

ORIGINS AND EARLY MODERNISM IN INDIA

The emergence of modern Indian art must be understood within the broader context of colonial rule, where the British viewed fine arts as an essentially European domain.

They believed that Indians lacked both the training and sensibility required to create and appreciate fine arts. Consequently, art schools were established in cities such as Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Lahore during the nineteenth century.

These institutions largely promoted academic realism and naturalism rooted in Victorian taste. Even the Indian crafts that received encouragement were shaped according to European market demands, reflecting a colonial bias that privileged Western aesthetics over indigenous traditions.

It was against this backdrop that a nationalist response in art began to take shape. The Bengal School of Art, under the leadership of Abanindranath Tagore and E. B. Havell, became a significant force in resisting colonial artistic dominance.

This movement sought to revive Indian artistic traditions and establish a cultural identity distinct from Western models. The establishment of Kala Bhavana at Shantiniketan in 1919 marked an important development in this direction.

Conceived by Rabindranath Tagore, it aimed to create art that was meaningful for Indians while remaining open to experimentation.

This period also coincided with global political and artistic transformations following World War I. Exposure to modern European art movements such as Cubism and Expressionism, through exhibitions and art magazines, played a crucial role in shaping Indian modernism.

These movements rejected academic realism and proposed that art need not imitate the visible world but could create its own reality through forms, lines and colour patches. Thus, abstraction began to emerge as an important artistic language.

Among the early pioneers of modern Indian art, Gaganendranath Tagore stands out for his innovative use of Cubism. Unlike Pablo Picasso's geometric

fragmentation, Gaganendranath employed vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines to construct mysterious interiors and spatial compositions, thereby developing a unique visual language.

Rabindranath Tagore, who turned to painting later in life, evolved a distinctive calligraphic style derived from doodles and crossed-out words.

His works, characterised by a limited palette of black, ochre, red and brown, created a self-contained visual world that departed significantly from the delicate refinement of the Bengal School.

At Shantiniketan, Nandalal Bose played a crucial role in shaping a new direction in Indian art. Although trained in the nationalist ideals of Abanindranath Tagore, he encouraged his students to explore diverse artistic expressions.

Among his most creative students were Benode Behari Mukherjee and Ramkinker Baij, both of whom drew inspiration from their immediate environment.

Mukherjee's mural *Medieval Saints* reflects his interest in the lives of Bhakti saints such as Kabir and Tulsidas, focusing on their humane teachings rather than epic narratives. His work demonstrates how history could be reinterpreted through a modern lens.

Ramkinker Baij, on the other hand, brought an unprecedented vitality to sculpture by celebrating everyday rural life. His work *Santhal Family* transforms a simple scene of a tribal family into a monumental sculpture.

By using modern materials such as cement mixed with pebbles and placing the work in an open environment, he broke away from traditional sculptural practices and introduced a new relationship between art and public space.

Another important figure of this period was Jamini Roy, who rejected academic training in favour of folk traditions.

Drawing inspiration from rural Bengal, he used bold lines, simplified forms and natural pigments to create a style that was both modern and rooted in indigenous practices.

While his art resembled village traditions, his personal signature and stylistic consistency distinguished it as individual modern expression.

Amrita Sher-Gil occupies a unique position in the development of modern Indian art. Trained in Paris, she was deeply influenced by European modernism, particularly Impressionism and Post-Impressionism.

However, upon returning to India, she sought to depict Indian subjects, especially rural life, through a modern lens.

By combining elements of Indian miniature and mural traditions with modern European techniques, she created a body of work that was both experimental and deeply rooted in Indian reality.

Her contribution lies not only in her artistic achievements but also in her role in shaping the direction of Indian modernism.

inequality and human suffering. As a result, art became a medium for social and political commentary.

In 1943, the Calcutta Group was formed under the leadership of Prodosh Das Gupta. This group included artists like Nirode Mazumdar, Paritosh Sen and Gopal Ghose, who rejected the sentimentalism of the Bengal School and sought to create an art that was universal and contemporary.

They emphasised simplification and focused on elements such as form, texture, colour and material rather than detailed representation.

The influence of Marxist ideology further shaped artistic practices during this period. Artists like Chittoprasad and Somnath Hore used printmaking as a powerful medium to address social issues.

Printmaking allowed for the production of multiple copies, enabling wider dissemination of their work. Chittoprasad's series *Hungry Bengal* vividly depicted the suffering caused by famine, while Hore's works conveyed the physical and emotional trauma experienced by the oppressed.

Another significant development was the formation of the Progressive Artists' Group in Bombay in 1946. Led by F. N. Souza, this group included M. F. Husain, S. H. Raza, K. H. Ara, H. A. Gade and S. A. Bakre.

They sought to break free from both colonial academic traditions and revivalist nationalism, advocating a new artistic freedom. Souza's works challenged conventional notions of beauty and morality through distorted figures and bold themes.

Husain, in contrast, combined Western expressionist techniques with Indian themes drawn from mythology, folk traditions and everyday life, thereby making modern art accessible in an Indian context.

S. H. Raza moved towards abstraction, exploring the spiritual dimensions of art. His use of symbols such as the *bindu*, along with references to mandalas and yantras, reflects an attempt to connect modern abstraction with Indian philosophical ideas.

This shift towards abstraction was not limited to painting but extended to sculpture and printmaking as well. Artists such as V. S. Gaitonde and Krishna Reddy explored new forms and techniques, emphasising the importance of material and process.



MODERN IDEOLOGIES, GROUPS AND STYLISTIC TRANSFORMATIONS

The development of modern Indian art in the mid-twentieth century was profoundly influenced by political events such as World War II and the Bengal Famine.

These crises led artists to reflect on their social responsibilities and engage with issues of poverty,

By the 1960s and 1970s, concerns about the imitation of Western modernism led artists to search for a distinctly Indian identity in art.

This resulted in the emergence of Neo-Tantric art, characterised by geometric forms and spiritual symbolism derived from traditional diagrams used in meditation. Artists like Biren De, G. R. Santosh and K. C. S. Paniker played a key role in this movement.

Their works represent a synthesis of modern abstraction and indigenous traditions, demonstrating that abstraction had deep roots in Indian visual culture.

An important feature of modern Indian art during this period was eclecticism, where artists borrowed ideas from multiple sources.

Rather than adhering to a single style, they combined elements from various traditions to create new forms of expression. This openness to experimentation reflects the dynamic and pluralistic nature of Indian modernism.

LATER DEVELOPMENTS AND CONTEMPORARY DIRECTIONS

By the late twentieth century, a tension emerged between internationalism and the search for indigenous identity.

While artists continued to engage with global modernist trends, there was also a growing concern about maintaining cultural specificity. Modern Indian art thus evolved as a process of selective adaptation rather than imitation.

From the 1970s onwards, many artists began to return to figuration and narrative forms. This shift can be linked to socio-political events such as the Indo-Pakistan war and the creation of Bangladesh, which prompted artists to address contemporary realities.

Artists like K. G. Subramanyan, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh and Bhupen Khakhar developed a narrative style that combined storytelling with modern techniques. Their works often drew inspiration from miniature paintings, folk traditions and popular imagery.

The Baroda School played a crucial role in this transformation. Artists associated with this school explored the relationship between tradition and modernity, often blending fact with fiction and autobiography with fantasy.

Their works reflected a heightened awareness of social and political issues, as well as a commitment to engaging with everyday life.

Another important development was the expansion of art into public spaces. Artists began to create murals and installations that could be experienced by a wider audience.

This shift reflects a broader understanding of art as a social practice rather than a purely aesthetic activity.

Exhibitions such as *Place for People* in 1981 highlighted the importance of narrative, identity and lived experience, while also emphasising the role of art critics in interpreting artistic practices.

The influence of popular culture became increasingly visible in the works of younger artists, particularly in cities like Mumbai. Elements from calendars, advertisements and film imagery were incorporated into paintings, resulting in hybrid visual languages.



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Techniques such as photorealism emerged, where paintings resembled photographs, reflecting the impact of mass media on artistic expression.

With the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s, new media began to play a significant role in contemporary art. Artists experimented with video, installation and photography, moving beyond traditional forms such as painting and sculpture.

Installation art, in particular, offered an immersive experience by combining multiple media within a single space. These developments were closely linked to technological advancements and the changing social landscape.

Contemporary artists also began to address issues such as urbanisation, environmental degradation and the marginalisation of certain communities. Photography and video became important tools for documenting social realities and raising awareness about pressing concerns.

Artists like Nalini Malani and Vivan Sundaram used these media to create thought-provoking works that engage with the complexities of contemporary life.

In the present context, the art world has expanded significantly, with the growth of galleries, digital platforms and global networks.

Social media has also played a crucial role in shaping artistic practices and making art more accessible. Modern Indian art continues to evolve, reflecting the changing realities of society while maintaining a dialogue with both tradition and global modernity.

