

## **8a. Contemporary manifestations of Indian Paintings and the ever changing Socio-Cultural context**

### Modern Indian Art in the last three decades: Art and Culture

In the history of modern Indian art the last thirty-forty years are bound to be considered as being signal of importance if only for the widening and deepening of the scene. **Art galleries mushroomed in metropolitan areas; art museums have become more receptive to contemporary art objects; there has been an awakening of interest on the part of the state in matters of art and culture.** Indian art activity and their probes have reached out from the professional to the non-professionals, uniting painting, sculpture, handicrafts, rituals and folk art into a continuous panorama. The fifty years that preceded these thirty years were loaded with the cultural conflicts in the colonial situation and the artists who lived through them carried this burden (*Mitter, 1994*).

Amrita Sher-Gil, after seeing the Ajanta murals in 1936, quoted - '*It is because there are many possibilities in Indian art that I am literally opposed to those that have not explored these possibilities*'.

Says Abanindranath in his Bageshwari lectures, '*It may be true that there can be no art without its yesterdays but it is equally true that no art can survive out of contact with the present*'.

**The first artists of Modern India were a new tribe**, outside the old professional guilds, concerned with the creation of self-dependent works to embody their personal experience of things and **their paintings and sculptures were considered as united visual images.** This brought their art-concept near to the 'post-renaissance' European concept with its various renditions. **A work was discussed on the basis of the emergent image, its originality and uniqueness, its visual and emotional content. The image, varied from the closely realistic to the relatively abstract.** There was a wave of 'eclecticism' (Eclecticism is a kind of mixed style in the fine arts: the borrowing of a variety of styles from different sources and combining them) in art. There was a widespread swapping of cultural traits across various countries including Henry Matisse's Persian paintings, Klee's arabesque (**Arabesque is a form of artistic decoration consisting of surface decorations based on rhythmic linear patterns of scrolling and interlacing foliage, tendrils or plain lines, often combined with other elements**) and calligraphic panels. **It tended to move towards stylization and adornment. Art gradually began to be treated like a commercial commodity among other commodities, subject to the same trade obligations such as promotion** (*Parimoo & Sarkar, 2009*).



Fig.236: Andy Warhol, Campbell Soup Cans, Commercial Art, 1962

A large 'coming together of the world' in the last few decades has made competition sharper and in the world's great art fairs artists attempt to outshine each other by taking recourse to every kind of visual device and promotional ploy. The modern artists strove to represent the visual scene in terms of the available visual data. Artists' work was classified based on whether their positioning was based on aesthetics or configurational. On the Global scene, pop-artist Andy Warhol excelled in this domain. He brought commercial art to a complete new platform of acceptance and appeal (Parimoo & Sarkar, 2009).



Fig.237: Andy Warhol, Brillo Soap Pads, Commercial Art, 1964

The artists worldwide designed their work to be as spectacular as they can in scale, media and singularity of theme; they declared elaborate manifestoes and indulged in extravagant parties of self-advertisement (Peers, 2006).

In the meanwhile, the Indian artists continued their search for the local roots. To some, the driving force was the rediscovery of an Indian ethos. The interactions of art and society remained a matter of discussion. Several art critics have tried to identify tools to facilitate art appreciation. The root search for identity that worked out in modern Indian art was that of Abanindranath and his followers. Theirs was a comprehensive position. They wanted to build a platform for art practice appropriate to the local environment and in tune with its cultural backgrounds. They tried to develop **a value-system within which art was central to life and necessary for its fulfillment, and was the main avenue for rapport between man and nature.** They idealized their cultural past and tried **to keep alive traditional theme-structures based on history and mythology** (*Subramanyan, 1978*).

In the next 3-4 decades the positions changed. Eclectic influences took over and the whole world became the artists' heritage. **When the European enthusiasm was centered on Mughal painting, they held Mughal as prototypical of the Indian traditions. It changed to Rajput painting and from there to Ajanta murals; there was a corresponding shift in interest. From there the interest shifted towards folk art and folk motifs, and now, when there is a great wave of Interest in Indian music, dance and devotional cults in the West** (*Dalmia, 2003*).

#### The ever changing Socio-Cultural context

The normally identifiable bases of contact points with the society are the physical and the cultural facts of the environment, physical facts like landscape, climate, people, flora and fauna, cultural facts like ways of life and language, thought and feeling, concepts and notions, modes of perception and behavior, technology and human environment. It is the environmental traits in works of art, through which we assess, the artist's consciousness of the social and cultural context.

**Cultural facts are not as long-standing as the physical; movements of populations, changes in social structure, changes in technology, changes in religious faith etc. can be relatively frequent and their effects on cultural facts can be drastic. Especially in a world like that of today changes are faster and more crucial** (*Parimoo & Sarkar, 2009*).

**The industrial revolution and the new education it brought along with it upset the social and cultural equilibrium of almost the entire world, and through this, the position of the artist in society and the avenue of communication between him and others. In the societies preceding this, i.e. the traditional ones, art had a settled place**

**in the scheme of things. In today's era, art has become more a commodity than a form of communication, and if communication it remains, it does so on a restricted level and to a restricted fraternity (Chatterji, 2009).**

**In India the social changes were initiated by a colonial phase in history. The colonial rulers proclaimed to be the flag-bearers of a cultural renaissance and undervalued the cultural heritage of the pre-colonial India. They also tried to implant their concepts and cultural attitudes in the Indian society and alienated its youth from their cultural past, out of a sense of belief that the previous culture was detrimental to progress. They introduced their new education system, designed to produce a new tribe of people Indian in dress and complexion but English in thought and attitude. But the attempt was sort of not so successful in achieving its objectives. There was a benign resistance from certain parts of the Indian Society, especially from the Indigenous 'socialites'. Around the turn of the century E.B.Havell played a significant role as a critic of colonial policies relating to art and education in India and as a relentless advocate of the revival of the Indian art tradition. All this provoked at least a small section of the Indian elite to sit up and look around. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some thoughtful and intellectual bureaucrats gathered together to form a society for the encouragement and preservation of Indian art. The efforts of the Indian artists of the first two decades of this century to come to terms with their socio-cultural environment is of significant importance. They were individual artists standing on the ruins of an artisan tradition, stranger to the old narrative traditions of Indian sculpture and painting-the mythology and symbolic elements of the early centuries and the courtly romances of the later centuries. They were looking for a new beginning, almost reversing the structure of old art (Mitter, 1994).**

The old art was 'linguistic' in structure; it had traditional terminology which the sensibilities of the artists, enriched by the contact with their surroundings, made them alive. The later ages could not hold on to this tradition due to the colonial interruption. **From time to time the new artists were obsessed with a desire to seek alignment with the 'national culture' image.** They were burdened with the problem of whether to preserve or pass away their cultural identities on international platforms in the new art situation which had dropped the old regional and religious boundaries. Early in the 20th century, some of the modern artists wanted to handle the Western realism (the arts is the attempt to represent subject matter truthfully, without artificiality and avoiding artistic

conventions, unbelievable, exotic and supernatural elements) and document with these the picturesque (visually pleasing) facts of their surroundings.

**The next generation of artists (that is, contemporary artists who started working at the end of the forties) were not concerned with linking themselves with their cultural antecedents in close alignment.** They were aware that their work could not be compared directly to the work of traditional artists. They took a position of stylistic eclecticism which was resultant of cross-projection of contrary cultural facts cutting across cultural and national boundaries. **There were influences of linear calligraphy, geometric abstraction, cultural symbolism such as masks, mudras, mandalas, tattoo signs,** fauna (snakes, elephants) and other ornamental detailing, and these were, probably for this very reason, popular with a certain kind of art enthusiast, who relished cross-cultural brews (a mixture of various elements). For example, in common use mandala has become a generic term for any diagram, chart or geometric pattern that represents the cosmos symbolically (*Peers, 2006*).

**The growing pressure of art trade, frequently changing art tastes and the influence of international patronage all affected the art scene of the contemporary Indian artists. But in the last two decades there has been a change in attitude. Avant-gardism on global level has taken shape.**

#### **8b. Art Museums, Art Galleries and other places for Art Restoration, Conservation and Inspiration**

Various communication media bring near to us art objects of various times, places, origins and lineages and try to enlighten the audiences. Museums and Art Galleries all over the world present a gorgeous show of these timeless works. Aestheticians incline towards finding beauty and goodness in art throughout the ages. Art objects stimulate interest even when their generative environment has faded away. Thus, art possess a sort of quality of timelessness (*Subramanyan, 1978*).

Going back to the time when a conscious effort was made towards the formation and functioning of such places for presentation of artifacts, **the art conference in 1884 voted in favor of setting up Indian museums to serve as ‘centers of art progress in a Province or District.** It was intended for the Indian artists; the artists would get fresh ideas in a museum displaying the best specimens of ancient and modern art works.

**Besides the museum, art exhibitions were also proposed to serve the purpose of art education in the country.**

**Two major art exhibitions** had been sponsored by the Indian Society with consent of the colonial authorities. One was held at **Wembley in 1924** and the other at **Burlington Galleries in 1934**. Both are historically important and each served as a landmark in the development of modern Indian art in the country. George Lloyd praised **the scheme of mural decoration to provide work for the young artists after completion of their training. This was an opportunity to express their innate Indian sense of design** (*Parimoo & Sarkar, 2009*).

E.B. Havell had enthusiastically reported on some of the Bengali artists whose work was mentioning. He referred to Abanindranath Tagore's 'Parvati', Gaganendranath's 'Howrah Bridge at night' and A.K.Haldar's 'Rasa Lila'. **Havell had also for the first time expressed his assessment of the so-called Indian style 'Mural Decorations' officially sponsored at Bombay's School of Art**, the credit given to Gladstone Solomon. Lloyd had also proposed to hold a 'Prize for Delhi' by the government of India which involved **selecting talented young Indian artists and to engage them to work on 'Mural Decorations' for the government buildings under construction in the new capital city of Delhi**. As already discussed, just to reiterate, after Independence, over the next 20-30 years, the art scenario in India was very different. **Art galleries mushroomed in metropolitan areas; art museums have become more receptive to contemporary art objects**; there has been an awakening of interest on the part of the state in matters of art and culture (*Mitter, 1994*).

**Even in today's scenario, 'Art Exhibitions' continue to act as an important tool to disseminate art and create awareness about our rich art heritage and to keep the living tradition alive in our lives.**

#### The Uses of Art Criticism

There are two major prevalent modes of art criticism, one designed to 'enliven' the passing days, the other designed to project the art-work as a 'coveted commodity'. The main purpose of the second type of art criticism is to spotlight the commodity traits of an art objects. In today's acquisitive (focused on acquisitions) society, **art and culture are commodities 'cultivated' for the materialistic pleasure of the 'consumer'**. **Art is designed to be "a maximized hand-made product" in a societal set-up of mass-production**, and culture is conceived as a means of affirming the individual in a society

where man's identity is deeply in crisis. The maximization of the handmade object is achieved by the art activity of the artists whose vision and skills transforms the ordinary into the 'aura of extraordinary'. Therefore **in today's art or cultural scene the quality most prized is the novelty of act or concept**; even those who want to acknowledge their gratitude to history would rather do it in novel ways (*Peers, 2006*).

**The art criticism plays a crucial role in the effort to extend art from the studio to the museums and galleries. The art critic plays a manifold role, interviewing artists, commenting on art, judging the art-works, selecting and setting up art-shows, working with mass-communication media for the coverage of art exhibits, etc. The Indian art scene is moving into a position of influence with increasing number of papers, magazines and journals that run columns on art thus permeating into the lives of people.**