

The making of modern Indian art

BY TELANGANA TODAY

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Hyderabad: Artists have created a hybrid Indo-European style of paintings, thus advancing the cultural hegemony of western artistic expression.

While the history of Indian art stretches back to the ancient era, the 19th century witnessed

an early progression of Indian art being adapted to the western visual lexis with the emergence of Company Style painting.

Synthesising elements from traditional Rajput and Mughal miniatures with techniques of western academic realism, the anonymous artists created a hybrid Indo-European style of paintings for their British patrons. It advanced the cultural hegemony of western artistic expression in India.

Eventually, the establishment of the Sir JJ School of Art in 1857 solidified the practice of western rudiments in art. The institute became one of the most important centres of art.

While Bombay was emerging as an art hub of western India, a renaissance was parallely transpiring in the south. A largely self-taught painter from Travancore in Kerala, Raja Ravi Varma was shaping a truly pan-Indian art practice by fusing his traditional western art training with the elements of Indian religious iconography.

Another artist famous for capturing India's culture and heritage through his canvases was MV Dhurandhar who worked with a range of mediums and created several landmark examples of Indian religious painting.

The founding of the Visva Bharati University was a significant development that culminated in the Tagores championing a return to Indian roots and value in art practices.



Often dubbed as the nationalist-revivalist and proponent of 'Swadeshi' value in Indian art, Abanindranath Tagore founded the famous 'Bengal School of Art', which would become a milestone in the further development of modern Indian art.

Gaganendranath Tagore was also an important artist of the time who pioneered experimentation and developed a complex cubist style of work. Poet and artist Rabindranath Tagore also contributed greatly to reshaping Indian art by introducing contextual modernism. Some of the greatest artists of the time such as Nandalal Bose, Jamini Roy, Mukul Dey, Ramkinkar Baij, Benode Behari Mukherjee, KG Subramanyan, among others, were trained at Santiniketan.

A staunch reviver of Bengal folk art, Jamini Roy brought a complete reinterpretation of Indian iconography. He found his muse in the Kalighat style of painting and captured people and scenes from rural India in his adapted 'flat technique' and unique linear modernist style with the use of bold colours like yellow, blue, green, red, and white.

On a par with these Bengal masters, Amrita Sher-Gil was rising to become a star of Indian art. A Hungarian-Indian painter who was trained in Paris, she created works that were influenced by different places and people of her own life. In 1937, her travel to India and especially to the Ajanta Caves altered her approach and thereon, she started to depict the lives of people from India's rural countryside.

In 1947, famous artist FN Souza founded the Bombay Progressive Artists Group. Joined by other like-minded aspiring artists of the time, including SH Raza, MF Husain, KH Ara, HA Gade, and SK Bakre, the group became India's representation of post-Independence modern art.

While each of the members had their distinct style, the group embraced the idiom of avant-garde movements such as Cubism, Expressionism, Surrealism, and Fauvism.

Even though the group was short-lived and disbanded a few years later, it created a playground for the other artists such as Tyeb Mehta, Jehangir Sabavala, Ganesh Pyne, Bikash Bhattacharjee, Krishen Khanna, and Prabhakar Barwe, amongst others. Evolving through various phases in life, these artists constantly experimented with styles and mediums.

Many of them also founded different artists' collectives and spaces to promote Indian art such as Delhi Silpi Chakra co-founded by artist BC Sanyal, the Baroda Group founded under the guidance of artist NS Bendre, and Group 1890, to name a few.

Several works by these eminent modernists will be appearing in our upcoming Modern Indian Art auction scheduled on December 27-28, 2021.

Sunny Chandiramani

Vice-President

AstaGuru Auction House