

FROM THE COLONIAL TO THE POST-COLONIAL: A JOURNEY OF TRADITION AND ART PEDAGOGY

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Alexander Melamid & Vitaly Komar, 'What is to be done' from Socialist Realism series, 1982-83



'SpiNN' - women's coiffure, transformed into black birds that invade a Mughal court, stills from a video animation, 2003.

Abstract : A department that focuses on teaching traditional art has long been seen as an anomaly in a contemporary art school. Yet, the history of the National College of Art in Lahore sets a paradigm shift where such a department spearheads a new art movement in that country. The artists used the elements of a medieval court language of painting and directed it to critique the present. A range of artists who came out of the school in the 90s proved that it is possible to re-vitalise, re-invent and re-purpose a language generally considered past its use-by date. Artists in the subcontinent have shown consistent interest in looking at our great heritage since the Bengal school movement at turn of the last century. However, in the post-colonial scenario revisiting a tradition is not about re-discovering a language and repurposing it for the present but fundamentally turning the language on its head to critique itself and the values ascribed to it historically. The scene this side of the border is different from Pakistan, as most artists who opted to use such a language has gone there searching it out for themselves outside the institutional framework. The only surviving department curiously named department of 'Indian style painting' at the government College of Art & Craft, Kolkata has not been able to infuse a similar dynamism but languished in an unimaginative and moribund orthodoxy. The range and diversity or the varying degree of radicalism apart the burgeoning number of artists who have attempted to reinvent languages that by historical determinism should belong to a bygone era is noteworthy in itself. This is an attempt to situate it in a historical context of our sub-continent and highlight the unique features of the phenomenon that questions the simplistic binary of tradition versus modern or contemporary.

Key Words : Colonial art education, Miniature painting, Government College of Art & Craft Kolkata, Bengal School, Indian style painting, National College of Art Lahore, Abanindranath Tagore, Shazia Sikander, Imran Qureshi, Aisha Khalid, Saira Waseem, Varunika Saraf, Nilima Sheikh, Meenakshi Sengupta, Waswo x Waswo.

Some years ago I was called to present a paper at the Government College of Art and Craft, Calcutta then celebrating its 150th anniversary and I was specifically asked to address the department of 'Indian Style' painting. This department owes its origin to the seminal attempt by E.B Havell and Abanindranath Tagore.



Imran Qureshi- 'Let it Bleed', 2012



Aisha Khalid,- Untitled

Over the years it's emasculated and much watered down existence of the department is often looked upon as an anomaly, irrelevant and frozen in time, an outpost of values discredited long ago.

As the curious name suggests it was a bit of an afterthought that happened when the initial euphoria around the cultural nationalism of Bengal School was already on the wane. However, what I will argue here is although it is generally held as a department well past its use-by date a dynamic and critical re-imagining is possible in a context that has changed beyond recognition. More importantly what demands our attention is the possibility of infusing a new life in a traditional painting language, if done with a critical awareness, right motivation and the liberty to experiment and innovate. It is possible to transcend, even in this time of hyper excitement with newer media, the binary of the hide-bound orthodoxy of 'tradition' and the creative freedom that every contemporary artist yearns to achieve.

In that vein it is perhaps worth our while to consider the history of another colonial art school that bears some similarity with GCAC, the National College of Art in Lahore. There are interesting and revealing parallels between the Calcutta school and its younger-by-a-decade sibling the Mayo school of art that was renamed National College of Art in the 1950s. I venture this in the hope that it might prove to be somewhat illuminating.

I must hastily add that the idea of a department only to perpetrate a particular tradition of painting in a contemporary School of art is not without its share of problems. But let us consider the general question of whether it is at all relevant to teach any technique or medium that belonged to another era in an Art institute that has any claim on contemporaneity then perhaps some answers can be found. After all the late 20th c. has seen a lot of traditions turned on its head, made to do things that were thought to be well nigh impossible. If we consider the case of Melamid and Komar duo, who rose to prominence in the 1990s what strikes us is their willingness to use the linguistic tropes of Soviet era Socialist-Realist painting to critique the very political system that engendered and encouraged the style. Alexis Melamid and Vitaly Komar were trained in the erstwhile Soviet Russia and emigrated to the West (first to Israel and then to the US) where they repurposed the much-discredited style to present a case of political criticism albeit through humour and satire. What we witnessed is not a neo-revivalism but rather a contrary paradigm that allowed for subterfuge, self-critique and an eclectic harnessing of linguistic tropes with a desire to reflect on the present. In doing it one has to look at the language, its nuts and bolts, stylistic features and re-arrange them to suit the new purpose.

It is a well-known fact that E.B. Havell and Abanindranath collaboratively brought in the 'National' into the discourse of art education in India. Havell started single-handedly by selling off the second rate English and Italian artefacts and replaced them with quality Indian art and craft examples almost as soon as he took charge as the superintendent of the Calcutta Government School of Art (1896). By 1904 the collection



Saira Wasim - 'Flirting with Faith-II, 2014-15



Meenakshi Sengupta, -'Go As You Like', 2015

of the school was almost a full-fledged Indian art gallery. The introduction of instruction where Indian art and its values were foregrounded started with right earnest when Abanindranath joined the art school as its Vice-Principal in 1905 at the insistence of Havell (Bagal,1966).

It was E. B. Havell who staunchly believed that students should be exposed to the Indian model to carry out original works based on Indian traditions and heritage. He also found the right collaborator in Abanindranath whose thinking was aligned with that of his own (Abanindranath joined the school in 1905 on August 15th, as luck would have it!) Havell's passion was a rather happy if somewhat paradoxical occurrence at a time when Bengal was on the verge of a convulsion. The partition of Bengal was declared by Lord Curzon, whose contempt for political aspiration of Indians was as strong as was his love for Indian art and architecture, another case fit for a study in Colonial paradoxes.

The indignation and re-awakening of the nationalist zeal that followed the declaration spread rapidly. The ground was already prepared for the idea of an Indian model in the arts as opposed to the European one. The declaration of partition of Bengal on Oct 16th 1905 happened within 2 months of Abanindranath joining the school. Havell's political views are not known but he was a firm believer in introducing Indian art and design to Indian students and was instrumental in getting Abanindranath to teach. Havell's views and Abanindranath's works were an anti-thesis of the colonial paradigm of art education of the time. But before the contradiction of his position became more pronounced in the charged atmosphere of the declaration of the partition of Bengal Havell had to return to England on a long leave (known as a furlough) and could never come back to re-join his duties. Abanindranath had a free run of the school till Percy Brown joined as Principal in 1909. Percy Brown more or less followed the system laid down by Havell with minor changes. It is safe to assume that instruction in Fine Arts was left to Abanindranath and he encouraged students to experiment with national ideas and ideals and drew subjects of their paintings from Indian history and mythology. 'Oriental subject' and 'Indian style' seemed to be the operative words of this period.

The Indian Society of Oriental Art was founded on the insistence of Abanindranath in 1907 to cultivate art in all its aspect after the ideal laid down by Havell. The annual report of 1909-10 mentions that in the annual exhibition of Indian Society of Oriental Art was "a very impressive collection of paintings in the Indian style, contributed mainly by the students...." and goes on to add, "a special feature has been...the preparation of indigenous pigments. The results of this action are being watched with some interest, as the old Indian colours are remarkable for their brilliancy and permanence." Havell stood by Abanindranath when major changes were undertaken that earned him the sobriquet of "English prophet of Indian Nationalism." (Bagal,1966)

Abanindranath finally resigned in 1915 over his disagreements with Percy Brown.

The students who gathered around Abanindranath and derived their inspiration from him includes

Nandalal Bose, Asit Haldar, Suren Kar, Samarendranath Gupta, Sailendranath Dey, Hakim Md. Khan, K. Venkatappa, Jatindra Kumar Sen, Kshitindranath Majumdar et al.

Interestingly all these experiments and introduction to new ideas were happening in the Fine Arts section and no new department for this seem to have started by either Abanindranath or Havell. Perhaps it was an informal arrangement. This, however, changed when Abanindranath left the school and Jamini Prakash Ganguly took over as vice-Principal in 1916. Ironically the colonial paradigm of boxing in the indigenous takes place under the aegis of an Indian, that too a relation of Abanindranath! Like Abanindranath Jamini Prakash was also a student of Palmer and privately continued his study for years. He was a painter of landscapes and portraits but more importantly was a staunch follower of the European techniques and modes. He reintroduced a strict academic syllabus with emphasis on figure study, still life, portrait painting and drawing with a British accent and divided the course formally into two separate streams distinct from each other. Fine Arts, that meant Western style of painting and Indian Painting. This was the beginning of the present day department of 'Indian style of Painting.' (Bagal, 1966)

Percy Brown as Principal had a hands-off policy and did not interfere with the change. Nevertheless, it was a surprising move considering that Percy Brown himself was an authority of Indian art and particularly Mughal painting that he imbibed while teaching at Mayo school in Lahore from where he came to Calcutta. Indian Painting was placed solely in charge of Lala Ishwari Prasad. In the words of Jogesh Chandra Bagal (Bagal, 1966)- 'under the changed circumstances Ishwari Prasad could hardly hold his own. The students of this class dwindled. Additionally, Ishwari Prasad failed to receive the amount of co-operation and support from higher ups.'

While the Indian art section was undergoing trouble at the art school, disciples gathered around their Guru Abanindranath at the society of Oriental art. The 1920's marked the triumph of the Bengal school, the first art movement in India. The students of Abanindranath took his message to the rest of the country as heads of art schools in Lucknow (Asit Haldar joined in 1920), Lahore (Samarendranath Gupta in 1911), Jaipur School of Art (Sailendranath Dey), Bangalore (K. Venkatappa) and Madras (Debi Prasad Roy Choudhury 1928) to name only the more prominent ones. 1905 onwards cultural nationalism increasingly held the attention of the Raj against the volatile swadeshi political nationalism. (Mitter, 1994) Cultural Nationalism came to be seen by the authorities as a safe antidote to Political Nationalism that often took violent forms. Lord Curzon, who held Indian political aspiration with utter contempt yielded to no one when it came to protecting Indian heritage. The critics of the Raj and the supporters of 'Indian spiritualism' over 'western materialism' such as sister Nivedita, Annie Besant found ardent converts to their cause helped along by Pan-Asianism of the Japanese ideologue Okakura Kakuzo and a new art history of Anand Kentish Coomarswamy who came from Cylone (now Sri Lanka).

Samarendranath Gupta joined Lahore's Mayo school of Industrial Art in 1911 and eventually became Vice-Principal and continued teaching there till 1942. His most prominent student was Abdur Rahman Chughtai, who imbibed the Bengal school aesthetic and soon made a name for himself. Eventually he was to convert the impulse to find an ideal Indian idiom into a search for Islamic identity and still later, after the formation of Pakistan (1947), became the most acclaimed father figure in Pakistani art circles.

The initial history of the Mayo school of Industrial Art bear a close resemblance to the other schools started by the Imperial Government. (It was named after Lord Mayo, the Viceroy of India who was assassinated by Sher Ali Afridi in port Blair in 1872). The school formally opened its door in 1875. Its first Superintendent was Rudyard Kipling's father Lockwood Kipling, who moved there from J. J. School of Bombay. His vision and his genuine regard for indigenous art, allowed the craft of the region to sustain at a time when it was under siege in industrialized Britain.

Percy Brown took over from him in 1894 and continued till 1909, when he moved to Calcutta





Varunika Saraf, *Untitled* (Note the security men camouflaged in the vegetation and strange creatures walking about).



Nilima Sheikh-*Gathering threads-Each Night Put Kashmir in Your Dreams-2004-10*

(1909-1927 and then moved as Secretary and Curator to Victoria & Albert Museum, London). In a similar trajectory both Calcutta and Lahore at the turn of the century were fortunate to have Superintendents who were sympathetic to local art and craft traditions and additionally Brown got enamored with Mughal painting along with Buddhist and Brahminical art and architecture during his stay in Lahore.

In the Mayo School's curriculum miniature painting was viewed as yet another craft product; local artists were encouraged to copy portraits of the Great Mughals alongside dancing girls with hookahs and other stereotypical scenes of the 'decadent east'. There is no clear record if this was treated as a separate department. Scant information is available for the years immediately after 1894, making it difficult to ascertain the exact time when miniature painting came to be included in the Mayo School's curriculum. A plausible explanation for its inclusion could be the shift of focus from Indian design to Indian "fine arts" as advocated by Havell.

The rise of the Bengal movement and the influence of Abanindranath Tagore spread to Lahore as Calcutta-trained teachers like Samarendranath Gupta joined the Mayo School of Arts as a teacher. The same year, Abdur Rahman Chughtai joined Mayo School as a student and later became a teacher there in chromolithography. His visit to Calcutta in 1916 reinforced his resolve to revive the greatness of Mughal art and to re-establish the loss of culture among Indian Muslims. By 1920 Chughtai had become a renowned artist of Lahore. With the recognition of artists like Chughtai and Abanindranath there was a resurgence of interest in Indian art and its historical past. Although there is no documentation indicating when miniature painting was included as a subject in the Mayo School of Arts, the first Catalogue of Paintings in the Central Museum in Lahore just across the road from Mayo School, compiled by S. N. Gupta and published in 1922, gives generous evidence of a burgeoning collection of miniatures from Mughal, Rajput and Pahari schools.

Documentation for miniature painting as part of the curriculum in the Mayo School begins in 1945, with the appointment of Ustad Haji Sharif. Miniature painting, however, remained an optional subject till 1958. That year The Mayo School became The National College of Art (NCA) and miniature was finally included in the Fine Arts syllabus. On Ustad Haji Sharif's retirement in 1968, Sheikh Shujaullah, who also belonged to a family of court artists, took over the teaching of "miniature painting" at National College of Art. For thirty-five years of their combined tenures, the two ustads followed a traditional mode of painting and its transmission of skills.

The status started to change with Zahoor Ul Akhlaq, an artist considered by Salima Hashmi as "the most significant influence on contemporary (Pakistani) art". Zahoor a former student of NCA completed his postgraduate studies from Royal Collage of Art, London, where he was exposed to the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum. He started teaching at NCA in the 70s. His legendary partnership with Salima Hashmi, the doyen of Pakistan's culture scene, was instrumental in shaping a generation of artists who changed the face of contemporary art scene in Pakistan and the profile of the miniature department.

Salima and Zahoor were both teachers in painting, while Zuhoor retired in 1991 Salima in 2000 as the Dean. Zuhoor's influence was not restricted to the miniature department but as the Head of painting he wielded considerable influence.

Zuhoor Ul Akhlaq was born in New Delhi in 1941 and forced to migrate to Pakistan during the partition riots. He broke away from his modernist education and began to re-work Islamic influences such as Calligraphy, miniature painting and geometrical abstraction in his work. Salima Hashmi found in Zahoor an able and empathetic partner and the two were instrumental in radicalizing the traditional art of miniatures.

Akhlaq's painting invoked a dialogue between modernist abstraction and many 'traditional' forms and practices found within South Asia (including Mughal Miniature painting, calligraphy, vernacular architecture to name but a few). Zuhoor's influences are from a vast range of sources, which include painting, literature, philosophy, Sufism, dance, and music. At a time when his contemporaries in South Asia were developing their work within a modernist tradition, or had primitivist leanings, he eschewed both schools by merging his interest in abstractions with traditional and vernacular practices. He however evaded the label of an abstract artist.

Bashir Ahmed, who studied painting under meticulous mentoring of Ustad Shujaullah and then studied under Zuhoor joined the department as a teacher and was to become a colleague of Zuhoor. It was in 1982 that the miniature department became an independent department that offered a degree course. Miniature painting started being taught as a Minor subject to all art students and as a Major to students who wish to specialize in it. Initially only two students enrolled in 1982 and it took nine years for the interest to build up and the number of students to increase.

Although Bashir Ahmed moved away from tradition by way of experimenting with technique, medium and size, his themes and images remained rooted in traditional sources. While Zuhoor also used elements from the Mughal miniature, his approach was more conceptual. Bashir used the immediacy of images he was familiar with and layered it with a haze to lend it a predominantly ethereal and a bygone look. Modern art critics often target him for being "firmly traditionalist" and a more conventional approach to teaching miniature painting (David. R). However, Bashir Ahmed is credited for his dedication in establishing the miniature painting degree program, a change from the minor subject that it was till then. While he continued to teach the traditional rigour of making wasli, brushes of squirrel hair, meticulous burnishing, drawings of the monochromatic siyah kalam, making of traditional pigments, etc. It was Zahoor who was the figurehead of trying out new directions and subvert the rigidity of the tradition. His training in the Royal College of Art and exposure to the miniature collection of V&A Museum made him much more receptive to the idea of broadening the discourse. Before his tragic murder in his own home in 1999 he mentored a crop of artists who were to become the leading lights of what came to be known as "Contemporary Neo miniature" in Pakistan. Among those who were his students in the 90's were Shazia Sikander, Rashid Rana, Imran Qureshi, Nusra Latif Qureshi, Ayesha Khalid, Saira Wasim and host of others.

The growing up years of all these artists were at a time of the turbulent socio-political climate engendered by the regime of military dictator Zia Ul Haq. From 1976 till his death in an air crash in 1988 the Zia regime unleashed the most repressive regime of persecution and pandering to the religious right wing. Promulgation of the Hudood law (1989) targeted women and the minorities. Floggings, hangings became

daily occurrences and any resistance invited targeted reprisals. In the name of fighting the Soviet regime in Afghanistan American money was flowing into the hands of the most regressive section of the society and 'Jihad' became a by word in political discourse. (David Rukhsana)

The NCA struggled to maintain its liberal ethos. Artists, students, writers and intellectuals opposed the Government. This was interestingly also the time when new thinking among the prominent teachers took place. The women's movement in Pakistan took off in the 80s. Salima Hashmi's father famous leftist Poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz was arrested and jailed. It will perhaps not be farfetched to surmise that the seeds of resistance were planted at this point that were to grow into a movement in a decade's time. Miniature, the traditional rather moribund medium that reveled in its backward glance to the days of past glory was to become the new symbol of resistance and subversion. A traditional language started being used as a potent tool of subterfuge, critiquing the status quo.

In the hands of this new generation the language of the courts, whether Persian, Mughal or of the Punjab hills, patronized by the traditionalists, found a new voice and a distinct movement was born. What started as a full-fledged department to promote traditional art became the hotbed of resistance and dissent. However, it must be noted that the department that started functioning independently in the Zia years took a full decade to attain maturation. It is only in the 90s that it started producing results.

Here is a quick look at some of the products of NCA. Admittedly it is not an exhaustive list only an indicative one, a sampler.

Shazia Sikander (b.1969), who joined the department amidst widespread skepticism of her teachers and peers. The choice itself was an act of defiance. She finished her course in 1992 with Miniature painting as her major subject and moved to the US to study at the Rhode Island School of Design. She stayed back in the US and was destined to become the first artist there to attract international attention to the possibilities of working within the traditional framework of miniatures. In 1994 her work "The Scroll" was acquired by the Asia Pacific museum of Pasadena, California.

Eclecticism was always part of her approach. The Scroll was an autobiographical work where the artist deliberately avoided heroic themes and chose to paint humdrum activities of daily life. She appeared repeatedly in a white salwar-kameez and dupatta. Over the years Shazia has matured to synthesize disparate elements and polarities, Islamic and Hindu myths, the personal and the political, the question of identity and its fluidity in a multicultural ambience, re-evaluating tradition where tradition is not opposed to modernity but actually a facilitator. Drawing icons from Islamic, Hindu, American, contemporary pop and her own experiences she produces art that challenges singular ways of looking and interpretation. She questions borders that define gender, religion, ethnicity and ownership.

Subsequently she moved into large-scale drawings, murals, installations, digital art and even digital animation. Her work does no longer fit into the format of delicately rendered "miniature" yet miniature remains her driving force.

Imran Qureshi (b.1972 in Hyderabad, Sindh) graduated in 1993 from NCA, a year after Shazia. Imran realized early that for the miniature to evolve it would not suffice just to replace the angarkha with jeans but something more had to be done. Imran was inducted as a teacher at NCA in 1994 and has proved to be an influential teacher, who believe, "to make the miniature relevant for this age it has to mirror its concerns not just its outer garb."(David, Rukhsana) Imran continues to chronicle the concerns of his time. He uses the formal devices of the miniature to do so, he refurbishes it with a contemporary idiom.

In 2000 when Pakistan became a nuclear-armed state he did paintings that are satirical representations of missiles and their use as self-aggrandizement by the leaders. Virginia Whiles, a writer compares them to "phallic monuments that are garlanded with flowers like the politicians who manipulate them."Imran is

critical of Pakistan's obsession to become a nuclear power at the cost of denying the basics of life to the common man. The tumult of life in Pakistan, the dictatorships, the Afghan war, 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror and bloodshed have deeply impacted the artists of Imran's generation. His trademark foliage patterns have found their ways into site-specific installations of gigantic proportions. He has been playing with the idea that it is not what it seems in the first glance. Importantly he has been teaching in the Painting department of NCA.

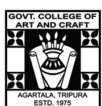
Nusra Latif passed from NCA in 1995. Taught at NCA from 1995 to 1999 when she migrated to Australia to pursue MFA from University of Melbourne. She now Lives and works in Melbourne. As an immigrant to Australia she deploys visual strategies learnt from the encounter of both traditions. She critiques how history gets layered and distorted by using sources as varied as Mughal miniatures, photographs from the Raj era, textiles exported to Europe and combines contour drawing, silhouettes and patterned surface with detailed rendering. The seemingly unrelated images often draw attention to the gaze of the colonized and the colonizer. She also moved away from traditional techniques and now uses acrylic, collage and other mediums.

Aisha Khalid graduated from NCA in 1997 and married Imran Qureshi in the same year and lives in Lahore. Aisha grew up in a conservative patriarchal family. The veil, the curtain and the burqa were part of her lived experience that found expression in her painting. Her early work addresses the oppression of women in Pakistani society, with the format of most of her paintings likened to space bounded by the four walls of a house. Placing her shrouded figures in the confines of an enclosed space she comments on their anonymity in the pattern of life. Barely visible through the patterns of her surroundings the female icon became a metaphor. The burqa-clad women of her paintings are always facing away from the viewer yet we know their faces are uncovered because we can see the folded part of the front of the burqa over their head. The burqa, while it hides the woman from the gaze of others it also allows her the advantage of looking back at others without being noticed. Aisha often symbolises this inherent paradox.

Post 9/11 and her stint at the Rijks Akademie she did a video and started some installation based works. Quilts with patterns made of pins is a very potent work that from a distance looks like a meticulously crafted gold on black base quilt that only reveals at closer inspection that the whole decorative pattern is made of brass or gold plated nails. The reverse of the work consists of the sharp end of the tacks.

Saira Wasim who lives and works in Chicago completed her course from NCA in 1999. Saira is known for work that derides contemporary local and global politics, fundamentalism and sexism. She is the only artist among the modern Pakistani miniaturists who uses a photo-realistic imagery and paints living personalities quite comparable with the Singh Twins based in UK (Amrit & Ravinder Kaur Singh). She fills the entire surface of her paintings with impeccably drawn real life politicians, army generals and *maulvis* (Islamic clerics) as she takes it upon herself to condemn the prevailing corruption. Her art she says is a "plea for social justice, respect, and tolerance through the use of caricature and satire". Her imagery provides a clever synthesis of a contemporary vocabulary and the artistic style and symbolism of traditional miniature painting. For example she uses the traditional putti in the halo, and the coexistence of the lion and the goat in many of her paintings but gives them new meaning by juxtaposing them with contemporary images of popular rulers or personages, guns, missiles and truck art. Saira's imagery is overtly political and she draws considerably upon Mughal painting that she feels is best suited to her purpose.

In December 1934 after E.B. Havell's death his obituary in the London Times observed that he glorified "Indian culture with a zeal bordering on fanaticism" (Poduval, J 2011). There was a grain of truth if we look at it from the colonial perspective since Havell embodied a view that was instrumental in shaping the direction of cultural nationalism in art and was a veritable anti-thesis of the colonial paradigm. Abanindranath challenged the premise of the colonial paradigm in more ways than one.



The department of Indian-Style painting in Kolkata was a direct by-product of that lineage but by the time it was started as a separate department Political nationalism had begun to take over from the Cultural nationalism. The idea that cultural regeneration was more important than political mobilisation was changing. Gandhi was instrumental in bringing this change. Gandhi's mass movement with the exception of Nandalal's involvement in Faizpur and Haripura Congress had no role for the artist (Mitter,1994). This decline of cultural politics impacted the artists. Art and politics parted company to a great extent.

That is not to suggest that the search for finding the 'authentic' Indian voice was over, it continued well into the 1980's undergoing various changes but the glory days of the cultural nationalism that brought about the Bengal school was on its way out. The artists tried out their own trajectories. Abanindranath himself moved away from judging his works against the "nationalist yardstick." (Mitter, 1994) Although Bengal school was extremely popular in the 1930's and 40s, thanks to the art schools being almost exclusively under their control and the culture of reproductions disseminated through influential monthlies such as Modern Review, the movement was being challenged from within by Jamini Roy on one hand, Amrita Sher Gill on the other. The rise of the Santiniketan artists whom Prof. R. Sivakumar famously described as the "Contextual Modernists" (Sivakumar, 1997) was another story. The 40s additionally saw the rise of the Calcutta Group and the Bombay Progressives.

At the National College of Art, Lahore although miniature was being taught for a very long time the focus on miniature painting as a full-fledged department happened very much in the post-colonial context, removed by more than half a century from the pre-eminence of the Calcutta school in the sub-continent. The connections and the differences are what I would like to draw attention to. It is undeniable that it worked as a camouflage to bypass censor as no one thought that practicing a traditional art form, often looked upon as a nod to the Islamic heritage, an idea close to the hearts of the ruling elite of Pakistan can actually be used subversively, as a cover to say rather unpalatable things. It perhaps will help us to re-imagine the importance of such a department only if we understand the changed context. A new vision is called for to take what we have to another level of global relevance at a time when the local can help us navigate the global. In this context it is interesting to note how political opposition to the censorship of images of the women's body during the repressive regime of Zia actually lead a lot of women artists of Pakistan to explore the female nude as a subject just when "... feminist artists in the West were rejecting female nudes as one of the obvious repositories of male-dominated art canons." (Hashmi S, 2004). The 'state-sanctioned' abstraction or the art of calligraphy found ready official patronage borne out of the antipathy towards the depiction of the human form. Progressive artists, particularly women artists, however rejected these as a mark of defiance (Hashmi S, 2004).

In the modern Indian context the quest for using traditional language and skills continued to hold sway over generations of artists. Starting from the late 60s through the 70s and 80s we saw A. Ramachandran, Gulam Sheikh, Manjit Bawa, Shail Choyal et al being impacted by different traditional schools. Even Bhupen Khakar was looking at the late company and bazar traditions. Nilima Sheikh came into her own in the late 80s after a long period of gestation. From Nalini Malani to Rekha Rodwittiya to Arpana Caur and Gogi Saroj Pal all acknowledge their indebtedness to traditional languages of painting. American Julie Evans and Udaipur based Ajay Sharma collaborated in the first decade of the new millennium. Yugal Kishore Sharma in Jaipur and a few others have attempted to infuse a sense of the contemporary in a traditional format with varying degree of success over the past three decades.

A newer crop of artists ranging from the Pondicherry/London based Desmond Lazaro, Delhi based Varunika Saraf and Anindita Bhattacharya, Kolkata based Meenakshi Sengupta and Baroda based Poushali Das and Puja Mondal continue the lineage raising different and newer issues. There is a newer crop of artists who are keen to learn and break the mold of a traditional language. American artist Waswo X Waswo, who lives partly in Udaipur, engages traditional painters to give form to his ideas. His works are often humorous



and subversive. Hedons the role similar to that of an art director and always credits his collaborators. In the previous generation Italian Trans-Avanguardia artist Francesco Clemente had attempted something similar in the 90s although he was rather stingy in acknowledging the actual executors who came from a variety of traditional backgrounds. The twin sisters Amrit and Ravinder Kaur met with a lot of challenges as British-Indians when they enrolled for an art school education in UK. They stayed their course and were responsible for bringing some visibility in Britain to the possibility in the 90s.

The next generation such as London based Jethro Buck, trained at the Prince's School of Drawing, a relatively new school in London started by the Prince of Wales to perpetrate the art of traditional drawing, is perhaps an indication of the changing scenario and reignited interest. The range and diversity or the varying degree of radicalism apart the burgeoning number of artists who have attempted to reinvent languages that by historical determinism should belong to a bygone era is noteworthy in itself. The question is why? None of these artists mentioned as well as many other younger ones never learnt the tradition in any academic programme as part of a curricular requirement of a formal college degree. They came to it on their own volition and thus making the binary of tradition versus contemporary largely irrelevant.

There lies a pointer that languages can outlive their time and still produce art of relevance. They can be morphed, tweaked, repurposed and made to do things they were not meant to and not only remain in currency but even a favored currency. Inculcating the intellectual wherewithal to allow creative individuals to find their own voices remain the key. A language is not a prefixed pattern of mannered application or a set of normative prescriptions but a live-wire medium of communication. This can help us negotiate the Modernist myth that each and every artist of significance necessarily has to invent a language from scratch that preferably come with little or no antecedents. In that light 'historic baggage' is not a pejorative term after all.

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