

BOOK REVIEW

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CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART: OTHER REALITIES



Yashodhara Dalmia, an eminent art historian, has edited this scholarly, beautifully produced book on contemporary Indian art. Besides writing the introduction, she has also authored one chapter; the remaining eight chapters have been contributed by specialists in their respective fields.

In her Introduction, Yashodhara Dalmia has stated that the conceptual basis for the Collection of essays is to foreground issues which have occurred around Indian art in its different places, rather than a mere chronicling of modes. They are, therefore, in the nature of debates rather than an elucidation of styles of art.

R. Siva Kumar discusses in his essays the work and ideas of such pioneers of India's modern art movement as Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose. The former was the first Indian artist to openly commit himself to a culture specific modernism. He saw himself at odds with Ravi Varma who had already attempted a combination of Indian themes with Western representational conventions. The discontinuity in tradition helped Abanindranath to selectively appropriate the past foregrounding with what agreed with his sensibility. It also promoted him to be selectively eclectic, connecting up art practices temporarily and culturally separated, but addressing comparable problems and sharing similar values. The wash technique adopted by him from certain Japanese paintings, was a personal invention, a work process developed to suit his own sensibility. He combined representation of perceptual facts with personal response, and interweaved reality and imagination.

Nandalal Bose was Abanindranath's foremost pupil, received his art education in the heyday of the Swadeshi movement, and he agreed with the nationalist critics that realism was an exclusive Western value, and in contradiction, Indian art was idealistic. Nandalal's attempt to grasp Indian tradition in structural rather than stylistic terms was presumably influenced by his early contacts with Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, a pioneer art historian. The latter held that the separation of artists from craftsmen was alien to Eastern traditions and the final products were often the results of a division of labour amongst a group of artists and craftsmen bound with a common aesthetic. For Nandalal, Ajanta was a splendid example of this, and he conceptualized tradition as a total system comprising a hierarchy of functions and their corresponding levels of skill.

The third artist of the Bengal School discussed in detail by Siva Kumar is K.G. Subramanyan. Working in the post-Independence situation, he was more open to Western traditions and realized that many of its innovations were shaped by cross-cultural innovations. Taking cue from Nandalal, Picasso's post-cubist explorations and the primitive arts that inspired it, as well as from the indigenous folk and popular arts, he developed a work process that he began from simple and often non-objective work units and through their variable orchestrations worked towards different levels of perceptual and experiential correspondence.

Yet in another essay on Abanindranath Tagore, Ella Dutta provides new perspectives on his contribution in the socio-political context of the time. His mature views on art enunciated in the Bageshwari Lectures instituted by the University of Calcutta in 1921, are referred to in detail by Ella Dutta, and she has given some extracts from Abanindranath's essay "Jati O Shilpa" to illustrate his true feelings for art as a form of pure expression shorn of such baggage as nationalism.

In his essay on Folk artists of Bengal and contemporary images, Jyotindra Jain examines in detail how the rural story-tellers, scroll painters and embroiderers of Bengal in the 20th Century, confronted the media and media-based imagery. By way of illustration, he has given detailed descriptions of two narrative scrolls from Medinipur as also Kantha embroidery depicting popular imagery.

Susan S. Bean in her essay states that time has a special place in contemporary art of India with its ever-changing claim to timelessness. Even when contemporary artists deal with the present moment, there is a transcendentality, which provides a distinctive character. While the time situatedness of contemporary art applies to work created anywhere in the world, the temporal aspect of contemporary art in India is usually rich because of the complexity and sophistication of co-present philosophical, theological, and scientific concepts. In the context, works of several artists are discussed in detail. Gayatri Sinha writing on 'Feminism and Women Artists in India' speaks of a "feminine space", rather than feminist art, whereby feminine consciousness is applied to a whole plethora of political and social issues.

Yashodhara Dalmia discusses the subject of the paradigms for post-modern art in India. She states that the earliest forebearers of modernity in Indian art were Rabindranath Tagore, Amrita Sher-Gil and Jamini Roy. Their work, though very different from each other, had a common aim: that of finding an authenticity of expression. Then, the formation of the Progressive Artists Group in Bombay in 1947, acted as a watershed in that a definitive move towards modernism was to be made by artists henceforth. The emphasis on plastic values, rhythmic tonality, and pure hues was to gather force. She concludes the essay with a discussion of the changing parameters of post-modernism of the 1990s and their articulation in the works of some artists infected by notions of pluralism and multi-culturalism, and borrowing from all cultures and frequent crossovers.

Thomas McEvelley asserts at the outset that though Eurocentrism has mostly disappeared, New York has become an extension of Europe or a surrogate for it, and it may now be termed Americentrism. The expectation of a cultural globalism has been drowned by the raw fact of economic globalism rushing over it. It is instead following along behind. While Asian capitalism was thriving in the 1980s, and Western art world was relatively eager to regard and receive it, India despite its numerous artists is not recognized as a functioning and exemplary part of the global situation. He concludes by saying that the need for Indian culture to maintain its living roots while exfoliating in the hybrid atmosphere of transnational capitalism will be of great importance in the future.

John Clark writing on Asian modernism is of the view that modernity invents everywhere it is required for a new relativization of the pasts of any given culture or group of cultures. He asserts that historically speaking, art, modernity, modernism, and post-modernism, do not form a series of clear-cut tripartite stage, but tend to overlap, particularly if there is a relative freedom to eclectically modify styles whose sources do not yet operate a bounding hegemony.

Finally, diasporic art, an increasingly important component of art practices, is considered by John Bowles. He explores this theme by briefly considering a few paintings of modern artists of Mexico and India - two old societies that have come late to modernity. This visual smorgasbord presents some of the diverse ways in which modern Mexican and Indian artists depict the U.S., - as well as certain ironies regarding their patronage and national integrity. He laments that readily forthcoming U.S. patronage entails limited 'freedom of expression', a very large number of artists prefer playing to the gallery. He concludes by quoting Octavio Paz's warning "..... one must not confuse the hegemony of the market place with fruitfulness, imagination, and power to create".

The last section of the book has extracts from significant writings which relate to the contentious issues of

Indian art from the formative to its present stage.

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