the root of civilization is European. Thus, they produced their Cubists, Futurists, Surrealists, the Ops and Pops. But in countries where the indigenous traditions have been strong issues have not been finally settled by the modern art movement in its favour. In Mexico, for example, where a strong native and indigenous culture has existed, the contemporary art movement has only been able to stimulate the latent capacities in the direction of a break from the European towards more authentic national expression. In the countries of the East, contemporary art is still digging its talons deep to make a widely noticeable and effective change. There are, however, some points on which Indian art traditions seem to parallel the trends in the contemporary movement in the West. For example, Indian traditions have always disfavored the portrayal of outer reality. In fact, the canons of art lay down that it is the conceptual essence behind the gross body that should be painted or of which an image should be made. Again, Indian art has always been conceptually related to our religious beliefs. Even the formal approach various pictorial devices and visual form- language, symbolic and expressive colour and the creation of linear effects in the traditional arts (classical and folk) is similar to that used by the contemporary artists. These formal aspects have been well studied and mastered. Similarly, images of the inner world which have attracted Indian artists have been deeply explored by contemporary artists.

It would, therefore, be of great interest to watch how contemporary developments in Western art will continue to influence the future direction of Indian art; for even the most traditional and folk-based art seems to possess a strong contemporary or modern flavour. The contemporary expression of the modern, no doubt has its source in the West, but the world has now shrunk so much that its influence is world-wide, and the significance of contemporary achievements is not confined to any one region. Mechanization, indeed, has given man today a new sense of power and domination. It's by-products like the radio, television, cinema or the car and aeroplane are merely the identification marks of a mechanized world. In the same

sense, fashion is not mere frivolity, but the reflection of a deep restless-ness, an urge of contemporary life, and man's attempt to keep pace with the tempo of change. Similarly, materialists, by exploiting human selfishness (that is by thinking of others first in one's own interest and serving one's self best through serving others), have ensured high wages, abundant purchasing power, the production of cheap goods and have provided people with more comfort and more enlightened leisure. Similarly, the stamping out of age-old social injustices is indicative of the rousing of social conscience. None of these changes, however, either singly or together, can wholly represent the modern. The modern is a new sensitivity of which the basis is knowledge and experience both of which are grist to the mill. Man's interest in the practical and positive, and his craving for insight into the fundamental or final truth, are not regarded as incompatible. Poetic truth is not regarded less real than scientific truth. The modern belief lies in an independent world of mathematical, measurable sequences and from this spring all the characteristics of the contemporary expressions, that is, clarity, exactness and its refusal to be content with what is only approximate or ill-defined. Qualities of precision and economy, poise and lightness are representative modern qualities. The perceptive powers of man have been forced to be so lucid as to see through both the abstract and the humanistic in order to be able to communicate the experience in terse and concise terms. The artist's will to form has struggled at every step to discover new aims and motives in order to be able to assist in the remaking of the universe. The period from Manet to the surrealists, from dada to the pop, and self-expressionists and the post-modern performists (creating installations and happenings), is littered with the corpses of many ephemeral art movements. The ardent tension or the sensitizing, soldering sensibility of man was seeking in each successive movement to rebuild and reshape. The net result, however, has been that after much revolutionary achievement, the period of great technical experiment has more or less ended. All the modern art movements, such as impressionism, post impressionism, cubism, futurism, abstractionism, fauvism, expressionism, surrealism and Dadaism, have contributed, each in its own way, to the preparation of new rhythms. The gain, indeed, has been immense.

The modern has produced a startling exactitude of vision in the works, of painters. It has been responsible for the most singular innovations by giving freedom to both poetic and chromatic sensation. It has opened new vistas, extended its reach by the introduction of 'foreign' element, found sanction for its technical departures in Japanese colour prints, Indian sculpture and paintings and the sculptures and forms of Polynesia.

Kalighat Pat, Contemporary water colour



Madhubani painting, Contemporary water colour



The dead-weight of tradition which thwarted and stifled attempts at original expression have been challenged. The modern has made possible for artists to see colour afresh. It has enriched their sensations. It has endowed their technique with firm and new instruments. The surrealists, by their exploration of the inner reality, rehabilitated intuition. Reason, as an individual instrument for passionate investigation, spelt that all objects in nature may be reduced to the cone, to the cylinder, to the sphere. It is the extreme of synthesis following upon the extreme analysis of neo-impressionists. Like other systems modern art has provided discipline to painters. The constructive efforts of cubism were the stirring symptom of a new intellectual order, which was followed by fauvism, futurism and surrealism. The present tension lies in the welding of intuition with reason; for already it is being indicated that intuition is a flame that spurts forth only through contact with an infinity of previous analysis and accumulated reasoning. Only that work will be endowed with inherently vital significance which shall be in accord with this tension. In a work of art, it is expected that the linear and chromatic elements will be substantiated by the integral function which they fulfill in the pictorial statements which the artist's sensibility perceives in the motive forces of contemporary life. We in India, however, are apt to forget that the modern in art (as also in literature),

has resulted from this intense and fierce sensibility. We have far too easily assumed that a particular subject or a particular technique is modern and have sedulously imitated that in order to be classed as moderns. It is ludicrous to be aping Picasso, Cezanne or Van Gogh, in our zeal to be dynamic.

2. Conclusion

The tension between the desire for the new and pride in the past has coloured the most diverse art styles in India in the period under review. This has been characterized no doubt by breaks and contradictions, but also by the many experiences and endeavors of various progressive groups. Despite the insularity of visual culture during the last fifty years, India has given birth to two most influential trends; the traditionalistic and modernistic. The contradictions of these existing attitudes, both in the visual and plastic arts, are quite apparent in the work and aspirations of many artists and their states of mind. The works today reflect the times that we are passing through, as also the weight of art traditions. It's no wonder that the art scene today reflects the dilemma of the Indian artist in recent times, caught between an irretrievable past and the inescapable reality of the present. There have hardly been any avant garde positions in the present-day Indian art scene. The most authentic expression of this period is rooted once again in history and a meaningful dialogue between the past and the present. And, in spite of the multiple influences from abroad and the deep desire to seek inspiration from India's own past and, of course no lack of skills the Indian artist has somehow not yet been able to create a sense of cultural and artistic rapture. Like all creative activity, it is highly appropriate that contemporary art in India has developed by drawing together the many threads of both the Indian and European art traditions. We are hopefully reaching a stage when Indian art will reveal a dignified unity of purpose. Contemporary Indian art is, indeed, destined for great achievements as the artist looks back to a glorious past in an attempt to recreate it on a grand scale.

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