



the **MAARAGM** & the **MODI**

BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY  
curated by Dr. Alka Pande

LALIT KALA GALLERIES  
RABINDRA BHAWAN  
MANDI HOUSE NEW DELHI 110 001  
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Director's Note



Gallery Espace continues another significant show – *The Mod* look anew at tradition, its inspiratic

Gallery Espace has over the last t stretching the frontiers of what c mounted various shows like *Drawin Hota Hai* in 2001 and now *the Mar*

For a number of years, this subjec by the ways in which contempor appropriatd visual language from Late Mr. K. K Nair who introduces series of books on tradition, Nair with me extensively.

I am grateful to Dr-Alka Pande for teaching of Indian Aesthetics, she Together we selected significant translating the concepts through th My team at the gallery – Arunima, and made this show possible.

A special thanks to Meeta Marwah w Yogesh Rawal whose ideas for har My thanks also to the staff at the Ganieve Grewal, Deeksha Nath, for And for the participating artists my support.

To my family – my husband Deven support, which gives me the streng Renu Modi

*"Only a dialogue with the past can produce originality"*

Wilson Harris

*"... That between the traditional and the new, or between order and adventure, there is no real opposition, and that what we call tradition today is merely a compromise between the two."*

Jorge Luis Borges

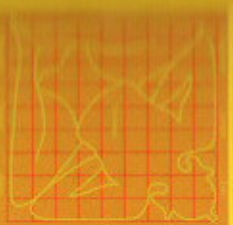
Tradition and modernity are not contradictory or exclusive. They are merely two different manifestations, which can interact beneficially. Tradition is still commonly considered a "thing of the past" without any contemporary legitimacy, and modernity is often mistakenly viewed as modernism.

What is tradition? The straightforward answer may be that it is the accumulated heritage of a culture, that is, the symbolic culture of a group. Tradition is located in the historic roots of the present culture. The formulation of this accumulated heritage of a group, its various events, people or historical processes become mythologised and function as images, as symbols, as myth or belief-systems. Tradition – the source of wisdom, of knowledge, of tools of survival – tolerates the coexistence of a multitude of life forms, of cultural patterns and ways of life. It shelters the forgotten, the marginalised and the destitute, the scorn and refuse of progress. It is an area of diversity in opposition to the uniformity of modern structures. Its every corner houses untold colours, designs, languages, tastes, sights, and smells.

Quite often tradition is viewed as anti-progress, a dead weight to scientific knowledge and technological advancements, rooted in a fantastic, glorified past. But there is a great power in continuing the centrality of tradition in India. It is diametrically opposite to Western/ developed societies. These societies in the overwhelming desire to embrace progress have lost their past traditions (religious, social, cultural, artistic practices) and now have to look outside themselves towards societies like us, which have not wholly jettisoned their past, in search of a belief-system and a sense of continuity. But this situating within the traditional doesn't deny India's grasp of or participation in the modern and post-modern discourses. On the contrary, the simultaneous cheek-by-jowl coexistence of all three strands is clearly manifest in our cultural expressions and art practices.

This brings us to the question of what constitutes modernity? Modernity may be understood as the sense or the idea that, through a process of social and cultural change, life in the present is fundamentally different from life in the past. Modernity is thus, a keen sense of *originality* of a specific culture at a particular moment in space and time. Modernity must be distinguished from amnesia, because nothing can be measured to be different, original, innovative, if the benchmark is not acknowledged or is deliberately forgotten or ignored! Thus, modernity being the vibrant experience of uniqueness of any moment in history is simultaneously the intricately bonded experience of a contemporary present with its historical memory.

The 'crisis of transition' from the traditional to the modern is not particularly easy to pinpoint and define within the Indian context. What is traditional today? Is it craft? Is it the decorative arts? What is modern? Did a tradition undergo a transition or mere displacement? Is the transition more about content? Is merely a change of format transition? Is the artisan the original traditional artist meticulously adhering to the



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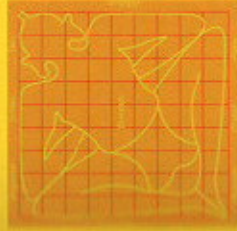
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canons prescribed in texts? Where is modernity in India? Are the folk and tribal traditions in art the linkages between tradition and modernity?

"Traditional" Indian art, as dictated by ancient texts such as the Silpa Shastras and Agama texts, provides invaluable insight into various aspects of the production of art from the scientific nature of paints to the canons dictating their use. These works make it very clear that different terms were specific to different arts – *citra* referred to sculpture, *citrarcha* meant relief sculpture while *citrabhasa* denoted painting. The Silpa texts are a rich source of information, and prominent among them are: *Visnudharmottaram*, *Samarangana-Sutradhara*, *Aparajitapirccha*, *Abhilasitartha-Cintamani* (or *Manasollasa*), *Silparatna*, *Naradasilpasashtra*, *Kasyapasilpa*.

Emerging from consciousness, artistic representation may be traced back to Vedantic and pre-Vedantic philosophy where thought preceded form. From the abstract to the figurative and from the figurative to the abstract, the core of Indian aesthetics develops in a highly structured fashion originating in the *Mayashastra*, a compendium of dramaturgy. In ancient India the very essence of appreciating the arts, be they the plastic or performing, lay in the savouring of the 'sap' or juice of expression.

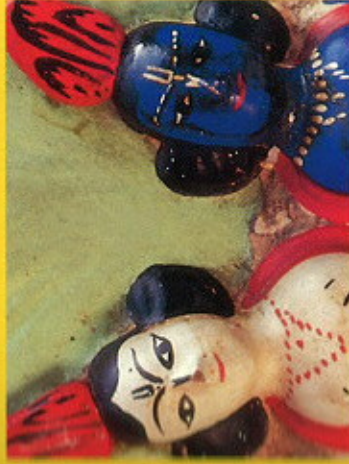
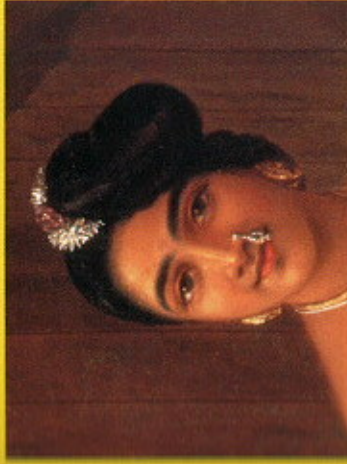
From our location within tradition, we shall have to explore modernity and post-modernity. Our tradition has already absorbed a good deal of the modern, starting with Rammohun Roy's use of the Enlightenment discourse in his dealings with the nascent colonial powers, to our present day fixation with development as the panacea for our poverty and backwardness. The use of modern concepts and strategies to critique tradition has been a part of the standard practice of our social reformers for the last two hundred years. Contrarily, we have used the insights of tradition to critique the excesses of modernity: the best example of this, of course, is Gandhi. Now we can extend these possibilities by using tradition which has already assimilated a part of modernity to critique post-modernity, or to use post-modernity in conjunction with tradition to critique our continuing investment in the modern.

Modernisation is marked by a shift in social behaviour leading to a change in nation-states, cultural, religious and gender politics. It is a composite concept. It is also an ideological concept, and ideology also serves as a canopy under which the similarities and differences of contra-distinct models of modernisation can be examined. Modernism may be defined as the deliberate departure from tradition and the use of innovative forms of expression that distinguish many styles in the arts and literature of the 20th century. While "Modernism" generally refers to the broad aesthetic movements of the 20th century, "modernity" refers to a set of philosophical, political, and ethical ideas that provide the basis for the aesthetic aspect of modernism.

The present "crisis of modernity" is the sense that modernity is a problem, that traditional ways of life have been replaced with uncontrollable change and unmanageable alternatives. The crisis itself is merely the sense that the present is a transitional point, not focused on a clear goal in the future but simply changing through forces outside our control.

In India the crisis of modernity exists at several levels. The co-existence of paradoxes, dilemmas, continuities and fractures renders it complex and challenging at the same time. The interface between art and craft, between the *Margi* and the *Desi*, between the formal and the non-formal, the spiritual and the decorative are key issues that need to be unravelled.

The exhibition **The Margi and the Desi** concentrates on these very questions, while raising key issues, such as the nature of the fine art tradition in India and whether there has been



a break in modernism in the past century. As part of this process of 'requestioning', each artist has been asked to incorporate this viewpoint in her/his work, producing a piece specifically for the exhibition.

True modernity has often been discussed as being aware of the difference of the present time to preceding ones, without implying that the preceding ones have to be rejected. It is the consciousness of a different sensibility and of a fresh perception of time and space. This thought was apparent in Raja Ravi Varma and Amrita Sher-Gill's work. However, were these the only examples of real modernity in India?

We experience modernity as a proliferation of alternatives either in regard to lifestyle or historical possibilities. Traditional cultures see themselves as repeating a finite number of alternatives in the present; while in modern cultures, the future opens up a vast field of historical and lifestyle choices. This proliferation of alternatives is a source of great anxiety and often results in cultural attempts to restrict alternatives in the face of this anxiety.

Neither tradition nor modernity is overriding enough in India for the one to erase the other. They are not separate but exist simultaneously *in the same person*. For instance, in Indian literature, tradition and modernity are not presented as exclusive; there is no either/or option. But it is a morally charged debate especially when we contrast the subterranean meanings that identify with these terms. 'Modern' as equated with the uniqueness of post-Enlightened Western Europe which is valued for the way it has transformed human and natural relations, placing the individual at the centre of all progress and change.

Similarly, contemporary Indian towns live in several centuries simultaneously. Western style high-rises coexist with urban villages or *mohallas*. The poverty, which is often a handmaiden of 'Third World' societies, was encouraged and given a somewhat modern form by the father of modern India, Mahatma Gandhi, who preached the virtues of the simple peasant



K. Venkatappa  
Ravi Varma, 14 x 20 cms, watercolour wash, tempera on paper, coll. NSMA  
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K. Venkatappa  
Ravi Varma, 14 x 20 cms, watercolour wash, tempera on paper, coll. NSMA  
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life as spiritually fulfilling (Fukuyama, 1992:228). This is in all respects opposite to the capitalist, free economy democracy of Western nations.

With this sanctification of poverty, many social scientists have assumed that religion was one of those aspects of "traditional culture" that would decline under the impact of industrialisation. And since religion is inherently irrational, it would give way to the rational acquisitiveness that constituted capitalism (Fukuyama, 229). But Weber disputed this belief saying that religion and modern work practices are very similar, both calling for intensive labour and early death, as work is itself redeeming.

It hardly needs emphasising that the ideas and institutions of modernity have wielded enormous material and moral power. Like all other social systems, modernity too has been historically and culturally specific but it is perhaps the only social system in human history that has had the technological capability, the social organisation and the systemic will-to-power to make so comprehensive an attempt to reshape the entire world in its own image<sup>1</sup>.

Scientific knowledge has been accumulating for a very long period, and has had a consistent if frequently unperceived effect in shaping the fundamental character of human societies. But a qualitative change occurred in the relationship of scientific knowledge to the historical process with the rise of modern natural science, that is, from the discovery of the scientific method by men like Descartes, Bacon and Spinoza in the 16th and 17th centuries. The possibility of mastering nature was a European discovery. With this discovery came the possibility of world domination.

But despite the remarkable convergent forces and processes (colonisation being its starkest form) that swept across the world, modernity is hardly a single unified entity. This predicament faces several more roadblocks when situated in non-Western, postcolonial societies. Seen as the brainchild of the West, modernity causes extreme anxieties in societies trying to locate independent cultural systems, as the point of evaluation is always Western. This makes mockery of the belief of equality. According to Hegel, history has to be understood as a "struggle of recognition": To continue to refer to non-Western or Third World societies as simply 'traditional' is misleading as all societies today have the faculties to produce local 'moderns'. If as Robert Redfield said "the word tradition connoted the act of handing down and what is handed down from one generation to another", then the implied sharp distinction between traditional and modern disappears. What is modern today is traditional tomorrow and the object, knowledge, handed down cannot preclude the contemporary.

During the modern period, traditional systems have undergone rapid change. A colonial and postcolonial phenomena, nation-states were the first to undergo massive restructuring, carving and consolidating in the modern period. Democracy has been viewed as one of its shining achievements. The last decade has seen a wave of real world democratisation and a number of commentators use media as an entry point to think about democracy, difference and representation (Barnett, 2003). Democracy has no one pure form which can be measured against the undistilled ideology of democracy. Representation is integral to the internal complexity of the concepts of democracy. Democracy has played a vital role in the production and consumption of visual culture. Indian democracy is distinct from the Western model. Imperialist domination relied heavily on visual codes to perpetuate its superiority whereas, in India, media allowed us to reclaim our own historicity and the already existing home-grown modernity or progress which happily coexisted with traditional belief-systems.

<sup>1</sup> Deshpande, S. 'Modernization'. *Des*, V.2003:63-98.  
<sup>2</sup> *Image: Krishna-Balarama, Kallighat painting, late nineteenth century, coll: Chester Herwitz, USA*  
<sup>3</sup> *Image: Surasvati in the Image of a New Woman Playing on the Violin (détail), Kallighat painting, 43 x 28 cms, watercolour on paper, 1970, coll: Chester Herwitz, USA*

McKim Marriott, who was in India during the Second World War and his successor, Milton Singer, who studied India in the 1950s, focused on the specific strategies used by urban Indians to manage the simultaneous presence of tradition and modernity in their everyday lives. They found that by compartmentalising traditional and modern contexts, institutions, Indians simultaneously parochialised and universalised their immediate environment. The latter is a process whereby elements of the mini traditions (customs, rites, deities) ascend to become part of the 'great' tradition and thus acquires universal status. The former is the opposite, the filtering of elements of the 'great' tradition which become personal and confined.

Tradition in culture most commonly refers to India's visual legacy or art practices. The *desi* categorises street and popular images, folk and tribal art, craft. The *margi* encompasses murals, wall paintings, manuscripts and scrolls, miniature traditions till the Kalighat *pats*.

Folk, tribal art or craft has traditionally been studied within the utilitarian framework for its use or performance rather than as part of the aesthetic discourse. Its usefulness, by employing tradition and simple methods, often demanded collective work. And as the producers and consumers of folk art are not from different social groups, it has led to the siting of folk art as a community effort. With the appropriation of folk aesthetics into modern art practices by artists such as Swaminathan, who adopted and adapted the art of Bastar, it is still viewed as a collective creation and evolves from within the community<sup>2</sup>.

Folk aesthetics played a vital role in articulating the modern/nationalist language of India at the turn of the 19th century. Coomaraswamy wrote extensively to shatter the boundaries segregating fine art and craft and attempted to construct a pedigree that included miniature and folk traditions. He argued against the colonial view which determined aesthetic standards by European representational art and the classification of art as folk or classical. He spoke of Indian art in terms of *desi* and *margi*, secular and sacred, placing folk art with the *margi* and the traditions of miniature, local and provincial schools with *desi*.

Coomaraswamy used this system of classification to specify that Indian art was people's art. Thus, he took the view that Mughal painting "even when more refined than Hindu painting is a byway rather than a highway art; it is essentially an art of portraiture... a "dated" art, which is as much to say a "placed" (*desi*) art. For we cannot logically restrict the idea of "local" to a merely spatial significance..." he commented, writings from an ideological resistance to colonialism (1937:79).

Besides Coomaraswamy's acumen, Rabindranath Tagore and J.Swaminathan have also written extensively on the concept of tradition and modernity in their own sphere of excellence.

Kalighat *pats* represent an example of the rural urban artistic interface creating new aesthetics based in metropolis. Deriving from the scroll painting of folk Bengal, they employed modern tools of paper and chemically created paint to portray contemporary themes using folk forms, composition and colours.

At Santiniketan, in West Bengal, a unique art school was set up by Rabindranath Tagore in 1901. It became a hub of art activity, basically a site which saw the translations of Tagore's experiments with education. Tagore was deeply engaged with the discourses of tradition and modernity. Bendobehari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar Baij, who were the early students of the school, along with Nandalal Bose brought in their combined energies and made Santiniketan the center of modern art in India. With its multidisciplinary slant and Tagore's preoccupation with culture of the environment, Santiniketan opened its wings to western thoughts, ideas and art practices.



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2 Chatterji, R. "The Category of Folk", *Dak*, V. 2003: 567-597.

(above right) Kankaraya, Kalighat painting, 43 x 28 cms, watercolour on paper, mid-nineteenth century, coll: Chester Herwitz, USA. (below left) Amrita Sher-Gil, Mother India, 72.3 x 97.7 cms, oil on canvas, 1935 coll: NGMA.

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Firmly convinced that Indian art should be working to serve society, Tagore's visit to Japan in 1916 showed him the path.. His subsequent visits to Europe and America distilled his perceptions further. Bringing the Viennese art historian Stella Kramrisch and the Bauhaus artists exhibition opened the minds of the Indian students to Western art practices.

Scholars, writers and artists naturally homed into Santiniketan at this time. Nandalal Bose, a brilliant young mind, was brought in to head Kala Bhavan. Nandalal Bose's contact with Coomaraswamy and Okakura changed the perceptions of traditions. "Rather than see tradition as a normative constant he learned to see it as a spectrum of functional and communicational purposes with corresponding levels of visual language that made each tradition varied yet connected panorama. (Sivakumar:69:2003)

Art and education, holistic learning became the backbone at Santiniketan. Public art was encouraged by Nandalal Bose, the Swadeshi Movement of the thirties transformed Santiniketan into the indigenous answer to art education, in the form of a space defining national identities. Benodebehari, one of the first students of Kala Bhavan, who was solely a painter of landscapes till 1942 became increasingly eclectic He also became involved in exploring different pictorial representations and like his teacher Nandalal Bose started looking at the art-craft continuum.

Yet another significant voice to emerge from Santiniketan was Ramkinkar Baij. Coming from the same trajectory of landscape art, he brought in dynamism and energy. He too was part of the sweep of modernism. Tradition and modernity go hand in hand in his works though not in the same way as that of Bose or Mukherjee's. Ramkinkar celebrated the vigour and energy of the Santal tribes in his monumental sculptures and paintings.

The modern in Indian painting was also driven by an urge to define national identity. And one artist who stood apart is Jamini Roy. Roy was tutored in the European academic-realist style at the Government school of Art, Calcutta. His personal interest in the folk art traditions propelled him to follow the guild structure of the Indian craft traditions. He turned his own family into a production unit But in his own art practice " he opted for significantly alternative sources to define tradition, that of the folk paintings and temple terracotta relief panels of Bengal. From these formal and stylistic references, he attempted to build up a viable personal pictorial language. " (Sivakumar:81:2003)

From Bengal came a resurgence, of nationalism, of a search for national identity, a relooking at traditions, a movement forwards. The artists from Bengal translated modernity in their art practices, changing pictorial representations, works which had strong roots in their immediate past histories, yet moving forwards.

Where folk art is comfortably nestled in small communities, popular art and imagery is fragmented and hybrid. The culture it represents has to be viewed within the larger social, economic and political arena.

The concept of inter-ocularly (dialogue between different visual media) is apparent in the traditional and contemporary visual culture of *margi* and *desi*. The intimate interactions between the two extend beyond an apparent demarcation.

I intend to look at the concept of tradition and modernity not art-historically, but as a cultural construct. It is in essence sacred and secular rather than highbrow and lowbrow. I am using the musical vocabulary to address the tensions and complexities between tradition and modernity simply because it is the most relevant. A superficial and systematic classification between the two is almost impossible – it is like the egg and chick theory:



Varma, Saravati, 180 x 137 cms, oil on paper, 1896

What came first, the folk or the classical? If we were to adopt the Coomaraswamy model sacred and secular go hand in hand. All through the ages the tribal, folk, agricultural and urban societies have existed side by side.

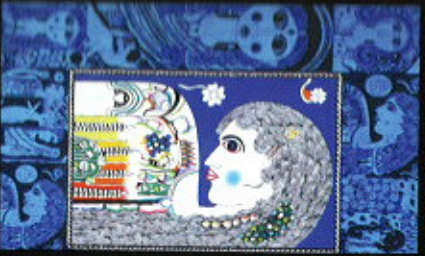
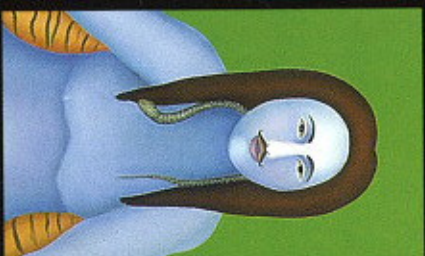
Both modernism and the avant-garde in the West always define themselves in relation to two cultural phenomena: the traditional bourgeois high culture and the vernacular and popular culture which is increasingly transforming into modern commercial mass culture. This is a volatile relationship, as most debates tend to valorise the former at the expense of the latter.

Most post-colonial communities see themselves as having arrived at their modern art practices by their own routes developing from a strong base in their own traditions rather than having been given modern art by 'Western' innovators. (Edwards, S. 1999:227).

If we were to follow Raymond Williams's situating of modernism in the period 1890 to about 1940, when the "canon" of modern art was fashioned and widely valorised, then the beginning of modernism in Indian art, which developed during and was influenced by the colonial domination by the British coinciding with the fifty years earmarked by Williams, becomes a valid historical process.

Raymonds believes that modernism originally developed as a rejection of capitalist culture, both aristocratic and socialist, has today been effectively incorporated into contemporary mass media. "The modern" is a perpetual condition, founded on exile, homelessness, anonymity. Much of these conditions can be applied to India where the modern language grew as the voice of a nation attempting to locate itself within and without the national politics of attaining freedom.

Modernism in India, according to Geeta Kapur, has the oddest retroactive trajectories (2000:297). On the one hand, we have Raja Ravi Varma who in the late 1800s was upheld by the British and Indians alike as a true 'gentleman' artist. His imagery was influenced by and synthesised the various elements of his traditional Hindu upbringing with his British education, creating a pictorial language which the vast Indian public could identify with and were most visually comfortable with. Without blindly aping the



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English artists living and painting in India, he combined the technique of oil painting with the decorative attitudes of Tanjore glass painting and the drama of Marathi theatre to create a fusion between the east and west.

At the other end of the spectrum, several decades later, Amrita Sher-Gil openly condemned the romantic aesthetic of the Bengal School artists and proclaimed the need for an international dialogue. Amrita did not paint celestial beings but placed her gods and goddesses in the silent, patient faces of the common people underlined with a sense of tragedy. She looked to Cezanne for the organisation of form and Gauguin for her organisation of colour, though simplicity always remained her guiding principle. Trained in Paris, Amrita Sher-Gil addressed the need of incorporating international aesthetics within the Indian sensibility in an attempt to nudge Indian art forward.

Within the fifty years that articulated and formalised the modern aesthetic, artists struggled to find their own inspirations. Synthesising national and international art practices and awakening to the realisation that to participate in the modern global discourse they would have to examine all avenues – national, international, rural, folk, mural, craft, artists in modern and contemporary India have developed a rich multi-hued language by adopting and adapting the visual grammar, imagery and composition if Indian miniature and mural traditions.

India has its own Parampara or canons for traditional art. Aestheticians have defined various etymologies of artistic practices. Modernity is a part of the Indian tradition and thus what is modern in India, is in many ways post-modern. Hybridity and multi-culturalism have been a part of India.

The 20th century presented India a lively and charged atmosphere – politically, socially as well as economically. The waning of imperialism on a global scale had far-reaching consequences on the cultural life of India. In post-Independence India, the social life was searching for a national identity much like the Nation-States of the 18th century. In Bengal the art saw a revivalist tendency wherein the present was being regenerated with a nostalgic regression to the 'glorious' past. A re-reading of the older traditions of Mughal and Pahari paintings, even the Ajanta wall-painting was being undertaken.

De-colonisation made Indian artists more conscious of their Indian identity as a consequence of a direct confrontation with the global modernity. Global modernity and national specificity occupied a centrality in the minds of the artists. This phenomenon was very aptly described by German art historian Hermann Goetz, who said, "Indian Art had faced a crisis during colonial rule, which ended with the rise of modernism, when the best artists started again on their quest for true art, not from a superficial imitation of the past, but from an understanding of the basic principles underlying all genuine creations."

The post-colonial India saw a rather bold group of artists coming together and forming the Progressive Artists' Group. Their most important contribution to Indian art was their willingness to learn from the European modernism as opposed to the hues preached by the revivalist artists. They also initiated a shift towards a mythical tradition and a break away from the fruitless pursuit of naturalism and revivalism. With a predominantly urban or at least urbanised background, these artists aimed at a definition of the self with a fairly modern vision.

This evolved into the 'free market' era of the 70s and 80s where the commercial aspect of art gained importance with galleries mushrooming in the main cities. Artists developed a style of expressing personal experiences with a platonic experience to make universal statements.



A gap still exists between tradition and modernity in our country aggravated by the complexities and tensions, which are inherent in any development. These also became a predominant feature of this transition. The exhibition appraises the manner in which traditions have been assimilated, translated, transformed and even included in the contemporary art practices.

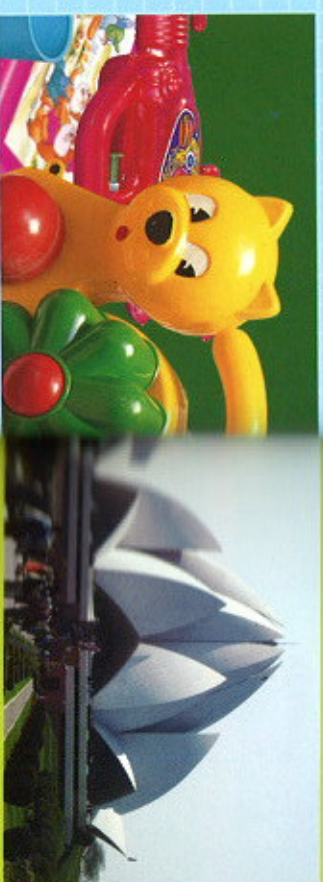
It also attempts to examine the new visual vocabulary that has emerged at the turn of the millennium, from the ancient to the modern, from the modern to the post-modern and to contemporary art practices. In painting and sculpture there is an underlying thread of continuity with fractures and ruptures at moments in history. Post-colonial India brought with it its own neurosis and with contemporary art geographical spaces are changing with artists moving from India to the West and vice versa.

The participating artists have been chosen with some thought. Each one approaches the dichotomy inherent in our present debate from a different position using themes, materials or styles as their choice from which to engage in the tradition/modern discourse. None of them claims to be either or but realises her/his art in the contemporary without a violent disclaimer of the past, recognising the debt we owe to our tradition.

Founder member of Group 1890 in 1962, J. Swaminathan (1929-94) in the manifesto declared a formal rejection of Western values in art. Trained at the Delhi Polytechnic, he became a full time artist in 1950s. The main feature of his paintings was simplicity of form and composition. The vivid imagery and bright colour, geometry and brush painting gave way to the use of symbols, a direct influence of the tribal arts and he began to use his fingers to apply the pigment in order to achieve the desired effect. His attraction to material/ ritual/ occult resituated the still extant visual culture of iconic forms present in India. He polarsed Indian and western aesthetics.

Manjit Bawa (b. 1941) trained at the Delhi College of Art. Inspired by Puranic texts and miniature paintings from Basholi, Bawa, like many artists participating in this exhibition, makes free use of tradition by mythic attributes and invented ancestral origins in his work (Kapur, When was Modernism, 2000:369). His works don't subvert iconography to elicit nostalgia but employ religious metaphors placed in natural surroundings to, not so much take a reactionary stance in the post-colonial era, but form an independent expression that serves to define difference. Manjit Bawa's work depicts a harmonious coexistence of man and animal. Deeply influenced by Sufism, he believes that scriptures explain human action and reaction, cause and effect. His sources of inspiration - Pahari miniature traditions, folk lore, love songs of Heer Ranjha and Sohni Mahiwal, Krishna legends and the mystical poetry of the Sufi mystics like Bulle Shah, are all executed in bold colours and forms devoid of any Western influence.

Jogen Chowdhury (b. 1939) trained in Paris and returned to India in 1968 to develop a distinctly Indian drawing sensibility (Sinha, Indian Art: An Overview, 2003:135). He too, like Swaminathan, rejects outright any foreign influence which detracts from a search for a visual idiom rooted in India. Jogen repeatedly employs symbols from everyday Bengali life like the bolster or local produce. His images belong to pre-industrial India. He is firmly equated with post-modernism because his art smoothly bridges the time between modern and pre-modern that supports the appearance of continuity rather than fracture. Jogen Chowdhury's art evolves out of a filial affinity to nature and milieu. Mnemonic displacements and personal associations add to the symbolic ambivalence of his motifs, making his images come closer to inexplicable experiences than to explicit signs. The figures adopt a fluid, organic flavour.



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Madhubanji Parekh (b. 1942) has had no formal training in art and draws upon her rural upbringing in Gujarat for her form, colours, compositions, themes. Analogies have been made between her work and child art, as it follows no set norms of perspective or proportion. Her art is primitive, infused with myths and fables taking the narrative format.

In the 1960s and 70s, a new movement evolved, with Baroda as its nerve centre, based on the Indian pictorial tradition of narrative composition. It consciously rejected abstraction. At the heart of the movement was Gulammohammed Sheikh (b. 1937). Placing the self at the centre he drew personal narratives, not as fulsome naïveté but as allegories. The compositions are populated with persons from the social and political arena much as was employed in Jataka tales.

Nilima Sheikh (b. 1945) works in traditional tempera on paper and casein tempera on cotton. Claiming pre-modern Rajput and Mughal court (miniature) painting as her artistic lineage, her relationship is more geared toward its visual forms than its technical aspects. Her's is a politics of affection to which she brings to bear her personal vulnerable feminine discourse of bearer, bringer and nurturer of life. For these she creates safe spaces wherein are staged her personal performances ranging from the everyday to the erotic to the mystical.

Sculptor Latika Katt (b. 1948) converts formal objects into contemporary icons and then back into solid entities acknowledging and emphasising the prominence of materials. Working with materials and their surface, she has expanded her sculptural ideas to include the natural aging or weathering effect of nature to underline the works' impact.

Meera Mukherjee (1923-1998) realised her need to search for the 'Indianness' in her work in the 1950s. From 1960s onwards she spent years in Bastar, researching the ancient technique of dhokra casting and alongside imbibed the ways and values of tribal living. She travelled extensively and was the first amongst her contemporaries to search for a complete identification with the crafts tradition. Her works are firmly placed within primitivism and destroy the distinction between art and craft.

Mrinalini Mukherjee's (b.1949) massive sculptures are a result of the material and craft based teaching at Baroda. Employing human and natural forms, her sculptures are rife with organic lyricism. They are metaphors of fertility – the powerful mother goddesses who are concurrently nurturer and destroyer.

Ravinder Reddy (b.1956) juxtaposes the iconic and classical with the kitsch and popular in his gold leaf covered gigantic female heads, beautifully coiffured. He synthesises the holy with the chaotic, the temple with the marketplace. His yakshis are seductive, ornamental, monumental, iconic and repetitious.

Amit Ambalal (b.1943) leads a traditional life in his family home Sumeru in Ahmedabad. He collects Nathdwara Pichhwais, Unani anatomical charts, Bengal School paintings in wash technique and old photographs – all of which influence his style. The centrality of his art is Krishna not as motif, symbol or subject but in essence. He uses the colours associated with Krishna's leela: midnight blue, lotus pink but that's where the visual clues end. His art highlights the humour of contemporary life without missing or diminishing the conflicts, all within the eye of Krishna.

Laxma Goud (b.1940) displays versatility over a range of mediums, from etching, gouache and pastels, to glass paintings. He has transformed his works from one medium to another very neatly and impressively over the years. A student at the Government School of Art and Architecture, Hyderabad, he graduated with a diploma in drawing and painting in



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1963. This was followed by a stint of training in mural painting and printmaking at M S University, Baroda. His works have a potent rawness about them. The portraits of men and women represent dynamic Indian ethos rather than particular individual identities. He delves very extensively into the erotic, which manifests in various forms of male and female sexuality in his works. A bridging of the various aspects of reality and fantasy is very starkly apparent in his works.

Lalu Prasad Shaw (b.1937) is known widely for his highly stylised portraits of Bengali men, women and couples. His works emphasise most on his subject's physical characteristics. Capturing the expression of his subjects perfectly with the greatest economy of line and colour each of Shaw's paintings has an intimate feel to it. He completed his education in fine arts at the Government College of Arts and Crafts in Kolkata. A particularly notable aspect of Shaw's paintings is their simple yet sophisticated look. Various stylistic elements seem to be perfectly synthesized to achieve a phenomenal effect.

Kalam Patua (b.1962) departed from tradition by focusing on contemporary life, although patuas traditionally told religious stories about gods and goddesses. "It was in 1997 that a meeting with curator and cultural historian Jyotindra Jain changed the course of my life," says Patua. A crusader for tribal art form, Jain recognised Patua's immense potential and encouraged him to use old metaphors in contemporary style. There was no looking back for Patua, who is quick in interpreting modern themes. While referring to Kalam Patua's work it would be interesting to recall the entire Western academic debate on the folk and tribal art of non-Western societies. It has centered round the polemic notions of the protection of their original cultural identity, and those of change and assimilation through exposure to modern industrial culture, which valorised individualistic innovative creations meant to be held out to a pure modernist aesthetic gaze.

Ravi K., (b.1972) in Khammam district in Andhra Pradesh has entered the discourse with his own inimitable vocabulary. Having studied at the two most traditional art institutions of the country – the Andhra University and a post graduate degree from Santiniketan in West Bengal, he combines the best of both in his art works. The strong drawing technique of Andhra Pradesh and the emotive and figurative ethos of Santiniketan reverberate in his work. Ravi K's sensibilities belong to a past which is traditional and the contemporary, which is modern. Resonances of Madhubani art tradition are intermingled with the formal stylistic expression.

The exhibition ultimately attempts to analyse the various similarities and differences inherent between the otherwise contradictory terms of tradition and modernity. It deals with both of them at various levels and also establishes a sort of congruence between the two. I have tried to focus on the understanding of the contemporary and modern through the evolution of the traditional and folk. Thus, *The Margi and the Desi* is actually a statement to the cultural identity of the present with a deep influence of the past.

**Dr. Alka Pande**

Art Historian and Curator



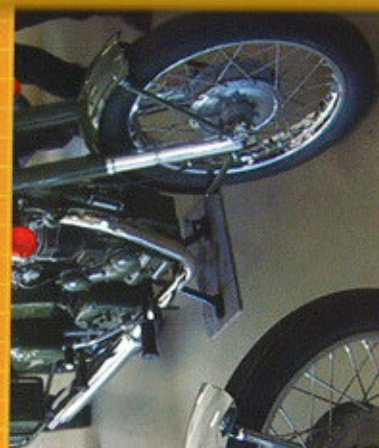
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# A TRADITION & MODERNITY

## Impulses to discovery and recovery

*"And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
and know the place for the first time."*

T.S.Eliot, *Four Quartets*

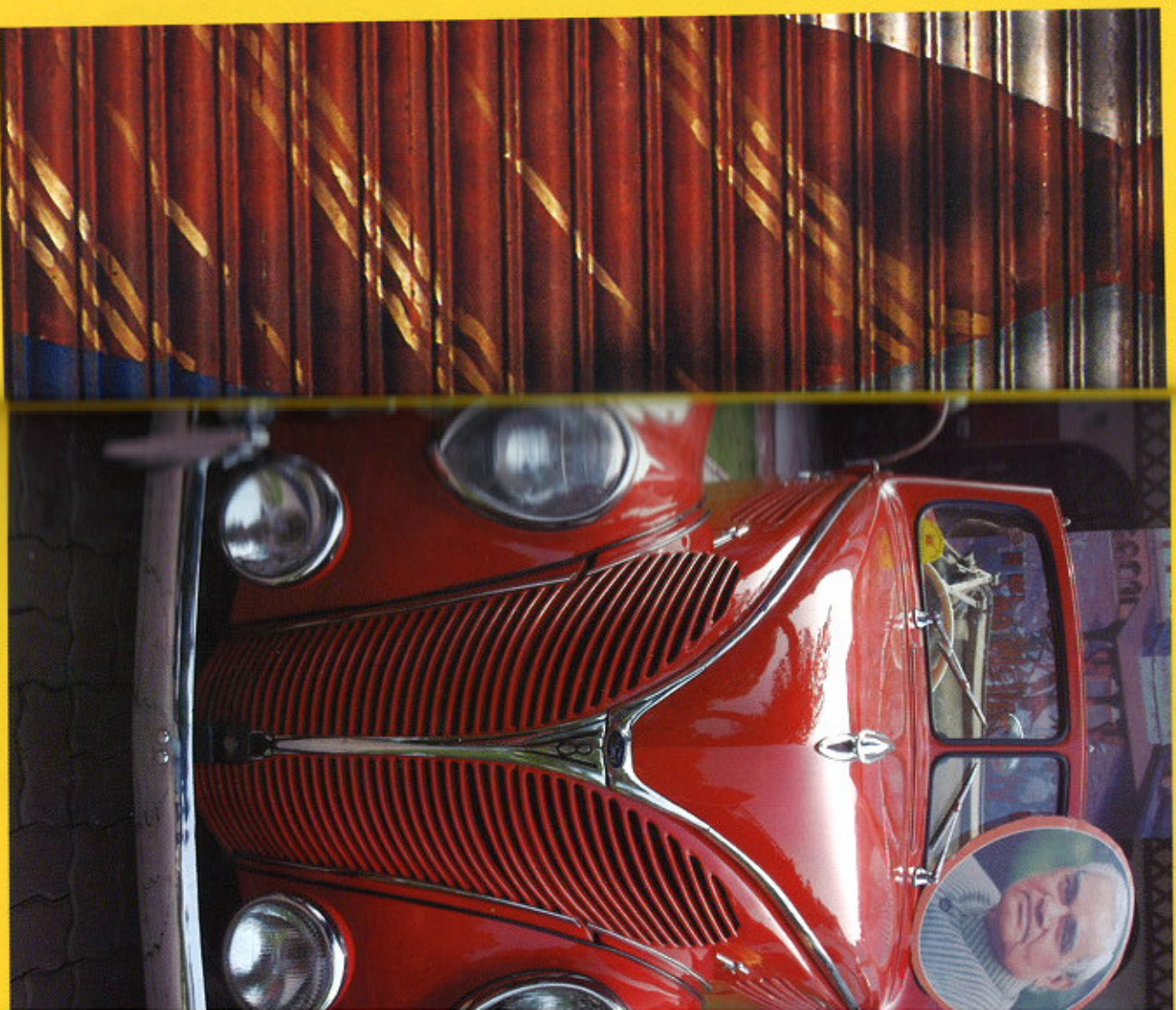
The human eye, like the human mind, is a lazy instrument, habituated to viewing its world through filters of prejudice and preconception. "All art is a lie that makes us realize the truth," said Picasso, and this re-orientation of perception is what drives the visual and literary arts alike.

Perhaps it's easier for us writers. The novel is by definition something that is always new; molding and recasting itself in the contours of the contemporary. Unlike the plastic arts, which cannot but subsist on aesthetics and aesthetic theory, narrative discourse is an immediate and social form. Although the subject of literature is always the human, human situations, aspirations, environment, yet human nature is portrayed in its social manifestations. The language and metaphor of nature change with usage, adopting what is current, modern and of the moment, while the subject tends to retain its constant and stubborn sameness.

Modernity is propelled by the impulse to discovery, while tradition implies the process of recovery. Each is precious and valuable in its place. As books are written, published, reviewed, and subjected to the vagaries of the cerebral marketplace, the process of canonization begins cataloging them into the "enduring" classics, and the passing flux of contemporaneous success. This process is full of its own insidious compulsions, but as good a filter as any other. Then, a process of debunking, of questioning and overthrowing, and sometimes re-legitimizing, the canon comes into play, and the eternal forces of equilibrium are again at work.

And so it continues, the dance of modernity and tradition, as sure-footed as the interplay of night and day, light and shade. In a story that is probably not apocryphal, Henry Kissinger once asked Zhou En Lai what he thought of the French revolution. The Chinese philosopher-politician knitted his brow and reflected for some time before replying "...it's really too early to tell." His reply is equally applicable to what is enduring in recent art. The forces of luck, determined self-promotion and motivated patronage tilt the scales of talent only temporarily. True quality is not limited to timeframes, but reaches across temporal and societal barriers to embrace the human situation.

Modernity then is a reinvention or reinterpretation from the roots, genesis and ancestry of tradition. The more things change, the more determinedly they remain the same. So-called radical breaks with tradition are the most likely to swing back the other way, in the





constant, assured cycles of romantic and classical, conservative and radical, trad and mod. It's a process as predictable as Paris hemlines or Bollywood remixes.

Pop music is a very good example of these cycles. Generations ago, Bob Dylan wrote and sang these words: "Mothers and fathers throughout the land / don't criticize what you don't understand / your sons and daughters are beyond your command." Well, those aging sons and daughters, as other over-thirties, now buy most of the pop music in the fiercely analyzed and segmented music market. The angry defiance of the sixties and the seventies, the iconic cult-groups like the Beatles, the Doors and the Rolling Stones, have entered the realm of hoary, venerable tradition. Most of those alive have been honoured with titles by the establishment. Golden Oldies are a staple of the sales counters, and their reinterpretations, such as the group Oasis modeling themselves on the Beatles, re-establish the familiar rhythm of rock and roll.

Another take on tradition and modernity could look at a different set of cyclical allusions, one dear to eighteenth century literary theory. The polarities of the Apollonian and Dionysian traditions followed the pattern of Romantic and Classical literature. Apollo, like Vishnu, conveys the conservative impulses of continuity, of maintenance, and preservation. Dionysus, like Shiva, stands for both destruction and regeneration. The unruly Romantic poets, rebels like Keats, Shelley and Byron, were prone to the Dionysian. In another age, iconoclastic groups like the Doors, with the startling poetry of Jim Morrison, were hailed as harbingers of a vibrant neo-paganism, a necessary reaction against sanitized, sterile, industrial-age Christianity. But the "modernity" of the Doors did not arrive readymade into their moody minds, it arrived via the influences of European and even Native American tradition. For example, one of the Doors most enduring hits, "Show me the way to

the next whiskey bar" was borrowed with acknowledgements from one of the greatest playwrights of Germany, Bertolt Brecht.

Let us examine these cycles in the case of narrative fiction and the novel. In his perennially-read thesis, *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster has this to say: "The pseudo-scholar ... would rather relate a book to the history of its time, to the events in the life of the author, to the events it describes, above all to some tendency...A mirror does not develop because a historical pageant passes in front of it. It only develops when it gets a fresh coat of quicksilver – in other words, when it acquires a new sensitiveness; and the novel's success lies in its own sensitiveness, not in the sensitiveness of its subject matter....We may say that History develops, Art stands still."

Forster refers here to the self-sufficiency and organic unity of a work of art in any medium. This internal integrity defies definition or categorization. Living art can survive cant words or linear cycles of modernity and tradition, and be open to a perennially human inspection. But, he continues, "History develops, Art stands still, is a crude motto, almost a slogan...it debars us in the first place from considering whether the human mind alters from generation to generation...It is more serious when we turn to the development and see what we lose from being debarred from examining. Apart from schools and influences and fashion, there has been a technique in English fiction, and this does alter from generation to generation. Literary tradition is the borderland between literature and history, and the well-equipped critic will spend much time there and enrich his judgement."

Then Forster goes on to talk about the "intensely, stiflingly human quality" which defines the novel. "We can neither examine nor preserve tradition. Principles and systems may suit other forms of art, but they cannot be applicable here – or if applied their results must be subject to re-examination. And who is the re-examiner? Well, I am afraid it will be the human heart. ...The final test of a novel will be our affection for it, as in the test of our friends, and of anything else we cannot define."

The "humanity" of a work of art is the connectivity that links its actuality to the classicism of other living and remembered humanity. This, of course, refers to the essence or spirit of the novel, and other narrative and visual traditions. But form changes constantly and inevitably, and changes in form and structure dictate deeper and more radical changes. Every change in technology becomes, in a sense, a change in consciousness. The tradition of oral story-telling was subverted via the written word, and subsequent intercession of the printing press eventually led to the rise of new modes of popular fiction. This tradition was then re-appropriated by visual narrative, by soap operas and blockbuster films. The dazzling digital agility and interconnectivity of various forms of media and new technology are breaking down barriers between art-form definitions in the realm of narrative. Sophisticated video games and the interactive novel provide new templates, often closer to the original form of oral story-telling than the interceding ones. The cycle of modernity returns again to tradition.

So it is with music, with the reed and the bamboo flute and the recorder and the synthesizer, with the same mournful song of the human heart played by them all. In the



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**Namita Gokhale**  
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plastic arts, wood gives way to stone, marble to canvas and vinyl and electronic screens, pointillism to pixels, but ways of seeing and perceiving with a startled new vision retain the continuity of the human eye.

Sometimes the accelerations of technology and social change lead to a breakdown in the energy and viability of tradition. In this context, V.S. Naipaul's views on the exhaustion in vitality of western narrative fiction, and the contrast of this entropy with the robust fictional impulse in developing societies, deserve examination. The mutations and changes in fortune of language groups also throw interesting light upon the convolutions of modernity and tradition. A language is famously a dialect with an army and a navy, and when John Company brought English to these shores, it became paradoxically the vehicle of both continuity and change. Despite Macaulay's vision of a language of cultural inculcation, a process of mutual assimilation was set in motion. Scholars like Charles Wilkins and John Woodruffe used the meticulous traditions of Western historicity to record, chronicle and archive much that might have been lost in the oral, Sanskrit and Bhasha traditions. Kalidasa's Shakuntala was translated into English, and in a paper read at the Asiatic Society, William Jones recognized Sanskrit as belonging to the Indo-European linguistic family.

The next cycle is the integration of the language in the host matrix, as in the case with poets like Michael Madhusudan Dutt adapting English to an Indian voice and sensibility. Then the inevitable reaction and return to the mother language, which in the intervention has been leavened by the gift of tongues. These were the traditions that birthed the twice-born English of Desani and Salman Rushdie. Modernity and Midnight's children re-appropriated the English language and literary tradition and made it their own.

All this is to be seen in the context of a culture where a two-tier language structure of Prakrit and Sanskrit was a longstanding tradition. The evolution of the English novel in India is a discourse resonant with the inter-lapping of modernity and tradition. Novelists writing in the English mainstream, often for an international audience, retain the specificity of the tradition, nuances and metaphors of their linguistic lineage in the subtext of their writing. Salman Rushdie carries the tameez of Urdu in his consonants, and the tradition of poets like Faiz Ahmed Faiz in the sinuous beauty of his prose. Amitav Ghosh and Amit Chaudhuri carry the intellectual agility and mellifluous strength of Bengali literature, and so on. This multiple layering of tradition and interpretation is what gives vitality to Indian writing in English and the Bhasha languages today.

In the times of Francis Fukuyama and *The End of History*, the virtual world is increasingly a simultaneous one. I will again invoke the concise voice of T.S.Eliot. "It is the business of the critic to preserve tradition, - where a good tradition exists," he writes, in *The Sacred Wood*. "It is part of his business to see literature steadily and see it whole; and this is eminently to see it not as consecrated by time, but to see it beyond time."

**Namita Gokhale**  
 (Namita Gokhale is a writer, novelist, and critic. She also publishes her signature 'Namita Gokhale Editions'.)