Art After Independence

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The subcontinent's independence was achieved in 1947 at the cost of partitioning the country into two separate states, India and Pakistan. Yet again, in 1971, Bangladesh was created out of East Pakistan. There are certain broad trends in art and architecture in the postcolonial period. International modernism, which had made only a hesitant entry into India before Independence, gathered speed after 1947. In the 1950s, artists enthusiastically joined the global 'race' for abstraction, and yet, in keeping with the Indian tradition, few artists fully renounced the human figure or the narrative. The first challenge to semi-abstract art came in the 1970s and continues today. Representational art was reinstated in the 1970s, but it was now tinged with irony or political overtones. This was a reflection of greater politicization of art and the influence of postcolonial writings and the women's movement on art. This was also the period when global modernism came under attack as subcontinental artists began to reassert their cultural identity. Many of the artists of this generation discovered their roots in the soil and the common people, seeking to obliterate the distinction between high, elite and low, 'subaltern' art.

India

Architecture

The first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, dreamed of creating a secular state, based on economic and social justice, which would offer moral leadership to the Third World. A modernist who favoured state intervention in all spheres, symbolized by the Five Year Plans, Nehru played a proactive part in a national art policy headed by the Lalit Kala Akademi (an officially sponsored artists' forum) and the National Gallery of Modern Art in the capital. Nehru gave a boost to artists by suggesting that one per cent of the cost of a public building should go towards its decoration with murals and sculptures.

Modern architecture had arrived in India before Independence but it was to be found not in official buildings but in commercial ones. Art Deco cinema halls, office buildings, and apartment blocks in Mumbai and Calcutta, built from the 1930s, were its most imaginative examples.

Detail of 132

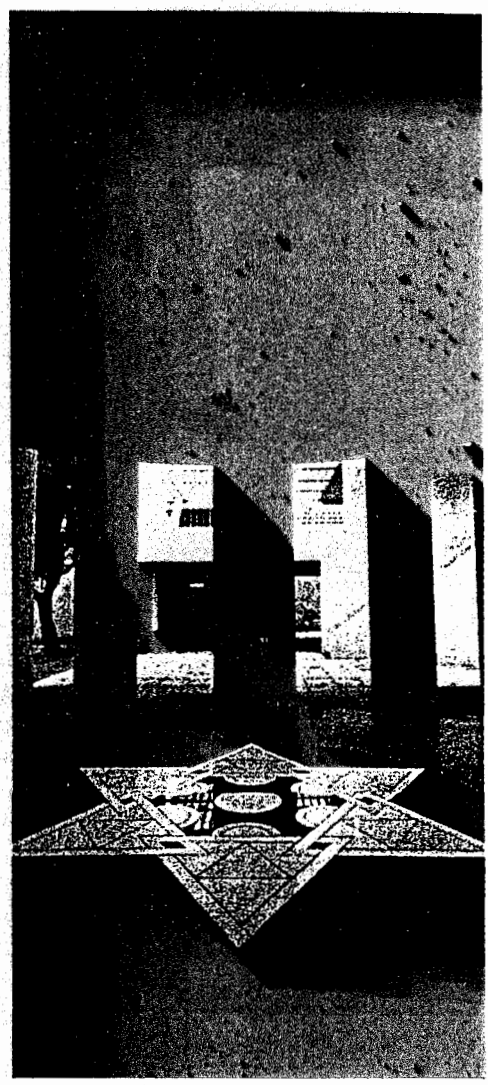
International modernism in public architecture was, however, consciously inaugurated by Nehru in a bid to look to the future rather than the past, recently sullied with blood and strife. In 1951, he invited the French architect Le Corbusier to design the capital at Chandigarh for the new truncated state of Punjab (most of Punjab was now in Pakistan). Le Corbusier's uncompromising functionalism consciously broke with the past 'historicism' of imperial architecture. This was followed by the avant-garde architecture, with a 'whisper' of the Mughal, of Louis Kahn in Ahmedabad (and Dhaka in Bangladesh). The era saw the debut of leading Indian modernist architects, among whom Balakrishna V. Doshi (b. 1927), for instance, worked with Le Corbusier. As with modern painting and sculpture, the international style gave rise to the problem of accommodating the national within the global. Modernist architecture abhors superfluous surface decoration, an attitude reinforced by the use of modern materials such as concrete, glass, and steel. There were tensions between the modernist canon and the Indian visual language, which has historically rested on decoration.[1] What caused anxiety among post-Independence architects was this: how could they avoid pastiche, namely the attachment of Indian motifs to essentially modernist architecture? Apart from the fact that elaborately decorated nineteenth-century buildings have faced disgrace in the twentieth, 'historicist' Raj edifices were perceived as flaunting a meretricious orientalist imagery.[2]

Misgivings among Indian architects gathered force in the 1970s and 1980s as part of a wider questioning of modernism as being exclusively western. Charles Correa (b. 1930), an internationally acclaimed Indian architect, articulated the problem facing architects in India as 'the necessity to simultaneously both rediscover India's past and invent its future'.[3] Correa found the solution in the revival of earlier practices, exploring the functions of Indian buildings, rather than their decoration, in his search for authenticity [**127**]. A pioneer in low-cost housing in the Third World, he developed two concepts inspired by Indian climate and ideas: 'open-to-the-sky' space and tube houses that conserve energy in a hot, dry climate. He has also used open courtyards and clusters of huts for the Gandhi Ashram in emulation of Gandhian values and explores the indigenous planning of space in the *vastu-purusa-mandala*. Balakrishna Doshi, on the other hand, borrows Mughal structural features, and Uttam Jain (b. 1934) is another architect who has introduced indigenous modes of building in his work. The architectural historian G. H. R. Tillotson pleads for a revival and not reproduction of Indian craftsmanship in building, which he feels is lacking in modern buildings in India.[4] Yet, in the final analysis, what matters is how effectively modern and local elements are synthesized in an architecture that works.

127 Charles Correa

Dome and inlaid floor, Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics, Pune University.

This scientific institution was one of two complementary projects (the other at Jaipur) expressing architecture as a model of the cosmos. Correa, who believes that modern scientific and Hindu notions have remarkable similarities, explores the relationship between the modern discipline of astronomy, our twentieth-century understanding of the expanding universe, and Hindu notions of the cosmos. The small openings in the dome accurately represent the stars of the night sky, while the floor pattern is of ancient Ayurvedic origin, and links the seasons with the constellations.



Semi-figurative art

The reception of modern art in India is encapsulated in the comments of the German art historian Hermann Goetz. Indian art, he argues, 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'.[5] The 1950s to '70s were dominated by non-figurative art, a global phenomenon. The backdrop to it was the politics of the Cold War; the 'free world' artists identified with formalism and abstraction, while

The Bombay Progressives

M. F. Husain, K. H. Ara, F. N. Souza, and S. H. Raza, the founding members, became the most successful artists in the decades following Independence. They were inducted into modernism by three refugees from the Nazis: the Expressionist painter Walter Langhammer, who joined the *Times of India* in 1938 as art director, became their mentor; Emmanuel Schlesinger, who set up a pharmaceutical concern in Bombay, became their main collector; and Rudy von Leyden, who joined the *Times of India* as art critic, championed their cause. The three émigrés joined forces with the radical novelist Mulk Raj Anand and Kekoo Gandhy, owner of the influential Chemould Gallery. Its other members were S. K. Bakre and H. K. Gade, later joined by Krishen Khanna and V. S. Gaitonde. Souza, the most articulate one, enunciated their formalist credo: 'elemental and eternal laws of aesthetic order, plastic co-ordination and colour composition'. Progressive artists had kindred spirits, many of whom trained under André Lhote, including Akbar Padamsee (b. 1928) and Jehangir Sabavala (b. 1922) from Bombay, Ram Kumar (b. 1924) from North India, Nirode Mazumder (1916–82) and Paritosh Sen (b. 1918) from Calcutta, and Zubeida Agha (1922–97) from Lahore in Pakistan.

narrative art was dismissed as being comparable to the Socialist Realism of the USSR. The critic Geeta Kapur writes, 'We developed a quiet, almost quiescent, aesthetic. The ... figure was withdrawn from the work of some of the major Indian artists, leaving behind the merest signs of the human presence in nature'.[6] However, if we are to look for a common thread here, it is the insistent return of the figure, the perennial subject of India, set against the background of abstraction. Paradoxically, de-colonization made Indian artists more, rather than less, conscious of their Indian identity as they confronted global modernity. Indeed, the tensions generated by the conflicting demands of global modernity and national specificity became a major preoccupation of Third World artists.

In 1947, the year of Indian Independence, the Bombay Progressive Artists Group was launched, which made a big impact with a much publicized exhibition the following year. However, without a clear ideology that they could share, the Progressives soon fell apart, two of them heading for Europe. With the notable exception of M. F. Husain, Europe became the training ground of all the leading Indian artists. London had traditionally been the destination of Indian artists reared on English academic art. Sher-Gil in the 1920s was the first artist to break with tradition in choosing Paris, the Mecca of modernism. In the 1940s, the Bengali sculptor Chintamoni Kar was the second Indian to spend some years in Paris. His sculpture was judged the best at an international competition held in Sweden. After Independence, many of the Indian and Pakistani artists in Europe joined the Académie Montparnasse of André Lhote (1885–1962). A minor painter who used Cubist mannerisms to create his rhythmic semi-geometrical shapes, Lhote had emerged as an influential teacher in the 1950s.[7]

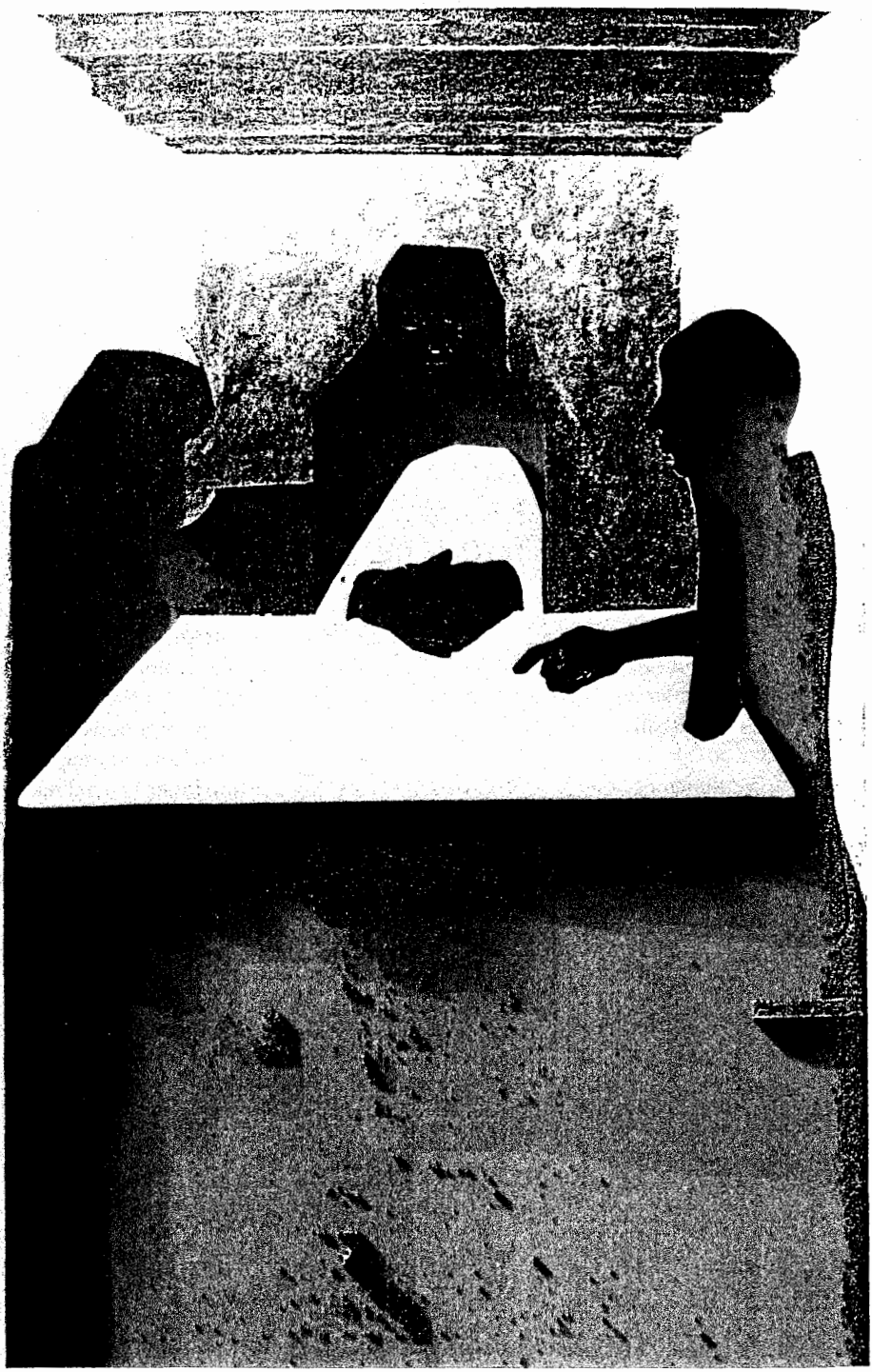
Apart from S. H. Raza, Indian artists with European experience returned to India to mould the post-Independence artistic milieu. By the 1950s, the centre of gravity in modern art had shifted from Paris to New York and London. And yet what these artists brought back with them were semi-figurative styles based on post-war French developments in abstraction. They introduced the pleasure of colour and texture in a country where until then narrative and meaning had been paramount in painting. Ram Kumar, who had been associated with radical political groups in France, chose on his return themes of social injustice and alienation, treated with a dark palette and with snatches of Cubism. He soon moved on to abstraction in his vision of Benares as a configuration of shades and textures, the colourful city reduced to stretches of clay, sand, and sky.[8] Jehangir Sabavala, a craftsman and perfectionist, became engrossed with the possibilities offered by Cubism after his return to Bombay, developing over the years a lyrical form of semi-figurative work.[9]

Krishen Khanna (1925–), who gained prominence in the late 1960s, was born in West Punjab, which is now in Pakistan. After studying in England, he moved to India where he worked for a commercial bank for a while. In 1961 he became a full-time painter. A politically committed artist, he has been an active member of the Artists' Protest Movement. The American-British painter R. B. Kitaj's powerful political statements made a deep impression on him. Khanna began in a semi-figurative style but, partly because of his belief in the political role of art, the image never disappeared from his work [**128**]. An exception to the general non-figurative trend was Satish Gujral who was also born in West Punjab and went to the Mayo College of Arts in Lahore. He left Pakistan in 1952 for Mexico where he worked with the Marxist muralist Siqueiros, before settling in India. Gujral's paintings in the 1960s had a strong Mexican social realist flavour with brooding sculpturesque figures.[10]

Maqbool Fida Husain (b. 1915)

During the first three decades after Independence, the most successful artists were the one-time Bombay Progressives, Husain, Souza, and Raza; the last two were also the first Indian diaspora artists. From a poor Maharastran family, Husain rose from being a humble painter of hoardings advertising Hindi movies to the undisputed leader in modern Indian art 'in the range of his themes [and] the quality of excellence which he has maintained over three decades'.[11] Flamboyant, courting controversy, displaying a generosity of spirit, Husain epitomizes the optimistic Nehruvian era itself. The high point of his career was the São Paulo Biennale of 1971, where he exhibited alongside Picasso [**129**].[12]

With his prodigious output and endless experimentation, he remains an enigma to the critics: 'They have barely been able to



128 Krishen Khanna
Emmaus, 1979.
In this modern retelling of the theme of Christ at Emmaus, Khanna uses a limited range of colours to create an atmosphere of subdued drama.

categorize one phase of his when he has stormed his way into another'.[13] Geeta Kapur, on the other hand, feels that:

[one] can only ask of him what his own work had promised; authentic understanding of the traditional—the 'typical' Indian. Having recognized it [with] something of a brilliant intuition, having embodied [it] in a series of lucid and memorable images, he let go of it, too soon and too easily.[14]

Francis Newton Souza (b. 1924)

A Catholic from Goa, Souza joined the Bombay art school in the last days of the Raj, only to be expelled for taking part in student unrest. The 'angry young man' of Indian art, Souza drew the attention of the Bombay police by exhibiting a full frontal nude of himself. The most articulate among the Bombay Progressives, Souza declared: 'Today we

129 Maqbool Fida Husain
Mother Teresa II, 1980s.
Husain uses 'collages' of bold colours bounded by nervous outlines and random associations of fragmentary images in order to make political and cultural statements. He often paints a series of works to develop his monumental themes, recycling forms by ransacking eastern and western cultures, distilling essences, and deconstructing icons.

130 Francis Newton Souza
Half-nude Girl in a Chair, 1960.
Souza's is a personal vision based on Hindu erotic sculpture, Christian iconography, and a facility with the nude. His nudes could be grim though displaying an innocent sexuality. In an interview published in *The Studio* (1964) he explained that he painted in artificial light, with the help of an overhead projector to 'blow up' photographs and 'pin-ups' from 'girlie magazines'. The method enabled him to keep his inspiration fresh and spontaneous.

paint with absolute freedom [with regard to] contents and techniques, almost anarchic, save that we are governed by one or two sound elemental laws of aesthetic order ... We have no pretensions of making vapid revivals of any school'.[15] Souza chose London, rather than Paris, as his destination in 1949, and received critical acclaim in the 1960s [130].[16]

Sayed Haider Raza (b. 1922)

Childhood memories of mysterious Indian forests drew Raza to landscapes, a rare subject among post-Independence artists. Another product of the Bombay art school, Raza discovered German Expressionism through Langhammer and Rudy von Leyden. His cityscapes progressed from an architectonic view of Bombay to an appreciation of its

Tantra and modern art

The esoteric system of Tantra makes use of elegant diagrams (*yantra*), based on geometrical and abstract forms, as aids to meditation (see chapter 3). Tantra and its idea of the vital force operating in all living beings had attracted the pioneering abstract painters, particularly the circle of Kasimir Malevich. But it was in the 1960s, when the Indian art historian Ajit Mukherjee brought a historic exhibition of Tantra art to the West, that it gained wide publicity: its elegant designs appealed to a modern sensibility nourished on abstraction, while the prevailing sexual revolution eagerly embraced Tantric religious sexuality. Nirode Mazumder, a product of Lhote's studio who specialized in the rhythmic treatment of geometrical semi-figurative shapes, was an early neo-Tantric painter. Others such as G. R. Santosh, Biren De and K. C. S. Pannikar were also discovering for themselves the artistic possibilities of Tantra.

moods, seasons, and colours. In 1956, some years after moving to Paris, he became the first Asian artist to win the Prix de la Critique. The French critic Jacques Lassaigne marvelled at his timeless landscapes and uninhabited cities suspended in the air beneath a dark sun.[17] From the 'transfigured nature' of his early years, Raza moved on in the 1990s to paintings inspired by ancient Indian Upanishadic philosophy and the Tantric cult [**131**].[18] Tantric art gained popularity in the 1960s in India and the West. In 1971 a pioneering Tantric artist, Nirode Mazumder (1916–82) offered a penetrating analysis of the connection between his artistic aims and Tantric philosophy [**132**].[19]

K. G. Ramanujam (1941–73)

An individualist whose work cannot be easily categorized, Ramanujam was part of the Cholamandalam village, the artists' commune founded near Madras by K. C. S. Pannikar. Congenitally deformed, Ramanujam considered himself to be too ugly to find a woman to share his life, deciding to end his life at the age of 32. His works were never shown in his lifetime. Cholamandalam influence can be discerned in Ramanujam's use of folk elements, such as his oversized male and female figures which resemble the papier mâché puppets carried in religious processions in Tamilnadu. Ramanujam frequently reincarnates himself in his fantastic paintings: a slightly grotesque figure flanked by his wish-fulfilment women [**133**].[20]

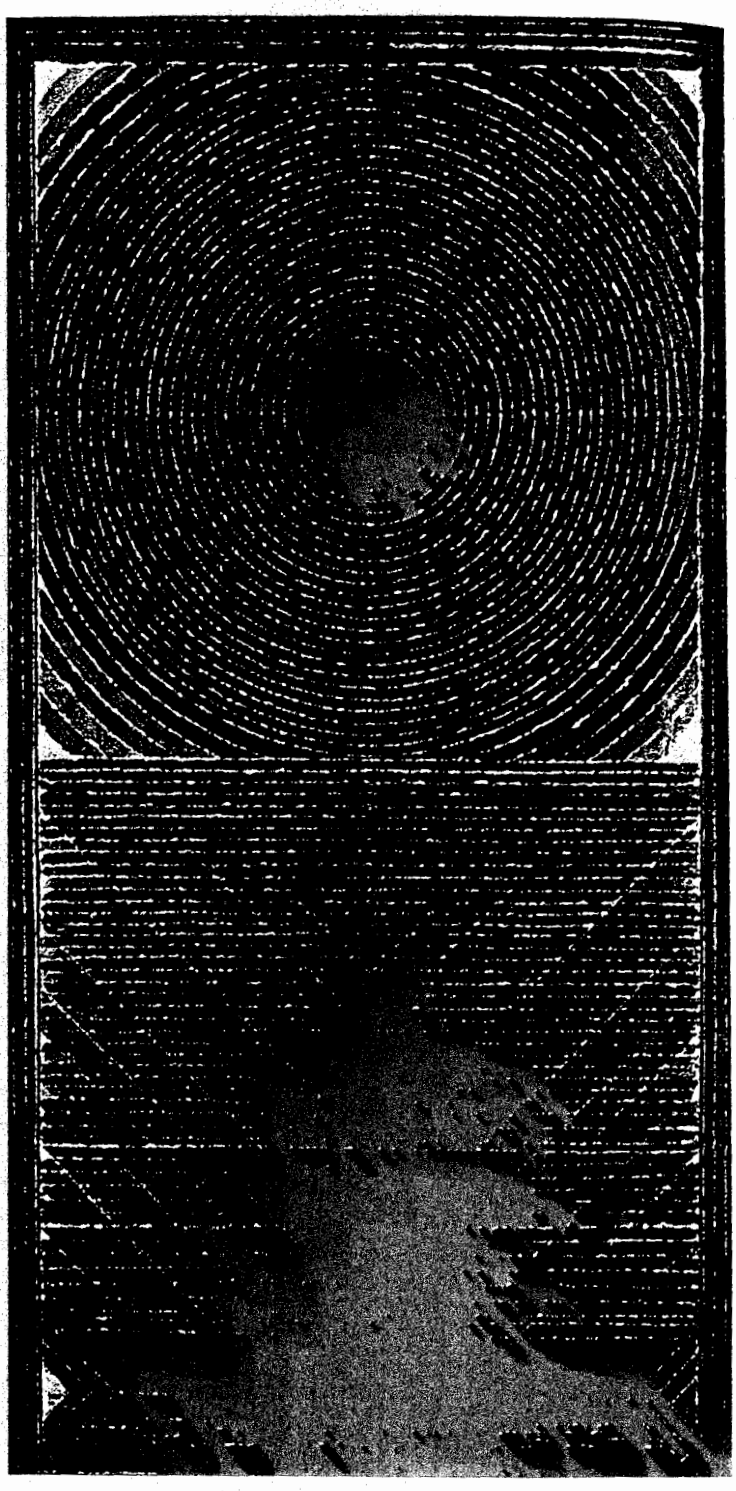
Modern art in Pakistan

The massive population transfers in the aftermath of the Partition in 1947 included Muslim artists, who moved from India to the newly formed East and West Pakistan. In the formative years the destinies of artists belonging to the two wings of Pakistan were interlinked. West Pakistan had inherited the key colonial institution, Mayo School of Arts in Lahore (renamed National College of Arts). Two leading Muslim artists, the orientalist Abdur Rehman Chughtai (1897–1975) and the academic painter Allah Bukhsh (1895–1978), who enjoyed

131 Sayed Haider Raza

Jala Bindu, 1990.

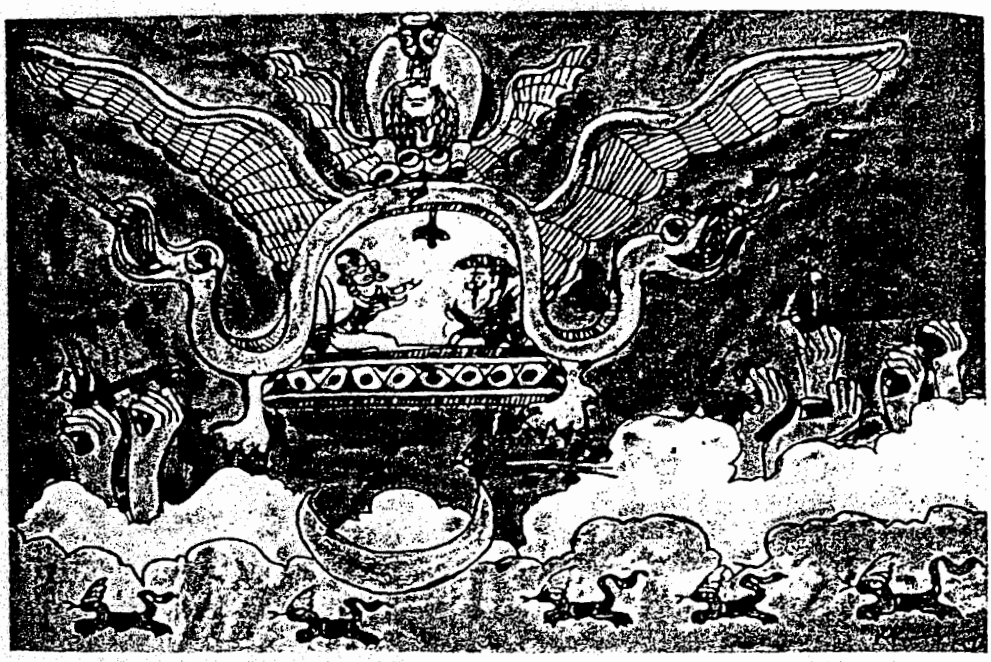
In this Tantric work, a series of colours is orchestrated around the *bindu*, the focal point of meditation, considered the ultimate source of reality in Indian philosophy. Raza conjures up a world of Rajasthani colours—blazing vermilions, mustard yellows, Prussian blues, and pitch blacks—in his painting.



132 Nirode Mazumder
Chandani Holding Gurudas's Feathers, c.1968.
'For the last 20 years I have tried to find solutions, maintaining as far as possible the symbolism of colours according to the *gunas* [loosely translated as spiritual essences], time etc. in my paintings, conceiving my works by series, each of the pictures in a series being a temporal image related to the point marking the centre, from which the whole picture generates and to which the figures developing first in the form of a lotus [a Tantric symbol] will ultimately return'.

pre-eminence as a painter of landscapes and Hindu mythology, became venerable figures in Pakistan. The Pakistani artists showed a particular aptitude for calligraphy and colours and probably felt more at home with abstract design, but the figure continued to be a dominant subject with them.

Because subcontinental artists, irrespective of their religious affiliations, had partaken of the same artistic ideas and movements and had faced very similar problems of responding to the international avant-garde, we can trace very similar developments in the three parts of the subcontinent. As with the younger Indian generation's impatience with the Bengal School, a non-figurative generation was emerging in Pakistan that challenged the earlier artistic concerns. Speaking on the role of international modernism in Pakistan, the art historian Akbar Naqvi remarked that he wished to explore closely 'how much Pakistani artists took from Europe and what did they leave out'.[21] In 1949, the modern movement in Pakistan was launched with an eye



133 K. G. Ramanujam
Untitled, 1972.
He creates an imaginary 'bricolage' universe made up of heterogeneous elements—architectural constructions, Tamil gods, sacred animals, children's books, snatches from the French Impressionists, and Venetian scenes. A Venetian cavernous arch, for instance, allows us an entry into a garish carnival such as one sees in South Indian films. His fantasy figures ride composite beasts with elongated lambs' heads and serpents' tails in an imaginary space.

to developments in American art but with scarcely any knowledge of the neighbouring Bombay Progressives, for instance. And yet interactions did take place. The moving spirit behind the Karachi Fine Art Society was an Indian diplomat.[22]

In the 1940s, the Bengali artist B. C. Sanyal's Lahore School of Fine Art had introduced a modicum of modernism in the Punjab. In the initial years of Pakistan, Anna Molka (1917–95), an energetic East European married to a Pakistani artist, joined the department of fine arts at Punjab University. An Expressionist painter herself, she encouraged modern art.[23] The first major modernist painter was Zubeida Agha, who is discussed in the next chapter in the section on female artists.

In the 1950s a group of artists formed the independent Lahore Art Circle. In 1952, Cubism was introduced by Shakir Ali (1916–75) at the National College of Art. A mystical painter and an inspiring teacher, Ali gave a lead to the younger generation through his Group of Five. After his training at the Bombay art school, Ali had worked at André Lhote's studio in Paris.[24] He then spent a period in Czechoslovakia learning textile design. His development from traditional art through Cubism to colouristic canvases was cut short by his early death. Among successful painters, the portraitist Ismail Guljee (b. 1926) from Sind province enjoyed lavish state sponsorship. Impressed by the visiting American painter Elaine Hamilton, Guljee enthusiastically plunged into action painting, creating dazzling surfaces enhanced with

gold and silver leaf and calligraphy. However, he did not relinquish his lucrative portrait commissions.[25] It is often forgotten in tracing the trajectory of modernism that there have been serious and talented naturalistic artists, as evident in the landscapes of Khaled Iqbal (b. 1929), Zulqarnain Haider (b. 1939), Shahid Jalal (b. 1948), and Ijazul Hassan (b. 1940), to name the best-known ones.[26]

Sadequain Naqvi (1930–87)

It is against this background of nascent modernism that Sadequain, the celebrated Pakistani artist and a prizewinner at the Paris Biennale of 1961, made his debut. Sadequain's versatility ranged from fine calligraphic miniatures to monumental paintings, though it is in public murals that he created a permanent niche for himself. In the words of the poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Sadequain was a visionary whose phantasmagoric creations expressed the emotional and social unity of all material things caught up in an upward struggle.[27]

Descended from a family of calligraphers in North India, Sadequain joined the Progressive Writers and Artists Movement in the 1940s. He then spent a period in Paris augmenting his skills. A short spell in the barren, cacti-ridden desert terrain by the sea at Gadani, near Karachi, became Sadequain's epiphany. In the ensuing allegorical works on the labouring man's spiritual struggle, the spiky cactus came to be a metaphor for the human condition; when it was accompanied by Kufic (a decorative form of Arabic script) calligraphy, it represented the fall of man [134].[28]

Between 1966 and 1970, the political situation in Pakistan worsened. In 1976, Sadequain's exhibition in Lahore was greeted with violent protests by conservative elements. Under threat in his final years, Sadequain's defiance died down. He turned to more neutral calligraphy, especially *tughra* (word pictures), combining abstraction with meaning, one of the first modern artists to use it to explore painterly texture.[29] Sadequain's use of Islamic calligraphy was part of a growing trend in Pakistan, culminating in the calligraphic competition at the Islamic Summit in Lahore in 1974, followed two years later by a German–Pakistan conference on the subject.[30] This phase of Sadequain's work, however, is seen by some as a retreat from his earlier social commitment.[31] Disillusioned, before his death the artist visited India, where he was received with enthusiasm.

Ahmed Parvez (1926–79)

The prolific and controversial Ahmed Parvez is considered to be one of the four 'touchstones' of Pakistani art. Parvez was born in Rawalpindi on the North West Frontier. His parents' separation caused deep problems in his personal relationships but it also fuelled his precocious creativity. Parvez was discovered by Shakir Ali and the modernist

136 Zainul Abedin

Famine, 1943.

In 1943 Abedin won recognition with his harrowing images of the victims of the great famine of Bengal, created with deft expressionist sketches of considerable intensity.

the younger generation, who admired the works of Zubeida Agha, Shakir Ali, and Sadequain. Among this generation, Mohammad Kibria has been a particularly sensitive artist in exploring subtle textures in his mixed media works.

The watershed for the artists of East Pakistan was the War of Liberation in 1971 that created Bangladesh. While it was a period of great suffering, it also offered a new national identity and a new optimism, which had a profound effect on art and artists. The private language of abstraction was felt to be inadequate for expressing the political struggle as it demanded readily intelligible and affecting images. Later, the leading artists of Bangladesh, including Abedin, were to produce works based on their own experiences of genocide and resistance ranging from the abstract to the figurative.[37]

In the general atmosphere of optimism that followed the founding of Bangladesh, the young state stepped forward as a patron, establishing academies and art galleries. These were to support artists through exhibitions and publicize their works with monographs and other publications. Among these, the most important is the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, the official sponsor of Bangladeshi art. Every year since 1974, the Academy has organized a national art exhibition and an exhibition devoted entirely to young artists.[38]

The most significant development since the 1980s, as also seen in other parts of the subcontinent, has been the marketing of art and the expansion of art galleries, subsidized by private concerns. In the 1960s

137 Shahabuddin
Freedom Fighter, 1997.
The freedom fighter is represented here as a sprinter charging across the battlefield, routing the forces of tyranny with sheer energy and exuberance.

there were only the Arts Ensemble Galleries in Dhaka. After 1971 galleries proliferated in the capital.[39] Since the 1990s, as poverty, political instability, and forces of conservatism have overwhelmed Bangladesh, there is a feeling that the optimism of 1971 has gone sour. Some critics complain that once again artists are returning to a personal language of abstraction, abandoning social commitment as earlier feelings of unity begin to fade.[40]

The War of Liberation produced a remarkable artist in Bangladesh. Shahabuddin (b. 1950), who showed promise in his student years, joined the armed struggle for independence, an experience that deeply coloured his mature work. He left for Paris in 1974, where he received further training, and has lived there since. From 1979, Shahabuddin began exploring the expressive potentials of the human form, as recalled from his war experiences. His most striking works are his male figures in motion, which he uses to great effect in capturing the drama of the struggle and eventual victory [**137**].[41]