



SANCHIT ART

## **IMAGERY AND IMAGINATION**

### **In Contemporary Indian Art**

Art is thinking in images. Modern art goes a step ahead by putting techniques of image-making as equally important, perhaps even more important, than images so created. Postmodern art today often substitutes the role of images with the concept of creating images as the single most important criterion of art. Whatever it may be, there is no art without images. And the purpose of images in art is to help channelize various visualization of objects into symbols aimed at clarifying the unknown by means of the known.

Max Liebermann, writing nearly a century ago in 1904, was a strong exponent of the power of imagination in art. 'Good painting remains painting that has been well-conceived', he wrote while serving as President of the Prussian Akademie der Künste from 1920 to 1932. He was instrumental in steering Germany's attention to French Naturalism and Impressionism. In a significant piece of art-writing that played a pivotal role in shaping the course of art movement in Northern Europe to start with he also wrote: 'A bunch of asparagus, a bouquet of roses, can yield a masterpiece; a beautiful girl or an unattractive one, an Apollo or a misshapen dwarf, anything can be made into a masterpiece as long as there is a sufficient amount of imagination at work. Imagination alone transforms a work of craft into a work of art'.

It is not surprising to find that the same importance to ideas, and ideals, was voiced a decade before Liebermann by Swami Vivekananda. In 1897, after his emergence in the World stage as the most important spiritual leader and an equally important social thinker, he had voiced his thoughts in art to Ranada Prosad Dasgupta, the Principal of the Jubilee Art Academy in Calcutta, in an informal meeting. What he advised the young Principal then do also serve equally well as food for thought today. His sayings, appearing in translation in the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (vol. 7), reads ' Art has its origin in the expression of



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some idea in whatever man produces. Where there is no expression of ideas, however much there may be a display of colours and so on, it cannot be styled as true art.... The ancient artists used to evolve original ideas from their brains and try to express them in their paintings. Now (*a days*) the picture being a likeness of photographs, the power of originality and the attempt to develop are getting scarce... For example, the paintings from your art school have got no expression, as it were. It would be well if you try to paint the objects of everyday meditation by giving in them the expression of ancient ideals’.

Selection for the present show is kept divided into two opposite streams of visualization and these two may be labeled as ‘FIGURATIVE SYMBOLISM’ and ‘LYRICAL ABSTRACTION’, both having a strong emphasis on the spirit of imagination as its driving force. To paint recognizable figures of humans and animals and flowers as symbolic representation of something else is not an easy task and one always needs artistic ability to create various levels of Naturalism to achieve this. The same is also true in non-recognizable forms of art that are generally labeled as Abstraction. A greater mastery over the tools of the trade, of using line and colour without any use of recognizable objects, is needed to achieve the delicate, often poetic, balance of abstraction in visual art. There is no denying that in no other form of art is this ability as crucial as it is in painting. Art of sculpture comes to close second but painting demands this ability to its limit.

Inherited controversy between large oils and small watercolours, between abstraction and narrative representation, between figuration with non-figurative formalism, has always occupied centre-stage in modern Indian art. It has now been replaced by a totally new set of debates. Artists in India today addresses this multi-dimensional complexities with an even wider sense of freedom of using lines and colour and yet remaining conservative to a large extent. Their obsessive association with artistic skill of representation is the binding factor that threads them together; at least to a large extent. This selection aims to reveal this preoccupation of artistic skill and its use in developing a visual language full of



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communicable ideals without sacrificing its artistic positioning in post-modern pan-Indianness.

At the age of eight, a sickness terminally impaired Satish Gujral's hearing and, in 1947, he had to discontinue his studies at the J.J. School of Art because of recurring illness. This enforced silence in his private world, along with witnessing human suffering in an unprecedented scale during the Partition of India, gave birth to distinctly emblematic visuals that characterize his art. The social content in his paintings and graphics drew its strength from the anguish of the millions who lost their homes and families and migrated across the border in search of an elusive safety. All this had surfaced in angry, sweeping gestural brushwork in his paintings. Laxma Goud, on the other hand, always went back to his childhood memories of sex in nature, mostly rural and uninhibited, with its open and ribald Eros. His imagination unfailingly creates this surreal theme of sex in animated life in thoughtful visuals and raises it to an emblematic visualization of evolution of life in Earth. His delicately balanced interpretation of all natural elements as a communicative vehicle of sex in life is interpreted in line and colour with controlled humour that are drawn with the skill of a superb craftsman.

The same attention to artistic skill is equally viewable in Thota Vaikuntham, a contemporary of Laxma. He had chosen to limit his art within a structured pattern of visuals that derived its uniqueness from traditional art practices. Impersonation of women characters by the male artists of the theatre groups that traveled to, and performed in villages of rural India is an age-old practice. The colours used to paint women give them a vibrant and decorative look. Since childhood Vaikuntham remained unashamedly fascinated by this art of make-up and has successfully used it in his art that aims to communicate the elemental feeling of men and women, engaged in performing arts, with masked appearance. He portrays women as sensual and voluptuous and his male form appears remarkably calm, with a sense of humour. Vaikuntham epitomizes use of a traditional art form to represent a contemporary reality. Lalu Prasad Shaw's works, on the other hand, lay similar emphasis on his subject's



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physical characteristics. Known widely for his highly stylized portrayal of Bengali women and couples, he has employed his unique ability of capturing the expressions of his subjects perfectly with the greatest economy of line and colour. Influenced by the Company School of art of the pre-Independent India, along with the technique and tradition of Kalighat Pat and the Ajanta cave paintings, Shaw's works, mainly executed in gouache or tempera, are like his own person, simple and graceful, well-composed with a smooth exterior. His style, like Vaikuntham, is unique and modern in its adaptation of academic and traditional Indian formats.

Art of Laxma Goud and Lalu Shaw and Badri Narayan, Satish Gujral and Sakti Burman, Neeraj Goswami and Paresh Maity, Manoj Dutta and Suryaprakash, Jayasri Burman and Shipra Bhattacharya, Maite Delteil and Shuvaprasanna, Arpana Caur and Jogen Chowdhury all share this obsessive intention of using human face in various degree of make-up to convey a personalized assessment of human drama, - intimately complex yet full of visual charm. Art of Shanti Dave and Partha Shaw convey a not-so-unfamiliar feeling with the help of lyrical abstraction. Deepak Banerjee, in his own world of Tantric philosophy, conveys his intended message of cycle of life by means of imagery not originally intended for the same level of communicability. Such doubling of personalized commentary should no doubt have its pride of place in all attempts of critical reading. Reading, through a critical viewing, of art in modern India demands such a relationship between the art, usually produced in relative isolation, and its end-use, which takes place in the clinical atmosphere of museums and art galleries, and seldom in contact between the two. Logic of artistic unity in the works selected for this show derives its collective strength if viewed to look for its critical undercurrents, diverse in visual imagery yet unified in thoughtful imagination.

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