



M.F. Husain, title and size not available, 1947.

# A Struggle For Modernism

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*Indian modern artists have fought to create their own brand of  
Here in the second part of his two-part article, Indian art historian*

*Modernism far removed from its early European influences.  
and critic Sundaram Tagore looks at the struggle of these artists.*



**T**he development of Indian Modernism is markedly different from the development of Modernism in the West. Modern Indian art, unlike the European movement, did not progress through grand evolutionary stages of linear achievement. Much of our understanding of Western art history is shaped by one momentous development after another—such as Courbet's building of a separate pavilion to exhibit *The Painters Studio*, Eduard Manet's *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe* or, in our own century, Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*. These, among other achievements, have been treated by art historians as convenient points of departure from the past. Although this notion of linear development is being challenged by a handful of scholars who embrace pluralism, it is nonetheless the structure with which Western art is defined.

In India, however, no such neat parallels can be drawn. The beginnings of the modern movement are tangled and complex, but ultimately can be traced to the formation of competing groups of artists in Calcutta and Bombay. There was not a gradual development as in the West, but a complete overthrow of the traditional artistic system by the introduction of Western representational art by the British. Traditional Indian art is the art of the figure—of highly idealized forms that shun naturalism. In fact, traditional Indian art possessed the very abstract qualities that Western artists were exulting and borrowing to create their modernist vocabulary. In this circuitous process, modern Indian artists had to relearn the abstract attributes of flat planes, hot colors, and idealized forms, which they had lost after the introduction of academic realism during the colonial period.

Although Modernism is a Western invention, it was nevertheless presented as a universal concept. Indian artists were eager to adopt and adapt it to suit their own contextual needs. Modernism, however, is tied to the notion of progress; it is bound up with history. Traditionally, Indians view history as an endless series of cycles of creation, preservation, and destruction; they do not perceive the development of art and culture in a linear fashion. This contradictory tendency created an anomalous situation in the development of modern art.

Indian Modernism can be said to have begun with the works of Rabindranath Tagore, Gagonendranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, and Amrita Sher-Gil in the early 1920s. The real Modernist drive, however, took place during World War II, when Parisian Modernism drifted into the ports of Calcutta with large numbers of Allied soldiers.

In 1942, a group of artists including Rathin Moitra, Nirode Mazumdar, Gopal Ghoshe, Prodosh Dasgupta, Paritosh Sen, Bansi Chandra Gupta, and Subho Tagore fell into the vortex of social upheaval affecting India. They banded together to form the Calcutta Group, and urged that art be used to effect meaningful changes in

the considerable range of opinion about art, politics, and literature. They argued about how to create forms that, although based on tradition, simultaneously expressed the complex experience of modern life.

The Calcutta Group was born in a complex social environment and its members were forced to think in eschatological terms. There was little scope for artistic growth since material existence was too precarious, the general state of affairs too unstable. At the core of the Calcutta Group's aspirations was the romantic notion of the artist as a cultural hero—the bohemian-rebel. The economics of the profession were given little thought since there were few collectors interested in modern art.

The members of the Calcutta Group largely came from elite backgrounds and as a result, lacked the vitality that characterized their socially and economically diverse rivals, the Bombay Progressive Group. However, on the eve of India's Independence, two artistic shifts were manifested by the Calcutta Group. Firstly, they vocally rebelled against the nationalist Bengal School, and secondly, the axis of artistic influence shifted from London to Paris.

The group did not have a common artistic ideology, except that they were all Modernists in an artistic atmosphere dominated by the Bengal School. Their works hovered between abstraction and figuration and tradition and modernity.

Subho Tagore, having been exposed to European Modernism from studies in Europe, created works that fused the folk sensibilities of Aztec and Tibetan art with Parisian Modernism. Thus a writer from the *Forward Bloc*, a socialist Indian magazine, commented in 1940, "In order to rouse the consciousness of the masses, our country

needs the services of this class of artists who are rich in Progressive ideas and well-equipped with modern techniques."

In 1943, in a period of unprecedented communal violence and famine, Rathin Moitra, one of the co-founders of the Calcutta Group, painted works dealing with social issues whose style was influenced by curvilinear art-deco forms and the primitivist vitality of Bengali folk art with its swerving lines and heightened colors. Instead of leaning toward the distortive power of Expressionism, which would seemingly have provided the rel-

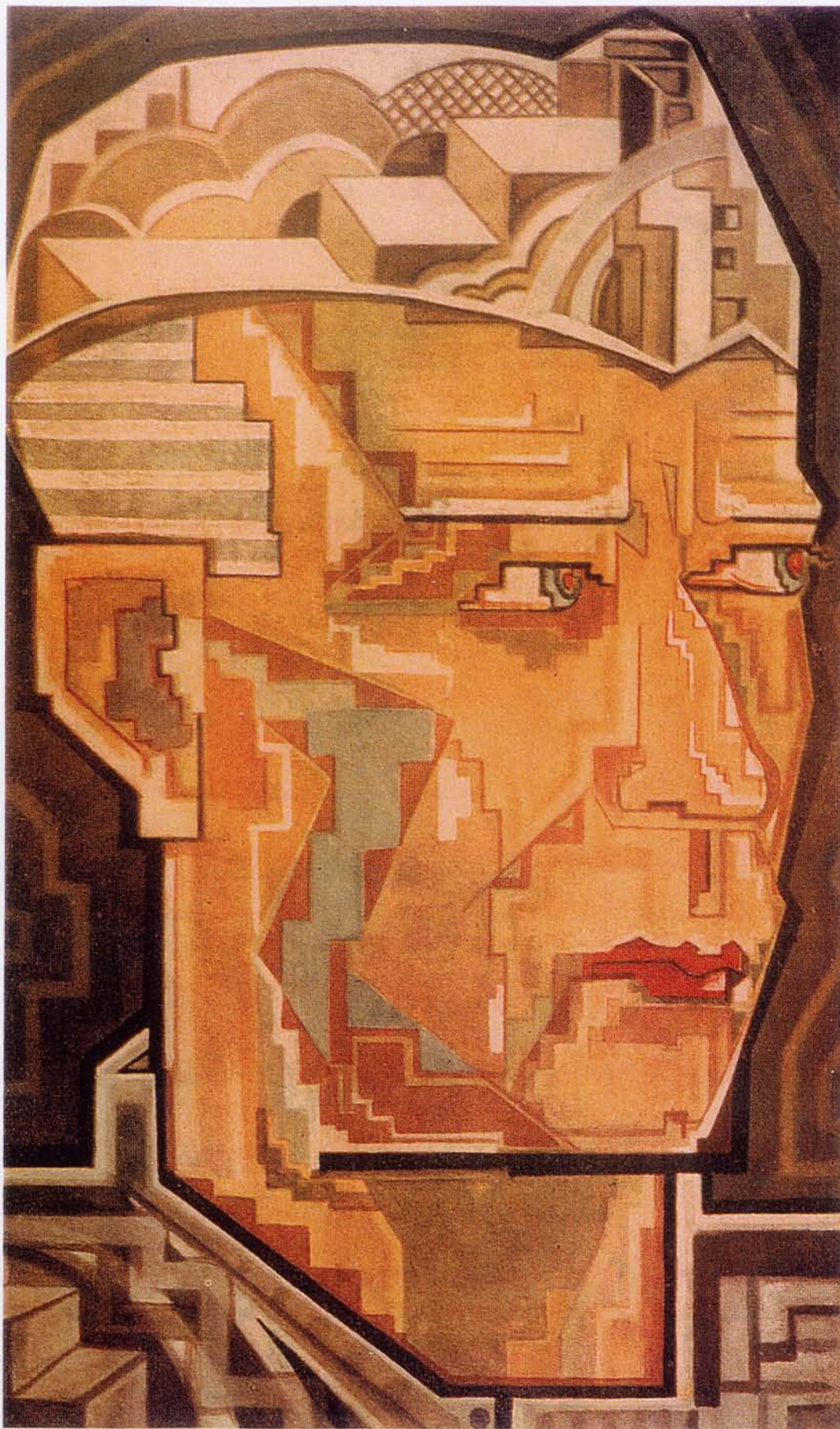


Rabindranath Tagore, *untitled*, 1932, watercolor, pen and ink, no size given, signed in Bengali script.

society.

The Calcutta Group artists used Subho Tagore's studio, where he was experimenting with painting, sculpting, textile and furniture design in an attempt to create a total aesthetic environment on the Modernist principle, as their headquarters. The studio also served as a salon for the liberal intelligentsia, and besides the group members, renowned figures such as the writer E.M. Foster, art historians Stella Kramrisch, and W.G. Archer, and European intellectuals including Martin Kirkman and John Irwin routinely visited and contributed to





Subho Tagore (founder of the Calcutta Group), **Jawahar, The Builder**, 1947, watercolor, 11 x 14 in.





Rathin Moitra (co-founder of Calcutta Group), **Brother**, 1943, oil on canvas.

evant vocabulary to express the cataclysmic social environment of the 1940s, the works of Calcutta Group members contained the varied artistic strains that arrived with World War II, when the impact of the West was most cogent and concentrated.

The Group's first exhibition, held in 1943, was that of the work of Gopal Ghoshe. Much of his oeuvre stood at the crossroads between the Bengali School and Modernism, attempting to reconcile lyricism and Oriental brushwork in the naturalist vein on the one hand, and impressionistic qualities on the other. The non-narrative format and immediacy of the compositions, in which the painting is done in rapid, swirling brushwork with a sense of energy and dynamism, give Ghoshe's pieces a modern feel unlike any Bengal School work.

Paris, with its *laissez-faire* lifestyle, held tremendous appeal for many modern Indian artists, and they attempted to keep abreast of the latest development by interacting with the European troops stationed in India, some of whom were not ordinary soldiers but middle-class intellectuals eager to share their experiences. Nirode Mazumdar, a Francophile and important figure in the group, was the first to win a French government scholarship in 1946. While in Paris, he created the *Chamunda Malani Series* which reflects the values of modern French painting. For example, free abstraction in his work becomes a statement of liberation; it is constrained only by his desire to reconcile the vestigial figural motif of traditional Indian art—an impossible task. He depicts a frantic image of the modern world with a lingering attachment to Bengal School religious

themes.

The Group's work slowly awakened the public's interest in modern art and provoked discourse among pro-and anti-Modernists. They had made considerable strides in the Indian art world. In 1944, they sent an exhibition, with the help of Rathin Moitra, to Bombay, which was emerging as the center of modern art under the guidance of Europeans such as Vonleyden, Schlesinger, and Langhammer. The Bombay exhibition created a stir among art critics and connoisseurs. As Mulk Raj

Anand wrote then, "the exhibition of the Calcutta Group showed that young [artists] were highly talented, and that they were aware of the crisis of Indian painting... they had shown tremendous courage in confronting the conservatives with a new direction in art."

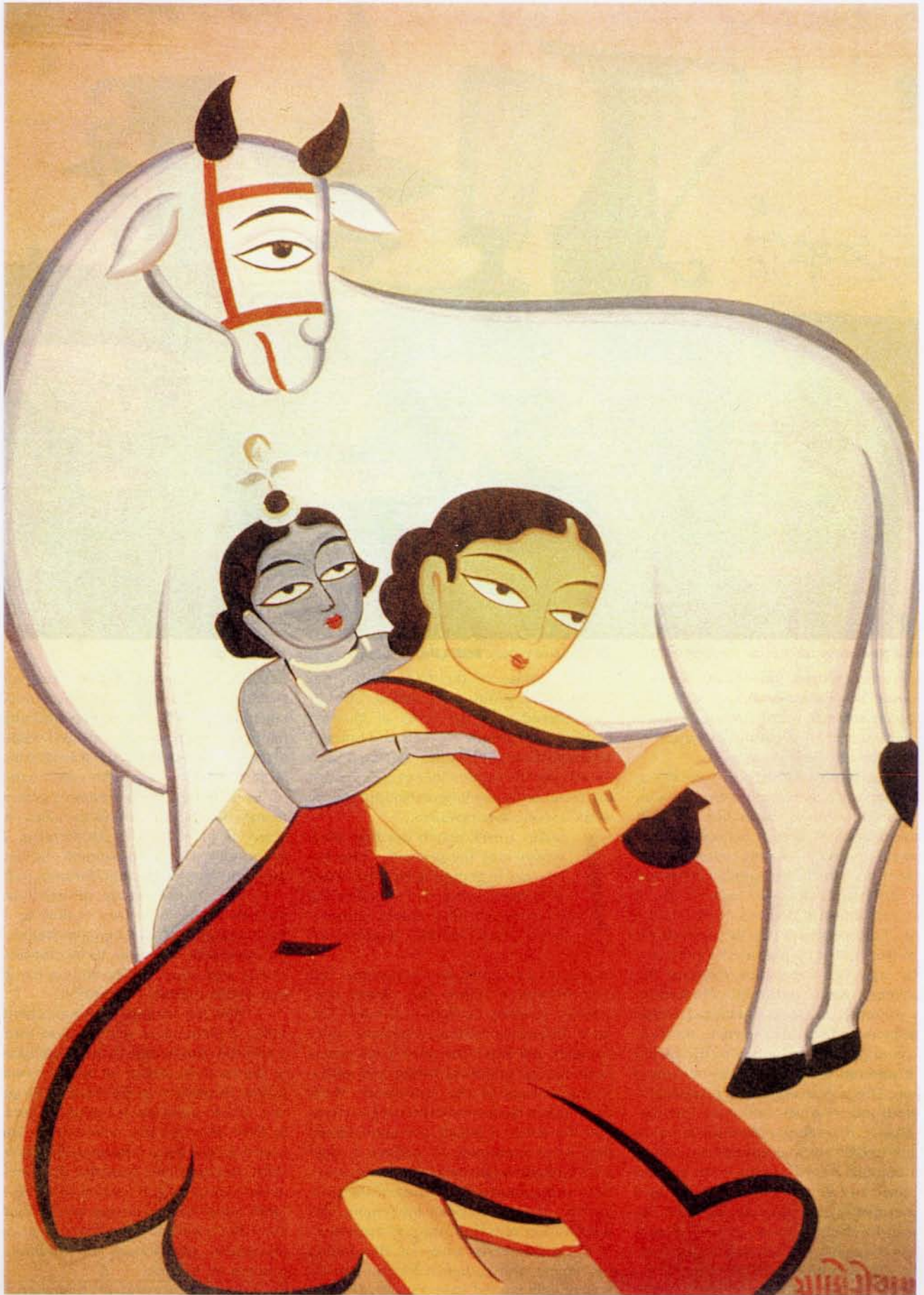
The Group, though continuing to exert a strong presence, finally held their last show in New Delhi in 1953, and after a decade of existence officially dissolved itself.

After Independence in 1947, India embarked on a new course with a full-fledged thrust toward Modernism, disregarding some of Mahatma Gandhi's vision for India. The winds of change affected all aspects of Indian life, including art. Just as the artistic axis shifted from London to Paris in the West, likewise in post-Independence India the center of art shifted from Calcutta to Bombay, where the Progressive Group burst onto the scene in 1947. The Progressives, whose membership included Krisnaji Ara, S.H. Raza, Bakre, Hari Ambadas Gade, M.F. Husain, and Francis Newton Souza, proposed that it was imperative for art to reflect the temper of the time. As in Calcutta, European cosmopolitanism appeared in Bombay with the significant presence of American and European troops who were stationed there. They transformed Bombay's burgeoning artistic world by disseminating the Modernist ideas that were prevalent among the avant-garde dissident culture of Europe. These young



Krishnaji Ara (founder member of the Bombay Progressive Group), **Still Life**, 1951, watercolor.





Jamin Roy (early Indian modernist), **Krishna and Yashoda**, no date available.





Francis Newton Souza (founder/leader of the Bombay Progressive Group), **Still Life**, 1958, oil on canvas, 122 x 183 cm.

Indian artists, already fed with the Western academic naturalism propounded by Colonial art schools, were striving to learn about Modernism—a natural extension of Western artistic pedagogy.

The Bombay Modernists were not to suffer the beleaguered angst that the Calcutta Group artists faced in their rejection of the nationalist Bengal School art. The Bombay Progressives were transfixed by Modernism, which they perceived as not only distinctive, but also superior to all other art forms that had preceded it. In the artists' headlong rush into the new movement they not only imported a new aesthetic style but the *raison d'être* of the movement was overturned. Modernism was presented as an international artistic movement, which like science, technology, and politics, belonged to the global civilization to which India was beckoned to join. This was an appealing prospect for modern Indian artists who were envisaging change. To embrace Modernism was to accept universalistic cosmopolitan values in a colonial world caught in an endless debate between Orientalists and Westernizers. Consequently, like their European forebears, the Progressive Group rebelled against the modern Indian pioneers (this included the leaders of the Bengal School, Rabindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, and Amrita Sher-Gil) to clear the table

of the vestiges of the past. Souza, the leader of the group, proclaimed, "our art has evolved over the years of its own volition; out of our own balls and brains." Modernism was inherently dissident, and the Progressives pitted themselves against the social order, seeking artistic autonomy in their iconoclast postures.

Indian artists' march towards Modernism was fraught with difficulty, not only in grappling with the issues of aesthetics, but also in cultivating an audience that would comprehend their works. Modern art

insinuates a complex set of questions that defy resolution unless the viewer possesses a similarly modern sensibility. The set of questions presented become more complex still when the artist is separated from the geographical origin and philosophical roots of the movement. What early Indian Modernists failed to grasp was that the level of artistic accomplishment they were attempting to achieve in decades had taken European moderns centuries. And a natural byproduct of the slow growth of the European movement was the creation of a sophisticated audience.

In the early years of the Indian movement, the audience for modern art was acutely limited, save a group of European refugees who gave a boost to the

nascent movement. These Europeans, along with a small number of cosmopolitan Indians, including writers and artists, many of whom were connected with the Marxist cause, donned the role of cultural arbiters. Also among them was a handful of enlightened businessmen centered mainly in the metropolitan cities who acted as incubators of Modernism. The proponents of the movement, however, were surrounded by an indifferent public.

From the beginning, the mystique of modern art has espoused exclusivity and the avant-garde had its greatest impact of the elitist few; therefore, its incomprehensibility and unpopularity among the general public defined its position.

With the stirrings of group activity in India, a plethora of groups were formed across the country signaling regionalization of the modern Indian art world. Soon to follow Bombay was the Madras Progressive Artists Association (although formed in 1946, they became active much later). Sayed Haider Raza, a Bombay Progressive artist inspired the Kashmir Progressive Artists Group which formed in 1948. The Delhi Shilpi Chakra Group was formed in 1949. But it was the struggles of these early Modernists that forged the tradition of modern art in India. Δ

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