



Progressive Group (Indian Art)

Introduction

Hello everyone and welcome to today's episode of learning in Art History. The Subject for this episode is Progressive Groups in Indian Art and the expert is Ms. Mrinal Kulkarni, Assistant Professor, Department of Art History and Art Appreciation, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi and I am.....

What is Progressives?

The literal meaning of the word Progressive is *Moving Forward*. In historical term this moving forward is associated with interest in new or modern ideas. Progressive is also related to the progress to the betterment. In modern period Progressives is attached to the political thoughts of social reform.

In 19th century England the word progressive was associated of all those people who wanted a better deal for the underprivileged and wanted science and technology to spearhead the movement for social development

In cultural field like literature, art progressives refer to the groups who were anti-imperialist and expressed views against the social injustice and backwardness in their art works.



In India in 1936 Indian writers formed Progressive Writers Association (PWA) in Lucknow. Many language writers were associated with this group the prominent ones were Sajjad Zaheer (Urdu) Dr. Mukherjee Anand (English), Munshi Premchand (Urdu, Hindi) Sadat Hasan Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Ismat Chughtai etc.

Their writings referred and criticized the imperialistic tools of British Government at that moment of History. They regarded socialism as an economic system which will help poor people to grow up and question the feudalistic and imperialistic notions in the society

In same line in Theatre also Indian Progressive theatre Association was established in Calcutta in 1943. Their major concern was to take theatre closer to the common people and for that they also revived the folk theatre forms like Tamasha and Jatra where the active involvement of audience was there.

Progressive Groups in India

In 1940 when in literature field, theatre field the progressive ideas were changing the way one interact with the creative field naturally the art world could not stay away from it. Influenced by these progressive ideas two progressive groups of art were formed in two major



cities of India at that time. The first one was formed in Calcutta they held an exhibition of their works in 1945.

The second one was formed in Bombay it came into existence in a meeting held on December 15, 1947 and they held their first exhibition in 1949 after independence.

There were some artists in Bengal who were inspired by the Marxist ideology and worked with progressive thought process independent of these groups.

Calcutta Progressive Artists Group

In 1943 Calcutta bore the brunt of a terrible famine that ravaged Bengal. The famine, which killed millions, was said to have been triggered by the wrong policies of the ruling British Government. This manmade tragedy forced artists to look in new direction of the art.

A group of young artists decided to reject the lyricism and the romanticism seen in the work of earlier Bengali artists. Six among them formed the Calcutta Group. The founder members were sculptors PradoshDasgupta, his wife KamalaDasgupta, painters Gopal Ghosh, NirodeMajumdar, Paritosh Sen and Subho Tagore. Others like Pran Krishna Pal, Govardhan Ash and Bansi



Chandragupta joined later.

This group of artists expressed the need for a visual language that could reflect the crisis of urban society. For the first time in modern Indian art, artists began to paint images that evoked anguish and trauma and reflected the urban situation. Rural scenes were no longer purely idyllic, and the formal treatment of the paintings began to reflect the influence of European modernism.

The group soon morphed into a movement along with the Bengal school of art. The former served as the new life and energy to the latter. The motto of the group was, "Art should be international and interdependent." The group believed in discovering newness and in progression towards new horizons. They believed that learning from past glories which were the workmanship of Masters of art, was as important as adopting styles of the present. They were proud of the Indian art maestros and wanted to infuse vivacity to the lost vigour in the strokes of the contemporary Indian art. The group actually made its first public appearance in the form of an exhibition organized by Mrs. Casey, wife of Governor of Bengal. The



exhibition created much needed flutter in the art circles and the Group got both its share of appreciations and criticisms.

Details of the artists of Calcutta Progressive Artists Group

PradoshDasgupta

Prodosh Das Gupta was born in 1912 in Dhaka, now in Bangladesh and graduated from Calcutta University in 1932. Under the manifesto of 'Art should be international and interdependent' he co-founded the famed Calcutta Group in 1943. The other members of the group were RathinMitra, Prankrishan Pal, Sunil Madhav Sen, NirodeMazumdar, Paritosh Sen, Kamla Das Gupta, Gobardhan Ash, Subho Tagore, Hemant Misra and Gopal Ghose. Although their individual stylistic approaches varied, they shared an innovative outlook and felt the need to enter the mainstream of world art, shaking off the tradition that no longer inspired them. The group chose to break away from the fashionable academic style in vogue at that time.

Prodosh Das Gupta was also the leading sculptor of the Calcutta Group which held its first exhibition in 1943-1944. Considered as one of the prominent pioneers who emerged at the juncture of India's Independence, Pradosh Das Gupta reacted strongly against the decay



that had set in modern life despite mankind's great achievements in the field of technology.

His works represent love, the humane values and affection for fellow men. He built his sculptural forms through the modeling technique, i.e., using clay or plaster, but the resulting effect was 'lithic', that is as if they are carved from a stone block maintaining the essential simplicity of the human form and scooping out just what is redundant.

His studies in Paris gave his figures a romantic touch. However, his return to India in 1940, added new shape and significance to these myriad influences. His depiction of the horrors of the World War II and the Bengal famine of 1943 made an impact in the second phase of his career.

The years 1946 to 1950 were the most crucial years of his career during which he had to struggle to break free from the methods and techniques of pure academia that were ingrained within him. The young Das Gupta, having recognised the basic truth about organic form both from his Indian roots as well as from the great masters who inspired him, tried to instill the same philosophy and formal quality into his own work. It was during this period that some of his best-known works, such as Head & Torso, Toilet, First Born, and Pounding Corn took birth. His dabbling in abstraction began in his early years with



works like Twisted Form (bronze), Cactus Family, Volume in Three Masses, and Symphony in Curves (Cement).

Kamala Dasgupta

Born in Kerala KamlaDasgupta studied at Kala Bhavan Santi Niketan. At the time when very few women artists were working as professional artists she became part of the Calcutta Group with her husband Pradosh Das Gupta. She was one of the most skilled women sculptor of her time and showed tremendous possibility in her works but she decided to move away from profession as sculptor.

Gopal Ghosh,

Trained in the style of art known as the neo-Bengal School, Gopal Ghose was born in Kolkata in 1913. He became a legend in his lifetime for his ingenious handling of the quick and unpredictable medium of watercolor. To him goes the credit of raising its status in Indian art history, from a dabbler's medium to an artist's medium.

After obtaining a diploma in painting from the Government College of Arts and Crafts, Jaipur in 1935, he formally trained in sculpture, from Government College of Art, Madras, where he studied under Debi Prasad Roy Choudhuri, known for his realistic style in his paintings and sculptures.



He was one of the founder members of the well-known Calcutta Group (1943). Proficient with several mediums, Ghose was adept not only with watercolor, but also with tempera, pen and ink, and brush and pastel. His economical technique of swift sweeping brushwork in his landscapes was especially admired, including by the likes of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Among his contemporaries, he stood out, both as a draughtsman and as a skilled water colorist.

He liked to draw as much as he painted and there was great diversity in his drawings that covered the many aspects of nature: trees, flowers and the Indian terrain - paddy fields, bamboo groves and riverside life. His sense of experimentation, together with his skill in drawing coloring produced some masterpieces. Normally small in size, his paintings have a miniature quality, but they point towards the impressionistic. His appeal is sensual and lyrical, almost poetic. His palette favored mellow hazy shades broken with patches of sharp color. At a time when art was dissociating itself from beauty, Gopal Ghose's paintings stood as a reminder of the pleasure and sensory delight that art is capable of evoking.

NirodeMajumdar

Of the first generation of Indian modernists of 1940's, NirodeMajumdar is remembered for his sensitive economy of pictorial means and his rootedness in the pictorial tradition of Bengal, which he harmonized with



the European modernist composition.

He had his first education under KshitindranathMajumdar, student of Abanindranath Tagore, at the Indian Society of Oriental Art in Calcutta, where he came into close contact with Abanindranath. After he finished his course NirodeMazumdar was awarded the Norman Blount Memorial Award for his artistic skill.

Along with the new generation of modernists such as Subho Thakur, Pradosh Das Gupta, Rathin Maitra, Prakrishna Pal and Paritosh Sen, NirodeMajumdar founded the Calcutta Group in 1943. On a French government scholarship he studied in Paris at the academy of the celebrated French government scholarship he studied in Paris at the academy of the celebrated French artist Andre Holland to learn engraving.

His first solo show in Calcutta was organised by the Calcutta Group in 1944. His paintings are mostly of mural dimension, and he gradually moved towards the subject matter of the Tantric Shakti concept - the image of the Devi. One particularly characteristic feature of the art of NirodeMazumdar is that he pictorially developed a single concept in a series of canvases.

Paritosh Sen



Paritosh Sen was born in Dhaka, now in Bangladesh, in 1918. The world of nature, colour, and movement fascinated him from his childhood as is clear from his collection of autobiographical vignettes, Jindabaha Lane, named after his Dhaka address. After finishing school, Sen ran away from home to join the Madras Art School headed by Devi Prasad Roy Chowdhury. His fellow-students there were K.C.S. Panicker, Prodosh Dasgupta, Gopal Ghosh and others. After finishing art school, Sen taught art at the Daly college in Indore. In 1943, he along with his friends formed the Calcutta group. In 1949, Sen left for Europe. In Paris, he studied at Andre Lhote's school, Academie Grand Chaumier, Ecole des Beaux Arts and Ecole des Louvre where he studied the history of painting.

In the course of his career, Sen's style of painting has undergone many changes. From the stylized to the voluminous, expressionist figures, he has traversed a long way. But there are continuities. For example, the drawing with bold, vigorous strokes, the use of volume in the figuration and sharp irony have been impressive elements in his work. Since 1991, his work has become more sensuous and he uses more exuberant colors.

Bombay Progressive Artists Group

The arbitrary selection at the current exhibitions of the Bombay Art Society had prompted some artists and critics to organize such a meeting on December 15, 1947. The persons who spoke at this historical conclave included the artists Souza, Raza and Ara besides the critic Rashid Hussain. Expressing their utter



disappointment with the judging and the lack of principle on which the exhibits were accepted for display, they insisted that the Judging Committee should be an elected body who should be able to justify before the public their choice of exhibits based on specific art values.

Rashid Hussain criticized the old orthodox critics and declared the necessity of the artists taking initiative in developing a conscious art patronage among the masses with conscious social purpose in their art. Newton (Souza initially referred to himself by this name) exhorted that artists should get together to thrash out common problems and initiate the development of a new national art. Ara demanded that artists should have freedom for their expression. Before this meeting, four of the artists had already met and decided to exhibit their works together. These were Ara, Raza, Souza and Bakre. Two more were added soon. Hussain was persuaded by Souza while Gade was brought into the fold of the PAG by Raza. Bakre who had been convinced by Ara, was already in the Group. They decided to limit the number of members at six in order to avoid stylistic scramble. The title 'Progressive' was inspired from the Progressive writers' movement which was started in Indian literature by the Marxist novelists, poets and fellow travelers at a conference held in 1936. The PAG had an anti-Imperialist outlook and the objective of 'bridging the widening gulf between the artists and the life of the people' was declared in the short manifesto



The first group exhibition of the PAG held at Bombay Art Society's Salon at Rampart Row in 1949. As noted earlier the six founder members Ara, Souza, Raza, Husain, Gade, Bakre participated in this exhibition which was opened by the celebrated author-critic, Mulk Raj Anand, known for his novels with leftist leanings. He commended the six 'Progressives' as the 'heralds of a new dawn in the world of Indian art'.

In their catalogue they had used Samuel Butler's quotation as their motto, viz, 'young art must be working out its own salvation from efforts in all fear and trembling'. Rudi Van Leyden's consistent exhibition reviews in Bombay during the 1940s gave the air of expectation of something important to happen from the young artists. His review highlights that the six artists formed a 'distinct group' inspite of their very different artistic approaches and tempers.

The formation of the PAG was significant because it spelt out an agenda for a shared future based on aesthetic principles. Theorizing a collective subjectivity on formalist grounds, Souza declared, "Today we paint with absolute freedom for contents and techniques, almost anarchic; save that we are governed by one or two sound elemental and eternal laws, of aesthetic order, plastic coordination and colour composition". In its bid for independence from the venerable academy, i.e. the J. J. School of Art, Bombay, the group primarily embraced artists who had failed to make the grade at the academy's rigorous examinations.



These artists challenged accepted styles as well as the social niceties of The Bombay Art Society's salon style of exhibition, even though they had initially attained visibility through the Society. They claimed autonomy by mounting their own exhibitions, which were supported by an emerging class of sympathetic patrons and art critics in exile from war-torn Europe who were well aware of international modernism. This aesthetic alliance, forged across hardening national boundaries, later led to the dispersal of the group, with many members choosing to make their way to London and Paris.

Details of the artists of Bombay Progressive Artists Group

F N Souza

Born in 1924 in Goa in a Roman Catholic family, he lost his father when he was barely three months old. Soon after, his little sister also expired. Little Souza was brought to Mumbai by his widowed mother, where she took a job as a dressmaker. He joined Sir J. J. School of Art in 1940, where the comprehensive teaching programme aimed at giving the young artists a sound basis of naturalistic skills and craftsmanship which included study from nude models, portraiture and landscape painting. Souza mastered these genres and proved his talent by winning prizes in the Art School exhibitions. An episode in the final year involving expression of overt patriotism became the reason for his expulsion from the Art School. Souza briefly joined the Communist party and in this period he portrayed Marxist



philosophy related ideals in some of his paintings titled 'Goan Peasants', 'Bombay Proletariat' etc. however, he soon left the Communist Party for some unknown reasons. Earlier writers on Souza have built up his image as someone who was full of bitterness, the cause of which was his personal sufferings. It was natural for him to develop into an iconoclast who wanted to destroy everything that was considered good and moral according to the so-called high-brow society. He was intelligent enough to be able to give his intensions a broad ideological orientation. He succeeded in motivating likeminded artists to form a group to engage in some shocking activities that would attract the attention of the art world. A good writer with a powerful language he became the spokesman of the PAG. He worked out a manifesto in which he also expressed his own ideas stating that 'they wanted to take art away from the sophisticated arty-arty crowd'. Souza much admired Ara's caliber as a painter whose work he found "stunning because of its direct, intuitive modernism". Husain's talent was also first recognized by Souza persuading him to join the PAG.

K.H Ara

senior member of the PAG, K. H. Ara, was born in 1914 at Hyderabad who was bought to Bombay by his grandfather at the age of seven. He began his life from a humble beginning, having worked at different types of jobs he was employed for washing of cars by a local Japanese firm. Painting in his leisure hours he started exhibiting in art exhibitions and surprisingly won prizes



also. Walter Langhammer, the then art director of the Times of India and Rudi Van Leyden, the art critic, noticed his talent and encouraged him. It has been acknowledged that, Ara blossomed into a painter under their guidance. Ara won the 'Times of India prize', in 1939. In 1941 he won a prize for the second time for his 'Flora Fountain'. Leyden saw a quality of genius in his careless dashes of paint and rather crude drawing, insisting that Ara take a few elementary lessons in Art. In his first one-man show of 1942, Ara revealed a dynamic spontaneity in his water colour paintings which were mostly still-lives, wine glasses, grapes, pine apples and earthen pots. His colour schemes and dynamic force were noted which are qualities associated with naïve or folk artists. Ara came into lime light when he won the Governor's prize at the Bombay Art Society's

M F Hussain

MaqbulFida Husain was born in 1915 at Pandharpur (Maharashtra) in the Sulaimani Bohra community. After his birth his father moved to Indore where he passed his childhood. Husain's mother died when he was 3 years old followed by the death of his paternal grandmother who was looking after him. Subsequently he was sent to his maternal grandfather at Siddhpur in Gujarat where the latter was head of a religious sect. Here Husain learnt to



read Urdu and was much attracted towards the geometric forms of Kufic Calligraphy. Later he was shifted to Baroda where he joined a Madrasa under the guidance of his uncle who wrote religious poetry. Husain cultivated to write poetry assuming the pen-name 'Haya'. As an adolescent he had to return to Indore to join his father. Unfortunately instead of completing school education he was apprenticed to a tailor but significantly side by side Husain developed the hobby of painting. Winning a gold medal at an annual show at the age of 17, prompted him to join the Art School at Indore. After 3 years he arrived in Mumbai to study at the Sir J. J. School of Art. However it was only since 1937, when he decided to fully devote himself to painting, living in a cheap room in the slum area near Grant Road undertaking all kinds of odd jobs. He painted cinema posters, designed nursery furniture, embellishing cots and rocking horses in colorful designs. The oil painting 'SunehraSansar' brought him to limelight in 1946 when it was awarded a prize at the Annual exhibition of Bombay Art Society for its remarkable composition. When in 1948 Souza saw Husain's painting



'Potters' at the Bombay Art Society's exhibition he decided to bring Husain into the fold of the PAG.

S.H Raza

Temperamentally Raza was much different than Souza if we consider the fact that the former was happy appreciating nature's beauty and expressing his own pleasure through his paintings. Said Hyder Raza was born at Bawaria in Madhya Pradesh in the year 1922. He received initial art training at Nagpur School of Art. His Nasik landscapes earned the scholarship offered by Art Society of India for a tour of India for the purpose of landscape paintings. He exhibited a group of water color landscapes depicting Bombay Street scenes at the Bombay Art Society's Annual exhibition in the year 1944. He combined the element of opaque color popularized by Bendre and Solegaonkar, (known as Indore School) along with the broad execution and the panoramic bird's eye-view observed in Langhammer's landscapes, usually the oils. Raza's water color landscapes at the 1944 exhibition were admired by critics as 'juicer' and 'delightful', and he was pronounced to be trying to out-BendreBendre. In 1946 his landscapes displayed at the Bombay Art Society's annual exhibition won the silver medal and were specially commented by the critic, Rudy Van Leyden, such as 'BoriBundar' and 'The DasasvamedhGhat'. He was hailed as the surest and most sensitive painter of landscapes in the whole exhibition. His main intention to discard the old naturalistic style and evolve his own to suit his



expression, may be the main reason for agreeing to join the grievances of his fellow artists of the PAG.

S. Bakre

The only sculptor member of PAG, SadanandBakre was born at Baroda in 1920. He joined the J. J. School of art, Bombay, where he was known as a very bright student, winning the Mayo Gold Medal reserved for the best student. He developed a special flair in the genre of portraiture. As early as 1940 his portrait bust 'My Father' was exhibited in the annual exhibition of Bombay art Society of that year. His portrait titled 'Seer' won a prize in the exhibition of 1942. His exhibit in the next year, was a bust given the title 'My Deeper Self' was much more interesting and expressive. His sculptures were characterized by sensitive modeling and distinct expression. Replacing naturalistic techniques he adopted the modeling technique of the British sculptor, Jacob Epstein, and experimented with cubist planes as in his portrait of Ara. He was interested in the art of painting also having won a prize for 'Sketch from Ambarnath' in 1942. Bakre too had developed some kind of resentment



against the so-called highbrows and orthodox art critics. Due to this reason and his friendship with Ara he was motivated to join the PAG as its founder member.

H.A.Gade

Born in 1917 at Berar, H. A. Gade was the only person from the PAG who had a sound university background. He earned degrees in Science and Education from Nagpur University. He received preliminary art training at Nagpur completing his diploma from the Sir J. J. School of Art at Mumbai. His paintings were noticed from 1946 onwards for good understanding of emotional qualities of color and a certain kinship with Raza's landscapes. Such comments had been made for the two of his paintings 'Narrow Lane' and 'Fountain Jubbalpore' displayed in the 1947 exhibition of Bombay Art Society. Gade also experimented in various directions which may be the reason Raza insisted that he join the PAG. In his early figurative works he was influenced by Shergil-sque elements and elementary simplification of forms in child art.



Progressives contemporary to these Two Progressive Artists Groups

Calcutta during the late 40s had witnessed artists like Somnath Hore and Chitta Prasad amongst others, who responded to the Bengal Famine. Artists from Chittagong (now in Bangladesh) they were directly affected famine. Chittoprasad had joined Communist Party of India and worked as an artist for Party's newspaper 'People's war'. For which he travelled in the interiors of the East Bengal and drew sketches and poverty, illness. Chittaprosad's Bhattacharya's works reflect his reformist concerns. They are a depiction of the images that were his preoccupation --- poor peasants and laborers. His hard-hitting caricatures and sketches of the poor dying in the Bengal famine (1943) worked like modern day reportage, and shook the middle class and the British officials out of their apathy.



His reformist concerns showed in his life too, when he refused to use his Brahminical surname 'Bhattacharyya'. Once refused admission in the Government School of Art, Kolkata and the Kala Bhawan, Santiniketan he was a self-taught artist, he experimented constantly with the art of picture making. A master of many forms, he quickly adapted to the need of the times and switched to simpler lines and fewer exaggerations of forms.

SomnathHore was born in a village called Barama in Chittagong, present day Bangladesh, in 1921. While he was still very young, he started making posters for the Communist party. His drawings of Bengal Famine in 1943 and Tebhaga movement has made historical impact on the modern Indian Art. This experience of human tragedy has left imprint of wounded human form on SomnathHore. The anguished human form has widely been reflected in Hore's figuration which continued in his later etchings series 'Wounds' as well as bronze sculptures.

It was with the help of P.C. Joshi, the leader of Communist party of India that he was admitted into the



Government College of Art & Craft. Later on that affected his development as an artist. From 1954 to 1967, Hore handled a number of jobs in various capacities. From 1954 to 1958 he was a lecturer at the Indian College of Art and Draftsmanship in Kolkata. Thereafter, until 1967, he held posts such as the "in-charge of the Graphic section" at the Delhi College of Art, visiting faculty at the MS University in Baroda and the head of the Graphic Art department of Kala Bhavan, VisvaBharati. In 1960, he became a member of the Society of Contemporary Artists.

Conclusion

Drastic changes on international scenario and its impact on national politics had created a major shift in art in India in 1940's. Just now we saw how in major cities of India the artists got interested in the humanistic aspect of progressive ideas and thus brought a forward looking approach to the contemporary art of that time.

Later on in relation to the Independence and the project of making new nation this optimism of progressive ideas



made many artists to develop their art language and form various artists collectives in all over India.