

Tradition and modernism

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ONE need not look any further than to a few illegal settlements that dot the footpaths of Delhi, home to nomads from Rajasthan, to know that these families earn their livelihood by manufacturing and selling utility items made from iron. These are mainly used by people from the low-income group in their kitchens or collected by some curious connoisseur of rustic designs. The skills of these nomads are rudimentary, but their products are functional and a reminder of our indigenous industrial design. The homes of these nomads, which are primarily made out of scrap, multiple discarded boards, house a living art form.

There is a wonderful symmetry in the way they place their objects on makeshift racks. Their visibility is unexpectedly strong. There are many other instances that urge one to think about craft, industrial arts (a pre-independent era term) and manufactured arts (multiple productions of same objects with many editions). Here I am not referring to the traditional textile which also has multiple productions. But the question arises with contemporary sculptures, the unusually large 'sculptural' or three-dimensional pieces with metal or fiberglass casting. An edgy surface finish, and automotive colour, give no sense of the personal statement.

It is imperative we bring back the discussions and propositions made by E.B. Havell, in his book *The Basis for Artistic and Industrial Revival in India* (1912). The continuation of a discussion around that book would be useful in raising awareness in the arts industry. Such an initiative was established in Kolkata in the mid-twentieth century. The India Design Convention held in 1954 suggested the following:

1. In adapting modern design trends to India's needs, steps should be taken to integrate her rich cultural heritage with the country's developing industrial design tradition.
2. Suitable facilities for the Indian Institute of Art should promote training in industrial design in the hope that (as in the United Kingdom) the government should lend full support to this aim, without which no tangible results will be possible.
3. The training of commercial artists, which is now being imparted in various institutions, should be reviewed and remodelled to meet the practical requirements of industry. This would result in a better appreciation of the significance and use of industrial design.
4. Advertising may be recognized as a profession, and facilities for training should be provided by properly equipped institutions.
5. Rural traditional artisans and designers may be approached sympathetically to introduce them to modern needs and conditions of life and living; to encourage them to evolve new forms and patterns by themselves. It should impart knowledge of the techniques and processes of reproduction of their designs. It is necessary that the institute bring designers and reproduction and printing technicians together for an interchange of ideas and techniques.
6. Such standardization of designs and patterns, as is necessary, should be confined to size and shape, not so much to the stylistic character of the design.
7. The institute should urge standardization of colours by the Indian Standards Institute like BS 1480, applicable in the United Kingdom.

8. The institute should interest itself in the improvement of the design of vernacular typefaces.

In a similar context, Havell suggested: 'It is not true that because in Europe many incredible inventions of machinery (and many very foolish ones) were made, that they have altered these conditions, that art has revolutionized elements and has to surrender to the dictates of modern scientific ideas. However, it is just as foolish for the artist to ignore modern science as it is for the scientist to ignore Indian art. It gives all knowledge to man for its proper use, and there is no antagonism between real science and real art.'

According to Ananda Coomaraswamy: 'The machine stays and, rightly used, may transform from a curse into a blessing. The problem is not how to abolish machinery, but how so to regulate it to serve without enslaving man; how to stop competition between machine and hand work, by defining and delimiting the proper spheres of each intelligently. The community cannot afford to dispense with the intellectual and imaginative forces, the educational and ethical factors, which go with the existence of

skilled artisans and small workshops. The greatest mistake that Anglo-Indian administrators have made is in ignoring these educational and ethical factors.'

Many years ago, Swami Vivekananda insisted that Sister Nivedita and Kakuzo Okakura visit rural Bengal and other parts of India to observe traditional forms of art in villages and temples. As a *paribrajak* (wandering saint) he had realized the potential and importance of the village community. Even Ananda Coomaraswamy was sensitive to the village community and its artistic practice. Under British rule, rural arts got commercial recognition and appreciation – this led to mass production of unique pieces, called the industrial arts in India. George C.M. Birdwood's *The Industrial Arts of India*, provides excellent documentation of those arts, but it received a mixed reaction. The concept of 'uniqueness' in the arts may be irrelevant today because life is no longer isolated. Even in the pre-digital era, folk and rural arts worldwide had a latent resonance. Manufactured art in India

after the late nineties made it uniform. It was the multiplication of a motif with an exaggerated concept.

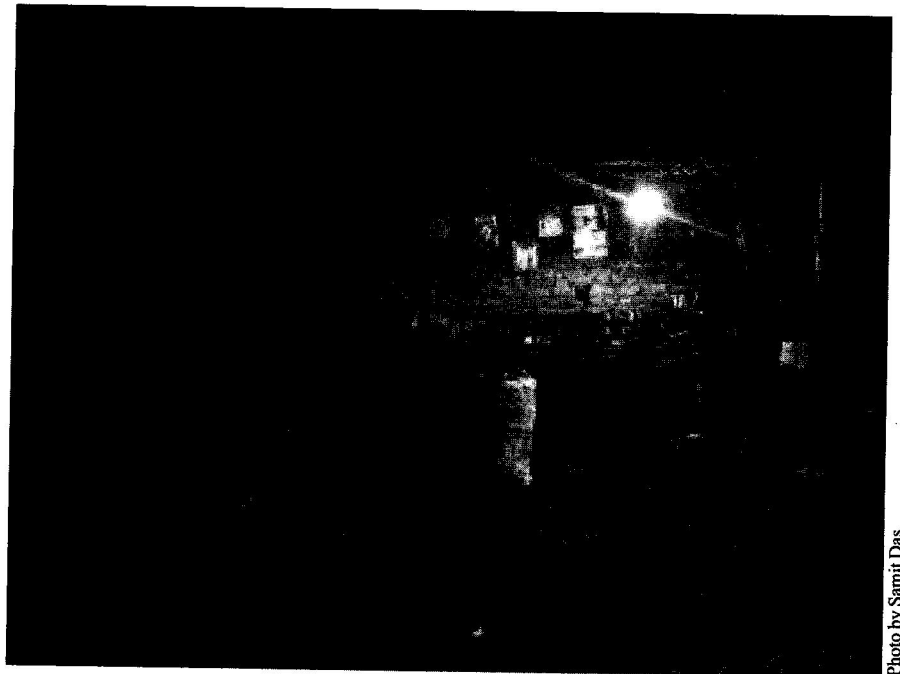
However, it is important to note that no imageries were the same in the past, and both the process of execution and mediums used were different. The concept may be identical, perhaps the reason being that the term 'art' did not exist – instead the practice was a part of life, a need. It was not a private art practice like it is today. Though artists claim to bring change in society and feel a responsibility towards the community, there is considerable doubt about the actual outcome. Interpretation of 'modern' art remains vague in India as it is a vast country with different genres and complex realities.

Here lies the big difference between the arts in rural India and arts in Indian metro cities. For villagers, art is an integral part of their lives. It is a need for them; it is not produced on mass demand. Art in rural India was open to all. Contemporary art in India, after the nineties, got branded as 'exclusive'. It encouraged limited viewership. The



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A woman churning butter, brass hide scraper, Gujarat. Published in *Indian Folk Art* by Heinz Mode/Subodh Chandra. *Alpine Fine Arts Collection*, NY, 1985.



A shop on a Delhi street as inspiration for art in the public domain.

Photo by Samit Das.

Coomaraswamy and Vivekananda era was different in India, and so too was the concept of the village. The circumstances and surroundings are not the same any more. However, we still need to recall those earlier debates as art in Indian cities is mostly dominated by international imagery and the curator's text, which is a far cry from the Indian ground reality of village art.

It is important to examine the crafts from rural India to see the embodiment of mythological images. However, in contemporary art there is no such criteria. It is a flood of similar images from the Internet, and it is only the use of various materials that has transformed the works into a different scale, according to market demand. Even in the materials used, environmental sustainability is essential, which has been ignored by many practitioners. Contemporary manufactured art, by and large, makes a shockingly brief appearance. We may not even remember the temporary stunt for any length of time, which also limits the audience as it is not viable to keep at home.

Glimpses of similar images are also confusing unless described in the right manner. The political situation in Hong Kong today cannot be the same as that in West Bengal. However, television images appear to be very similar showing water cannons trying to stop demonstrators. In the practice of art, one should not blindly imitate some favourite images flooding social media or Pinterest as part of artistic practice. It was observed that often the context was alien and did not become an intrinsic part of the personal 'art language'. Though there is visual similarity, the whole plot was entirely different.

The present generation may not understand the essence of the particular, and experience the event personally, because the virtual world and its



Photo by Samit Das

Cities in India are a living installation of many voices.

numerous platforms like Pinterest have endless visual resources. However, in art it is essential to realize the specific contexts. We all know about fake and doctored videos. The media may show similar images because some components of the incidents shown are identical, but the supporting act of the pictures is never the same. It is the same with artistic practice. The subject matter and imagery of international artists cannot be the same as of artists living in India because it is a personal realization that expresses itself in a visual or textual language. Every element of the arts have their unique features which differ from one another.

The pre-independence industrial arts in India are defined as those which are mass-produced. However, the numbered and limited edition art of today fails to retain its strength of language, apart from being a stunt to elicit some reaction. It projects some vague issues and concepts, which cannot be explained. Even a museum cannot show them to elicit public reaction due to limitations of space.

Over the last couple of years, the fever of modernism in Indian art has

risen too high. During the mid-nineties in Delhi and Mumbai, the art scene created a frame for post-modernism, and later, internationalism came to define it with a few artists from the Indian metropoli. It has no reference or connection with social anthropology, legends and folk traditions. Many artists from the various states were not included. The exclusion of such influences was apparent in the Bengal School and through the period of the national movement. A significant and broad change which involved the entire country, including its past traditions, was a notion from history, to construct a new language of art. However, it was ignored and as a result the politics of polarization began to manifest itself in Indian art much before anybody realized. Having done extensive research on Tagore's *Jorasanko*, and the art of Bengal, the author can showcase the effort India has made to look forward by looking back. Enormous archival material exists to validate these assumptions.¹

1. <https://samitdas.com/installation-projects/idea-of-space-and-rabindranath-tagore/> extended to the contribution of Swami Vivekananda, <https://samitdas.com/installation-projects/details-of-the-swami-vivekananda-show/>

The word 'modern art', derived from the West, does not apply to India at all. Indian art must be defined through age and time. The history of art and the history of urbanization in India has a long history. Writers cannot isolate writing art history practice without looking at the social and political history of India from the ancient world to today. One should also look at the writings of British travellers in India, which may not be taken at face value, but provides many eyewitness accounts.

Before the eighties, many art historians and critics introduced Indian art in the context of its traditions, and other genres of art. It is essential to ask why some specific artworks have been crowned 'modern' or 'post-modern' art, while others are termed 'contemporary' art. All these categories never included folk art traditions. After the late eighties, art history writing in India became insensitive to vernacular literature on art and culture, which was not the case before the eighties. There was a lot of in-depth writing on art by practicing artists. This polarization of art politics in India created a vacuum among the general public and artists because it was the non-

vernacular texts that had created the history of art in India.

The Bengal School movement ceased to be active after 1947, and in fact, it became weaker. It strongly influenced many of the Indian artists who worked from Paris, then the cultural capital of the world. Most of the artists turned back to Indian philosophy, spiritualism or a thoughtful, meditative approach. It is an open question whether those directions made them more special than the masters from the Bengal School movement. It is important to mention that Bengal was the epicenter of the movement, but Bengalis did not own it nor was it limited to Bengal.

The Bengal School movement was much misunderstood, seen as being narrowly nationalistic, one that never looked at other areas explored by creative personalities, working in architecture, utility design, refinement of crafts and inspirations from the crafts, evolving through ancient texts, performances, public art, installations and many more. Team work involves a collaborative process. There was a robust architectural resonance within Japan, Santiniketan, and Bauhaus. However, Bauhaus was based on mathematics and geometry. Its hallmark was sharp geometry. With Japan and Santiniketan, it was different.

The art of the Bengal School only extended to Santiniketan and never encouraged the idea of mass production of crafts and mythological image, for the western market. Instead, they introduced the ideas of the Sloyd school for training and production. Sreeniketan/Shilpa Sadan was the outcome of this programme. The Tagores of Kolkata stud-

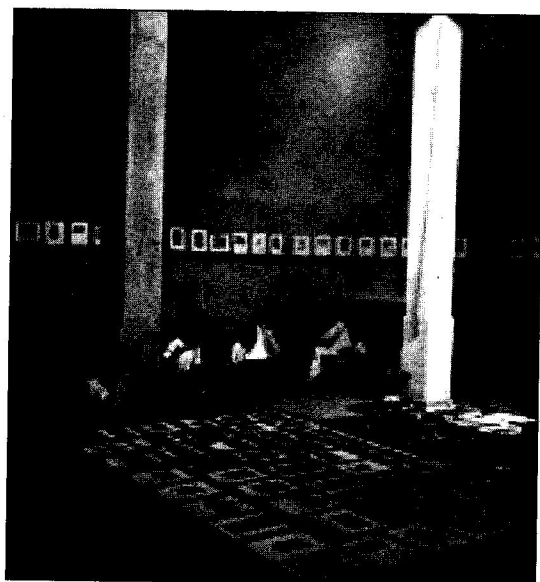
ied traditional art and crafts, Rajput and Mughal drawings, which they collected and are now part of the Tagore Collection.

During the early nineteenth century, Havell and Coomaraswamy took a healthy initiative to develop rural crafts and arts. However, Looking at today's India, one cannot imagine the concept of a village in those times. Batch production of artistic practice is difficult to accept amidst the rich craft traditions of India. This practice of batch production was expressionless and lifeless, and did not reflect the voice of artists from the various regions of India. The practice made art a dull product with little utility. However, this was before the nineties. There was in India a greater consciousness about the art and craft movement.

In the early twentieth century, Santiniketan/Kala Bhavan established Shilpa Sadan. These two institutions started an initiative to develop craft and rural arts as a utility items. It seems complicated to impact the sensitivity and 'naiveness' of rustic art in today's fast changing society. But, looking at the rare and old books on craft and the rural arts, one comes to the realization that craft and rural arts are imbued with the spirit of a living tradition, a self-driven process. The urban educative process is unlikely to help preserve our rural art and crafts.

Despite the art in industry initiative, Santiniketan did not succeed in this craft development process. Rural art and craft is a useful document for future reference, but this area of artistic expression has to be seen as ephemeral art that still exists in various parts of India. The documentation can create another pedagogy language in the arts, though this method may not work with rural art and crafts in India.

In contemporary art practice, making objects with a 3D printer or



Art classes at Santiniketan, old Nandan, early 20th century. Photo courtesy Rabindra Bhavan, Santiniketan.

fiberglass casting is not the answer to preserve the ephemeral arts. Perhaps this is a poor example of industrial arts, which does not carry any personal statement. These are expressions controlled by artificial intelligence. Batch production art endorses the view that all human beings are inspired or affected by the same or similar issues, which is not possible. There is no such integrity in life. There can be many seminars and debates on these issues, but the opinions expressed here are based on my journey and archival evidence. This dialogue also depends on a patron; on the need to be sensitive while building an art and craft collection.

Many years ago, Abanindranath Tagore realized that floral decorations on the floor (*alpana*) is an ephemeral art. That the energy passes through the personas of all who cross the motifs—mind and memory keep the decoration alive. Over time, it disappears. He never thought about the permanency of floral decoration on the floor.

Havell suggested in his essay, 'The Ethics of Machinery'—'good handicraft educates public taste and morals. Modern manufacturing process debase them. The handicraftsman works for an educated public which prefers one good thing to two inferior. Machinery in art manufacture supplies the demand of a public, which ignorantly exchanges old lamps for new, only craving for novelty and not knowing what is right and what is wrong.'

There is an urgency to construct the historiography of Indian art based on region rather than by adopting superficial terminology. In the last three or four decades, many art historians have tried to categorize art in India using international adaptive terms, but the current affinity with 'modernism' suggests that the experi-

mentation did not succeed. Art must always move with the times. Real art expresses the thought of the time. There is no final in art at any period; it always needs the stimulus of new ideas to keep it vibrant, just as the human body continually requires fresh blood to flow in the veins.

The language of any form of art which becomes merely imitative, decays. All forms of art must stimulate a creative language. A new idea cannot germinate as long as the educated Indian is content to be imitative. One must appreciate the appetite of a Picasso, Bhisn Das, Baswan, Rembrandt, or Mansoor. It is also essential to analyze Ramkinkar and Rodin on an equal platform without attempting a mere comparison. It has now become necessary to think about mapping Indian art history in diverse ways where India has played a significant role. The idea of the modern or modernism cannot remain merely a monolithic thought in the context of India.

To quote from the writings of Will Durant: 'I have long felt that our usual method of writing history in separate longitudinal sections—economic history, political history, religious history, the history of philosophy, the history of literature, the history of science, the history of music, the history of art—does injustice to the unity of human life; that history should be written collaterally as well as lineally, synthetically as well as analytically; and that the ideal historiography would seek to portray in each period the total complex of a nation's culture, institutions, adventures, and ways. However, the accumulation of knowledge has divided history, like science, into a thousand isolated specialties; and prudent scholars have refrained from attempting any view of the whole—whether of the material universe or the living past of our race.'