CHAPTER 3

ART OF ARPANA CAUR

3.1 Influence

Arpana Caur has not imitated the styles and ideology of other painters for her paintings, therefore, what we see in her paintings are the original ideas of her own which are mainly influenced by the various environmental, social and political issues.

3.2 Master pieces

Her art is a direct reflection of her personal experiences, inspired by local and world events. Over the years, her main focus has centered on Indian women, and capturing the essence of their day to day activities inspired by social, cultural and spiritual themes. All her paintings in some way or the other have figuratively narrated the story of Indian women—past and present. They are about human tragedies, emotions and traumatic experiences of life. She has always strongly emphasized humanism. Arpana Caur knows the demand of the market for paintings of women but she never has used women on her canvas. Her canvas includes mountains, flower valley, nature's scene and the dancing men. Her painting series 'Sheltered Women' 'Starlet Room' and 'Bazaar', 'World Goes On', 'After the Massacre', 'In Vrindavan' series, 'Warli', 'Godhana paintings' etc. have depicted several aspects of a common Indian woman. There is an eccentric use of colours in her paintings. These figures not only talk about the present, they also tell us where we have gone astray.

Hindustan Ravi Utsaw 2003.
They also remind us of our lacking in the social sphere. Some of her master pieces are as follows:
3.3 Techniques in Arpana's paintings

Every artist has its own way of medium, technique and ingredients for painting. From the very beginning oil paints and canvas were the medium and source of Arpana’s paintings. She never likes painting on papers because she says the surface of the canvas is flexible
which is user friendly. She has also used the acrylic paints because they dry up very quickly whereas the oil paints take 

enough time. But she never liked acrylic colours. She very cleverly describes the reason with a nice example for this. She says when we put the paste on a toothbrush there is a certain weight of the paste that we feel. If the paste liquefies and we repeat the process we would not be able to enjoy it. Likewise the acrylic colours apply no weight on the brush and, therefore, Arpana doesn’t like this. This doesn’t mean that she has never used paper for painting. In one of her exhibitions named as ‘World Goes On’ in 1985 in Delhi she has used pencil drawings extensively which were also displayed in Mumbai. She has also painted on glass as well which was displayed in the year 1988. She used to do painting on the glass on the reverse side. She used to paint on imported fibre glass which she purchased from Paharganj Area of New Delhi. The imported fibre glasses were used for painting so as to avoid the problem of fungal spread and dampness. Arpana Ji started etching painting and Zink painting till 15 years and painted mostly black and white paintings along with some coloured paintings. Still all these paintings of her are less important compared to her oil paints. She prefers making man size figures in her paintings.

She starts her painting by coating the canvas with a mixture of Turpentine and linseed oil and after that leaves it for two-three weeks for drying. After air drying the canvas, she starts painting onto them. The entire process is repeated for three times. She uses more than half of the turpentine and linseed oil in first coat. She works on two three canvas simultaneously. If she wants to check the effect of first coat on a canvas then she uses one third of the turpentine oil and one fourth part of the linseed oil. Next coat is

---

22Hindustan Ravi Utsaw 2003.
done using linseed oil. Instead of the oil paintings she has done some other paintings as well like etching and glass paintings etc.

**Etching**

In the art of etching is began with the black coat on a zinc plate when the plate becomes black the lower surface of the plate is brushed with a specific resin.

After the solution of resin gets dried this dark surface is embossed after etching using some pointed thing like nails etc. After that a solution of water with nitric acid is prepared. The zinc plate is dipped in this solution. After that the part in which etching was done starts bubbling. These bubbles are removed using a soft feather. For this pigeon feather is used because it is resistant to acid and also because of being soft it doesn’t harm the figure. When the embossed figure gets cleaned with acid, the plate is simply washed using the normal tap water and then the black varnish is removed using a sprit. Now these dark lines on the plate are filled with the black ink and the plate is cleaned using a newspaper. This is done so that the ink may not get wiped. After cleaning the plate the lines are filled up with the ink. Lastly, this damped paper is used for printing using the etching press. The process is repeated for several times to get the best result.\(^{22}\)

\(^{22}\)Hindustan Ravi Utsaw 2003.
Techniques for doing glass paintings

Arpana Caur says that Flexed glass should be used for Glass paintings. Initially it was drawn on a paper and the paper is kept beneath the glass and the sketch is drawn. The black lines after drying fulfill the colour of other paintings. Initially Arpana Caur did a sketch for their art. Since the very beginning she uses the artist quality Camlin paint. She prepared the canvas by herself. Since all these took much of her time therefore, she uses canvas only.

In the beginning her paintings were not in a big demand still she did not compromise with the quality of the ingredients. Her mother always encouraged her to use quality paints. Until about fifteen years ago she used paints of Winsor and Newton company. In her paintings first coat she use to apply with Indian Camlin colour and the final coating using colours of Winsor and Newton company. Later she used colours of Michael Harding company which were better than that of the Winsor and Newton company. The cost of these colours is 2 to 3 times the cost of Winsor and Newton colours.

Geometry in Arpana’s paintings

Arpana Caur uses various geometrical designs for her paintings:

1. Wavy
2. Square shaped
3. Wavy and square shaped division
4. Vertical division
5. Horizontal divisions
done using linseed oil. Instead of the oil paintings she has done some other paintings as well like etching and glass paintings etc.

**Etching**

In the art of etching is began with the black coat on a zinc plate when the plate becomes black the lower surface of the plate is brushed with a specific resin.

After the solution of resin gets dried this dark surface is embossed after etching using some pointed thing like nails etc. After that a solution of water with nitric acid is prepared. The zinc plate is dipped in this solution. After that the part in which etching was done starts bubbling. These bubbles are removed using a soft feather. For this pigeon feather is used because it is resistant to acid and also because of being soft it doesn’t harm the figure. When the embossed figure gets cleaned with acid, the plate is simply washed using the normal tap water and then the black varnish is removed using a sprit.

Now these dark lines on the plate are filled with the black ink and the plate is cleaned using a newspaper. This is done so that the ink may not get wiped. After cleaning the plate the lines are filled up with the ink. Lastly, this damped paper is used for printing using the etching press. The process is repeated for several times to get the best result.\(^{22}\)

\(^{22}\)Hindustan Ravi Utsaw 2003.
Techniques for doing glass paintings

Arpana Caur says that Flexed glass should be used for Glass paintings. Initially it was drawn on a paper and the paper is kept beneath the glass and the sketch is drawn. The black lines after drying fulfill the colour of other paintings. Initially Arpana Caur did a sketch for their art. Since the very beginning she uses the artist quality Camlin paint. She prepared the canvas by herself. Since all these took much of her time therefore, she uses canvas only.

In the beginning her paintings were not in a big demand still she did not compromise with the quality of the ingredients. Her mother always encouraged her to use quality paints. Until about fifteen years ago she used paints of Winsor and Newton company. In her paintings first coat she use to apply with Indian Camlin colour and the final coating using colours of Winsor and Newton company. Later she used colours of Michael Harding company which were better than that of the Winsor and Newton company. The cost of these colours is 2 to 3 times the cost of Winsor and Newton colours.

Geometry in Arpana’s paintings

Arpana Caur uses various geometrical designs for her paintings:

1. Wavy
2. Square shaped
3. Wavy and square shaped division
4. Vertical division
5. Horizontal divisions
6. Multiple divisions

7. Mixed divisions

**Wavy division:** This is the main style of Arpana Caur which makes her paintings lively.

In one of her paintings ‘Fire’ there is a wavy expression of her flame. This gives the indication of an intense fire. In most of her paintings Arpana has used the wavy figures.

In her painting ‘River of Time’ these wavy figures are clearly be seen. The waves in this figure are showing the fiercely flowing water. All the figures are equally mobile as river.

In this figure the oscillating plug is indicative of the mobility of wire. In her wavy creations the theme is being fulfilled completely.

**Square shaped division:** This style is also very prominent in Arpana’s paintings.

Since 1986 Arpana Caur has covered a variety of issues related to gender, violence, the inner quest for nirvana and the predicament of the contemporary woman. Some of her recent work feature political incidents like ‘Heart of Darkness’ which depicts the Bamiyan Buddha incidence in Afghanistan in 2000. For Arpana the love myth of Soni and Mahiwal is about a woman’s courage
in love and the legends contemporary relevance that is important. Her art is remarkable in the simplicity with which she presents a radical view of the realities of our lives, using images that we are used to in a new context. In recent years her works have become more symbolic and certain symbols keep appearing. Colour still dominates her work but she has started to use more black in her works which beautifully offsets the blues, browns and the gold she uses.

SYMBOLS IN ARPANA CUAR’S PAINTINGS

To understand the meaning of symbol some example is necessary. Once upon a time a saint presented a fruit of Banyan tree to his son and given him to break open and asked him what did he see into it? The son broken it and said that he could see small seeds into it and nothing more than that. The learned saint said listen son that this seed is the progenitor of the vast Banyan tree. This indicates that this seed contains the vast tree into it.

Arpana Caur uses symbols for most of her paintings. Her symbols are quite expressive and give the life to her paintings. In this chapter an efforts have been made to understand the meanings of the symbols. According to her, some symbols are personnel because they contain our feelings in them. She mostly uses scissors, plug, thread and needles as symbols in her paintings. She likes very much some of her symbols like scissor which she has used in most of her paintings22,23

22Hindustan Ravi Utsaw 2003, 23Vadhera Art Gallery, New Delhi
Mostly we see scissors for Arpana’s paintings which she emphasizes in her paintings. Since the past 10-15 years Arpana Ji is using this as a symbol in her paintings. She has given dual meaning for the scissors. One is the constructive and the other part is destructive. In the same manner as the nature makes us and then destroys us. From the philosophical point of view we can say that the men born and die when the time comes and the thread of life gets broken. Similarly in one of her paintings Arpana has been shown.

In one of her paintings Arpana has shown an old lady cutting the moon. This also is a form of time. She has depicted the same in her painting ‘Day and Night’. Here time cycle has been shown. Lady is cutting the moon with scissors which is indicative of the emergence of day after the night. Arpana has a tenacious belief in the life and death. Medium Oil on Canvas, Size 84” x 60”
Water

The anti Sikh riots in 1984 hit Arpana badly. She expressed the realized sorrow on her canvas. Never before this had she painted the death on her canvas. In these pictures Arpana used water as a symbol of death. Whosoever is drowning is going to meet death. Her painting series ‘World Goes On’ is solely based on melancholy of anti Sikh riots.

Plug

Arpana has used plug to symbolize the spiritual connection. When some electrical appliances get connected with some connection using a plug, it gets energized. Likewise, she depicted the use of plug to connect mankind with the Almighty.

Traffic Light. She has signified the traffic light as the trees of Delhi. Most of her symbols are personal which she has designated herself and is meant for daily life. None of her symbols are traditional. This symbolizes the ideology of the artist.

---

24Suneet Chopra: Arpana Caur 1975-95, Catalog.
Women

In most of her paintings we can see the women. The heroin of her paintings is usually of simple and generous nature. She has never painted an aggressive woman and the women of her paintings bear large rounded eyes²⁴.

Love beyond Measure Oil on Canvas 40” x 72”

Umbrella

She has given special significance to umbrella in her paintings. In her initial paintings she mostly has used umbrella as a symbol of security.
Women on Embroidery

In most of her paintings she has shown women on embroidery. She has shown this woman as a creator. In other way she has been symbolized as nature. This woman does embroidery from its one end and cuts it through its other end. In first part this is depicted as a creator and in the other as a destroyer\textsuperscript{15}. In 1996, in a ‘Brand Fold Museum’ Arpana has shown Arpana has illustrated nature as a lush green woman\textsuperscript{23,24}.

\textsuperscript{23}Vadhera Art Gallery, New Delhi, \textsuperscript{24}Suneet Chopra: Arpana Caur 1975-95, Catalog.