

# Towards Identity

*Modern India has produced numerous fine artists who are only now being recognized in the international art market. Here, in the first of a two-part series, Indian art historian and critic **Sundaram Tagore** looks at the roots of art and modernism in India.*

**W**ith figuration, plurality of forms, and hybridity in vogue, Indian contemporary art is gaining a new following among international art critics espousing post-modernism. Before reaching this stage of history, however, Indian artists faced tremendous challenges in the process of creating a tradition of modernism.

Although the seeds of modernism were planted in 1922 when a Bauhaus exhibition of European avant-garde art containing works by Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and Ettinger was staged in Calcutta, the decisive period in the history of Indian art occurred during the Second World War and after Independence.

The rise and spread of the modern movement in 20th-century India was organized by Indian and European intellectuals. It was essentially an urban movement, and the metropolitan cities of Calcutta, Bombay, and Delhi became the incubatory zones.

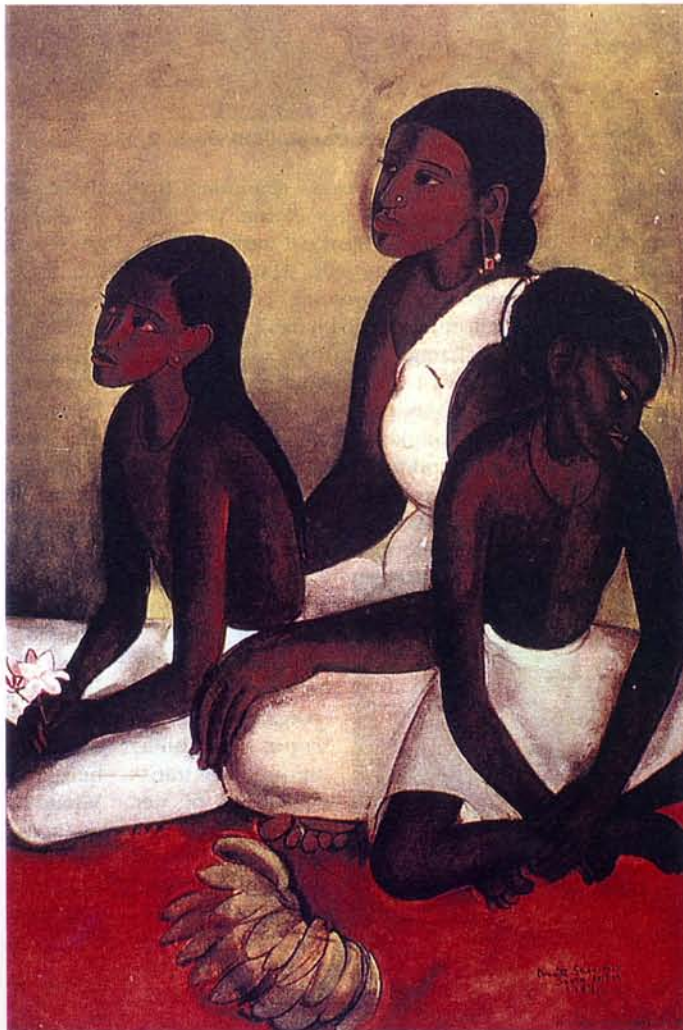
The Modern Movement achieved full bloom during the Second World War, when global industrialization and increases in trade and commerce were felt in India at an accelerated pace. This prepared Indians to view modernism as an inevitable force, and they were drawn to the international spirit of the Movement, which was primarily associated with the School of Paris. The Movement supplied Indian artists with a new lan-

guage that allowed them to enter the modern age just as India was beginning to see itself as a major player in the international community of soon-to-be independent nations.

Most Indian artists who embraced Modernism in India did so without leaving the country. This was part of the colonial

aesthetic reality where many of the modern artistic developments that transformed the visual art scene in Europe were absorbed in India through journals, books, and photographs. Many young progressives, such as the Calcutta Group, India's first Modernist group formed in 1943, and the Bombay Progressive Group of 1947 adopted the classic Modernist figurative vocabulary mainly from published works. There were a few exceptions, however, such as early Modernists Rabindranath Tagore, who, being Noble Laureate, had the opportunity to interact with European masters, and Amrita Sher-Gill, who was half European and had studied in Paris in the 1920s. Among the artists of the World War II generation, it was Sailoz Mukherjee who traveled to France to meet Matisse in Nice. From the late 1930s to early 1940s, it was Subho Tagore and Prodosh Das Gupta of the Calcutta Group who studied and traveled in Europe.

Since very few Indian artists were able to travel to Europe even in post-colonial India, the movement appeared bewildering, far removed from the source of its origin, unable to reveal its many strains clearly. Yet, it was an exciting prospect for Indian artists of the 1940s and 1950s to be part of the brave new world of the moderns—Modernism gained followers in rapid numbers, though, the response was many-faceted. Some docilely accepted Impressionist and Post-Impressionist forms only on aesthetic grounds. While for others, accepting Modern-



Amrita Sher-Gill, **Banana Sellers**, 1937, oil on canvas, no dimensions given.



Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), *Stormy Night*, wash and tempera on paper, 21 x 30.5 cm.

ism meant challenging the very premise of tradition with avant-garde belligerence. Unable to grasp fully the full complexities of the movement from such a distance, a group of dynamic young artists including F.N. Souza, S.H. Raza, Akbar Padamsee, Tyeb Mehta, and M.F. Husain exiled en masse to Paris in the late 1940s and early 1950s to learn and interact with European moderns.

**T**he word "modern" developed in the sixth century in Europe from the word "modernus" meaning "current" or "now." In the 16th century, it began to be used to demarcate the post-Renaissance from the classical and the medieval ages. During the Renaissance it developed a floating association with the "contemporary." With the advent of the industrial revolution in the 19th century, the word modern acquired its present definition: progress.

Although in India Modernism connoted progress, in the early phases, it meant naturalism. Thus India, *shilpi*, or traditional artists, were increasingly adjusting their flat forms and hot bright colors to approximate the illusionistic images of European naturalist art. It is paradoxical that what the European Modernists were

learning from art of the non-European cultures—flat forms and pure colors, for example—were being rejected by traditional artists in favor of naturalism. The basis of Modernism is the revolt against tradition, and for Europeans that meant the naturalist tradition achieved through the illusionist techniques invented during the Renaissance period. In India, however, students in colonial art schools were being taught the same mimetic art the Western Modernists were revolting against.

The European Modernists' disenchantment with Renaissance naturalism reached a spiritual and ideological crisis with the discovery of the scientific theory of relativity. The notion of absolute certainty and the absence of contradiction embodied in naturalistic art became irrelevant in the face of the inherent chaos and ontological contradictions of the modern age. Modern art embraced the view that each person sees the world in a different way, and that no one perception of reality can be accepted as an absolute truth.

The new artistic inquiry supported by scientific investigation questioned the premise and validity of naturalism, and thus led to the quest for new aesthetic criteria. To create a new syntax and vocabulary, European artists were compelled to look beyond their own Western

artistic tradition.

European artists searched the aesthetic storehouse of extra-European cultures, cannibalizing the art forms of African, Oceanic, and Eastern cultures in order to forge a radical imagery that would enable them to express the complex world that technology had ushered in, and relative ideals which could not be expressed in traditional Western pictorial language. European modernists' intercourse with primitive and extra-European art resulted in drastic changes in their works as they adopted pure, hot, bright colors and broad, abstract plains.

Indian artists encountering Western art, on the other hand, did not enjoy the same freedom of choice their counterparts in the West experienced. Before the advent of colonialism, *shilpi* artists were a vital part of traditional society, working within a guild and performing a wide range of activities. The ancient *shilpi* artists were endowed with an aura of magical power and their role was to harmonize society's disjunctured spirit and restore the communities' psychological equilibrium with ritual art and craft. They expressed society's aesthetic and religious values through art.

With the arrival of European colonizers, and the establishment of Victo-



Nandalal Bose, **Head of Shiva**, no date given, wash & tempera on paper, 44.5 x 37 cm. (Bengal School Member)



M.F. Husain, **Between the Spider and the Lamp**, 1956, 122 x 244 cm. (Bombay Progressive Group member)

rian-type art schools in the metropolitan cities, traditional Indian art forms with their spiritual content ceased to exist. Modernism, on the other hand, offers an individual and secular aesthetic freedom, therefore, the basis of Modernism is a reaction against tradition. Modern art is about individuality, whereas traditional Indian art is a creation of collective ideals. The collective psychological make-up of traditional artists did not provide the necessary force for the new aesthetic of naturalism and its ideological underpinning of progress.

This vastly altered persona of the artist and the new circumstances created a revolution whose impact was far-reaching. Traditional *shilpi*-artists were destroyed by the establishment of art schools based on a model of London's Royal Academy which promoted Western ideals of art.

A new breed of intellectual artists was born in the art schools. They were brought up on the Western notion of change and progress and saw themselves as intellectuals equal in stature to their patrons, readily adopting the representational aesthetic. Consequently, modern art in India developed in a complex pattern, oscillating between unrestrained embracement of Western art and a reaction against it, heightening the cultural tension that colonialism engenders. This characteristic clash between reform and reaction is evident throughout the history of Modernism in India. It began with Raja Ravi Varma's successful adoption of Western academic painting and was followed by Abanindranath Tagore's nationalist Bengal School art and the search for authentic Indian imagery. The Calcutta Group and the Bombay Progressive Group adopted an avant-garde position, full of Modernist belligerence, while artists of the Neo-Tantra movement of the 1960s and 1970s reacted against the School of Paris, which the artists of the 1940s and 1950s readily accepted. This oscillation between Modernism and Tradition was an ongoing conflict.

The proponents of "tradition" or "indigenism" who searched for a clear cultural identity were, in fact, misguided. In reality, such a demarcatable and forthright identity did not exist. The very essence of Indian art, because of its long and continuous history of invasion, has been one of assimilation and absorption of external influences. All of the important Indian artists of the modern age have forced themselves to see their art as a synthesis of indigenous and Western elements. Modern Indian artists see themselves as characterized by the duality of the Modernist affirmation of individual creativity on one hand, and projecting the collective identity of "Indian-ness" on the other. Therefore, they stand poised between "indigenism" which contextualizes their work, and Modernism which provides an international language in which to participate in the artistic global dialogue.

Indian artists do not place as much stress on innovation as do their Western counterparts. Although, modern Indian artists have adopted some of the values of Western art, the notions of "originality" and "innovation" as criteria for judging art simply do not have the same value in India, and using these criteria as benchmarks to assess their contribution leads only to misconceptions. "Originality," as the collector and connoisseur of modern art Ebrahim Alkazi succinctly explained, "consists in the artists' capacity to confront the present through the collective visions of his country's past, and to bring to it the total experience of history in such a way as to open up new perspectives of thought and feeling." Western modernism on the other hand has, for over a century, embodied an impulse toward continuous change and innovation that is distinctly alien to a traditional society.

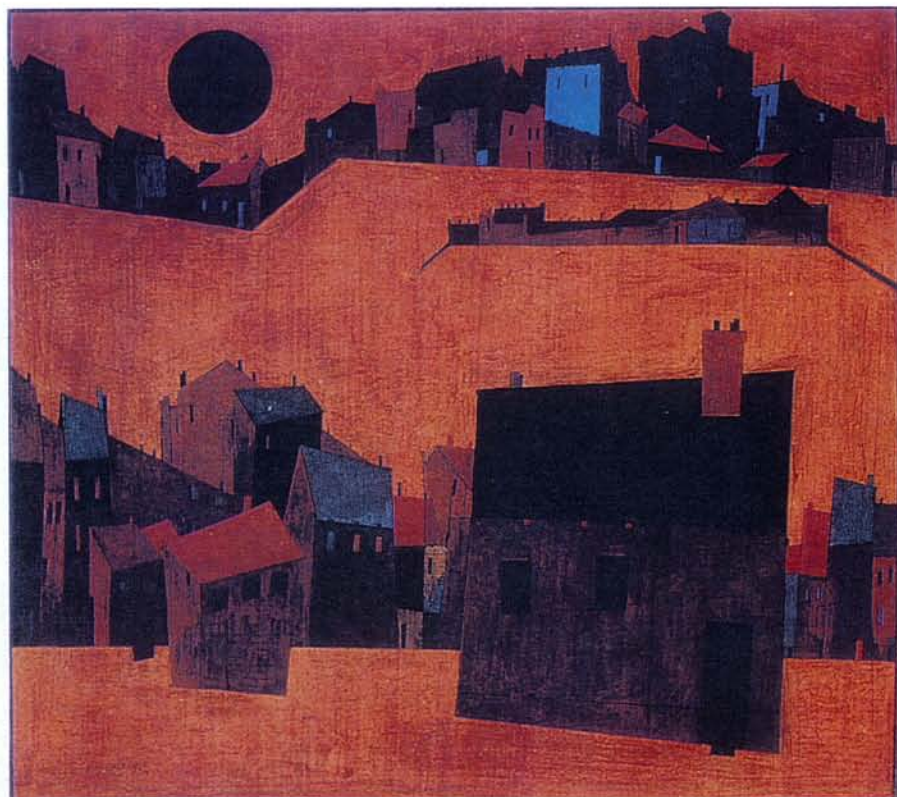
The canons of Modernism are the denunciation of authority, the renewal of the language of art through neologisms, subversion, and disruption by breaking the boundaries of tradition. If Modernism is a defiance of authority, a rejection of tradition—in essence a revolutionary step of vanguardism—then the modern Indian artistic quest is a departure from mainstream Western modernism. The idea of assault on tradition did not and does not possess the same relevance in India because Indian artists were not rejecting tradition, but amalgamating tradition to create contemporary forms.

One of the important factors compelling Indian artists to rush to embrace the international art vocabulary was their deep-seated desire to join the international art world in the 1940s and 1950s. Throughout the

colonial period, Indian art and culture had been denigrated; Modernism brought a sense of liberation and unleashed energies. It was presented as international and transcended cultural boundaries; it gave Indian artists ammunition to fight the badge of inferiority that had been pinned onto them. As the American art historian McEvelley has stated, "A certain wishful element seems involved and the mechanism of which was based on the modernist concept of universality. It seemed for a brief time one could enter history on the same footing as everyone else if one tuned one's modern sensibility."

However, as McEvelley later reassessed, "Modern art, with its imperative of formal evolution—and above all abstract art, with the claims that it transcended social forces—was an emblem of the master soul of European modernism; it provided an exemplary array of evolution—like developments that were taken to guarantee that history was indeed engaged, under Western leadership, in an adventure of progress."

**B**y the end of the 1950s, Indian artists felt that they were disenfranchised from the global artistic discourse as a result of Western disregard for Third World artists' contributions. Many Indian artists raised the question of cultural diffusion and chronology. Indian artists have an astonishingly large artistic tradition which makes the possibility of creating a truly original work, stylistically as least, slim. However, as the artist Gulam



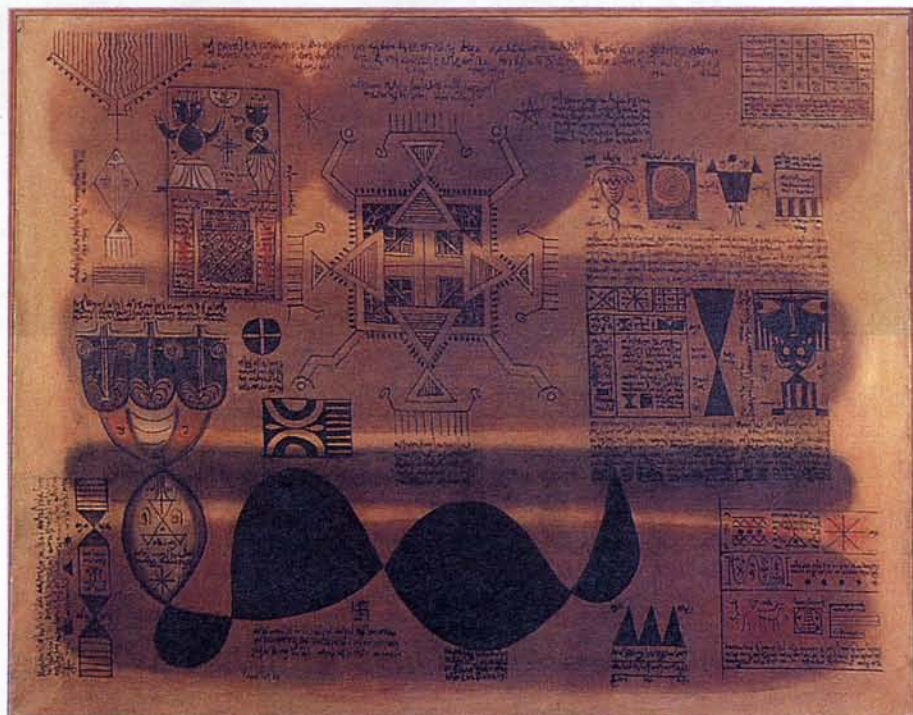
**Syed Haider Raza, Haut de Cagnes, 1951, gouache on paper, 70 x 74 cm. (Bombay Progressive Group member)**

Mohammed Shiek said: "The expressionist and abstract vocabularies adopted by the Indian artists had not only been expanded in their scope but undergone qualitative transformations when tested in the Indian context." Many Western critics, however, do not accept this assertion. Because of this attitude, many modern Indian artists

opted out of the race for vanguardism, believing that there was and still is a tendency to measure the success and failure of all human efforts to a Western paradigm.

The shift in this paradigm is in the making today. As non-Western countries gain more economic clout, so do their cultures gain new respectability. Also, within the structure of a postmodern society, where tradition and the past are relevant sources, Indian artists have begun to borrow freely from the whole world of art irrespective of period and culture to produce new and cogent forms, developing a correspondence with postmodernism in the West. With the advent of postmodernism, and a return to figuration in West, Indian artists are seeing a new light at the end of the tunnel providing them with hope. Baroda Group artist Gulam Mohammed Shiek showed an evolved consciousness when he said in the 1980s: "You are told to choose between 'Eastern' and 'Western' art and between 'traditional' and 'modern' art. I do not suggest these problems are not real. Obviously they have surfaced for historical reasons. But my attempt has been to free myself from them." This development in Indian art occurred independently from the West.  $\Delta$

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**K.C.S. Panniker (1911-1977), Words and Symbols, no date given, oil on canvas, 119.5 x 152 cm (Leader of the Neo-Tantra Movement)**