Portraits, Politics and the Picturesque
in the Art of Colonial India

Prachi PRIYANKA[1]

Abstract

Colonial art of India highlights a remarkable blend of east and west – converging on grounds of matter and manner of expression. An important intervention of colonial experience on the cultural life of India was the establishment of art colleges in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay with an intent to 'elevate' the status of Indian art by teaching them western theories and finer taste. This paper examines the politics behind establishment of art institutions and how company paintings, portraits and representation of the picturesque became perfect examples of the amalgamation of east and west on canvasses. The paper also explores how this cross-cultural exchange revolutionized modern Indian art in the process.

1. Art depicts the Age

Paintings have many stories to tell and though they are themselves frozen in time, they become visual records of ideals, aspirations and cultures of a different age and time. They reflect the gradual change in taste and temperament of individuals, societies and nations thereby establishing an interconnectedness between art, literature, science and philosophy of any given era. India has been a land of invasions and mixed cultures. Indian art of colonial period may be said to tell various stories of the dialogue between east and west. The British ruled India from 1757 to 1947, staying longer and exercising greater influence than any other European power. Partha Mitter argues that the British brought with them a sense of "moral obligation" that assumed "the task of guiding native taste" (1994: 29). Britain's appreciation of Indian art grew after the Great Exhibition of 1851 and they were confident of their own ability to train and tutor the local artists with new, improved forms of design. This was driven by the motive that such steps would further help them in preserving and

---

[1] Dr Prachi Priyanka, Sharda University, Prachi.writes@gmail.com

developing traditional art industries in the colony by establishing formal art education (Guha-Thakurta, 1992).

2. Politics in Art: Colonizer and the Colonized

The British took the pains to establish art academies to revolutionize the art scenario of India. What was it that propelled British to take such initiatives to reform Indian art? To take control over another nation or territory through the use of force or consent – the colonizer often takes the process of cultural domination. Two scholars on colonial education, Gail P. Kelly and Philip G. Altbach help define the process as an attempt "to assist in the consolidation of foreign rule" (Kelly & Altbach, 1984: 1). As an integral part of colonization, a colonizing nation like Britain imposes its exclusive form of education within its colonies. The implementation of new education system not only instils a lack of identity in the colonized; it also allows the indigenous history and customs to gradually slip away. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o explains the experience of colonized people as something that "makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement" and "it makes them want to identity with that which is furthest removed from themselves" (1981: 3).

It is important to note that Indian art had been going through a lull phase for a long time. The kings and royalty who used to commission art works had grown weaker with the rise of British power and local artists were looking for patrons to support their living. The British sense of superiority about their own knowledge and culture led them to take a patronizing effort to train and educate the local people. Hence, the power and educational needs of colonizers hold the pivot point around which the curriculum and pedagogical practices are used in the institutions. With the establishment of art academies in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay - endeavour was made to improve taste of indigenous artists and train craftsmen to work according to western standards. Art historian, Ananda Coomaraswamy argues that a British artist had limited appreciation for India and understood it largely based on curiosity. The representation of India in their artworks were more to do with projecting British as the rulers of India (Coomaraswamy, 2016). The foreign gaze of a traveller is evident in their images of Indian rulers who were presented as incompetent and exploitative personae and placed adjacent to formally dressed British officials, these kings looked out of place in their own kingdoms. The British

visual representations of India were therefore a strategic means of alienating India from itself and presenting it as a part of British empire.

Though both India and the west started to exert artistic influence on each other leading to eclectic fusion paintings; not much on the actual transformations of western sources have been studied in the same light as we talk about western influences on the indigenous art of India. Mitter is of the view that the idea that western art holds a privileged position and hence should be evaluated differently is at play many a times. The European artists had explored their own styles and the non-western world offered a wealth of opportunities to them to experiment with primitive art in the "foreign waters". Certainly, there is no shame in borrowing ideas or styles – for such exchange of experiences enrich our cultures. But it is true what Mitter argues here:

> *Yet, however much one wishes that delineating influences were a neutral exercise in the context of colonialism – it becomes difficult to ascribe influence in a way that does not automatically presume the inferiority of the borrower (1994: 6).*

The natives associated Europe with modernism and hence the contrast between their own style systems and the fast-paced British structure with superior technology was glaringly obvious. However, unlike the willing acceptance of the impact of technology, the reception of European academic art did not receive a whole-hearted nod and the opinions kept "oscillating between enthusiastic acceptance and vehement resistance" (Mitter, 1994: 3). This was probably because while the impact of technology on Indian social economic framework was certain and obvious – in art, the judgements of value are not absolute and clearly measurable – and hence the consequences of westernization were more elusive and problematic.

3. The Picturesque

During the colonial rule, many British landscape artists arrived in India with an intent to sketch and paint the marvellous decorated palaces, interiors of temples, forts and mosques and capture the grandeur of the Mughal way of life alongside their attires, cultures and customs. Besides, the diverse topographical views attracted them to paint the picturesque. As

Captain Godfrey Mundy observes in his book Pen and Pencil Sketches in India:

> *In the picturesque properties of the scene, how greatly does this Indian assemblage transcend our own! …we have here domes, minarets, fanciful architecture and a costume, above all, flaunting in colours, set off with weapons and formed, from the easy flow of the drapery, to adorn beauty and disguise deformity…. Every hut, equipage, utensil and beast of India is picturesque …Eastern manners, customs and attitudes are picturesque: the language, even replete as it is with figure and metaphor, may be said to be picturesque (Mundy, 1858: 75).*

Picturesque art placed its emphasis not on the realistic representation, but on the creation of an arranged landscape that fulfilled certain expectations set by western standards. It lasted till the beginning of the 19th century. During this phase, Indian painters from the north to the south and from east to west had started working for new 'masters', producing series, sometimes remarkably extensive series, of commissioned works. Fascination for the novelty of western art in terms of realistic approach, sense of perspective and handling of colour brought about marked difference in the traditional manner of painting in India. In essence, the European advent marked a relative insensitivity to native art traditions because the former Indian patrons of art had become economically weak and less influential owing to the growing powers of East India company. The fusion of Indian traditions with European style at this time gave rise to new architectural styles became an emblem of power. The Indo-Saracenic Revival, as it was called - was an architectural style and movement in the late 19th century, where public and government buildings were often rendered on an intentionally grand scale. British brought with them new styles and popularized certain techniques and styles that changed the traditional art form of India. The idea of realism they brought with them encouraged artworks to be realistic rendering of nature. The art developed in many cities of India. In Bengal, the Kalighat painters and scroll painters began developing their own style of art by the use of shading and rounded figures to make them appear three-dimensional. The technique of oil painting itself was a new and unfamiliar territory for Indian artists and enabled them to produce images that looked as real. Portraiture was another means to capture the lavish settings of courts and palaces. The convention of giving portraits as gifts to British officials also offered the

western audience to experience the royal exceptional feel of robes and jewellery. Portraiture as a genre also came to be influenced by the Western concepts of art. While the medieval Indian paintings were miniature in size and style; European portraits were big in comparison. The rich and the powerful in India began to be painted in life size big canvases. History painting also evolved during the colonial era. The tradition sought to dramatize and recreate various episodes of British imperial history and thus celebrated their power, victories and supremacy. Besides the technical advancements, new studios were set up by Indian artists that helped them training new methods of life study, oil painting and print making.

4. Portraits, Politics and the Company Art

The British set up schools in the major cities of India such as Bombay, Calcutta and Madras with an objective to train Indian artists with Western techniques. Stanckiewiz argued that art education contributed to cultural imperialism by teaching young people in colonial societies that their traditional arts were not as highly ranked in an aesthetic hierarchy as European arts, not their artistic taste as finely cultivated as that of European experts (2007: 7-31) The establishment of arts schools in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, though overlapping in their pedagogical and theoretical practices – were also individualistic in their approach, governed by different British officials. There was a dual purpose in establishing the art schools in India: aesthetic (a revival of Indian crafts) and economic (related to the manufacture and sale of art). The Calcutta School of Art was established in 1854 with an objective to provide employment and introduce the idea of taste and refinement in the arts among the upper classes, thus, offering them the opportunity to invest in the arts at affordable prices. The administration of the institution went from Locke's hands to Jobbins and finally under E. B. Havell and Abanindranath Tagore, there was a revolutionary shift to an emphasis on Indian art as the basis of all instructions. The Madras School of Art was established in 1850, with the objective to improve native art through the humanizing culture of the fine arts. While the artistic department of the institution focused on drawing and technicalities of academic art; the industrial department excelled in crafts like silverwork, metalwork, carpet weaving, jewellery, pottery and so on. The artworks were exported and considerably praised in England – which inspired Jijibhai Jamshedji, a Parsi industrialist from Bombay, to

donate funds for opening an art school in Bombay "for the improvement of arts and manufacturers and the habits of industry of the middle and lower classes" (Mitter, 1994: 31). The J. J. School of Art was established in 1856. James Payton, Joseph Crowe and George Wilkins Terry were the mentors who instilled in them curiosity to imitate European art while John Lockwood and John Griffith in 1965 emphasized practicing decorative arts and sculpture painting.

There was an undeniable need felt by the employees of East India Company to capture images of the Indian lives amidst all the mysteries and local flavours so that they could share them with their friends and family home. Though camera was invented and photography was in vogue – many foreigners were keen on engaging with the picturesque than painting every day to send back home and thus they gradually became the new patrons of the Indian art. These new patrons wanted that the artists depict Indian life and scenes but in a medium of their own. They trained artists to paint ordinary subjects keeping to the taste of the western audience. Besides, the withering of Nawabs and Rajas who now took little interest in patronising art works, led to the growth of company art promoted under the Britishers. Thus, a synthetic style was born in which the Indian artists imitated European style and this new Indo-European genre of painting known as the Company style came into existence. Artists who graduated from these schools set in different cities were called Company School artists. Company paintings can be understood as a bridge between European influence to Indian Art. In the absence of camera, their works served as visual documentaries on the lives of natives trained under the supervision of the British art connoisseurs. What emerged as result of these art set ups was not just an imitation of European arts but a more hybrid form of art with considerable Indian influence in it. There was a great demand to capture Oriental natures, sceneries and lifestyles which was exported to Britain as souvenir or visual records of curious lives of Indians. Many Indian Rajas used to commission European painters to show themselves in grandeur clothes and pose. As European paintings were more toward realism, very soon, Indian painters also started using oil paints with realistic effect gained by knowledge of chiaroscuro and perspectives. Portraits were executed with finesse and artists sincerely adapted new techniques on the canvasses. Some of the changes that may be observed in colonial art includes realistic rendering of familiar mythological episodes, colour and tactile illusionism, and simulation of

tones, textures, substances and atmosphere. Thus, the flattened pictorial space acquired depth and dimension, and figures acquired feel of flesh and muscle. Moreover, a number of art studio 'mytho-pictures' also directly grafted on the model of European neo-classical painting. The biblical image of 'Pieta' seems to have provided the formula for the mythological painting by Raja Ravi Varma, one of the most influential artists of colonial India who experimented a fine blending of western perspective on Indian subjects. The figure in the painting is grieving Savitri cradling her husband Satyavan's body as she pleads for his life before Yama, the God of Death. Savitri, according to Hindu belief, is an epitome of ideal wife and utmost devotion to the husband's welfare. In the painting 'Savitri', the single dramatic shaft of light that runs through the dark forest draws on the chiaroscuro techniques of European painting. Besides, the ghostly apparitions in the dark seem reminiscence of 'The Last Judgement'.

5. Western influences on Indian art

Calcutta became the centre of cultural development in the 19th and 20th century. The rapid urbanization led to the expansion of market economy and neo aristocrats formed power structures of the changing socio-economic and cultural mores. Woodcut artistry was one of such forms that gave new expression to the commercial art of Bengal. In 1878, some scholars of art school in Calcutta set up their own lithography press which specifically undertook projects in Hindu mythological scenes. These artworks were important in the way they brought challenge of new stylistic standards in the bazaar art. And also, because they depict how the western training and standards were indigenised at different levels to accommodate local tastes. The art of making prints from wooden blocks was imported from Europe in the 17th century. They gave it a new style and vision and called it 'Battala printing', based on the location where the prints were developed at large. The rich artistry of woodcut prints, covering a wide range like book illustrations and advertisements marked an evolution of a culture that was a synthesis of the western and eastern cultures. Rabindranath Tagore was influenced by the German printer Hermann Max Pechstein (1881 – 1955). A prolific printer who belonged to the German expressionist art movement and whose artistic works left an imprint on Tagore's art. It is believed that Tagore had visited Berlin in 1921. Rabindranath's legacy of woodcut print received a distinct dimension as a

creative medium in 1921 when Nandalal Bose took charge of Kala Bhawan. In 1921-1922, French artist Madame Andre Carpales, who was an expert in wood engraving, visited Santiniketan. It was during her visit that Ramendranath Chakraborty learnt the technique of wood engraving and started experimenting with coloured woodcut prints. Tagore also found inspiration in the works of western artists like Paul Klee by being abstract; and yet being representative of nature and its eternal beauty. Archer, in his wide-ranging essay on Tagore's painting, he observes prime source of Tagore's artworks may be located in the paintings of Klee, Munch and Picasso – in the unconscious. One of the important aspects of his art is his engagement with human face. He was sensitive to connect with human emotions and transform them into artworks with faces that reveal a range of moods from melancholy to mysterious and menacing to melodramatic. There can be no question at all that Tagore's art began as an unconscious process. In a conversation with his close associate, Ranee Chanda, Tagore remarked on his own works: It is an interesting situation that before the process of automatism and tapping the unconscious source of pictorial imagery could influence American artists in a big way during the 1940s, Tagore had, by the end of 1920s, made this process as the gateway through which he made his creative urges to outflow (Parimoo, 1989: 35).

Gaganendranath Tagore, nephew of Rabindranath Tagore, was also a rare artist who experimented with various art styles. His paintings from 1915-1921, known as the *Vichitra period*, show cubist impressions. The first series of his cubist paintings were reproduced in 'Rupam' in 1922, along with an article by Stella Kramrisch, where she insists to refer to him as "An Indian Cubist". Kramrisch opined that the approach of Indian art and cubism are at odds with each other and yet Gaganendranath Tagore successfully "reinvented cubism by evoking and then tracing formal tendencies". She further insisted that despite the fact that cubism originated in west, its simplicity in a formalist way was neither significantly different nor unique from the objectives of other forms of non-illusionist art. Hence, Gaganendranath's technique of using light and space in his otherwise simplistic compositions worked well with the cubist style.

Tapati Guha Thakurta points out that the arrival of new techniques and methods of paintings marked a shift and progression in the tastes for new kinds of Indian pictures. The oleographs and lithographs of Raja Ravi Varma acted as a 'catalyst' at the time when Indian art was in a process of change. Raja Ravi Varma set up an oleograph press with local German

collaboration in Bombay. Thus, there began the mass production and a countryside circulation of glossy-coloured prints of Ravi Varma's 'puranic' pictures. Another influence of the West on the fluctuating nature of high and bazaar art of India was the genealogy of 'calendar art' that emerged during colonial period. A type of iconography that came to be popularised in India in late 19th century were soaked in academic realism and the accompanying elements like perspective and tactile illusionism. With it, a set of new European genres intervened on the Indian scene – life size portraiture, picturesque landscapes, oriental sceneries and neo-classical compositions.

Some of the stylistic techniques of the west that were borrowed by Indian artists were the transparency of texture, soft tones and broad stones in watercolour paintings. Raja Ravi Varma, one of the pre-eminent Indian artists of colonial period meticulously learnt the art techniques of the west and introduced them to paint Indian subjects and themes. He studied the technique of oil painting and was to become one of the most popular and highly paid portraitists of the period. His paintings show the influence of the famous European painter, Theodore Jensen who visited South India and Ravi Varma procured access to watch him paint for hours. Raja Ravi Varma's paintings fed in the central concerns of Indian nationalism. More importantly, his paintings shaped its images of women and mythic heroines as ideal national prototypes. He was influenced by French painters Gustave Boulanger[2] and William-Adolphe Bouguereau[3] and drew heavily on their pantheon of nude Venuses and Psyches, and their allegorical images of Chastity and Charity. His mythic characters in elaborate Indian costumes somehow carry the same coy expressions and guileful mannerisms that we come across in western academic art (Thakurta, 1991). Moreover, European art can also be witnessed in the act of male voyeurism legitimized in many religions and mythological narratives. Just as bathing Susanna spied on by the elders offered opportunity to add nude's erotic appeal with the presence of two-fold lecherous men; similarly, we see instances of innocent beauties of Raja Ravi Varma exposed to male voyeurism in mythic episodes, for example:

---

[2] Boulanger was known for his classical and orientalist subjects.
[3] Bouguereau was specially noted for his realistic genre paintings where he used mythological themes, making modern interpretations of classical subjects, giving emphasis on the female human body.

Indrajit[4] parading a captive made 'apsara' modelled on an antique cast of Venus, or in another painting 'Ravana'[5] clutching on to a flimsily draped Sita.

Amrita Sher-Gil is another significant artist often recognized as the first Indian modern painter. Art historians and cultural theorists have hailed Sher-Gil as an avantgarde, an iconoclast and a social rebel whose hybrid identity had certainly much to do with her artistic temperament and troubled life. Her honest, non-conformist self and rebellious attitude was reflected in her lifestyle artworks and her views on art of the times. Upon arriving in India, Sher-Gill announced that "Europe belongs to Picasso, Matisse, Braque and many others. India belongs only to me". She went on a self-exploratory journey to the southern part of the country. She was awestruck by the beauty of Ajanta murals and frescoes and also by the ancient sculptures of Mathura and Khajuraho as well as the miniature paintings. In 1938, she married her first cousin, Dr Victor Egan – and decided to stay in Saraya, a small town in Uttar Pradesh. Sher-Gil focused on painting women and there can be seen an intimate connection between the artist and her women subjects. In her paintings 'Village Scene', 'In the Ladies Enclosure' and 'Siesta' – she brings out the angst, frustration and ennui of women in the countryside and in feudal states.

Sher-Gil's art is a beautiful amalgamation of eastern and western concepts, techniques and subject matters. She was heavily influenced by the western masters as well as the ancient frescoes, palaces and temple panels of South India. Painting in the post-impressionist idiom, Sher-Gil's work bore strong impressions of Gauguin, Van Gogh and Modigliani – along with traces of Cezanne and Matisse. Drawing upon the multiple similitudes along with 'visual strategies' and manoeuvres in the self-portraits done by Van Gogh and Gauguin, Repper (2013) asserts that Sher-Gil tries to pay her artistic tribute to the two avowed 'fathers of modernism', through her masterpiece Self-Portrait as a Tahitian (1934). There is a constant struggle between the identities of east and west that Sher-Gil's works carry – and nowhere is this tension brought out better than in the self-portrait where she transposes herself as a Tahitian but

---

[4] Indrajit, according to Hindu texts, was a prince of Lanka and possessor of Indralok or heaven.

[5] Ravana was a king of the island Lanka and the chief antagonist in the Hindu epic, Ramayana that tells of his abduction of Goddess Sita, wife of Lord Rama and then his defeat in the battle that followed.

carries her characteristic identity: dark skin and full lips. According to Mathur, the painting "addresses a number of contemporary intellectual concerns like the profound and intractable global entanglements of modernism, the cross-cultural currents of the early twentieth century, the place of primitivism and Orientalism within the discourses of the modern [and] the avant-garde's treatment of the nude...." (2011: 516). In her later works, Sher-Gil keeps trying to fuse European techniques and aesthetics to the vibrant colours and stylised modes of classical Indian painting, creating a distinguished style of her own.

Sher-Gil's canon proves that despite being the offspring of a hybrid culture, she had managed to transcend both. She was in critical dialogue with European art and artists even as she turned to Indian sources from the pre-colonial past and rural present. The desire to cultivate organic art that was connected to the past and the West sustained Sher-Gil's practice. She strongly believed that 'art... must be connected with the soil if it is to be vital' (Khullar, 2015: 47) It was this eclectic dialogue between the past and the present and response to the contemporary, besides grappling with tradition, nationalism and modernity, that made Sher-Gil the harbinger of modern art in India. According to Khullar, Sher-Gil showed the representational categories of women, village and the masses as being carriers of histories as she depicted contemporary practices and life-worlds of the people of India (Khullar, 2015: 41-90). At the same time, her art made claims to global art and "cosmopolitan modernism" which was not bounded by the nation. 'Self Portrait as a Tahitian' definitely extends on the idea of indigenous nude in Gauguin style and hence makes a powerful composition. However, it is important to note that the painting does not completely immerse itself in Gauguin's style.

> *The woman in 'Self-Portrait as a Tahitian' is in fact only partially nude. Sher-Gil has covered herself, from the waist down, with a pale jade Polynesian wrap, but there is no floral pattern, no vibrant color, no flower in her hand or hair – all of which were among Gauguin's signature tropes in offering up his European viewers the islands of the South seas as a lush sexual paradise (Brooks & Eisenman, 1990: 51-90).*

Mathur rightly observes in her essay that Sher-Gil's sexuality is not depicted through the terms of the French male painter's preoccupation – "her body is not offered for consumption in the manner of the fearful, reclining nude of *Nevermore*" (Mathur, 2011: 521). In another picture 'Two

Girls', Sher-Gil juxtaposes brown and white skinned women in a single frame that brings east and west together. It may also be read as "a form of self-portraiture that projected her known racially-divided self" (Mitter, 59). In her assessment of Sher-Gil's legacy in India, Kapur has set up a powerful equation between the young painter and Frieda Kahlo of Mexico, arguing that the two artists, who never met but were contemporaries positioned at the birth of modernism in their separate third world contexts, both exercised the same "vexed prerogative", that is, "to represent women in and through their experience of otherness" (Kapur, 2000: 5).

Peggy Phelan argues that in posing for a portrait "we imagine what people might see when they look at us, and then we try to perform (and conform to) those images … The imitative reproduction of the self-image always involves a detour through the eye of the other" (Phelan, 2003: 36). The development of various genres of portrait painting during the 18th and 19th centuries allowed an individual to choose the persona they wanted to project. Orientalist portraiture was another medium through which European authority was acted out and performed publicly – in many cases the audience for this display was not the native population, but the spectator in the West. There can be seen an amalgamation of the traditional and cosmopolitan in the artistic style of Parsis. 'Feeding the Parrots' by Pestonji Bomanji is a reflection of how the Indian and the global are connected harmoniously. In terms of techniques – we can see how the play of light makes the scene come alive, and the accuracy of the flow on the lady's face. The painting adheres to European trends of the time, yet the setting is very 'Indian'. His works have often been compared to the work of Dutch realists like Rembrandt and Vermeer. Impressed by his talent, John Griffiths, the Principal of J. J. School of Art recommended him to Valentine Prinsep[6], for apprenticeship. Under this renowned British painter, Bomanji developed interest in portraits which ultimately formed his artistic legacy. His style was greatly influenced by Prinsep, which is apparent in his juxtaposition of western aesthetics with Indian subjects and setting. The decade 1940-50 in Bengal was marked by the rise of artists such as Somnath Hore and Chitta Prasad who drew inspiration from the Bengal Famine while Nirode Mazumdar, Prodosh Das Gupta and Gobardhan Ash and others formed the Calcutta Group in their attempt to move away from the Bengal school. Another significant development around Indian

---

[6] British painter of the Pre-Raphaelite school

independence was the establishment of Shilpa Chakra Group[7] by a few refugee artists who came from Lahore. These artistic endeavours created a number of channels through which art styles in India picked up pace that set the stage for the formation of Bombay art group. Inspired and propelled by the exhibition of the Calcutta Group in Bombay in 1944 and 1945, Progressive Art Group had its first exhibition of paintings and sculptures in Bombay in July 1949.

The impact of European art work could be seen in works long after the British left and India became an independent nation. Some of the most important artists of the Progressive Group that took inspiration from European avant-garde movements were F. N. Souza, S. H. Raza, M. F. Husain, K. H. Ara, H. A. Gade, and S. K. Bakre. These artists challenged the existing conservative art establishment and experimented with new forms, styles and subject matters. Souza was an independent and rebellious artist and his works have a distinct disturbing imagery that dwells on themes of still life, nudes and Christian iconography. The unconventional distortion of form that marks his style along with recognizable attributes of Goanese folk art and Cubist techniques that he employed was unprecedented in Indian art. With an emphasis on depicting inner conflicts and sexual tensions in man-woman relationships exhibited through techniques like crosshatch method that experimented vigorously with line, colour and form became his trademark style. His work, Temple Dancer (1957) a post-colonial painting that shows the impact of Britishers on the works of Progressive Art Group. Certainly, it was Souza who pioneered the frontal nude and the painting shows influence of classical Indian temple carving in the jewellery, hair ornaments and posturing – yet, we may also see the inspiration drawn from Spanish Romanesque in the frontal composition. Like the nudes of Manet, Picasso and Renault – Souza's nudes go beyond the boundaries of convention. The influence of Picasso and cubist art can also be seen in the dark outlines of the figure. S. H. Raza, another artist from Bombay Progressive Art Group explored his style and over the years evolved his canvases into an eccentric mix of expressionism and geometric abstraction teamed with Indian iconography. His later works are in depth

---

[7] Silpi Chakra was established by Pran Nath Mago and other artists who came from Lahore post-partition. The emergence of the society symbolized the aspirations of young progressive artists who believed that art illuminates life and hence must express the soul of people through visual renditions.

study of the ancient Indian symbolism behind a single point/circle or 'The Bindu', which is a Sanskrit word meaning 'point' or 'dot'. Though Raza mastered several forms in his artistic journey – he initially started with adopting an expressionistic style depicting lyrical landscapes and later moving towards an abstract style showcasing strong influences of geometric forms. M. F. Husain's paintings on the period of colonial rule bring together the elements of history and satire in large intimate watercolours that comment on the social, political and economic realities of the time. In some of the paintings of 'Raj' series, Husain portrays the marriage between rulers of India's princely states and British or American women – a common phenomenon in early 1900s.

6. Conclusion

Amongst all these cross-cultural exchanges in art works, the native artists strived to develop a style of their own that could be considered both modern and Indian. On one hand, there were artists like Ravi Varma who painted themes from Indian mythology in techniques learnt from the western art. His paintings became popular among Indian prime art collectors, their palaces and art galleries. On the other hand, we witness the reaction of a group of nationalist artists gathered around Abanindranath Tagore who rejected the art of Ravi Varma as imitative and westernized. Instead, they tried to capture the spiritual essence of east. They took inspiration from medieval Indian tradition of miniature painting and the ancient art of mural paintings in Ajanta caves. They were also influenced by the art of Japanese painters who visited India to develop an Asian art movement. Archer mentions in his work 'India and the Modern Art' (1959) that the Indian artists emulated the works of western masters. However, in this process he fails to consider the intentions of native artists. Mitter argues the case of Gaganendranath Tagore's paintings which are compared with Picasso's works – however, they are certainly not just "pale shadows of cubism" but rich with "new poetic nuances that were meaningful in the Indian cultural milieu" (Mitter, 4). Besides, it is important to emphasize that in this fascinating journey of exchange of art, the Indian painters turned to the West to borrow new techniques, the European avantgarde headed east for inspiration. While the mutual exchange of ideas and styles may be good for any art to prosper, we may like to agree with E. B. Havell

when he warns the Indian masses to respect their own art and celebrate the uniqueness and age-old culture.

> *The honour you mete out to Indian artists should not be in proportion to their skill in imitating European art the essence of art is creation, not imitation but in proportion to their ability to interpret truly Indian life and Indian artistic thought. By putting Indian fine art on a lower intellectual plane than that of Europe you lower the whole intellectual vitality of India, for nothing is more intellectually depressing than the feeling of a constitutional inferiority. (Havell, 1912: 34 -58)*

References

1. ARCHER, W. G. (1959) India and Modern Art, Macmillan Co.

2. BROOKS, P. (1990) "Gauguin's Tahitian Body," Yale Journal of Criticism 3 (Spring 1990): 51–90, and Eisenman, S. 1997 Gauguin's Skirt, New York.

3. COOMARASWAMY, Ananda (1919) 'The Significance of Oriental Art' in *The Art Bulletin*, 01 September 1919, Vol. 2(1), p.17-22.

4. GUHA-THAKURTA (1992) The making of new Indian art: Artists, aesthetics and nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1929, Cambridge University Press

5. HAVELL, E. B. (1912) "Chapter IV: Fine Art and its Revival in India" in *The Basis for Artistic and Industrial Revival in India*, 34-58. Madras, The Theosophist Office.

6. KAPUR, Geeta (2000) When Was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India, New Delhi.

7. KELLY, GAIL P. and Philip G. ALTBACH (1984) Introduction: "The Four Faces of Colonialism." Education and the Colonial Experience. Ed. Gail P. Kelly and Philip G. Altbach. New Brunswick: Transaction, 1-5.

8. KHULLAR, Sonal (2015) Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930–1990. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

9. KRAMRISCJ, Stella (1922) An Indian Cubist, Rupam, vol.xi , Calcutta.

10. MATHUR, Saloni (2011) 'A Retake of Sher-Gil's Self-Portrait as a Tahitian', Critical Inquiry, 37 (3) 515-544.

11. MITTER, P. (1994) Art and nationalism in colonial India (1850-1922): Occidental orientations, Cambridge, England, Cambridge University Press.

12. MUNDY, G. C. (2012) *Pen and pencil sketches in India*, Rarebooksclub Com.

13. PARIMOO, Ratan (1989) Rabindranath Tagore: Collection of Essays, the University of Michigan.

14. PHELAN, Piggy (2003) Unmarked, the Politics of Performance. Routledge, London.

15. REPPER, Michelle Suzanne (2013) 'Amrita Sher-Gil: Conversations in Modernism'. Unpublished thesis submitted for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Art and Art History. The College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA.

16. STANKIEWICZ, M. (2007) Capitalizing art education - Mapping international histories. in L. Bresler (Ed.), *International handbook of research in arts education* (pp. 7-31). The Netherlands: Springer.

17. SUNDARAM, V. (2010) Amrita Sher-Gil, letter to Karl Khandalavala, Apr. 1938, in *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Self Portrait in Letters and Writings*, New Delhi.

18. THAKURTA, T. (1991) "Women as 'Calendar Art' Icons: Emergence of Pictorial Stereotype in Colonial India". *Economic and Political Weekly, 26*(43), WS91-WS99.

19. THIONG'O, Ngugi Wa (1981) Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature. Portsmith, NH Heinemann.