

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY ART OF PUNJAB

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Abstract

This research paper deals with the evolution and the growth of the Contemporary Art of Punjab. It is a humble effort on the part of the writer to present the facts of the Contemporary Art scene of Punjab and its development in the Post-Independence period. The artists who were born in Punjab having deep roots in Punjabi culture and got national and international recognition with their techniques and concepts, they worked for and reflected the psyche of their oeuvre. This is probably the first-ever paper to be presented with different aspects of Contemporary Art of Punjab.

Keywords: *Contemporary art, Modern art, Industrial Revolution, Italian Renaissance, Reawakening, Industrial Art Society, J. J. School of Art, AIFACS, Shilpi Chakra, Bengal School, Shilpa Shastra, Kala Bhawan, Shantiniketan, Lalit Kala Akademi, National Gallery of Modern Art, Punjab Art Council, Punjab Kala Bhawan, Dr. M.S. Randhawa and Dr. Mulk Raj Anand.*

‘Contemporary Art’ in its literal meaning pertains to art which is being practiced by the artists today. Contemporary art showcases the present day cultural, philosophical, ethical, creative and socio-economic scenario which deals with creative impulses, desires, aspirations, hopes, manifestations, perceptions, visions and insights of the contemporary society. It also offers an individualistic freedom of expression in chosen styles, mediums, subjects and mannerisms. There is a striking similarity between Contemporary and Modern art especially considering the present styles and trends in art. These concepts of ‘Contemporary’ and ‘Modern’ are not geographical, it does not mean mechanization. Some experts were of the opinion that the Modern art was synonymous with the machine and ought to be indecent and decadent. However, a few others were of the opinion that Modern art is nothing but material civilization and must be viewed down from the spiritual heights of India. Few youngsters felt fundamental theory of social organization is what is modern and favors the exception to the existing and the traditional in their own society. The fundamentals of Modern art are the character of consciousness and it is a state of concentration which accompanies human mind and effort, when it grapples with the changed aspect of form and tries to grasp the new. It is what gives the impulse vigorous direction and passionate human function of the period. Contemporary or Modern art is nothing but the exciting state of activity in the twentieth century.¹

However Modern art has predominantly been accepted to have started from 1863 A.D. from Paris which was the cultural capital of Europe with most modern outlook of that era in the world. Edouard Manet had first exhibited in epoch making “*Dejeuner sur l’herbe*” at Salon des Refuses. This exhibition has been seen as the most important of all times and marked the beginning of “Modern Art”. Ever since the artist assumed the new role in the rapidly changing urban society whose opulence came from the benefits of Industrial Revolution, the artist hence forth started painting the world as they saw it rather than following the rules dating from Italian Renaissance and the outlook for the world art was set to change forever in many ways which Manet and his contemporaries could never think in their wildest dreams. Modern art in India that took off in a purposeful way, though a humble beginning was in 1947 A.D. was when the British finally left India and let it go on its own way which was described by the then Prime Minister- Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as “tryst with destiny”.²

Art schools were set up by the British government in various parts of India where the Victorian concept of art was inculcated. In these Art Schools of India, ‘Greek Method of Art’ was followed by the English, which was another aspect that hampered Indian creative spirit and inevitable efforts of the trend could not stop the western influence over the Indian mind. European style works got better place instead of traditional Indian style, as a result there was outflow of cheap prints from Europe that made better place in Indian

markets. This cheap imitation of European prints declared the death signal of lyrical quality of traditional Indian painting. In due course, a new style of bazaar had come up and Bazaar painters set themselves to paint Indian mythological and historical themes in the form of calendars and theatrical companies got importance in reawakening.³

Three Schools of Art were introduced in India at Madras, Calcutta and Bombay on experimental scale. The Art School at Madras in 1850 A.D. and Calcutta in 1854 A.D. set the pattern of education in art. Madras School was a production center in its initial stages. The Art School at Calcutta was organized as a 'School of Industrial Art'. There the art was started in 1854 A.D. as private enterprise by a group of Indian and English enthusiasts as 'Industrial Arts Society'. The same as 'School of Art and Industry' was started in Bombay as well in 1857 A.D. which was later named as 'J.J. School of Art'. All these schools- at Madras, Calcutta, Bombay and later the School of art in Lahore now in Pakistan, and Lucknow in 1913 A.D. were private agencies taken over by provincial British Government and they shaped them according to the desired standards of education in art. Few aristocrat students who joined the school were sharp and hard-working; they were not interested and able to develop Indian art. They got familiar with the methods used by European schools equally and benefitted by the galleries, museums and books and several other ways to embrace and develop the principles of art and execution of realistic art and technique. They were cut off from both the Indian and European background and found the new and wonderful techniques unfolded for the first time to them. The rules of art in India had been historically proved were against its cultural climate and sensibility. In fact, these principles had lost its hold from where it had started. This new awareness with attempts and search of moderns and the complete disregard for the academic principles were found in Europe in the late nineteenth century, created a new awareness and formed new values.⁴

The Partition of the India in 1947 A.D. was a dreadful story of separation and displacement. Most of the artists moved to Delhi from Lahore and became the members of 'All India Fine Arts & Crafts Society' (AIFACS) in Delhi. Few artists of this group did not follow the discipline and followed the leadership as a result of which there was growing discontentment among the working artists. This situation had developed with other established 'Art Societies' in Bombay and Calcutta. Disagreement in working conditions, made a few members to resign the council and start with the foundation of 'Shilpi Chakra' on 25th March 1949 A.D. by Krishna Kulkarni, Pran Nath Mago together with B.C. Sanyal and Dhanraj Bhagat, later added with various artists. The emergence of 'Shilpi Chakra' also symbolized the aspirations for upcoming artists looking for something distinct from the popular trends of 'Bengal School'. It was a group of writers, musicians, poets, critics and dramatists also. 'Shilpi Chakra' worked according to the declared faith that art and culture belongs to all and not only to a few artists and has a role of conveying message of creative

experience to the people and for his own development through awareness among people. The role of 'Shilpi Chakra' Artists had become dynamic by infusing the social significance in their creative expression and they made a meaningful contribution to the growth of Contemporary Art in India.⁵

The task of transforming the tradition and imparting valuable guidance was accomplished by another Punjabi painter of immense competence- Amrita Sher-Gil, who has been honoured as the first Modern Indian painter not only of Punjab but of India also. She had the benefit of being thoroughly educated in Modern art in Europe having been trained and taught in proper academics in art from the best school of art- *Ecole des Beaux Arts*, Paris. She acquired the greatest compliment in harmony with the western principles of design in composition, modest and freshness of colors which characterizes the Indian art of bygone era of the medieval times.

Among the contemporary painters S. G. Thakur Singh and Sobha Singh are the best known. In spite of traces of Bazaar style found, they produced significant works. Their personal achievements won them immense popularity. Thakur Singh's works comprised of portraits and landscapes in realistic touch. He was an academician and painted in oil, pastel and water colors. His basic achievement lies in opening an 'Art Academy' and an 'Art School' in Amritsar at very early age, he was recognized and been known as a state artist since then. Sobha Singh depicted Sikh Gurus, Saints and famous love legends like Heer-Ranjha, Sohni-Mahiwal, etc are considered by peculiar mystic quality with superb craftsmanship and lyrical softness.

Deriving the inspiration from strong roots of its rich civilization exemplified in Shilpa Shasstras and other classical works as well as rich tribal folk and traditions, Modern Indian art has also managed to selectively absorbed ideas that spread all over the world with its strong sense of Indian cultural ethos, practices and palate. The set up of art schools at Madras, Calcutta, Bombay, Lahore and Lucknow amongst others during the pre-independent era provided the foundation for formal art education and training to a new breed of artists. The establishment of art institutions such as 'Kala Bhawan, Shantiniketan'; 'The faculty of Fine Arts of Banaras Hindu University' and 'M. S. University of Baroda' and several colleges of art established in various parts of the country had given further impetus and inspiration to experiment the new kind of art work that changed the sensibility of forthcoming generations. This received a further boost through the support provided by the leading art institutions, like Lalit Kala Akademi, State Academy of Art, The National Gallery of Modern Art and other similar establishments at various parts of the country giving chance to practice and explore new dimensions in the field of art in India.⁶

The story of 20th century art in India and Punjab begins with Amrita Sher-Gil,

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daughter of a Sikh aristocrat and Hungarian mother who was a pioneer in the Modern art in the country. Punjab saw the emergence of group of highly talented and dedicated Sikh painters- S. G. Thakur Singh, Sobha Singh, Hari Singh, Master Gurdit Singh, G. S. Sohan Singh, Tirlok Singh Chitrakar, G. S. Bansal, Amar Singh and Kirpal Singh.

Art activity received an extraordinary flip when Dr. M. S. Randhawa was appointed the first chief commissioner of Chandigarh- Union territory, a matchless crusader, connoisseur, promoter and patron of fine arts. He subsequently founded Punjab Art Council (PAC) in 1979 A.D. He also persuaded to get Punjab Kala Bhawan built in Chandigarh in Rose Garden. Punjab is proud to have two stalwarts, Dr. M. S. Randhawa and Dr. Mulik Raj Anand who have done enormous pioneering patronage in promotion and development of art and artists in Punjab. They are well known personalities in the region with their glorious contribution and the quality, evaluation and quantity of their splendid work still remains to be surpassed. These two gentlemen are today known as Grand Old Men of Punjab's glorious history in the art world.⁷

The Punjabi artists who have been distinguished in post-independence period are Dhanraj Bhagat, Kanwal Krishna, Harkrishan Lal, Pran Nath Mago, Satish Gujral, Amar Nath Sehgal, Krishen Khanna (**Plate No. 1 & 2**), K. C. Aryan, S.S. Vohra, Rajesh Mehra, Bishamber Khanna and Manjit Bawa (**Plate No. 3 & 4**).

Others who made their significant role in Contemporary Art of Punjab include Anupam Sud (**Plate No. 5 & 6**), Avtarjeet Singh Dhanjal, Charanjit Singh Matharoo, Sohan Qadri, R.S. Rania, Hardev Singh, Nand Katyal, Jagmohan Chopra, Krishan Ahuja, Paramjit Singh, Raj Jain, Shiv Singh, Prem Singh (**Plate No. 7 & 8**), Satwant Singh (**Plate No. 9 & 10**), Gurcharan Singh, Ranbir Singh Kaleka, Viren Tanwar, Rameshwar Broota, Shobha Broota, Balvinder Singh (**Plate No. 11 & 12**), Arpana Caur, Jagdish Chander, Surjit Kaur, among many more who comprises a rising generation of Punjabi artists.

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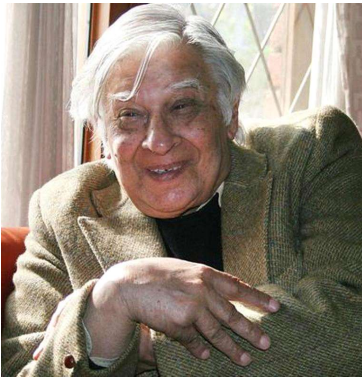


Plate no. 1



Plate no. 2

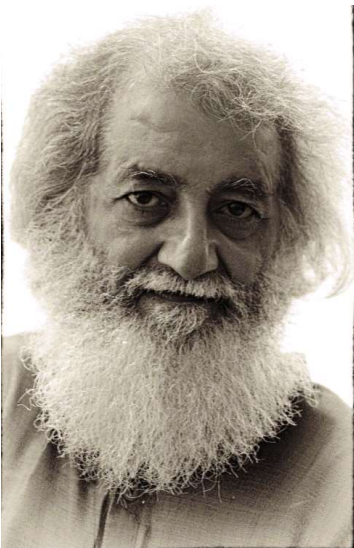


Plate no. 3



Plate no. 4

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Plate no. 5

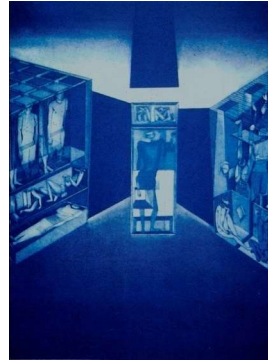


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Plate no. 7

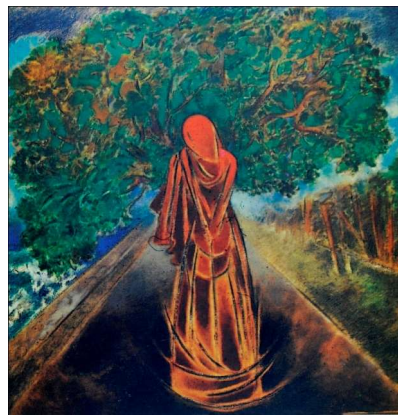


Plate no. 8



Plate no. 9



Plate no. 10



Plate no. 11



Plate no. 12