

From The San Francisco Chronicle

Exhibition A Window On Indian Art

By Katie Vaughn

Friday, June 3, 2005

Contemporary Indian art, until recently, was largely an unknown genre in the global art world. Providing an introduction to one of the most important 20th century art movements most Americans have never heard of is an exhibition at Palo Alto's ArtsIndia West. "Ashta Nayak: Eight Pioneers of Contemporary Indian Art" showcases a collection of old and recent paintings by leaders of the historic movement.

On the eve of India's independence from Britain in 1947, a handful of Mumbai (Bombay) painters formed the Progressive Artists' Group with the goal of creating a new mode of Indian art. Motivated by politics as much as aesthetics, the liberal group desired its art not be confined to India, with its standard mythological iconography and British colonial influence, but rather hold a position in the international art world.

"They aimed to create a new national aesthetic for India within the boundaries of international framework," said Madhurika Dev, gallery director of ArtsIndia West. "By using modern techniques, they tried to evolve a language for Indian contemporary art."

Looking to new developments in Western art, particularly Expressionism and Fauvism, the Progressives began showing paintings characterized by bright colors, bold brushwork and abstract forms. The group formally dissolved in the late 1950s when several of its members moved to Europe, but the artists continued painting throughout the next five decades, developing their own styles.

"Ashta Nayak," which ran this spring at Gallery ArtsIndia in New York City, combines paintings from a variety of decades by eight artists, some of whom were formal members of the Progressives and others who often exhibited with them. The large collection of works illustrates the diversity of the group's aesthetics.

F.N. Souza's 1965 painting of a stylized chessboard and pieces, made with blunt outlines and thick Van Gogh-esque strokes of color, contrasts sharply to a 1979 piece by Tyeb Mehta, in which flat planes of warm colors depict two angular human forms. In turn, those paintings are nothing like J. Swaminathan's untitled Bird Series work, a Surrealist-like scene of repeating organic elements and barren expanses of color.

Furthermore, the juxtaposition of works from various periods provides a visual timeline of particular artists' evolutions. For example, while Ram Kumar's "Landscape Green" of 1960 features compressed dark squares and planes, a classic ode to analytic Cubism, three of his untitled paintings of 2004 boast larger, soft colored shapes arranged loosely across compositions.

The influence of European art is also evident in works like the 1972 "Maya the Dream" painting by M.F. Husain, the best known of the Progressives, still active at age 90. The thick, sweeping brushstrokes and smudgy areas of intense color show the impact of Fauvism, and other movements concerned with liberating the use of color and form and presenting an emotional and personal vision of the world.

Perhaps as interesting as the paintings themselves are the questions such pieces ultimately raise about influence and comparison, tricky issues in the subject of art. It would undoubtedly be unfair to say that any of them plagiarize, say, a work by Picasso or Matisse. Yet, Projjal Dutta, a partner at Gallery ArtsIndia, said that acknowledging the Progressives' art was inspired by European artists does not lessen its worth or impact.

"I don't think invention happens in a vacuum," Dutta said. "Everyone is derivative, but I think the real story lies not in where you begin but where you end up. And I don't think any of these artists have ended their journeys where they started."

What's more, Dev said, is that viewers find unique interpretations of a work due to their knowledge and backgrounds. For instance, while some may see S.H. Raza's "Shanti Bindu" simply as a canvas filled with concentric circles in muted colors, others may regard it as a reaction to a Jasper Johns painting. And Dev reads an altogether different message: she believes the circles are references to the bindi dots many Indians wear on their foreheads or to energy centers in the human body. She cites the painting as one example of how the artists have taken foreign movements and made them their own.

Regardless of personal interpretations of the paintings, Dutta said the influence the Progressives have had on today's contemporary Indian artists is undeniable.

"In India, they made modernism viable," he said. "They certainly showed a way and made it acceptable critically and commercially to work completely abstractly."

While contemporary Indian art has been slow to gain popularity in the United States, the situation is quickly changing. In 1995, Sotheby's held its first auction of the genre, but last year saw seven such auctions. Dutta said the ArtsIndia exhibition provides an ideal opportunity to get an idea of where the style began and how it has matured over the past 50 years.

"This show reveals the shoulders on which a lot of contemporary Indian art stands," he said. "Art of this quantity and quality is not being shown anywhere else in the world now. It's a very unique event."

Where to go

"Ashta Nayak: Eight Pioneers of Contemporary Indian Art" runs through June 19 at ArtsIndia West, 535 Bryant St., Palo Alto. Artist Paresh Maity will paint live in the gallery 6:30-8 p.m. June 12; a closing reception will be held 6-9 p.m. June 18. The gallery is open Tues.-Sat. 11 a.m.-7 p.m. and Sun. noon-5 p.m. (650) 321-4900; www.artsindia.com.