

# Expanding Horizons: Sudhir Patwardhan

(excerpts from the catalogue by Deepak Ghare)

## Broadening the Concept of Art

Sculpture was conventionally understood as a three dimensional, static object of defined shape in a particular material. Movement in a painting or sculpture was something that took place in the observer's mind and imagination. The background and surrounding space of the sculpture also had a limited significance. In installation art placement of the object or objects, and the space around them, acquire much more importance. Spatial movement, from being just a mental element, becomes actualised in video art.

In the context of new media practices, the artist's position as creator and author has also changed. Previously the artist was thought to be the sole creator of the work from the time of its conception to the final execution. Today's artists feel free to use the help of others to execute their conceptions.

The artist has become more the conceptualist and organizer and less the talented craftsman.

The changing nature of art practice makes it necessary for us to broaden our ideas and expectations about all aspects of art today. Images, spatial structure, originality and creativity, talent - all these need to be rethought. Rather than how skillfully an artist uses a medium, the question of what new contexts he can create through a conceptual reorganization of elements has become more important.

For many people, the paintings of Raja Ravi Verma and the academic realist tradition propagated in institutions like Sir J.J.School of Art are still benchmarks of good art. Though Modernist and post-modernist art, with a distinct identity, have become established in India today, its appreciation among the people has not evolved to the desired degree. In Maharashtra, all the Modern literary movements have found eager readership, but corresponding movements in visual arts have not found a similar response among people. A view that there is an inherent contradiction between appreciating realism and appreciating modern art has contributed to this feeling. But for a few exceptions, there has also been no concentrated effort to educate people about modern art, either from artists or art-institutions. It would surely help the situation, if a wider critically appreciative viewership for the visual arts develops.

Baburao Sadwelkar started a tradition of informative and critical writing about art in Marathi. The monographs on popular artists of an earlier period being published these days are evidence of this. But similar writing on contemporary painters is yet to be done. This exhibition of contemporary art titled 'Expanding Horizons' acquires importance in this context. The prime purpose of this exhibition is, that people should feel connected to this form of art and they should develop an appreciation of it. For this, it is necessary to show the evolution of art from the academic traditions of Sir J.J. School of Art to today's post-modern currents. The Bengal school and the Bombay school were two dominant currents in art during the pre-Independence era. In the post-Independence period, along with Mumbai and Kolkata, other centers like Baroda and Cholamandal developed.

The currents of Modernism began to be evident in India from the 1920's and 30's. Rabindranath Tagore and Abanindranath Tagore brought new thinking about art to Bengal, while Charles Gerard, the Director of Sir J. J. School of Art introduced modernist concepts through education in Mumbai. In 1922, an exhibition of German artists associated with the Bauhaus was held in Kolkata. Indian audiences for the first time saw works of western Modernists like Vassily Kandinsky, Lionel Feininger and Paul Klee in this exhibition. Around the same time, Indian artists in 'Shantiniketan' were also being exposed to art from the Far East. In the works of artists like Vinayak Masoji, the influence of Chinese and Japanese art can be seen.

Amrita Sher Gil was an important presence on the Indian Art scene around this time. She attempted a synthesis of western modernism and traditional Indian art, and she became a symbol of the liberated woman at a time when probably even the phrase 'women's liberation' was not coined. Jamini Roy, starting out as an academic painter, turned first to impressionism and then to folk art. In his folk art inspired line, we find the modernist principle of economy of expression. Nandalal Bose tried to make art 'of the people, for the people'. His work responded to current social and political realities, and in it we can see the birth of a National art, bringing together classical and folk traditions as well as modernism.

Speaking about the situation in Maharashtra, the influence of Raja Ravi Verma has been paramount. Painting in an academic realist style, Ravi Verma created images of Gods and Goddesses in a new form. He created history in print making use of colour oleographs.

In the Sir J.J.School of Art, portraiture was always given prime importance. Artists like Pestonji Bomanji, A.X.Trindade and S.L.Haldankar created a tradition of portraiture here. Ganpatrao Mhatre's 1894 sculpture 'To the Temple' became an ideal to emulate. This sculpture of a young bride carrying small puja implements to the temple was a rare and beautiful synthesis of Western principles of ideal anatomical proportions, and Indian traditional values of purity and inner grace. Unfortunately this tradition of sculpture later became restricted and moribund in public memorials only.

[In the annals of Sir J.J.School of Art, Abalal Rehman is an artist who has a special place. [In his paintings like 'Sandhyavahini' of 1915, we see the influence of impressionism. The light in his landscapes is an expression of spiritual yearning.

Two artists of the next generation, Madhav Satwalekar and Shankar Palshikar became known for the balance they achieved between academic realist training and a modernist viewpoint. [n Satwalekar's paintings, within the framework of a realist structure we see the beauty of abstract colour harmonies and form. Palshikar brought in currents of folk culture into his work and also explored abstraction through the principles of Indian philosophical concepts of Mantra and Tantra. Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee, Jatin Das, Prabhakar Kolte, and many other artists acknowledge their debt to Palshikar as the teacher who introduced them to new developments in Modern art in the 40's and 50's including the work of Paul Klee.

After independence, in the 50's, there were rapid changes in the visual arts scene in India. S. H. Raza, K. H. Ara, M. F. Husain, Sadanand Bakre and H. A. Gade were all part of the Progressive Artists' group that F.N.Souza established. Though the group did not last very long, it performed an important function. It managed to break the shackles of the academic tradition of the Sir J.J.School of Art. Of the six founders of the group, Husain has been the most prolific and experimental, creating art in a variety of mediums. Due to his unconventional personality, he has always been at the center of controversy and publicity. Raza began as a landscapist and then turned to an abstract style based on tantric symbols. Like the progressive group in Mumbai, the Calcutta group also embraced western modernism whole heartedly.

In the 60's and 70's a new generation of artists came to the fore. The work of the first generation modernists showed only an indirect connection to the current socio-political situation, or to Indian cultural traditions. In the 1960's, tensions and deformities resulting from industrialization, cultural transformations and political instability became pressing concerns. To express these, a new language was needed. Different currents were born out of this need, each exploring different aspects of modernism. 1. Swaminathan and other neo-tantric artists. K.C.S Panikkar and his group at Cholamandal, and the Baroda school were some of these new currents. The influence of the Baroda school, and of Abstraction, have been the most lasting. There were of course, many overlapping influences too. The artists' village at Cholamandal in Tamilnadu was established by K.C.S. Panikkar in 1964. Panikkar, and Swaminathan in Delhi, popularized the trend of using symbols from the Indian tradition like tantric symbols. Other artists like G.R.Santosh developed this neo-tantric form of abstraction further. At the same time artists like Gaitonde, Ram Kumar and Laxman Shreshta were pursuing a more pure form of abstraction.

The term Baroda School began to be applied to a group of artists who had come together in Baroda, either to study or to teach at the M. S. University. K. G. Subramanyan, Bhupen Khakhar, Gulammohammed Sheikh are some of the artists considered to belong to this group. But artists like Sudhir Patwardhan, Gieve Patel, Nalini Malani and Vivan Sundaram from Mumbai or other parts of the country, also came to be associated with the Baroda school because their work showed similar preoccupations. The depiction of social reality through personal experience, the dissolution of the distinction between classical and popular art, and the exploration of various possibilities of narration in painting were some of the characteristics of this group. Mention must be made here of the artist Badri Narayan, who though not belonging to any group, has created rich neo-mythological narratives in his work. After 1990, we see a new generation of post-modern artists exploring new media. A new mental attitude has evolved from the effects of globalization, terrorism and uncontrolled urbanization, and we see this expressed in installations and video works. Ramkinkar Baij and Meera Mukherjee were the first sculptors to achieve a synthesis of Indian folk art and modernism. We see a new embodiment of this synthesis in the work of G. Ravinder Reddy. From the modernism of Adi Davierwala and Piloo Pochkhanawala to the post-modern works of Valsan Koller and Subodh Gupta we see a complete transformation of the idea of sculpture itself.

Seeing this journey of Indian art from the age of modernism to post-modernism, we become aware of certain things. Today Indian art has been able to create its own niche, on the vast international art scene. It has been possible, because it succeeds in keeping the dialogue alive on both local and global levels. It has the capacity to address different needs, and levels of reality - self-discovery, social reality with the ugly face of violence and the eternal quest of the spirit. This capacity has come from a critical understanding of the Indian classical tradition and folk traditions, and from diverse experimentation with narrative spaces and possibilities. Indian art of today has also shown the strength to reject tradition when necessary.

The purpose of art, is documentation and decoration, on the primary level. The idealization of historical episodes and figures in memorial sculpture, and recording of the life styles of different people are forms of documentation. The frescoes in the wadas or mansions of the Peshwas of late Maratha period were a form of decoration. Expression of the individual experience of the artist and interpretation of reality may be considered to be higher aspects of art. The works of Bhupen Khakhar, Gieve Patel and Prabhakar Barwe do not just record the superficial aspects of reality. They analyse and interpret the inner structures of that reality. To appreciate contemporary art today, we must understand this new sensibility.

### **The influence of Western Modern Art**

British colonial rule had introduced western academic art to India and made it popular here. The movement against this academicism took clear shape as Indian artists became familiar with the new developments in Modern art in Paris and the concepts developed at the Bauhaus in Germany.

Francis Newton Souza, Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee, Adi Davierwalla, Ram Kumar and V. S. Gaitonde were all influenced by Modern art movements from the west. While Souza embraced the aggressive and rebellious elements in Modern art, Tyeb Mehta's work showed this influence in a more subdued manner. Ram Kumar and V. S. Gaitonde were attracted to abstract and minimalist currents. And Davierwalla created a truly international style with little affinity to any local tradition.

Art with a nationalist agenda had also challenged western academic art for some time. Nandalal Bose's work incorporated the influences of folk culture and also reflected the political situation in the country.

Later modernists like Souza and Ram Kumar rejected this nationalism too. But in searching for a purpose for their art in the context of modern developments, their art did reflect the current social atmosphere in which it was born.

### **The search for Cultural Roots and Post Modern Concerns**

Under the strong influence of international modernism, traditional cultural principles and current socio-political realities had both been swept aside, and did not find adequate representation in the work of the first generation modernists. As the next generation of artists was maturing in the 1960's and 70's there was a renewed interest in all forms of indigenous and folk art forms. The social and political aspects of reality began to be confronted with all their tensions and contradictions. Women's questions, questions of the working class and of specific caste-groups, the alienation and fear in urban life, all these began to replace earlier aesthetic preoccupations.

Post-modern art, using narrative in new ways, interpreted and presented reality in a fresh and stark light. We can see the use made of the influence of folk art and miniatures in the works of Meera Mukherjee and Manjit Bawa. The works of Prabhakar Kolte and Rajendra Dhavan continue Gaitonde's tradition of abstraction. Bhupen Khakhar, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Nilima Sheikh, Gieve Patel and Sudhir Patwardhan are identified with the social preoccupations of the Baroda group. Prabhakar Barwe and Dilip Ranade's paths of self-discovery leading them through an exploration of cultural legacies, and Jyoti Basu's exploration of future worlds - all these give us a sense of the wide variety of concerns artists addressed in this period.

### **New ways of Grasping Reality**

The variety of new ways of grasping reality that we see in today's art has been termed, 'Mediatic Realism' by Nancy Adjania. Life has become a reality show and people's sorrows and joys have acquired market value.

The distinctive feature of this 'Mediatic realism' is that it speaks in the same medium that it is criticising or commenting upon. To speak about the mechanization or dehumanization in the automated computer age, it uses digital means, pixels, screens, text, photography etc. We can see this in the works of litish Kallat and Baiju Parthan for example.

Atul Dodiya has used photographic images of political leaders like Mahatma Gandhi to create a psuedo-reality. Political realities are also pictured in the work of Gieve Patel. Sudhir Patwardhan uses multiple perspectives to break up the conventional view of reality.

In sculpture too the ways of presenting reality have changed. Subodh Gupta's use of stainless steel utensils and the works of Valsan Kolleril demonstrate this.

In academic realism, the aim was to create an illusion of the three dimensional world as seen by the eye. Modern movements in art first challenged this. In today's mediatic realism we see a return to hyper-realist imagery. But there is now a basic rethinking about the compositional principles and presentation of art. Gieve Patel's portraits of victims of violence would never have been acceptable within the conventional norms of portraiture. And the vases and vessels of the conventional still-life have themselves become today a part of installations!

In the narrative space of conventional realism, time, space and the people inhabiting this space formed a congruous whole. Today's narratives can bring together in one frame, not only different times and spaces, but also elements from different cultures which have nothing in common with each other. To express this incongruity and chaos is actually an aim of the formal structure of today's realism.

To achieve this, artists have incorporated everything from miniatures to digital photographs, from Renaissance art to pop culture, and Asian pictorial traditions into their vocabulary.