

The Contribution of N.S. Bendre to Modern Art Movement

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Abstract

Narayan Shridhar Bendre (1910–1992) was one of the most important artists in modern Indian art. He is known for his creative use of shapes, colours, and painting techniques. This research examines how his art evolves from realistic paintings to a more modern and expressive style. It explores his association with the Baroda School and his role as a teacher, which influenced Indian art after independence.

The study discusses different stages of his work, such as landscapes, human figures, and his experiments with styles like pointillism and abstract art. By analysing selected artworks, this research shows how Bendre combined Indian ideas with modern art styles from around the world. It also explains his role in creating a unique identity for Indian art in the 20th century.

Overall, this paper shows that Bendre was not just a painter but also an important pioneer who connected traditional and modern art and inspired many future artists.

Keywords

Narayan Shridhar Bendre, modern Indian art, artistic development, realism to modernism, Baroda School, art education, post-independence art, landscapes, figurative art, pointillism, abstract art, Indian themes, global influence, visual identity, 20th-century art, traditional and modern art, pioneer artist.

Introduction

N. S. Bendre was one of the most important artists in modern Indian art and also a very respected teacher. He was born in 1910 in Indore, and from a young age he was interested in drawing and observing nature and people around him. He later studied at Sir J. J. School of Art in Mumbai, where he learned academic drawing, realistic painting, and Western art techniques. This training helped him build a strong base in art, especially in understanding form, light, and colour.

In the beginning of his career, Bendre made paintings that were very realistic, especially landscapes and portraits. His work showed careful observation and soft use of colour, which was influenced by European styles like realism and impressionism. However, as time passed, he did not stay limited to one style. He started experimenting more and slowly moved towards modern art. His later works became freer, with simpler forms, brighter colours, and more focus on expression rather than exact details. This change shows how he was always open to learning and growing as an artist.

One of the most important parts of Bendre's life was his role as a teacher at the Faculty of Fine Arts in the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. Here, he influenced many young artists. He believed that every student should develop their own style instead of copying others. He encouraged them to observe life, think deeply, and express their own ideas through art. Because of his teaching, the environment in Baroda became very open and creative, where students felt free to experiment and try new things.

Bendre also believed that art should be connected to real life and human experience. According to him, art is not just about making something beautiful, but also about expressing thoughts, emotions, and understanding the world. His ideas helped shape a new direction in Indian art, especially in Baroda, where storytelling and personal expression became important. This later developed into what we call the Baroda Narrative style.

In simple words, N. S. Bendre was not only a great painter but also a guide who helped many artists find their own voice. His contribution to Indian art is very important because he supported creativity, freedom, and new ideas. Even today, his influence can be seen in modern Indian art and art education.

Early Life and Education

N. S. Bendre was born in 1910 in Indore, a city that had a rich cultural atmosphere and growing interest in art and learning. From a young age, he showed a strong interest in drawing and observing things around him. He liked to look at nature, people, and daily life scenes, and tried to capture them through sketches. These early habits helped him develop a sharp observation skill, which later became very important in his artistic journey. At that time, choosing art as a career was not very common, but Bendre's passion for art was strong, and he decided to follow it seriously.

For his education, Bendre moved to Mumbai and joined the Sir J. J. School of Art, which was one of the most well-known art institutions in India. There, he received proper academic training in drawing and painting. He learned the basics such as proportion, perspective, composition, and the use of light and shadow. His education was mainly based on a realistic and academic style, which focused on making artworks look natural and close to real life. This training gave him a strong technical foundation and discipline in art.

During his time as a student, Bendre was also exposed to different styles of art, including Western techniques and Indian traditions. He carefully studied these influences and slowly began to understand how art can be more than just copying reality. His early works, especially landscapes and portraits, clearly show his strong training and careful observation. At the same time, this period also helped him build confidence and develop his own artistic thinking.

Overall, the early life and education of N. S. Bendre played a very important role in shaping him as an artist. His childhood interest, combined with formal training at Sir J. J. School of Art, created a strong base for his future growth. This foundation later helped him experiment with different styles and become a major figure in modern Indian art.

Early Artistic Style: Academic and Impressionist Phase

Bendre's early paintings are usually described as academic and impressionist in style. During this time, he mostly painted landscapes and portraits, using materials like oil paint and gouache.

Characteristics of Early Work

The early work of N. S. Bendre is mainly known for its strong foundation in academic realism and careful observation. In this phase, he focused on painting landscapes, portraits, and scenes from everyday life with a natural and detailed approach. His paintings show correct proportion, perspective, and balance, which reflect his formal training at art school. One of the key characteristics of his early work is the soft and controlled use of colour, where he tried to capture natural light and atmosphere, giving a calm and realistic feeling.

Another important feature is his close study of nature and surroundings. He often painted outdoor scenes like villages, trees, and human figures placed naturally in the environment. His brushwork during this period was smooth and disciplined, as he focused more on accuracy rather than expression. There is also a slight influence of impressionism in the way he handled light and colour, especially in landscapes.

His landscape paintings beautifully showed the spirit of Indian nature with great care and detail. During this time, he became known as a talented artist and received important awards, including a Silver Medal from the Bombay Art Society in 1934 and a Gold Medal in 1941.

Role in Art Education

One of the most significant contributions of N. S. Bendre to the modern art movement was his role as an educator. He joined the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, where he influenced a whole generation of artists.

His teaching approach was very different from traditional methods. Instead of forcing students to follow a fixed style, he encouraged them to think independently and develop their own artistic language. He believed that art should come from personal experience and understanding, not just technical skill.

He created an open and creative environment where students felt free to experiment. This approach played a major role in shaping modern Indian art, as it produced artists who were original, confident, and expressive.

The Baroda Phase and Institutional Contribution

The Baroda phase of N. S. Bendre is one of the most important stages in his life, where he made a lasting impact on modern Indian art as both a painter and a teacher. When he joined the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, the institution was still developing, but it soon became one of the leading arts centers in India. Bendre played a key role in shaping this growth by creating a positive and creative environment where students were encouraged to explore their ideas freely. He believed that art education should not be limited to copying styles, but should help students understand and express their own thoughts and experiences.

His teaching method was very balanced, as he focused on both strong technical skills and but at the same time, he motivated them to experiment with new forms and ideas. This approach helped students become more confident and original in their work. Another important contribution of Bendre was that he encouraged open discussion about art, culture, and society, which made the learning process more meaningful and thoughtful. Because of this, Baroda became not just an art school but a place of creative thinking and exchange of ideas.

Bendre also continued his own artistic development during this period, moving from realistic styles to more modern and expressive forms. His growth as an artist inspired students to keep evolving and not remain limited to one style. His influence can be clearly seen in many important artists who were connected to Baroda, such as Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, Bhupen Khakhar, and K. G. Subramanyan, who later became major figures in Indian art and developed strong narrative and expressive styles.

Overall, Bendre's Baroda phase was not only about his personal success but also about building a strong foundation for future artists. His key contributions include promoting independent thinking, encouraging experimentation, connecting art with real life, and

helping Baroda become an important center for modern Indian art. His role as a teacher and guide continues to influence Indian art even today.

Modernist Experimentation

During his Baroda period, Bendre began experimenting with various modernist styles. His works from this phase show a shift towards abstraction and structural complexity.

Key Styles Explored



- Cubism
- Expressionism
- Abstract forms

[Thorn, 1955]

His painting *Thorn* (1955), which won a National Award, exemplifies his experimentation and mastery of modernist techniques. The painting “**Thorns**” by N. S. Bendre is a symbolic work that expresses ideas of pain, struggle, and challenges in life. In this painting, thorns are not just natural objects but represent difficulties and obstacles that people face in their lives. Bendre uses simple forms, sharp shapes, and expressive colours to create a feeling of tension and emotion rather than showing realistic details. The artwork does not tell a direct story but allows viewers to connect it with their own experiences and feelings. Overall, “Thorns” shows how life has both beauty and hardship, and it reflects deeper human emotions through symbolism.

Bendre’s work during this period reflects a dialogue between Western modernism and Indian aesthetics

Pointillism and Late Style

After leaving Baroda in 1966, Bendre developed a distinctive style inspired by pointillism. Unlike Western pointillism, his approach was adapted to Indian themes and sensibilities.

Features of Bendre’s Pointillism

- Use of dots and colour patches
- Emphasis on texture and light

- Integration of Indian subjects

Scholars argue that his pointillist paintings act like a bridge between cultures, combining Western techniques with Indian ideas.

This stage shows the peak of his artistic journey, highlighting his maturity and creativity.



Modern Evening Sale | New Delhi, Live -Sep-4, 2014 -Lot 23 -N S Bendre

The painting shown in the *Modern Evening Sale (2014, Lot 23)* by N. S. Bendre reflects his modern style, where he focuses more on colour, form, and composition rather than realistic detail. The shapes are simplified and sometimes slightly abstract, creating a balanced and expressive design. He uses bright and harmonious colours to give a lively feeling to the painting. Overall, the work shows his mature style, combining simplicity, creativity, and emotional expression.

Themes in Bendre's Art

1. Landscape

Landscape remained a central theme throughout Bendre's career. His works reflect:

- Emotional connection to nature
- Exploration of space and form
- Changing stylistic approaches



Autumn Art Auction -Sep 19-20, 2012 -Lot 2 -N S Bendre

2. Rural Life

Bendre often depicted rural scenes, emphasising:

- Simplicity of village life
- Cultural traditions

- Human-nature relationship



Untitled (Gypsy Camp Scene) – N. S. Bendre

3. Modern Identity

His later works explore the idea of modern Indian identity, blending tradition with modernity.

Major Works

Some of Bendre's notable works include:

The Sunflower (1955) - N. S. Bendre's painting *The Sunflower* shows his developed style of art. In this painting, he uses bright colours and small dots to create the image of a sunflower. The painting is not just a simple picture of a flower. It also shows light, colour, and feeling.

Overall, *The Sunflower* shows how Bendre tried new styles and made a simple subject look beautiful and interesting.



Monkey (1957) - N. S. Bendre's monkey painting shows his creative and playful style of art. In this work, he paints monkeys in a lively and interesting way, using simple shapes.

The painting is not just about showing monkeys realistically. It also shows movement, energy, and mood. The monkeys may look fun or active, which makes the painting feel alive.



The Cow and the Calf (1948) - N. S. Bendre shows a peaceful and loving bond between a cow and its calf. The painting focuses on simple rural life and the idea of care and protection. Bendre uses soft colours and gentle forms to create a calm and emotional feeling. Overall, the painting shows warmth, simplicity, and the beauty of everyday village life.



The Bullock Cart - N. S. Bendre shows a simple village scene of a cart being pulled by bullocks. The painting reflects rural life and the everyday work of people in the countryside. He uses soft colours and simple shapes to create a calm and natural feeling. Overall, the painting highlights the beauty of village life and traditional ways of living.



Contribution to Modern Artistic Thinking

The contribution of N. S. Bendre to modern artistic thinking is very important because he helped change how artists understand and approach art. During a time when many Indian

artists were either following traditional styles or copying Western art, Bendre encouraged a more independent and balanced way of thinking. He believed that art should come from personal experience and observation rather than imitation. This idea helped artists develop confidence in their own ideas and created a new direction in modern Indian art.

One of his key contributions was his focus on individual expression. Bendre believed that every artist has a unique vision, and this should be visible in their work. Instead of following fixed styles, he encouraged artists to explore their own thoughts, emotions, and identity. This made art more personal and meaningful. He also believed that art should be connected to real life. According to him, artists should observe their surroundings and express social and cultural realities in their work. This approach made art more relevant and engaging.

Another important aspect of his thinking was his support for experimentation. Bendre encouraged artists to try new techniques, styles, and ideas instead of staying limited to one method. His own journey from realistic paintings to modern and semi-abstract styles shows his belief in continuous growth. He also promoted the idea of combining tradition with modernity, where artists could take inspiration from Indian culture while also exploring modern forms.

Through his teaching at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, he created an open and creative environment that allowed students to think freely and develop their own style. In simple words, Bendre's contribution to modern artistic thinking lies in encouraging creativity, independence, and meaningful expression, which continues to influence artists even today.

Influence on Future Generations

The influence of N. S. Bendre on future generations of artists is one of his most important contributions to modern Indian art. As a teacher at the Faculty of Fine Arts in the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, he guided many young artists and helped them develop their own style and thinking. Instead of asking students to copy a particular method, he encouraged them to explore their own ideas, observe life closely, and express their personal experiences through art. This approach gave students confidence and freedom, which played a big role in shaping their artistic identity.

Many of his students and followers later became well-known artists, such as Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, Bhupen Khakhar, and K. G. Subramanyan. These artists developed their own unique styles but carried forward Bendre's ideas of creativity, experimentation, and connection with real life. Their works often included storytelling, social themes, and personal expression, which became important features of modern Indian art.

Bendre's influence is not limited to a few artists; it can be seen in the overall development of contemporary Indian art. His teaching created a strong foundation where

artists were encouraged to think independently and continuously grow. In simple terms, his impact on future generations lies in the way he inspired artists to be original, expressive, and open to new ideas, making modern Indian art more diverse and meaningful.

Connection Between Art and Society

The idea of a strong connection between art and society was an important part of N. S. Bendre's thinking. He believed that art should not exist only for decoration or beauty, but should reflect real life and human experiences. According to him, an artist must observe the world around them—people, culture, daily life, and social changes—and express these through their work. This approach made art more meaningful because it became a way to understand and communicate the realities of society.

Bendre encouraged artists to look beyond imagination and connect their work with real situations. He felt that art can express emotions, struggles, and relationships that people experience in everyday life. Because of this, many artists influenced by his ideas began to include social themes in their work, such as identity, class, and cultural change. This helped modern Indian art move closer to society, making it more relatable and thoughtful for viewers.

Through his teaching at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Bendre created an environment where students could freely discuss social issues and express them creatively. In simple words, his idea of connecting art with society helped artists see their work as a way of sharing real experiences and ideas, making art more relevant and impactful in modern times.

Critical Analysis

While Bendre's contribution is widely appreciated, it is also important to look at it critically. Some critics argue that his focus on individuality may sometimes lead to overly personal or difficult-to-understand art. Others feel that balancing tradition and modernity is not always easy.

However, these challenges are part of modern art itself. Bendre's work and teaching opened new possibilities, even if they were complex. His contribution lies in creating a space for exploration and discussion.

Awards and Recognition

N. S. Bendre received several important awards and recognitions during his lifetime, which show his significant contribution to modern Indian art. His work was appreciated both in India and internationally for its quality, creativity, and evolving style. One of his early achievements was receiving recognition at national-level art exhibitions, where his paintings stood out for their strong technique and artistic depth.

He was honored with prestigious awards like the Padma Shri by the Government of India, which is one of the country's highest civilian awards, given for his contribution to the field of art. He also received awards from institutions such as the Lalit Kala Akademi, which recognizes outstanding artists in India. These honors reflect his importance not only as a painter but also as a major figure in the development of modern Indian art.

In addition to awards, Bendre's work was widely exhibited in important exhibitions in India and abroad, bringing him recognition at an international level. His role as a respected teacher at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda also added to his reputation, as many of his students became well-known artists. Overall, the awards and recognition he received highlight his lasting impact and respected position in the art world.

Legacy

N. S. Bendre left a very strong and lasting impact on modern Indian art, not only through his paintings but also through his role as a teacher and mentor. His biggest contribution was shaping a new way of thinking about art, where artists were encouraged to explore their own ideas instead of copying traditional or Western styles. Because of his guidance, many young artists developed confidence and originality in their work, which helped modern Indian art grow in a new direction.

One of his most important legacies is his contribution to the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, which became one of the leading art institutions in India. He helped create an open and creative environment where students could experiment freely and express personal thoughts. This atmosphere later led to the development of the Baroda Narrative style, which focused on storytelling and real-life experiences in art.

Bendre also showed how an artist can grow and change over time. His journey from realistic paintings to modern and abstract styles inspired many artists to keep experimenting and not stay limited to one approach. His influence can be seen in many important artists who came after him, and his ideas about creativity, freedom, and connection with life are still relevant today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, N. S. Bendre made a major contribution to the modern art movement in India through his work, teaching, and ideas. He helped artists move from traditional imitation to modern expression, encouraging them to think independently and creatively.

His role at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda was especially important, as it helped develop one of the leading art centers in India. Through his guidance, many artists emerged who shaped modern Indian art in different ways.

Bendre's legacy is not limited to his paintings; it lives on in the ideas, practices, and artists he influenced. His belief in creativity, experimentation, and connection with life continues to inspire artists today. Because of his contributions, modern Indian art became more expressive, meaningful, and connected to society.

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