9. TRIBAL ART AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CONTEMPORARY ART
"Modern art stands as a shadow to primitive art, as there seems some meeting point between the two. Both are not realistic, but something more than wayward elements are needed to understand or appreciate primitive art."¹

It is believed that modern art was born in the early 19th century when the era of realistic art had almost ended. It had become easy to show the outer manifestation of the world with the help of the camera. Since the goods were delivered by a sheer mechanical device, artists started losing interest in realistic art and as a consequence seeds of modern art were sown.

Modern art developed in two main directions:

A. Some artists, instead of painting the realistic outer world, started painting only to express the inner self. Thus impressionism, expressionism and surrealism came into being.

B. The second direction gave more importance to the fundamentals of art, such as colour, line, form, texture, solidity and composition. The composition received greater attention than the subject. Colours were used for their own sake, lines were being considered as lines and not as part of the shape. Thus were born cubism and abstract art.

It will be helpful to have an idea of the divergent trends which developed in modern art before we compare it with tribal art.

A. Expression of the Inner Self

1. Impressionism:

An art critic has said, "The impressionists open the way to a
study not of what man sees in nature but how nature affects man". That is, instead of painting the details of the outer world as a camera would, the impression that the outer world has on the artist's mind is attempted to be painted. The objects which attract the mind find more prominence, and the details of other things are omitted. These artists gave more emphasis to sensitivity. This led to selection of subjects which afforded beauty and scenic grandeur. Subjects were chosen to show colours and in these colours an attempt was made to portray the environment. Such subjects as green water and blue sky were taken up. Colour, composition and light attained importance. Monet gave importance to colour and light. Pissarro divided colours into dots. Renoir attempted to reform the academic aspect. Cezanne gave importance to composition. In the art world impressionists started an attempt to show mainly what was felt and liked rather than what was seen of the outer world (Fig.No. 186).

2. Expressionism:

This gave more importance to personal likes and dislikes of the artists, which are based on psychological forces operating on individuals, each having his own taste, temperament, structure, nature and culture. The starry night pleasant to others, was not so to Van Gogh. He says, "I have tried to express the terrible passion of humanity by means of red and green."\(^2\) (Painting: 'The Night Cafe', (Fig.No. 187 ) 1888 ). Through the medium of art an artist always displays his personality. Emotions and feelings are expressed not only through colour but also through line and form. Van Gogh, Toulouse, Lautrec, Ensor Munch, and Hodler presented their different personalities through their art. "How do you see this tree?" says Gauguin. "Is it really green? Use green, the most beautiful green on your palette. And that shadow rather blue? Don't be afraid to paint it as blue as
possible."  He also says, "I think that man has certain moments of playfulness and infantile things, far from being injurious to his serious work. Endow it with grace, gaiety, and naivete. When machines have come, art has fled, and I could never believe that photography has been beneficial to us." Again: "The savage is decidedly better than us. You were mistaken once in saying that I was wrong to say I am a savage. It is true, nevertheless; I am a savage. And the civilized foresee it, for there is nothing surprising or confusing in my work except this savage-in-spite-of-myself. For that reason it is inimitable. The work of a man is the explanation of that man."

Expressionist art not only manifests and reveals the independent personal mind, but also tries to present the various thoughts and feelings of different nations the artists belong to, for example, the painting 'Guernica' of Picasso expresses the national resentment generated by the Nazi attack on Guernica city.

As Paul Klee says, art reveals the reality that lies hidden behind things. It is art which makes it visible. "It is the lines of the draftsman, which are going for a walk, that can lead to the land of deeper insight."

With expressionism, painting acquired a distinct personality of its own. It was no longer just a maid servant. "Painting", says Picasso, "is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defence against the enemy. The mural is definitely the expression and solution of a problem and that is why I used symbolism. I don't work After nature, but Before nature and with her".

3. Surrealism:

"Any conscious mental control of reason, taste, will is out of
place in a work that deserves to be described as absolutely surrealist". (Max Evnst)

Surrealism is a deep study of the human mind, seeing the union of various seemingly unrelated things in the dream world. One sees supernatural and marvellous creations combined with the factual world. Salvador Dali's painting, 'Persistence of Memory', (Fig.No. 188 ) is the best example of this form. In this painting watches are shown melting on a tree and big black ants cling to it. Even though the dream is a fantasy, it appears to be real.

B. Importance of the Fundamentals of Art

1. Cubism

The commencement of Cubism was against the prevailing Western traditional thought. The pioneers -- Picasso, Barque, Henry Rousseau, Alfred Jarry, etc -- derived their inspiration from the paintings of African tribals. "Their interest in non-Western art, such as African and other primitive sculpture, and their admiration for the naivete of Henri Rousseau and the aggressiveness of Alfred Jarry were, like Cubism itself, implicit rejections of traditional standards".7

Picasso says, "Out of the handle bars and bicycle seat I made a bull's head which everybody recognised as a bull's head. Thus a metamorphosis was complete; and now I would like to see another metamorphosis take place in the opposite direction. Suppose my bull's head is thrown on the scrap heap. Perhaps some day a fellow will come along and say: "Why, there's something that would come in very handy for the handle bars of my bicycle....." And so a double metamorphosis would have been
The three phases of Cubism:

(a) Cezanne Phase (1907 - 1909)

(b) Analytical Phase (1910 - 1912)

(c) Synthetic Phase (1913 - 1914)

(a) Cezanne Phase:

In this period, light and perspective were annihilated, and objects and nature were shown in a state of disorganization. Painting was monochromatic.

(b) Analytical Phase:

In this period, along with the disorganization of objects and nature, the human figure too was disorganised. The same object was shown from different angles. Picasso and Barque started collage, in which playing cards, jute cloth, paper, newspaper etc were all used.

(c) Synthetic Phase:

In this period many colours were used. The basic architecture of the painting and the portrayal of the essence of an object were considered important.

In Cubism, various pieces of the object were put together and a very different structure of the painting was created with visual genius. Because of this reason, the form of the main object was
considered secondary and the composition of the painting attained prime importance.

2. **Abstract Art**

Michel Seuphor says, "I call abstract art, all art that does not recall or evoke reality, regardless of whether that reality be the paint from which the artists started or not". This is also recognized in the name of non-representative art. Kindinsky started this type of art, the inspiration was from music and architecture. He says, "The most important thing about form is to know whether or not it emerges from inner necessity." The artist should feel and give importance to the inner inspiration instead of the inspiration of the outer world. The association of music is not much with the outer world but with one's inner self. The musical composition of each note is created from the singer's inner core of the heart. The abstract artists are confident that this type of creation can be done in painting. They have tried to establish an independent existence merely with colours, lines and shapes. The colours which appealed to the artists were utilized in their paintings which had absolutely no connection with the outer subjects. The form was pure plastic realm of rhythm.

Thus preference was given to create the paintings from the core of the human heart. What had pride of place in realistic art now became absolutely secondary. Realistic art accepted the bindings of reality. Perspective, anatomy, shade and light, proportion, all these had an extraordinary importance. Even colours had to accept the slavery of realism. Lines were drawn solely to portray reality. Nobody considered that colours and lines could have their own different power and competence. Naturally, as in a snap shot, the fine, subtle details, the exterior view of the emotions had their definite place in realistic art. To exhibit the
exact reality, there were rules and these were observed very rigidly. So the artist worked under many restrictions.

C. Modern art rebelled against all restrictions. Some of the new schools like Faunism, Futurism and Dadaism were born mainly as a revolt against conventional and conservative restrictions.

1. Faunism:

Henry Matisse, Andre Derain, George Ranaut were the founders of this cult in 1905. The name came later. The artists introduced many experiments in the colour theory. They gave simplicity to a painting by using elementary colours like red, yellow and blue. They held an exhibition in 1906 at 'Salon des Independants', which paved a new revolutionary path. In this exhibition, among other things, they displayed a bronze Florentine type of sculpture, which was very different from the paintings. Because of this reason the art critic Louis Vausc Welirs wrote: "Don et ello among the wild beasts". The paintings were not realistic, so the critics called them wild beasts or 'faunes'. The artists like Matisse took it as a compliment and named their movement as Faunism.

2. Futurism:

This movement came into existence in 1909. Their opinion was that museums, libraries and academies should be abolished. They asserted that there could never be any novelty in an art which adhered to ancient traditions.

3. Dadaism:

This came into being in 1915. They selected their name by opening a dictionary and picking up the first world they came
across. The word was 'Dada' : 'hobby horse'. Their ideal was: "Free forms born out of fantasy and unconsciousness". With this came the advent of egoism, pride and destructive emotions. They also ridiculed art and beauty. One of the artists drew moustaches on a print of Mona Lisa and exhibited it in his exhibition.

Modern art thus is altogether different from traditional realistic art, against which it rebelled in various ways.

D. The Nature and Salient Features of Tribal Art

1. When an aboriginal creates his art, his aim is not realistic portrayal. He creates for various purposes like rustic magic, wedding ceremony, memorials for the dead, prevention of disease, protection in a crisis, agricultural prosperity. Besides, they paint their houses solely for decoration. Naturally, their paintings include various incidents and objects which take on a symbolic significance. Moreover, all objects, including animals, flowers, leaves, etc. are drawn in a decorative form.

For example, 2 triangles, one circle and 4 lines help to create a human figure. If 4 squares are drawn one on top of the other, then it takes on the form of a 4-storeyed royal palace. All these forms are very simple and straightforward which anybody can draw. One can say that tribal art is more symbolic than realistic.

2. In tribal art there is complete absence of light and shade. In a way it simplifies the process of painting, but realistic effect becomes secondary.

3. Figures do not overlap each other. The painting shows all objects complete and drawn at the same level.
4. The details of the background are eliminated. There is an absence of horizon, and even elements like clouds and the sky are absent.

5. The painting is not restricted by any fixed dimensions or boundary. It is drawn as if it were part and parcel of the wall. There is no line dividing the portion of painting and the rest of the wall.

6. Many shapes are analysed geometrically. Elephants, horses, human figures, well, houses and other such objects are based on geometrical shapes.

7. There is generally no colour or shading in these paintings. The whole painting is completed with lines.

8. The facial details are not shown. Similarly, emotions and facial expressions are not drawn.

9. In one painting itself you will find a mixture of various incidents and various factors.

10. The shape and size of the objects in a painting are dependent on availability of space in a painting, instead of their proportional size and shape. And that is why many a time it so happens that a human figure drawn is larger than that of an elephant. The sparrows or birds sitting on a house are many times larger compared to the house.

11. Painting is created with symbolic adornment. Many times the lines of human figures drawn give an impression of decoration or border design. Instead of facial expressions and detail, the decorations found are geometrical, very simple and easy to draw.
All the qualities of the tribal art show great similarity to the main principles of modern art, which has attempted to attain a form very different from that of realistic art. Tribal art does not give any importance to reality in a painting. In both therefore, light and shade, perspective and anatomy are absent.

When a modern artist draws a painting, he divides available space to the best of his ability, and for that purpose changes shapes and dimensions. In tribal art too the painter operates in the same way. Modern art is introspective, it tries to display one's inner spirit, feeling and emotion. Tribal art too was born to express one's feelings, ideas and aspirations. Thus both Tribal and modern art bear a close resemblance.

Modern art has brought simplicity and spontaneity in painting. Consequently, disorganization of forms was adopted and geometrical shapes which already existed in tribal art, were introduced. As has already been said, many modern artists have derived their inspiration from tribal art. That is what accounts for the similarity between the two. In the evolution of modern art the most significant fact was the artists' endeavour to depart from the bonds of tradition and advocate the unfettered flow of thoughts and ideas.

Today, the machine age has made human life artificial. The modern artist rebels against this artificiality, and looks for what is natural. Where does one find the uncontaminated mind? Is it still preserved in the far-off places in jungles away from 'Civilization'? The modern artists were confident that the tribals who do not have any contact with urban people, definitely retain human mind in its purity. The Ganga near Calcutta is polluted with contamination poured into it from all the cities she and her tributaries drain. If one wishes to see the pure Ganga one must go to Gangotri -- her place of origin in the Himalayas. Similarly, the modern artists seeking the clear, pure tribal human mind
went to the jungles -- to the tribals.

Van Gogh and Gauguin went to the island of Tahiti. They considered this forest area as their land of inspiration and made a study of the forest and the tribals living in it.

Picasso derived his art inspiration from the texture of African sculpture, the division and the simplicity of its forms. With these he gave new dimensions to modern art.

Simple lines, simple colours, simple and easy forms, adornment and the spontaneous method of displaying the subjects -- these factors of tribal art have influenced modern Indian artists also. Jamini Roy, Almelkar, Hebbar, Bendre, Meera Mukherjee and many other artists have derived inspiration from tribal art.

"Modern Art is an art of invention, its starting point is an outburse of feeling. So by its very essence it is closer to the archaic arts and the primitive arts than it is to Renaissance Art." For Matisse, African art was a stimulating example of liberty and simplification. As Jean Laude observed, "What modern artists discovered at the beginning of the century may not have been Negro art, but it was probably through becoming aware of Negro art that modern art revealed itself. Far from being something that was revealed, Negro art appeared as a revealer." Jean Luc Daval says: "While the world was becoming Europeanized, European artists went primitive. Apollinaire said, "It took great daring of taste to go so far as to consider these Negro ideas as veritable works of art. African objects had for the creator a well-defined specific function, generally of a religious nature, and if the style varied from region to region that did not matter to Western artists who interpreted the objects differently according to their own diverse temperaments."

Herbert Read explains how primitive art is near applied art.
"Peasant art as so defined has various characteristics. In the first place, it is never what an odious distinction calls 'fine art', it is always 'applied'. It springs from a desire to impart colour and gaiety to objects of daily use like dress, furniture, pottery, carpets, and so forth. It is not regarded by those who practise it as an activity justified for its own sake. In the second place it shows a surprising tendency towards abstraction -- either towards geometric abstraction, as in the rugs of Finland, the embroidery of Rumania, the pottery of Peru; or towards a rhythmical stylization of naturalistic motifs, as in the pottery of central Europe. The carved wood-work of Polynessa and the embroidery of Czechoslovakia. In many cases, for example in the Greek Islands and Italy, both tendencies go hand in hand. The explanation of the tendency towards abstraction is to some extent to be found in the nature of technique and materials of decoration. Certain methods of wearing, for instance, lead naturally to geometric patterns as 'the easiest way out'; the rotation of a potter's wheel and the use of liquid slip' in pottery decoration similarly tend towards curvilinear patterns; delicate needle-work or lace-work is most effective in naturalistic motifs. But direct representational art of the type dear to the academic artist is almost unknown in peasant art -- the peasant never seems to have found it serve his purpose, making his world a pleasanter place to live in. He prefers to add something to his life, rather than act as a mirror to his drab actuality."

Another critic states that "modern painters such as Picasso, Barque, Matisse and Leger had reacted against delicacy and refinement. They had ignored perspective, used colour for its own sake for symbolic purpose and had freely distorted and modified the human form. They had aimed at intense simplification and had abandoned the natural in favour of the abstract or the geometric. Their work was seen to carry with it great prestige and to have created a revolution in European artistic circles. At the same time it was clear that these artists
had been deeply influenced and fortified by the example of primitive art (Fig. No. 189, 191) -- in particular by that of Negro sculpture. Primitive and popular art were at last arousing interest, for they appeared to possess many of the qualities admired in the work of modern painters. Popular painting in Bengal seemed in this respect no different from Negro sculpture and it was in a mood of excited patriotism that certain Bengali writers, critics and painters began to re-appraise Kalighat painting and at the same time to seek art and collect another and distinctive form of village painting -- the scrolls made by Patuas in rural Bengal. The influence of African art on Picasso has seemed so strong that these creative years are referred to as the "Negro Period". For Picasso all precious illustrations or sentimental values were dissolved and connected into plastic energy." (Jean Leymarie). He thereby achieved an expressive power which gives his works a forceful and disquieting presence comparable to that of the African masters. The projection of the nose (a problem that preoccupied many painters from Chardin to Cezanne) was rendered by flattening its volume and slowing it round against the surface of the canvas. André Salmon, one of Picasso's closest friends in the Bateau -- Lanoir period, saw the importance of facial features in Picasso's art in the early 20th century. "Soon Picasso tackled faces whose nose was usually treated as an isosceles triangle. The sorcerer's apprentice took his cue from the Oceanian and African wizard"

Brancusi always denied having been influenced by African and archaic art. "For him, even more than for other artists, the question was not one of influence but of incitement. Incitement above all to simplicity, of which he said: "That is not an artistic goal, but is reached inspite of oneself by approaching the real meaning of things". But the 'real meaning' is something hard to discover and other modes of expression can help the artist in that search. Such meaning appears for example in the vigorous yet vibrant man of 'The Kiss' (picture No. 190) the
subject of a gravestone erected in the cemetery of Montparnasse in memory of a young woman who died of love.  

Contemporary Indian Artists:

Indian artists were lucky enough to perceive and probe tribal art because India has been treasuring her characteristic traditional folk art since ages. Some artists who are born and who have spent their childhood among the tribals are fully drenched in the colours of primitive art. They have from time to time derived inspiration in various forms from the rhythm, colour composition, dance movement, music, sculpture and paintings of the tribals. What impressed them most was the simplicity and purity of form. I shall briefly mention how Jamini Roy, Husain, Bendre, Almelkar, Hebbar and others have been influenced by tribal art.

Jamini Roy: He is often called the Picasso of Asia. He was the first person who drew our attention to tribal art. He was born in 1887 in the Bankura district of Bengal, very well known for terracotta work, which influenced him most to create his own, pure Indian style. He had studied at the Government School of Art in Calcutta, and was trained in the European academic tradition. Like many young artists he too felt dissatisfied, unable to find real self-expression in these un-Indian forms.

That he was very much influenced by folk art can be seen in his paintings (Fig. No. 192). The simple composition, bright colours, limited lines, big eyes coming out of the face constituted his speciality. He was very deeply interested in child art also. He says that he was helped by his fourth son who as soon as could hold a pencil began to draw. His goal in art had become what he called the child mind. Simplicity of primitive art
and child art are nearly the same. So both were his inspirations, since his search was for purity. He says, "Art decorates not merely our room or walls or landings -- supreme art decorates life supremely.

M. F. HUSAIN : He is the most celebrated artist of India today. Asked by Pritish Nandy (Illustrated Weekly, 4 Dec. 1983) what the major influences on his work were, Husain said, "The classical influences of the Gupta Period, the Basoli and the Pahari and, above all things, the folk and the tribal art of our country were the direct influences. Tribal art influenced me the most", (Fig. No. 193).

N. S. BENDRE : When I met Bendre in connection with the present work, I asked him about his opinion on tribal art, and whether it had influenced his style. He said, "I respect tribal art very much, but I do not copy their shapes, nor do I have any intention of doing so in future. I am much impressed with its different attributes like freedom, simplicity, limited lines, easy composition, etc. But I do not try and utilize these artistic virtues in my style. You may say that the simplicity of shapes and composition found in my paintings (Fig. No. 194) are the attributes of tribal art, but they may have come in my work unknowingly...........Whichever object impresses the artist is assimilated in his subconscious mind, and at the right moment it automatically graces his painting". Bendre has made an adequate study of the tribal areas. In his many paintings one finds a portrayal of tribal women. He does not believe in discussing this matter any further, but wants to express it, feel it.

However, when we appraise the aesthetic essence of his paintings, we find a fine specimen of simplicity of composition, simplicity of its figures, minimal utilization of lines, usage of Indian colours; and the simplicity of the entire painting in my opinion vividly shows his love of tribal art.
K. K. HEBBAR: I met Mr. Hebbar also in connection with my present work. I found that even he is quite impressed by tribal art. He said, "To speak frankly, the significance of tribal art is of intuitional and emotional value. They never attempt to make it look real in the photographic sense. As a result, there was a time when it was considered as the first ordinary scribblings and duddlings of amateurs. But later on, as the Indian artists became aware of the deficiencies in their art, they started slowly realising the greatness of tribal, folk art, and that too perhaps only when foreigners started appreciating this art.........I feel they are much more fascinating, more vigorous, forceful and naive -- qualities of creation which you like and assimilate automatically and that show in your painting in one way or the other.......I never copied this art, but unknowingly the qualities of this art have come in my paintings." (Fig.No. 196).

In one of Hebbar's paintings I saw that the form of footprints drawn and painted was exactly like in tribal art. When I asked for the reason he answered, "What ever is assimilated, automatically comes out. It must come automatically, otherwise it becomes imitative." Like Jamini Roy, he is also deeply influenced by child art, to which his daughter Rekha drew his attention. He says that Jamini Roy's contribution is that he made artists aware of the greatness in folk art. However, he would never like his style to be called the folkish style.

ALMELKAR:

He is no more with us, but when I started my present work and visited him, he said he was very fond of tribals and had stayed a lot with them. In all his paintings he demonstrated tribal subjects connected with their day-to-day life, functions, fairs, festivals etc. The influence of tribal art thus was very strong in him. (Fig.No. 195).
He said, "I would like to breathe my last breath among and with these folks." Unfortunately this last wish of his was not fulfilled. The virtues, simplicity, expression of emotions, creation of various shapes and forms in tribal art were the ones which influenced and inspired him the most. In his paintings one sees an effect of the tribal wall. The selection of colours is a symbol of love and inspiration.

There are many other artists who have been influenced by tribal art. I saw Meera Mukherjee's exhibition at the Jehangir Art Gallery. She creates her sculpture through the bell metal process and tries to maintain the same proportion and simplicity which I had seen at Bastar a few days earlier. K. Srinivasulu, Mukund Kelkar, etc also show the influence of tribal art. When Raza came from Paris recently, I could manage to meet him in Bombay. He did not speak much, but he wrote one sentence which speaks volumes: "We have to think a lot about tribal art -- for us only". (Fig.No. 197)


3. ibid p. 53

4. ibid, p. 83

5. ibid, p. 127

6. ibid, p. 273

7. ibid. p. 193


9. ibid, p. 132

10. ibid p. 135

11. Ibid p. 138

12. *The Meaning of Art* by Herbert Read (Penguin) p. 64

13. *Indian Popular Painting Office Library* by Mildred Archer (UB9) P.


15. ibid, p. 136

16. ibid p. 139.