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## Non Representation in Art and Innovative Methods

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### INTRODUCTION

In many respects, 'progress' was the watchword of the late nineteenth century. The world, therefore, was complex and fractured. As Harvard philosopher and psychologist William James put it, a "booming buzzing confusion"<sup>1</sup>. There were artists who rejected it, seeking a spiritual, utopian or primitive alternative. The result was the creation of art, which was highly personal and not reflecting any group vision and work that was more abstract than representative.

When you think abstract, you think of forms and colours that exist for their own expressive sake. The term 'abstract' is quite western in terminology and concept.

There have been many theories put forth by historians and critics, regarding this movement that put New York front and centre of the art world has had. They said that abstract and other mediums of that era were a medium of spiritual discourse and an escape from the so called 'Modern World'.

Often their works represented fantasies and dream worlds. It sought relief from the crass, empty materialism of modernity and a more meaningful explanation for existence.

Artists like Picasso and Braque, aped scientists, treating their studios like laboratories where each creative breakthrough served as the stepping-stone to the next, as they sought to develop a new model of visual perception.

Italian Futurists on the other hand, embraced modernity and used radical stylistic developments to capture the technological wonders.

German Expressionists, sought an antidote for the cold, impersonal tenor and crass materialism of modernity and tried to invest contemporary life with spirituality. Continuing Gauguin's quest to find spiritual peace in a primitive world that was in tune with nature, many artists turned to the direct, more abstract vocabulary of tribal art as well as child like art and medieval art. Many of these artists were also heavily influenced by Theosophy and believed in mystical interpretation of all things, which they sought to capture. For artists attempting to visualize the spiritual, the new stripped down vocabulary of art- the abstract- was the perfect vehicle and a refuge!

And what we come across is finally 'Art for Art's sake'.

'Art for art's sake' is the usual English rendition of a French slogan, from the early 19th century, '*l'art pour l'art*', and expresses a philosophy that the intrinsic value of art, and the only "true" art, is divorced from any didactic, moral or utilitarian function<sup>2</sup>.

Now that we know that Non – representative art, in western context is resultant of the so-called 'Modernization', in the case of Indian art, Non – Representation in art came as a post independence rebellion and to break away from the traditional Indian art practices. This is especially evident in the works of artists like Raza, J Swaminathan ,K C S Panikar and many more.

When we look at the Western history of Art, we come across a suitable chronology and various social & political reasons for the emergence of Abstraction in art. However, in context to Modern Indian art , there is no such record. So I have tried to identify the reasons, trends, and tendencies of Abstraction, both in Western and in Indian art.

<sup>1</sup> Janson's History of art, VIIIth edition, 'Towards Abstraction: The modern revolution, 1904-1914', Part IV

<sup>2</sup> Christopher L.C.E Witcombe. 'Art for Art's Sake', revised



The term Abstraction is the only common factor in both the movements, but how it branches out into different segments is what we'll talk about.

### 5. TRACING ABSTRACTION IN WESTERN ART

The term Abstract Expressionism refers to the 20<sup>th</sup> century painting and sculpture that abandon the traditional European conception of art as the imitation of nature.

Herbert Read gave the following definition: 'in practice we call "abstract" all works of art which, though they may start from the artists awareness of an object in the external world, proceed to make a self – consistent and independent aesthetic unity in no sense relying on an objective equivalence'<sup>3</sup>.

In other words, Art that does not imitate or represent anything equivalent to natural occurrence, and rather is a personal expression through juxtaposing of colors, lines, textures etc as desired.

Abstract art in this sense was born and it achieved its distinctive identity in the decade 1910 – 20 and is now regarded as the most characteristic form of 20<sup>th</sup> century art.

Many of the leading painters of the 1890s—notably the Symbolists—stressed the expressive properties of colour, line, and shape rather than their representative function, and the major avant-garde movements of the first decade of the 20th century—notably Cubism, Expressionism, and Fauvism—took this process further. By 1910, then, the time was ripe for abstract art, and it developed more or less simultaneously in various countries. Kandinsky is often cited as the first person to paint an abstract picture, but no artist can in fact be singled out for the distinction; as George Heard Hamilton writes, 'it is probable that there was never a particular moment when a particular individual for the first time self-consciously set out upon the new path. Rather, a number of artists in several different places and at various times, although on the whole within a year or so of 1910, came gradually to understand the limitless potentials of design divorced from representation'<sup>4</sup>.

Among the other pioneers who produced abstract paintings at about the same early date as Kandinsky were the American Arthur Dove and the Swiss Augusto Giacometti (1877–1947), cousin of Alberto Giacometti. The individual pioneers, were soon followed by other abstract groups and movements and among the first were Orphism and Synchronism in France. There was a particularly rich crop in Russia, with Constructivism, Rayonism, and Suprematism all launched by 1915. With some artists, abstraction represented merely a brief phase in their careers (among them the British Artists Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, and Wyndham Lewis), but with others it was a vocation or even a mission. The almost religious fervour with which some of the Russian artists pursued their ideals was matched by the members of the De Stijl group in Holland, founded in 1917 (Herbert Read thought that the most serious pioneers of abstract art tended to belong to 'the metaphysically anguished races—Russian, German, and Dutch'<sup>5</sup>). To such artists, abstraction was not simply a matter of style, but a question of finding a visual idiom capable of expressing their most deeply felt ideas.

### 6. AN INSIGHT TO THE ART OF WESTERN ABSTRACTION ARTISTS

Let us briefly look at the lives and works of Kandinsky and Malevich. For they both, even though are known as abstractionists, they are responsible for creating separate genres for themselves within abstraction itself. They represent in their own personal idioms the true essence of abstraction, free from all sorts of imitations, only pure self-exploration.

### 7. VASILY KANDINSKY

Pioneer of abstract art and eminent aesthetic theorist, Vasily Kandinsky (b. 1866, Moscow; d. 1944, Neuilly-sur-Seine, France) broke new ground in painting in the first decades of the twentieth century. His seminal pre-World War I treatise *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (On the Spiritual in Art), published in Munich in December 1911, lays out his program for developing an art independent of one's observations of the external world. In this and other texts, as well as his art, Kandinsky strove to use abstraction to give painting the freedom from nature that he admired in music. His discovery of a new subject matter based solely on the artist's "inner necessity" occupied him throughout his life.

<sup>3</sup> *A Dictionary of Twentieth Century Art*, Ian Chilvers, 1999, Published by Oxford Univ. Press

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*



As the world was moving towards a new reality – the so-called Modernism, Kandinsky, wanted to create a world of his own in tune with music. His works exemplify musical notes and chords and its relation with color and non representational forms.

Writing that "music is the ultimate teacher," Kandinsky embarked upon the first seven of his ten Compositions. The first three survive only in black-and-white photographs taken by fellow artist and friend, Gabriele Münter. While studies, sketches, and improvisations exist (particularly of Composition II), a Nazi raid on the Bauhaus in the 1930s resulted in the confiscation of Kandinsky's first three Compositions. They were displayed in the State-sponsored exhibit "Degenerate Art", and then destroyed along with works by Paul Klee, Franz Marc and other modern artists.

Influenced by Theosophy and the perception of a coming New Age, a common theme among Kandinsky's first seven Compositions is the Apocalypse, or the end of the world, as we know it. Writing of the "artist as prophet" in his book, *Concerning the Spiritual In Art*, Kandinsky created paintings in the years immediately preceding World War I showing a coming cataclysm, which would alter individual and social reality..

As he stated in *Concerning the Spiritual In Art*, Kandinsky felt that an authentic artist creating art from "an internal necessity" inhabits the tip of an upwards moving triangle. This progressing triangle is penetrating and proceeding into tomorrow. Accordingly, what was odd or inconceivable yesterday is commonplace today; what is avantgarde today (and understood only by the few) is standard tomorrow. The modern artist/prophet stands lonely at the tip of this triangle making new discoveries and ushering in tomorrow's reality. Kandinsky had become aware of recent developments in sciences, as well as the advances of modern artists who had contributed to radically new ways of seeing and experiencing the world.

Composition IV and subsequent paintings are primarily concerned with evoking a spiritual resonance in viewer and artist. As in his painting of the apocalypse by water (Composition VI), Kandinsky puts the viewer in the situation of experiencing these epic myths by translating them into contemporary terms along with requisite senses of desperation, flurry, urgency, and confusion. This spiritual communion of viewer-painting-artist/prophet is ineffable but may be described to the limits of words and images.

One has to closely observe and penetrate deep into Kandinsky's paintings, for they offer more to the inner self than what meets the eye alone. His works appear lyrical and geometrical at the same time. They appear to be a conscious and an unconscious effort at the same time. The deep influences from music, lyrical notes etc. come out very clearly in his works. Kandinsky is known to fully comprehend the use of color and form in his compositions.

'All works of art created by truthful minds, without regard for the works conventional exterior remain genuine for all times.'

## 8. KAZIMIR MALEVICH

Malevich, Kazimir (1878-1935). Russian painter and designer, with Mondrian the most important pioneer of geometric abstract art.

Born near Kiev; trained at Kiev School of Art and Moscow Academy of Fine Arts; 1913 began creating abstract geometric patterns in style he called Suprematism; taught painting in Moscow and Leningrad 1919-21; published book, *The Non-objective World* (1926), on his theory; first to exhibit abstract geometric paintings; strove to produce pure, cerebral compositions; famous painting *White on White* (1918) carries suprematist theories to absolute conclusion; Soviet politics turned against modern art, and he died in poverty and oblivion.

Kazimir Malevich's art and his Suprematist manifesto are amongst the most vital artistic developments of this century. Most of his paintings are limited to geometric shapes and a narrow range of colors, but the pinnacle of his Suprematism was his *White on White* series. He claimed to have reached the summit of abstract art by denying objective representation.

Although Chagall and Soutine both left Russia to seek inspiration in France, the early 20th century saw an amazing renewal in Russian art. Since the far-off days of the icon painters, there had been nothing in this great country but the monotony of academic art. Now, as if unconsciously anticipating the coming revolution of 1917, one great painter after another appeared. They were not universally welcomed in their homeland, and more than one artist sought a response elsewhere, but some of the most significant painters dedicated their lives and their art to their country.



They are difficult artists. Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935), who founded what he called Suprematism, believed in an extreme of reduction: "The object in itself is meaningless... the ideas of the conscious mind are worthless". What he wanted was a non-objective representation, "the supremacy of pure feeling." This can sound convincing until one asks what it actually means. Malevich, however, had no doubts as to what he meant, producing objects of iconic power such as his series of *White on White* paintings or *Dynamic Suprematism* (1916; 102 x 67 cm (40 x 26 1/2 in)), in which the geometric patterns are totally abstract.

Malevich had initially been influenced by Cubism and primitive art, which were both based on nature, but his own movement of Suprematism enabled him to construct images that had no reference at all to reality. Great solid diagonals of color in *Dynamic Suprematism* are floating free, their severe sides denying them any connection with the real world, where there are no straight lines. This is a pure abstract painting, the artist's main theme being the internal movements of the personality. The theme has no precise form, and Malevich had to search it out from within the visible expression of what he felt.

## 9. ABSTRACTION IN MODERN INDIAN ART : A QUEST FOR IDENTITY

### *Brief Introduction to Indian Art*

Indian Art, throughout the history has been modified and recreated constantly and has been made suitable by various periods and their rulers to justify their needs. Be it the Mauryan period – where art was used for spreading the teachings of Buddha, or the Classical Gupta period or the great Mughal dynasty, one thing that prevails common to all these eras and their respective art – is the usage of art abundantly for political unification and self (high in command rulers) supremacy. Each religion and philosophical system provided its own nuances, vast metaphors and similes, rich associations, wild imaginations, humanization of gods and celestial beings, characterization of people, the single purpose and ideal of life to be interpreted in art. The main characteristics of Indian art, which comes forth from the depiction of these celestial beings – is the emphasis on Beauty and super reality. Indian art, as rightly quoted by Bharat Muni, evokes a kind of *rasa* that uplifts the soul – making it one with the artwork and transcending into a new realm of reality. Art prevailed in the form of vast sculptures, wall paintings; rock cut architecture, heavily ornated and

decorated temples, later there were miniature paintings – depicting the kings and queens at leisure etc, or their respective gods and goddess and also the folk and tribal art which flourished alongside.

If we trace the 20<sup>th</sup> century art development in India, we come across the fact that while India was suffering from a strong domination of British Colonialism in the first half, Europe had reached the saturation in Non-Representational Art. At this point of time, the British art institutions were riviving Indian traditional art with their general conception that there was no fine art in India; hence, the beautiful craft tradition of the country was rescued for its economical growth. Subsequently, in an attempt to train the designers and craftsmen in academic naturalist style they juxtaposed European technique with Indian subject to produce a confused result of mere mixture of styles.

The contemporary art that we know as of today, owes its existence to some extent to the British colonial rule as well. The British were responsible in setting up of structured institutes 'to impart foreign art practices'. This was done so that they were able to produce art, which was cheaper to acquire, and which found lot more value back in the west. Also the students from these art schools were used for the documentation of certain historical Indian monuments and structures of great relevance.

It was only during the Nationalist Movement of Bengal Art that the ontological quest for Indian traditional and folk art was traversed for the first time.

E.B Havell, Abanindranath Tagore and a group of like-minded people created a climate focused on the revival and upliftment of what was shadowed under the superficiality of mere pictorial representation. Emphasis was laid on the interpretation of Indian spirituality, aspirated through Ajanta and Ellora classical tradition and Mughal Miniature. The scores settling here was apparently on the track of tracing the roots but the seed of modernism was being sowed unintentionally and unconsciously for the time to come.

The first traces of modernist style was sighted in 1922 when Rabindranath Tagore initiated the Bauhaus artists exhibition in Calcutta, which entirely changed the course of Indian Art. The contours of modernism, in India, in a manner that was to become decisive for the artists of future generation, were Rabindranath Tagore, Amrita Sher Gil, George Keyt and Gaganindranath Tagore.



These efforts of Rabindranath and Gaganindranath Tagore somehow did not receive any strong hold in the Renaissance revolution in Bengal, it was subsequently the progressives of Bombay who took charge to disseminate the modern concept, which was later followed by other revolutionary groups all over the country.

1947 in Indian history was marked as the most glorious time when a long due independence from the colonial rule was attained. Along with the other developments of the moment, a class of progressives Indian artists broke through all sorts of subjugation, especially the formulae of British Art and also the pattern produced by the Bengal school of art, since these artists were not in commune with them.

During the formative period of post independence contemporary art of India, artists who had gathered around Delhi, Bombay, Madras and Calcutta had a choice to draw their inspiration from both Indigenous and Western sources. But because the art scenario was at its embryonic stage, artists had no alternative than to move from one direction to another and one concept to another, until they reached a desired goal, which took a couple of decades. These fluctuating tendencies among Indian artist had also been a common phenomenon because of many strong pressures, such as: how to come in the main stream of world art, how to retain the indigenous classical and traditional art, and how to cultivate a sense of individual concept to create something extraordinary. We constantly come across the fact, that the Indian artists lacked an Identity of their own and in search for one they traversed and experimented with various art forms to formulate their own personal language.

### ***Post Independence Indian Painting***

India's independence from colonial rule in 1947 came with the partition chaos and communal riots, which resulted in the migration and insecure social and political condition. Though it might have seemed an ideal moment for a creative expression that could portray the correct picture of what was happening but it proved to be a dark period for any creative activity. However, after the Independence some art activity could be noticed.

During the migration some artists who came to Delhi from Punjab were, B. C Sanyal, Amarnath, P.N.Mago, K. C Aryan, Kanwal Krishna and Satish Gujral. Artists like Sailoz Mukherjee, N. S Bendre, K. K Hebbur, K. H

Ara, Shivax Chabra, K. K Sen, Gopal Ghosh, and Dhanraj Bhagat became the source of inspiration for the younger generation artists through imparting their spirit of *Joy de vivre* during this transition, creating the theme of oneness with nature and rural serenity.

All these senior artists gradually disseminated in different parts of the country and contributed in forming different groups, disciplines and ideology

As soon as the political situation became comparatively normal, the artistic activities were revitalised and accelerated on the base formed by the pioneers of Indian modernists, Rabindranath Tagore, Gaganindranath Tagore, Nand Lal Bose and Amrita Sher-Gil. Though Indian artists found many impediments in the way to developing a modern visual idiom, the torch was already lighted some where in Bengal Renaissance to perform as the beacon.

The art scenario saw the setting up of Lalit Kala Akademi, an earliest initiative taken by the first education minister Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Our first Prime Minister Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru himself emphasized on the modern approach in Indian art and initiated a series of steps towards the creation of the National Gallery of Modern art, the Lalit Kala Akademi and other institutions.

The formation on Delhi Silpi Chakra in 1949 by a group of artists as Bhabhesh Sanyal, Kanwal Krishna, Dinkar Kowshik, Jaya Appaswamy, Prannath Mago and Damianti Batra was an attempt at social reconstruction. Most of these displaced artists from the newly created Pakistan faced the central issue of how to pursue formal aesthetic exploration in a society beleaguered by mass hunger, class conflict, and destitution. The group questioned the very meaning of art – to whom should it appeal? What kind of message should it carry? What response should it command? With their new ideals and programmes they attracted many local intelligentsia and artists seeking change and progress. Although their approach was social, they looked at their environment critically, yet sympathetically, specially the brutalities of man.

Ram Kumar among the young artists tried to define himself through his claustrophobic characters and atmosphere during the Delhi Silpi Chakra region. One artist who helped create the patina on New Delhi artistic history was Sailoz Mukherjee whose reform came with the hint provided by the French master Matisse, when he



suggested you came from the land of Nataraja and I have nothing to teach you. Mukherjee received a kind of guru mantra and fused Matissian form with Mughal colors, bringing modern Indian art closer to the International art scenario. Satish Gujral as a New Delhi artist made a remarkable impression with his expressionistic approach towards tackling the issues of brutality and the mass genocide of partition head-on. In his work, one notices a collective sorrow and sense of looming pathos. He used the forced migration of Hindus and Muslims to create an art for social protest. India's first private art gallery, the Dhoomimal Gallery formed in 1939, at Connaught Place, played an important role in promoting all these artists.

Calcutta also to some extent came into the grip of partition trouble because of the emergence of East Pakistan in Bengal. Therefore, the difference between the expressionistic values of the Calcutta Group and Delhi Group were mainly based on social and natural conditions governing at that time. Children with swollen bellies and skeletal human figures with mask like faces were a powerful subject, but the member of the Calcutta Group (around 1943 - 53) artists wanted to create art for art's sake to bring progress. The group formed by Raithin Maitra, Gopal Ghose, Nirode Mazumdar, Paritosh Sen, Krishna Pal, Sunil Madhava Sen, Prodosh Das Gupta, Subho Tagore and Pran Krishna Pal presented their manifesto, *Art should be international and interdependent*, displaying a similar sense of excitement of Bombay Progressives and also about the modern world claiming that the Paris of Sartre, Stravinsky and Picasso is the center of the day.

On the contrary, Bombay, Madras, Hyderabad and Baroda had no breakage of social or natural atrocities and therefore elements of human suffering are absent in the exposition of these groups. The 'Bombay Progressive Artists Group' emerged between 1948 - 56 consisting of F. N Souza, S. H Raza, H. A Gade, S. K Bakre, M. F Husain, K. H Ara. The Group was founded on the belief that true life of art lay in its formal vocabulary, and that existing pictorial vocabularies had run dry. Somewhere hidden in all this was our implicit belief in the eternal law of change<sup>6</sup>. These artists were quite conscious of the fact that the art, which was practised till then, needed a change, a total break with the past. The group was quite open-ended. Each artist followed his own aesthetic horizon.

<sup>6</sup> Krishan Khanna, 'Memories of a progressive past', *The Art News Magazine of India*, Vol.2, issue - 1, Bombay, 1997

As Sadanandji Bakre recalls the only 'ism' we had in common was 'individualism'. We shared a desire to get out of the mould, to free our work and ourselves<sup>7</sup>. His desire for freedom came as Exploded Atom (1966), which reflects the *Young and mesmerizing spirit* of the year 1947, and exemplifies his desire to loose himself emotionally free. The determination to shut out the misery of reality infuses the heavy brushstrokes of this painting with a sense of pleasure, and renders the entire canvas of celebration.

Raza's approach towards abstraction reflects in his *Marine Drive*, K.H Ara's desire to break the forms to its most basic origin received perfection in his still lives. Husain's *Zameen* reflected the very soil of its origin. F.N Souza's self portrait and *Heads* brought out a revolutionary visual reality to cultivate in his viewers a habit to experience what they were not accustomed to. His confident ability to transform his erotic - religious feelings in to a wild - discipline of expressionist drawing and pigment handling, brought him significant international acclaim by the 1950.

The new conceptual freedom was emphasized in all these artist's use of colours, also allowing it to express their individual pent up emotions, desperate to break with the past orthodoxies. The greens, the blues, and the yellows with a little bit of red for the use of contrast were the main colours, which dominated the palette of the artists. The expressionism of Rauvult, Van Gogh, Klee, Mondigliani in vogue in Paris during the 1940s formed the inspirational basis of these artistic thrust. As F. N Souza, S. H Raza, S. K Bakre and M. F Husain crossed the boundary of India for quite some time, artists like V. S Gaitonde, Krishen Khanna and Mohan Samant joined the Progressive Artists Group in 1950.

The trend in Madras art world was either iconographic or realistic in this decade. Though many artists who later adopted idioms of the Modern Art, were still experiencing the strong attraction towards folk element in both their art and craft.

The Jehangir Gallery in Bombay was established in 1952, essentially under the patronage of Sir Cowasji Jehangir and the Parsi Community with its democratic values. In Baroda the establishment of M.S. University, devoted to Arts, in 1950 was a devotional move of Markhand Bhatt, Hansa Mehta, N.S Bendre and Sanko Chaudhary. K.G Subramanyam joined the team later in

<sup>7</sup> 'Vintage' *The Art News Magazine of India*, Vol.2, issue - 1, Bombay, 1997



1951. The M.S University soon became a leading academic institution for the arts in India.

#### 10. APPROACHES TOWARDS ART, HENCEFORTH..

By the mid – 1950s, the modern Western abstract idiom had filtered into the Contemporary Indian Art, this attitude was perceived differently when the Non – Representational group of Bombay etc. formed a new ideology with a belief that abstraction had been long rooted in Indian Art tradition and the authenticity of abstraction in Indian Contemporary Art came from a philosophical idealism. Some artists chose a very different connotation having the concept that while Indian artist should not adopt western traditions, they should also not repeat the old Indian traditions of the Buddhist, Mughal or Rajput schools, instead should have no prejudice against the assimilation of the latest phases of the European paintings of the post Impressionism, Abstract Art and Cubism, without dominating the basic Indian national manner of expression.

The first Post – Independence Indian artists to sustain the international abstract idiom were Raza, V. S Gaitonde, Biren De, G. R Santosh, later followed by certain members of the *Group 1890* such as Ambadas, J. Swaminathan and Jeram Patel among others. Ram Kumar from Delhi also to a certain extent falls in this section reflecting the non- representational idiom in his later Benares scapes and landscapes.

Baroda Group, which was formed in 1956 with the motive to experiment with abstraction, gave their first exhibition of the works of N. S Bendre, Jyoti Bhatt, Prafull Dave, Shanti Dave, Ratan Parimoo, G.R Santosh, and K. G Subramanyam and fellow artist.

K. G Subramanyam experimented continuously with landscape, philosophy, poetry and man – woman relationships, which gave way to his early abstraction. His *White and Red Series* (1968) pulled him towards his later tantric diagrams, rituals and insights.

The urges of contemporary art of 60s belong to the climate of modern world, its metaphysical question marks, its restlessness and anxiety, disillusionment and confusion.

These artists wanted to break free from the regular and typical Indian art in a search of a personal quest. They not only crafted an individualistic identity for themselves but earned respect for 'Art from India' as

well. The spirit, the thirst, to do something new, different and individualistic, to create their own personal niche was the call of the day. Even though abstraction in art was not center stage in India, yet one could see it emerge and being accepted.

On August 25, 1962, a group of artists called *Group 1890* issued a manifesto referring *art for us is not born out of a preoccupation with the human condition, we do not sing of man, nor are we his messiah. The function or art is not to interpret and annotate, comprehend and guide, such attitudinizing may seem heroic in an age where man, caught up in the mesh of his own civilization hunger for vindication. The group declared art is neither conforming to reality nor flight from it; it is reality itself*<sup>8</sup>.

The Group 1890 was membered by Jyoti Bhatt, Himmat Shah, Jeram Patel, Rajesh Mehra, J. Swaminathan, G.M Sheikh, Ambadas, Balkrishna Patel, Eric Brown and Redappa Naidu.

#### 11. THE COURSE TOWARDS ABSTRACTION: A QUEST FOR IDENTITY

In the course of this transitional phase many Modern Art movements were adopted by most of the artists willingly or as a preliminary lesson. It was the drive within the Indian artists that let them venture beyond the subjugations and the limitations of Indian art, as such, and move towards a totally unknown territory – the Non – Representative in Art! Though only a handful of them practised Non – Representation in its purest form. It was only some revolutionary artists also took a hesitant step towards Abstract Art.

In February 1964 K.G Subramanyam, K.C.S Panikar , N.S Bendre and others established the Cholamandal Artists Village, near Mahabalipuram in Baroda. Their ideology was expressed in their first journal *Artrend* in 1961 as: -

*Life in India today seems to provoke her artists to begin to think more pertinently of their aesthetic requirements, and to evoke in their own minds a cleaner picture of what they are looking for in the art of their time. They fairly accept that what passes for modern Indian art in many quarters here, is, at best, and almost sterile Indian version of a European way of art expression. It still lacks vital Indian inspiration, which alone can ultimately*

<sup>8</sup> P.P Ramachandra Rao, *Contemporary Indian Art, Hyderabad, February 1969*



*fuse the apparent contradictions into an acceptable pattern...*

This existential feeling at that level which agitate the drawing all through, was the true contemporary experience, they clarified.

K.C.S Panikar the former principal of Madras School of Art in South India, who created a unique direction and imagery for himself and his students, based the breakthrough. The Artists, V.Vishwanathan, Redappa Naidu, Ramanujan, S.G Vasudev and P.V Janakiram followed him. The central idea advanced in his paintings and in those of his associated was that of patterning. Since the grammar of patterning has nothing to do with laws of nature, the rules of realistic representation cannot hold at all, and one can picture freely.

By the mid – 1960s a number of talented artist were working in an atmosphere of urgent inner search, focussing on the use of the line, within an idiom, which respected the traditional south Indian craftsmanship, especially its decorative aspect, hand in hand with a conceptual and spiritual rigor. Painters attempted this by conjugating symbolically, colours and shapes in to primordial patterns and fields.

Abstraction in the context of India needs to be understood analytically since abstract provides two different conditions – a process and a result. This way, the term abstract is seen in a very wide perspective and it opens two different connotations to its definition – one, which strictly adheres to the final result and the other, which follows the development.

The final result is *pure* abstraction where any adulteration of representational form or imitation of any kind, which may evoke any sign of realistic world, is strictly prohibited. It is totally divorced from objective or visual reality. The second condition deals with a long process where abstraction evolves varying degrees from near naturalism through semi abstraction to pure abstraction.

Pure abstract belongs to an extreme, fully developed condition while abstraction merely provides a passage to the ultimate goal, which sometimes is deliberately not reached. Often, abstraction is an unacknowledged process in Modern Art while Abstract Art is a complete and developed art form to represent its real and pure meaning.

Abstraction in Contemporary Indian painting is a complex thing because it inherits paradigms from both

Western and Indian traditions. Both these traditions represent very different trajectories in general.

Abstraction, which empirically anchors the profusion of new possibilities suggested by the changing ethos, developed particularly around 1940s in India. It had taken a gradual progress in Europe from Academic Art to French Realism to Pre – Raphaelites and from there to Impressionism and Modern Art towards various Abstract Art movements. In India, we reach directly from Academic Art to various types of abstraction where the artist confronts directly to a developed and mature form of Abstract Art. And it was presumed that Abstract Art for these artists was like a riped tree, which was full of fruits to pick and enjoy the taste. As a matter of fact, this presumption did not prove so. Abstraction was connived, consciously or unconsciously with a preoccupation of an ongoing conflict of traditional versus modern approach of the initial stratum to the extreme of representational versus non – representational dilemma, which loomed around for long.

## 12. AN INSIGHT TO THE ART OF INDIAN ABSTRACTION ARTISTS

The three artists described here, elaborate the reach and impact of abstraction in Indian art. All of three of them practice the Non-Representation in art and have highly developed sense of personal language, formed over years.

The main reason for choosing S. H Raza, K. C. S Panikar and Nasreen Mohamedi, is the fact that they are all masters in their genres of abstraction.

Raza went on to represent the 'Bindu' – the point of beginning for everything, Panikar – explores the depths of Indian symbology and traditional texts and Mohamedi – goes on to discover a totally different personal idiom, free from any influences esp. Indian.

They represent (and ofcourse others too) the heightened sense of creativity and understanding towards the Non-Representation in Indian art.

### *K.C.S Panikar (1911-1977)*

Born in Coimbatore on May 31, 1911, and received his education in Kerala and later in Tamil Nadu. The lush green village in which Panikar lived influenced the colourful landscapes of his early years. The bright colours stayed in his paintings, even though he moved away from landscapes onto other things.



A virtual child prodigy, Panikar began painting landscapes when he was only 12. By the age of 17, he was already exhibiting at the Madras Fine Arts Society's annual shows. Somewhere in 1918, he gave up college education to take up a job at the Indian Telegraph Department to support his family after the death of his father.

It was not until the age of 25 that he joined the Government School of Arts and Crafts, Chennai (1936-40).

Panikar, was one of the best metaphysical and abstract painters in India, took to interpreting the country's age-old metaphysical and spiritual knowledge in the 60s, when Indian art was still under the influence of the western painters. "That was the time when a few Indian artists were trying to break out of this Western influence and establish an idiom and identity of their own," he once said<sup>9</sup>.

*...My work of words and symbols series, started in 1963, using mathematical symbols, Arabic figures and roman script, helping me create an atmosphere of new picture making which I seemed very much to need...in the course of Malayalam script more congenial. The scripts are not intended to be read. To make them illegible I introduce strange shapes and characters in between the groups of letters. The symbols and diagrams, the tabular columns etc have no meaning whatsoever other than their visual aspect and images born out of association of ideas*<sup>10</sup>.

The Madras School Artist K.C.S Panikar represents the best intimacy with his consciously adopted calligraphic motifs as a regular pursuit in order to move into the world stream of art, he used the script in a painterly context. Apart from the problems related to intimacy or visual image, Panikar adopted different script as one of his fundamental motifs in order to build up his canvasses. Tamil or Malayalam characters of the script in his compositions hardly denote any meaning, content or clue to the painted surface, yet, these characters are so integrally interwoven that if they are presumably removed from the canvas there would remain nothing except the dead shaded or silhouetted, elongated parabolas or allied monochrome geometrically based

shapes<sup>11</sup>. K.C.S Panikar went on with the researches into the discipline of figuration, which he had started while at the College of Art, Madras. *In his words and symbols* series he worked off the ego consciousness and its burden of emotion with an extremely craftily organization of purely syntactic graphic conventions<sup>12</sup>.

In uniform and equal strength, the script flows sometimes vertically and sometimes horizontally in spontaneous character harmonizing to the tune of the monochrome spaces. His way of using the Indian script on canvas is the best example of Indianization of modern art.

### S.H Raza

*"My work is my own inner experience and involvement with the mysteries of nature and form which is expressed in colour, line, space and light"*.

S. H. Raza

Syed Haider Raza was born on February 22, 1922 in Babaria, Mandla district, Madhya Pradesh. After his high school, he studied further at the Nagpur School of Art, Nagpur (1939-43), followed by Sir J. J. School of Art, Bombay (1943-47), before moving to France in October 1950 to study at the *École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts (ENSB-A)* in Paris, 1950-1953 on a Govt. of France scholarship. After his studies, he travelled across Europe, and continued to live and exhibit his work in Paris. He was later awarded the *Prix de la critique* in Paris in 1956, first non-French artist receive the honour.

*Whatever the direction art expression may take, the language of form imposes its own inner logic and reveals infinite variations and mutations. The mind can perceive these mysteries only partially. The highest perception is to an incentive order, where all human faculties participate, including intellect, which is ultimately a minor participant in the creative process. This stage is total bliss and defies analysis*<sup>13</sup>.

S. H Raza always aimed at *pure plastic order* through which he expresses his deepest concerns of nature and elemental philosophy. The early paintings of Raza

<sup>9</sup> K.C.S Panikar, 'Contemporary Painters and Metaphysical Elements in the Art of the Past', *Lalit Kala Contemporary* - 12,13, April - September 1971

<sup>10</sup> K.C.S Panikar, 'Contemporary Painters and Metaphysical Elements in the Art of the Past', *Lalit Kala Contemporary* - 12,13, April - September 1971

<sup>11</sup> Anis Farooqi 'The role of the script in Contemporary Indian Painting', *Lalit Kala Contemporary* - 32

<sup>12</sup> Josel James, 'An Artists Village', *Lalit Kala Contemporary* - 35, September 1997

<sup>13</sup> As told to Anahita Contractor, 'The devious inner Eye', *The observer of Business and Politics*, February 1992



resonate with profoundly as does a full-throated *alaap* in Indian classical music. His later artistic approach towards the genetic vocabulary of point, the line, element and color and structural unity, all signify his quest, *as the task of art is to make things visible so that they may become objects of reflection*<sup>14</sup>.

The *bindu*, the natural elements, terrestrial explorations, fertility symbols and other issue bordering Indian spiritualism, have persisted in his painting over the years without a tangible evolutionary credibility. For: *The kinds are a sign with marker metaphysical implications. Like a seed – vital, a symbol of human, natural and universal energy*<sup>15</sup>.

In pursuit of his preoccupation with landscapes, townscapes, temples and village in his early paintings he says, *It was an impressionistic style – more or less European, because our whole curriculum was based on Victorian thought*<sup>16</sup>. For him the construction of a picture and color is very important.

His formative period took 25 years to reach a certain point. At a point he went through the *lyrical abstraction* and than towards Indian music like *ragas* and *raginis*.

Raza emphasizes that music is co-related to his work. He refers to a large canvas called *Germination: there is a pre-planned structure, with some thing akin to teen taal, with the possibility of dividing the space and time into squares, and where the colors are arranged in a certain order to create almost an orchestration of lines, forms and color. Some thing akin to music*<sup>17</sup>.

The paintings done in acrylics, in *Zamin* 1971, and *Oasis* 1975, this vision and perception is freed further from the slightest reference to representational elements. There are no specific forms that relate to architecture or to the forest, nor is there any indication of a point of view or a perspective. A dark, calligraphic structure or a series of impetuous notations flow over a variegated field continuously placed motifs, which are luminaries and streaked and veined with membranous textures.

For three or four years, Raza underwent a period of thought process – until he came to the realization that his vision had something to do with the *bindu*. His perception goes as: *it punctuates our manuscripts. It is a sign with major metaphysical implications, like a seed vital, a symbol of human, natural and universal energy*<sup>18</sup>.

The significance of *bindu* developed gradually in Raza's mind. Ever since Raza received full revelation of this symbol around 1975, his work has revolved around this seed.

The metaphysical awakening, the fertility symbols as in *Ma* and other issues bordering Indian spiritualism, *Naga, Jala – Bindu, Tree of life* and emergence have persisted in his paintings. His canvasses depict a point that becomes a circle around which there are four lines that make it a square. At the heart of the circle a horizontal and vertical line intersect – and there are colors, radiating energy.

The act of painting is a form of *yoga*, he analyses. *You have to be so near to it, that you stop thinking about yourself. You become a part of whole activity, and some of the best paintings are created in this elevated state where reason has little access. It is not the intellect that decides, it is the instinct and essentially intuition that have the upper hand*<sup>19</sup>.

Raza represents the triumph of Indian art not only in India but also across all borders, all over the world.

#### Nasreen Mohamedi

Nasreen Mohamedi was born in Karachi in 1937 and raised in Bombay. She studied at the St. Martin's School of Art in London from 1954 to 1957, and later she returned to India.

Nasreen Mohamedi was a key Indian artist creating non-figurative work in the early decades after Indian independence in 1947. Trained in Europe and widely travelled, the influences behind her spare, poetic and evocative drawings and photographs ranged from Kandinsky and Malevich to the dunes of the desert.

Her introspection found expression through a geometrically disciplined abstract idiom all through her life, and was untouched by the basic anthropomorphic intent; embedded in Indian art. The condensation of symbology, iconography and subjectivity of metaphysical paradoxes was evacuated by Nasreen Mohamedi. Her ink on paper coalesces the pure abstract thoughts of Malevich, Kandinsky, Op Art and minimalist.

Nasreen Mohamedi found her niche particularly in disengaging the representational ethics with a supporting

<sup>14</sup> Maria Louis, 'A RAZArt Symphony', Society, March 1992

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid



mentor like Gaitonde, in 1960s, in Bombay and colleague Jeram Patel in Baroda.

In the early period like many other contemporary artists Nasreen also experienced transitional phase, which gradually settled with her strong sense of silence of desert. A deep silent trajectory of Nasreen's work starts with lyrical mode inspired by Kandinsky and Klee. (A vertical watery stroke at the edge of the paper suggested an approaching storm, or the sky was made eventful by majestic sweeps of soil red and black colors). In her diary she mentioned *again I am reassured by Kandinsky – the need to take from an outer environment and bring it an inner necessity*<sup>20</sup>, which may be the extended perception of her late 1960 *the new image of pure rationalism. Pure intellect, which has to be separated from emotion... A state beyond pain and pleasure. Again a difficult task begins*<sup>21</sup>.

Further, she worked with a sense of shadows, the shadow of the Hiroshima victim on the rock; she replaced the icon with indexical sign that is always determinedly against the symbols as well.

A strong Eastern aesthetic sense of fleeting, evanescent, always at the point of vanishing, and taking the view with it,<sup>22</sup> and the spontaneity of Chinese and Japanese painting is visible in her work from late fifties through the sixties.

Her first hand interaction with European abstraction came at the age of seventeen when she was studying at St. Martins School of Art in London, which lingered on as foundational base later after her return to India in 1958. she used oil and ink mixed with thick, flat – tipped brush with hard bristles or a roller, and the oil was allowed to seep into the paper on either side of the color. A saturated red or watery gray – blue with sepia or black seems to be utilized for its tonal and textural values, which were later, eliminated by the use of black ink. Her calligraphic brushstrokes are visible in her later pen and ink drawings, which later resembles with Arabic inscriptions in her desert landscapes.

The nature bound imagery, calligraphic brushwork and tonal and textural seduction gave way to pure abstraction in early seventies at her arrival to Baroda as a drawing teacher. Her aesthetic temperament finally turned towards the potential austerity of an abstract idiom

devoid of color. Her fascination for sanded desert of Gulf, the terraces of the Mughal movement accented by linear patterns, the geometric arrangement of the sandstone slabs of Fatehpur Sikri, the variations of the rectangular slabs, irregular crisscrossing of their fitting, the narrow streak of shadow of a water channel across the field, terrace steps descending into a square water tanks shown in her photograph series, the intricacies of her mediating design of the cobweb, it seemed inevitable that the idiom Op – Art would be appropriate to reflect her own inner turmoil, which was searching for some clear – cut order by the late 1970s.

In the early days at Baroda she began to use straight lines measured and drawn with the help of the geometrical scale. Mark by mark, small ink drawing evolved into a grid like structure. During late seventies her drawings and large works, built up into a close – knit web of silken lines. Diagonal intersecting with the vertical and horizontal lines of the grid itself creates a regulated pulsation across the surface. The drawing thus generates surface movements and under currents that vary in different parts of the paper<sup>23</sup>.

Her inspiration also came from post war abstractionists of French Tachistes like Mathieu and Michaux in her middle 1960s bio morphic forms. She was also, strangely enough, interested in technology, in cars, in industrial movements, in water storage tanks, in the street, telegraph wires, airport runway, cameras and precision instruments and architectural drawings and architectural spaces.

With the minimalist such as Carl Andre or Andre Martin, North American, Zen and Tao, she shared precedence in non – platonic thought. While the Minimalists used a language of abstraction, their mode differed from Abstract Art in that the latter is posited on the platonic idea of representation as a reflection of the natural world<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Altaf (ed.), *Diary entry on September 30, 1970, Nasreen in Retrospect*, Bombay, Ashraf Mohamedi trust, 1995

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>22</sup> Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting : the Logic of Gaze*, London Macmillan , 1983

<sup>23</sup> G.M Sheikh (ed.) *Contemporary art in Baroda*, Published by Tulika, New Delhi 1997

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*