Calcutta Group and Madras School

(Academic Script)

Hello everyone!!!

I welcome you all to an interesting episode where we would focus on two Artists Groups: Calcutta Group (1943-1953) and Madras School.

The 'Artist Groups', more recently defined as a 'Collective', has been visible since the early 1940s. Artists have assumed positions within Indian modernism, acting in groups outside the institutional framework, guided by ideology and aesthetic concerns. More recently the collective has emerged as a curatorial and a discursive formation.

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Calcutta Group

While tracing the trends in early twentieth-century art of modern India; art-practice in Bengal has remained prominently central. From the urban-folk imagery of the Kalighat pictures and contemporary prints in wood-block and lithographs to the emergence of the three Tagores (Abanindranath, Gaganendranath and Rabindranath), and then to the legacy of the "Bengal School" with Nandalal Bose and his students creating a distinctive movement from Rabindranath Tagore's educational institution at Santiniketan, as well as the role of Jamini Roy in introducing a folk-inspired alternative, significant transformations in the art of Bengal—all have been acknowledged as having played an eminent role in the early modern art of India.

The nationalist re-invention of tradition in pictorial language, initiated by Abanindranath Tagore, began to assume the proportions of a movement

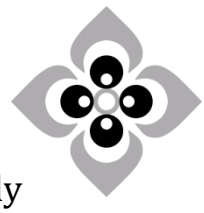
among his disciples and followers. While the new "Indian" style found supportive feedback from Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Sister Nivedita, O.C.Gangoly and others, there also emerged a strong opposition that rejected it because of its limiting nature for visual arts. There was a strong advocacy for European pictorial conventions and an opening up to a heritage unrestricted by nationalist/geographic limits.

While the so-called Bengal school was undergoing its own transformation in the paintings of Nandalal Bose, Benodebehari Mukhopadhyay and Ramkinkar Baij at Santiniketan, signs of a new change were apparent in Calcutta. Few students who were expelled for protest-demonstration at the Government School of Art joined hands in 1931 to form an artist's group called "Young Artists' Union". Renting a studio-space and sharing it by turns, their effort was to follow the ideals of a commune. The union held its major exhibition, in December the same year, by hiring a stall at the Calcutta Town Hall, on the occasion of the seventieth birth anniversary celebrations of Rabindranath Tagore.

When the short-lived Young Artist's Union drew to a close, its initiators along with new members formed the "Art Rebel Centre" in 1933. The intention of the group to practice an art that would primarily be anti-sentimental was voiced in the introductory catalogue-note to their April 1933 exhibition. While anti-sentimentalism referred obviously to "Bengal School" romanticism, the artists simultaneously also rejected the art-school brand of academic realism in practice, and turned towards the relatively contemporary art languages that had evolved through the European modern art movements, for inspiration. However, like the previous collective, the Art Rebel Centre too did not last long enough.

It is against this backdrop that the new artists' collective, the "Calcutta Group", emerged in 1943.

".....The guiding motto of our Group is best expressed in the slogan "Art should be international and inter-dependent". In other words, our art cannot progress or develop if we always look back to our past glories and cling to our old traditions at all cost. The vast new world of art, rich and infinitely varied, created by Masters the world over in all ages, beckons us. From Egyptian and Assyrian arts to the works of Italian, Dutch, French masters—we have to study all of them deeply, develop our appreciation of them and take from them all that we could profitably synthesise with our requirements and traditions. This is all the more necessary because our art has stood still since the seventeenth century. But during the past three hundred years the world outside of India has made vast strides in art, has



evolved epoch-making discoveries in forms and techniques. It is absolutely necessary for us to close this hiatus by taking advantage of these developments in the Western world."

An excerpt from the Introductory Note in the Calcutta Group handbook/Catalogue, presumably published to accompany an exhibition, emphasises the group's leaning towards the art of the West. The intention of the group is clear from the note—to infuse new life into the then contemporary Indian art, through the invention of a visual language, which is modern i.e. “international” and therefore capable of being the vehicle for expression of the diverse nuances of transformed experience of a new time.

The Calcutta Group of artists came into existence in 1943 as a response to the famine in Bengal that year which killed thousands of people in the countryside and provoked scenes that shook the conscience of the state. The famine was said to have been triggered by the wrong policies of the ruling British Government. This unprecedented devastation and other contributory factors such as the effects of World War II—felt in the form of high prices; heightened political activity with Mahatma Gandhi's Quit India call; and frantic troop movements steered several artists into looking anew at their visual language. These young artists in Bengal felt that the lyricism and the romanticism seen in the works of Bengal School—whatever its other achievements were—may not help adequately in generating a response such political circumstances demand from the art fraternity.

Initially, eight young artists formed the Calcutta Group, who worked on the idea that “art should aim to be international and interdependent”. The group consisting of two sculptors Prodosh Das Gupta and Kamala Das Gupta and six painters Gopal Ghose, Rathin Moitra, Nirode Majumdar , Subho Tagore, Paritosh Sen and Prankrishna Pal had their first exhibition in 1945. The configuration of the group’s membership did not remain constant. There were many artists like Abani Sen, Sunilmadhab Sen, Gobardhan Ash, Bansi Chandragupta and Hemanta Mishra who joined the group later and there were many who departed from it. After 1953, most of the artists of the Calcutta Group evolved their individual trajectories.

The Group's ideological stand emphasized an ambitious yearning to seek their formal and stylistic solutions in the western art. Instead of looking backwards for indigenous sources they sought inspiration from European artists like Van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso, Braque and Brancusi. The group 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's first exhibition had mixed responses among the critics who either supported the arrival of the new forms or ridiculed the efforts on nationalistic stands. In 1950, they held a joint exhibition with the Progressive Artists Group in Bombay. Their work received wide praise, including from the writers Mulk Raj Anand and E. M. Forster and the critic Rudy Von Leyden. The latter wrote: "They have sought to imbibe a far more vital feeling from contemporary Far Eastern and European Art than their elders did. But this is not to suggest that they are in any sense imitative, for their love of the people and the old folk culture of Bengal roots them in the long Bengal tradition."

Despite having survived for a decade, lack of any kind of systematic documentation makes it difficult to form an idea of the works created by the group. For this reason, they are associated with the works of the later period rather than what they produced as members of a collective attempt. The Calcutta Group booklet, published in 1953, along with an article by Klaus Fischer in the journal "Marg" the same year are two invaluable sources that not only document the works of art by members of the group but also has short biographical entries accompanied by brief introduction to their individual proclivities.

Prodosh Das Gupta mostly experimented with the sculptural possibilities of the human body. In the case of the single female figure in the sculpture titled *First Born*, he simplified the shapes down to the basic convexities to arrive at a monumental bulk. Kamala Das Gupta was apparently a portraitist. Very few works of hers are known and the only examples reproduced appear to be study from models like, *Head of Saumini*.

Nirode Majumdar's early trip to Paris had an immediate impact on his subjects and treatment where he developed a distinctly attenuated type of figure with characteristic gesture and postures. Prankrishna Pal has always been referred to as having assimilated the qualities of folk art in his paintings. Superficial similitude with folk art forms is apparent in his language. He was a modern artist working with simplified forms defined through the sophisticated controlled flow of contour lines and the use of flat areas of colour.

Rathin Maitra was still a student of the art school when the group was formed. This relatively young painter dealt with theme of labour on the one hand, like the railroad labourers or the workers on their way to the factory and subjects like card players and the nude on the other. His choice of subjects showed a tendency to align with the notion of the modern in the west while stylistically he sought to achieve a post impressionistic simplification.

Goverdhan Ash was rooted to his village surroundings but his paintings exhibited an expressionistic vigour. Paritosh Sen also went to Paris but the blending of European elements in his works is slightly different compared to works by Nirode Majumdar. Subho Tagore had an acute sensitivity for design and his layouts adapted well when translated into textiles. Gopal Ghose's landscapes combined boldness of bright pure colours with the swift calligraphic lines of the forms and soon achieved the mark of a distinctly lyrical personal style.

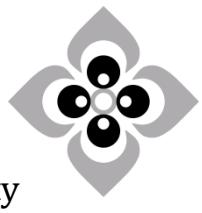
In conclusion, the Calcutta Group had a genuine intention to break new ground and arrive at a modern expression. The individual artists constituting the Group rather came up with certain visual correlates that were primarily and in their own way, contextual to the local urban experience. Rather than an overarching definition of an Indian modern, the Calcutta Group' efforts can be best realized from the point of a regional modern.

Madras School

Defining Madras Art Movement

Being established in 1850, the Government College of Fine Arts in Chennai is the oldest and first art institution in India. Initially known as Madras School of Arts, it was renamed in 1962 as the Government College of Arts and Crafts, before finally being renamed as present.

The Madras school never existed in the sense in which, say, the Bengal school did. Yet the term 'Madras school' has been employed by the art writers to refer to the distinctive principles, methods and techniques that one learns at this art institution. From mid-40s onwards, the Madras School of Arts had become a symbol of academic excellence and a well-defined art aesthetic. Eventually, in the 1960s, the college became the locus for the



emergence of Madras art movement, which initiated search for authenticity in modernism rooted in the region's cultural heritage.

The configuration of this regional art movement had been initiated under the tenure of Deviprasad Roy Chowdhury (1930-1957), who was the first Indian artist-principal of the Madras art school. This eminent painter and sculptor, who was also the first chairman of the Central Lalit Kala Akademi (1954-1960), laid emphasis on the development of fine arts curriculum; put forth an empirical and perceptual approach to art; and axed the colonial pedantry of human form study based on regurgitated classical statuary. These were considered sweeping innovations, since the school's curriculum had privileged craft teaching until the date of D.P.Roy Chowdhary's appointment as its administrative head. These reformations in the school stopped it from being an institution for future drawing teachers and manufactory of exotic craft products. Instead, it turned into an institution for creative artists. This charting of a trajectory was critical for the school and required to be extended in the 50s—as it would eventually lead to the development and growth of potential artists.

K.C.S.Paniker and the Madras Art Movement

It was K.C.S.Paniker (1911-1977), who took up the challenge of pulling the Madras artists out of their self-inflicted isolation. He became the next principal of the institution in 1957 and initiated a different pedagogical approach based on the study of 20th century modernist expressions of European artists. The pedagogy subscribed by him opened up avenues for technical and expressive creative explorations that became the hallmark of the school—setting up the tone and pace for contemporary art in Madras.

The denominating title 'Madras' though specifically refers to the city of Madras, the present day Chennai then was a gravitating centre, to which primarily artists from all the four Southern states, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka converged—determining it's artistic contours. This was the only government institution for providing instructions in fine arts in the region till mid 1970's. Each of these artists carried his/her cultural sensibility that they brought to bear upon their works. These diverse conditions and factors enabled Paniker to charter a new trajectory effectively aided and supported by his position as the head of the institution, the infrastructure, and the resources of his colleagues and students.

The late 50s witnessed an artistic crisis across the country. The crisis was the vexed question of authenticity and the search for identity within the post-colonial experience. The crisis urged artists across the country to rethink and redefine their ideology, which would neither be a return to older Revivalist style, themes or content, nor blind following of internationalism.

Against this emergent trend, the beginning decade of 60s also brought urgency for self-search to move on through different tract. In this respect, in the South, the Madras Group attempted intensive soul searching to become nationally visible on one hand and on the other to establish its own distinct identity as an independent regional movement.

The College of Arts and Crafts, thus, became the site for the emergence of Madras art movement. For within the institution K.C.S.Paniker gathered around him a band of talented, intelligent and committed students with whom he held debates, discussions and lively arguments and extended the same with teacher artists like Dhanapal, Munuswamy, Santhanaraj among others concerning the status of modern art within the country.

Paniker's disillusionment with contemporary scenario called forth the need for a self search going beyond modernist formulae and turn towards traditional sources for redefining the modernist idiom. The Madras group consciously attempted a regional vocabulary in terms of folk arts and crafts, forms of accoutrements derived from performing arts like Kathakali, Theyyam and also from the high pictorial tradition of South Indian arts.

Paniker's administrative skills combined with his passionate zeal were also responsible for the founding of many associations like: The South Indian Society of Painters and Sculptors, 1943—an agency responsible for representing artists from south by holding their exhibitions mainly in Bombay and Delhi; The Progressive Painters Association, 1944—responsible for publishing the art journal known as Art Trends (1961), a 'quarterly bulletin on contemporary art, mainly Indian'; and The Artists' Handicrafts Association, which made the sale of various handcrafted artefacts.

Cholamandal Artist's Village

K.C.S.Paniker was not only responsible for encouraging, motivating, inspiring and mobilizing artists and students towards newer horizons that

resulted in the establishment of the Madras Art Movement, but also conceived of the possibility for establishing an artists' centre where the students could pursue their experimental vision after they had left the portals of the Art Institution. He was instrumental in realizing his vision of establishing an artists' commune where the talents and skills would be nurtured without the constant worries of economic exigencies. By mobilizing the resources towards these concerted efforts he successfully translated it to establish the Cholamandal Artists' Village.

Once an obscure fishing village stretching across eight acres of cactus and casuarinas on the Coromandel Coast, the Cholamandal artists' village—Paniker's brainchild—made a firm impression in the national context. The name, Cholamandal, was to reinforce Paniker's ideology of being Indian in spirit by a conscious link with the past heritage, as well a mark of continuity of tradition. With the birth of this dynamic new concept, Paniker had set himself and the group on the path of bold experimentation. In Cholamandal artists as a commune would live together to foster the spirit of artistic brotherhood and collective organization. It came as a boon—realizing the career of many young talents that otherwise would have been lost in banality of proletariat existence.

"In this village the artists were free and bound, timeless and traditional, individual and universal as intellectually and artistically they waged the struggle between the east and the west, Asian forms and European freedom in igniting the spark of modern and Indian in this fertile paradox called 'Cholamandal artists' village'", said Els Van Der Pas—a Dutch curator who visited the artists' village in 1989. The artists' village in many respects became an arena for the encounter of eastern and western traditions, for the ideology of Paniker and the group was premised on this synthesis without having to lose the resources of its tradition. The village was not only the locus of painterly and plastic creative activities, but also a place where the allied arts of dance, drama, theatre, music, poetry readings and active discussions on art thrived side by side.

K.C.S.Paniker, S.Dhanapal, Krishna Rao, P.V.Janakiram, Ram Gopal, L.Munuswamy, A.P.Santhanaraj, and C.Dakshinamurthy are few of the prominent artists who belong to the first generation of Madras School.

K.C.S.Paniker: The Artist

Paniker demonstrated the validity of his stand by example and not by precept alone. He had gone through phases which any serious, questioning artist goes through—the Royal Academy style Western discipline, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and modernism before he turned to Tantric symbolism. His travels and exhibitions abroad and the critical comments directed towards his works, led to an introspection of turning to indigenous and regional resources as a point of reference in his art.

He used mythic symbols and ancient scripts in patterns for aesthetic rather than spiritual impact. By adapting the ancient Indian visual vocabulary of signs and symbols, he made it clear that his intention was not metaphysical, but that as an artist, he was only trying to legitimise his contemporary expression. He insisted that the scripts he used were not intended to be read. Thus, the diagrams, the tabular columns, signs and calligraphic flourishes had only a visual function. He felt intensely the need for something new, something which vindicated his creative perceptions more convincingly than mere adaptations of European or American art-forms. He painted canvases, which deliberately foreground the visible use of Indian tradition. Briefly stated, Paniker abandoned perspective and volume in figuration and adopted instead a complex interplay of signs and symbols, freed from their ritual associations.

Madras School Style: A Brief

The Madras School, a regional phenomenon starting in mid-1940s, began forming its specific characteristic features during the second half of 1950s and early 60s. With Paniker in painting and S.Dhanapal in sculpture as its leading figures they pushed their initiatives in search for an authentic modernism rooted in the region's cultural heritage by becoming the torchbearers of this new direction.

It is possible to draw out two broad specific areas within which the artists of this school visualized their creative temper—i.e. the 'figurative' and the 'abstract' mode.

The foremost among the artists who made abstraction their vocabulary were Munuswamy, K.V.Haridasan, V.Viswanathan, K. M.Adimoolam, P.Gopinath, Achuthan Kudallur and the graphic artist Rm. Palaniappan. The abstraction that these artists practiced had a range from international to national to regional.

On the other hand the human figure was a dominant motif for a large number of artists like, J.Sultan Ali, K.Sreenivasulu, M.Reddappa Naidu, Santhanaraj, Anthony Doss and Alphonso Arul Doss.

S.Dhanapal (b.1919), though initially a painter, by the end of the 1950s, driven by his own concept and experience of modernity, switched to sculpture—drawing freely from folk images and legends. He produced works resonant with elemental energy and aesthetic empathy and emerged as the doyen of South Indian sculptors.

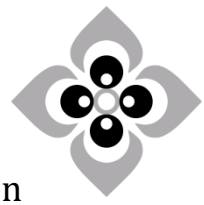
Following Dhanapal and Paniker, Kanai Kunhiraman, Janakiraman, Nandagopal and Balan Nambiar emerged as significant sculptors from the mid-1960s onwards—using iconicity, frontality, linearity and traditional imagery, combined with the traditional technique of metal repousse (*kavacha* tradition).

P.V.Janakiraman's (b.1930) energetic and sensuous reliefs in sheet metal, beaten into slick, technically flawless formats through the response process represent the updated version of the Chola bronze tradition even as they are radically innovative. Adding pieces of metal in varied shapes, often layered and repeated, he created textural variation and visual rhythm that adds to the quality of the beaten and welded form of his creations.

C.Dakshinamurthy (b.1943) excels in unveiling the mystery and sensuality of the human form. He uses his chisel to put life into forms dormant in stone or clay. P.S.Nandhan (b.1940) draws not from familiar sources but from the unexplored child mind which is open and inventive. What distinguishes his work, apart from its technical excellence, is its disarming directness. S.Nandagopal (b.1946) uses folk, tribal, classical and ritualistic sources. His crisply welded copper and brass figurines, suggested by familiar folk forms are rural in their feel as they are contemporary in their flavour. He has a special fascination for *gopurams* or temple towers, which explain the pyramidal format of his sculptures even as village deities, hero stones, ritual symbols, stimulate his imagination.

Paniker's aesthetic had a favourable reception among the Madras painters who sought to create a distinctive form of image making that heralded a specific *avante gardism*.

M.Reddappa Naidu (b.1932) was a firm believer in taking tradition forward. His art was born out of restlessness with his inquiry based on tradition and its productive adaptation and reinterpretation within the modern paradigm. His experimentation with icons made him realize that



he was venturing into a territory that in modern Indian art had not been trespassed for artistic mediation. He was attempting to project a sacred image into a secular domain.

K.M.Adimoolam is an outstanding exponent of the abstract genre of painting. P.Gopinath (b.1948) paints tidy and terse hymns to nature which he calls biomorphic forms. These capture the order and symmetry inherent in nature, beneath her turbulence.

Another artist who has reduced art to mathematics within the four walls of figuration is Rm.Palaniappan. He etches time-space equations which, on the surface, appear cerebral and even contrived and his prints may look cluttered with flight data. But on scrutiny one realises how much creative planning has gone into these artistically conceived and intricately worked tapestry-like designs, which have the eerie perspective of aerial photographs.

Cholamandal today is an inter-disciplinary complex, home to several practicing artists.

Conclusion

In the development of modernism in Indian art, the use of tradition, as against western adaptations has been a site of serious search and contestations. The episode focussed on two such artist collectives, the Calcutta Group and the Madras School, whose efforts can be best realised from the point of a regional modern.