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Understanding the Importance of Eclecticism: K. G. Subramanyan and Twentieth-Century Indian Art

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This scholarly note investigates the philosophy of K. G. Subramanyan, a contemporary Indian artist, with respect to how he has navigated modernity and postcolonialism to create artistic identity and meaning through eclecticism. The editor recommends searching the Internet for visual images of the artworks mentioned throughout the discussion.

Eclecticism as an Internal Solution to a Postcolonial Identity Crisis

Indian artist K. G. Subramanyan (b. 1924) is a theoretician and educator who addresses many of the issues of contemporary art practice in India. One of the major topics he identifies is *eclecticism*, which he defines as "the interaction, and maybe the reconciliation, of different cultural forms."[1] Eschewing the related term *hybridity*, Subramanyan dismisses the pejorative connotation of eclecticism, explaining that it not only is indicative of the modern multicultural situation but also can be an important tool in the renewal of culture. For Subramanyan, accepting modern culture as eclectic is one of the first steps to finding what he terms "an internal solution" to the "identity crisis" that marks much of postcolonial Indian art.[2]

This essay explores Subramanyan's notion of eclecticism and its importance in twentieth-century Indian art. Subramanyan refers to three influential Indian artists to illuminate his points: Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951), the "father" of Indian modernism; Nandalal Bose (1883–1966), Abanindranath's student and later Subramanyan's mentor; and Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Nobel Prize–winning poet and artist. I explore the ways in which all four men have negotiated various cultural forms in their artworks. The ways in which these artists have dealt with and transformed diverse cultural facts can be understood as methods for negotiating Indian identity in a multicultural world.

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Art as a Language for Understanding Cultural Facts

Distinguishing between "traditional," pre-industrial societies and "modern," industrial societies, Subramanyan explains that the worldview has drastically changed. He believes that, because traditional societies shared similar physical and cultural environments, interaction between societies was less dramatic. Such societies knew their heritage and had their own sensibilities that "conditioned . . . the traditional artist for cross-cultural exposure."[3]

By contrast, industrialization, beginning in the late eighteenth century, led to improvements in communication and transportation. As a result, cultures came into contact with one another like never before. Consequently, the modern artist is exposed to many dissimilar cultural facts; but these facts are usually viewed out of context. Since the contexts cannot be duplicated, and artists cannot fully grasp original intents, artists can understand only diverse cultural facts and forms in fragments. As a result, Subramanyan argues, these cultural facts must be placed in a meaningful framework in order for them to be beneficial.

Subramanyan identifies a possible comprehensive model for understanding diverse cultural facts, one of art as language. In other words, Subramanyan views art as a system of communication, not as a procession of styles. Since all facts potentially have varying impacts on the artist, they form a hierarchy of visual information. In modern society, this information is comprised of forms from all parts of the world and from both "high" and "low" realms of art. Nevertheless, according to Subramanyan, his "model or concept will accommodate all kinds of art activity" and will help to "avoid the basic weakness of the present global art scene which equates diverse objects, or arts . . . without any discrimination or reference to a total value system."[4] Using Subramanyan's model, one can begin to look at the underlying rationale of various art forms as well as their differences and capabilities.

However, like any language, this model is subject to constraints. Instead of advocating a contextual understanding or a non-contextual, formal appreciation of the object, Subramanyan argues for an interpretation and understanding of diverse cultural information "by the facts and experiences that are familiar to us."[5] He says that "eclectic interactions are most rewarding when the contact with an alien art form clarifies for an artist a special feature of his own work-system or gives support to a preconceived scheme on his part for its revision."[6] In other words, interaction is most meaningful when contact with another activates something within one's own culture or provides an alternative to that culture. Numerous examples of meaningful interaction can be cited. One is the Impressionists with Japanese *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 prints; another is twentieth-century Modern artists with primitivism.

In a postcolonial country like India, cultural exchange is complex. In the nineteenth century, the British established European-style schools that

emphasized academic realism. Students were instructed to draw from casts of classical models, and value was placed on verisimilitude. Instead of encouraging a continuation or revitalization of Indian arts and crafts, the British educational system, along with European products, cultivated an educated Indian elite with European tastes. Indian traditions were supplanted for a more singular notion of European modernity.

As a result, some grew concerned about the disorientation of their culture. Subramanyan identifies Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, and Rabindranath Tagore as “the only three of our early modern artists with serious views in this regard.”[7] The development of their artistic expressions spanned from the 1890s into the early decades of the twentieth century. This period was also one of growing nationalism, and these artists were looking for ways to respond to and counter British dominance while trying to reconnect with their own past traditions. They negotiated many diverse types of cultural objects and facts in their artworks. Four types of cultural forms can be ascertained: European art forms; traditional Indian painting from Ajanta, Mughal, and Rajput miniatures; Far Eastern aesthetics; and folk and popular art.

A Synthesis of European & Asian Aesthetics: The Art of Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951)

Of the three artists Subramanyan identifies, Abanindranath, who was apprenticed with two European painters in the 1890s, was the only one specifically trained in European techniques.[8] Early pen-and-ink drawings and pastel portraits illustrate his use of European materials, chiaroscuro, and cross-hatching. However, these forms became increasingly unsatisfactory to him. Searching for a new expressive language, in 1896 Abanindranath began taking lessons from an Indian craftsman. He was also given an illuminated manuscript of Irish ballads in the Art Nouveau style and a portfolio of Indian miniatures.[9] Exposed to these alternatives, he began to experiment with these idioms.

Though Abanindranath rejected academic realism, he did not abandon certain naturalistic details in his paintings. Furthermore, although he looked to past traditions for inspiration, he also called tradition a “stumbling block” and cautioned having blind loyalty to traditional canons.[10] Instead, he sought an eclectic blend of these approaches because, as Subramanyan explains, eclecticism was and is the situation.

Although Abanindranath’s blend was not always successful, it shows his attempt to establish an “Indian” style. Combining European naturalism, Art Nouveau linearity, Pre-Raphaelite detailing, and the subjects of Indian miniatures,[11] *Avisar* (c. 1895) and *On the Swing* (1896) reveal an artist searching for ways to reconcile diverse cultural idioms. However, the overall effect

in each piece is an awkward blend of approaches: simplified, stiff figures are positioned against naturalistic details; and flat planes mix with skewed perspectives.

By contrast, Abanindranath's Mughal-inspired series (c. 1897–1900) exhibits a more sophisticated eclecticism. In *The Last Days of Shah Jahan*, a sense of depth is suggested in the foreshortening of the Mughal emperor's head and the angle of the throne. His monument, the Taj Mahal, is smaller and less detailed, suggesting its distant position. In addition, facial details in both figures suggest a sense of individualism. Combined with these more "Western" techniques, Abanindranath adds the decorative, flattening Islamic patterning; and the space is tilted upwards. However, unlike Mughal miniatures, Abanindranath's image is said to be infused with *bhava* (feeling, mood). Thus, Abanindranath does not simply revive Mughal or Rajput techniques and themes; nor does he uncritically apply European naturalism or symbolism. Instead, he fuses these diverse styles with an eclectic approach that engages his Western training and reconnects with the past.

India was not the only country concerned with reconnecting with the past. In Japan, Okakura Kakuzō 岡倉覚三 (1863–1913, also known as Okakura Tenshin 岡倉天心), an intimate member of the Tagores' circle, developed a Pan-Asian vision based on tradition, nature, and originality in response to the modernization and Westernization of Japan. Affecting the development of India's own nationalist movement, Okakura also sent two Japanese artists to India, resulting in an exchange of artistic styles. While Far Eastern details had already been adopted via Art Nouveau, the wash and calligraphic ink techniques thereafter were added to the mix.

Both Abanindranath and his student, Nandalal Bose, experimented with the Japanese wash technique. In his series based on the *Rubbaiyat* of Omar Khayyam (1048–1131), Abanindranath adopted Japanese flat color and the hazy, atmospheric effects of the wash and combined them with the curvy simplicity of fin de siècle illustration and the minute details and highlights of the miniature format. As illustrated in *End of the Journey* (c. 1912), these qualities are utilized to be suggestive or evocative of an end—the fading of the day as the sun sets, or the passing of a life suggested by the collapsed camel. Infused with *bhava*, this symbolism relates to his European fin de siècle contemporaries.

Traditional Indian Aesthetics: The Art of Nandalal Bose (1883–1966)

Similarly, in early works like *Sati* (1907) and *Shiva Drinking Poison* (1913), Bose adopted his guru's wash technique; evocative, subdued colors; and atmospheric haze. In addition, the simplified forms and linear contours are similar to the Japanese aesthetic. However, where Abanindranath's figures are melancholic and fragile, Bose's figures exhibit the solidity and rubbery

plasticity reminiscent of second-century (B.C.E.) figures from the Ajanta Caves in Maharashtra. Approaching tradition as a language system, Bose took the Indian style in a different direction.

Unlike his individualistic guru, Bose viewed the artist as an ordinary worker; like any laborer, the artist needed tradition and training. For Bose, a simple reconnection with the past was not sufficient; instead, he believed that, in order to be able to respond authentically to many different cultural facts, the artist must understand and cultivate an environment that is in touch with both past and living traditions. To such ends, Bose adopted a conservative but highly versatile approach to art-making. Similar to Abanindranath, he chose his subjects and styles from Indian literary and painting traditions as seen in *Siva and Sati* (1947) and *Radha's Viraha* (1936). However, while alluding to the Imperial miniature format in *Radha's Viraha*, his treatment is closer to popular arts. Avoiding linear perspective, he tilts the picture plane to reveal the scene and employs flat, tropical colors. Foliage details are stylized. The figures' extremities are elongated and graceful, and their clothing is simplified into planes. Lacking the miniature's exquisite luster of details and gold, *Radha*, by contrast, appears very modern. It is instead akin to Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) in its flat, bright colors and Henri Matisse (1869–1954) in its decorative appeal. These images, however, also relate to folk and popular arts in India that Bose admired and encouraged his students to study.

Joining Rabindranath's school at Santiniketan, West Bengal, in the 1920s, Bose actively sought to locate and continue a living tradition, one that connected the past with the present. To cultivate an environment in which this extension could occur, he invited local and foreign craftspeople to Santiniketan so that his students could learn various craft techniques. He also participated in a variety of artistic, craft-making, and performance activities. While Abanindranath's subjects were rooted in images of a romanticized past, Bose, who was devoted to Gandhi (1869–1948) and his indigenous program, looked to nature and the life around him for inspiration. Constantly sketching, he employed both the Japanese wash and ink techniques in a more spontaneous manner to connect with his immediate environment. This tendency can also be seen in his Haripura Posters (1937).

Responding to Gandhi's request for imagery, Bose created panels to decorate the gates and pandals (temporary structures used as meeting places) of the Haripura session of the Indian National Congress (1938). Evoking the spirit of village life, Bose adopted a simplified, hieratic format similar to popular art forms like Bengali Kalighat paintings.[12] Using bold forms and flat colors articulated by a few calligraphic lines, he recorded the daily activities of village life, such as women preparing food and craftspeople at work. He also depicted scenes of women in their toilet or tending to their children, common themes of *ukiyo-e* prints. Appealing on many dif-

ferent levels, these images reveal the desire to connect to the environment and situation of the Indian village while they also display—through bold colors and simplified designs—both a modern and a local language to use. Thus, in viewing tradition, nature, and life as parts of a visual language, these eclectic forms can be used by the artist to express an array of subjects, as evidenced by Bose's diverse oeuvre.

Internal Eclecticism: The Art of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941)

While Abanindranath and Bose were trying to develop a new "Indian" style from these interactions of forms, Rabindranath (an uncle to Abanindranath) provided a more subtle and perhaps more "modern" negotiation of cultures. Known primarily as a poet, Rabindranath began painting when he was in his sixties. Unlike Abanindranath or Bose, Rabindranath received no artistic training but was exposed to many diverse art forms in his many travels abroad. He was probably acquainted with many modern European movements, including "primitive" art from the Americas and Africa, as well as children's art.[13] The diverse sources with which he came into contact were absorbed into his subconscious and eventually manifested themselves in the doodles and erasures that appeared in his manuscripts as early as 1924.[14] Thus, while Abanindranath and Bose's eclecticism is more visually obvious in their paintings, Rabindranath's was more internal. He wrote that "the sign of greatness in great geniuses is their enormous capacity for borrowing, very often without knowing it."[15] Pen and ink images of grotesque birds, animals, and portraits reveal affinities to "primitive" art but also, in their allusiveness, relate to Symbolism. The nature of their formation, as unconscious doodling, connects to Automatism and Surrealism.

Although these images are personal, taken from memory and the unconscious, Rabindranath's example perhaps had more impact because it not only freed the artist from specific references to the past and the world but also stressed the importance of the creative individual. An artist could use both the past as well as external stimuli to reinvigorate artistic expression, as long as this interaction enhanced the individual's interaction with his or her environment. From this vantage, an alien culture was not necessarily destructive but could provide "a fresh impetus and inspiration to a sagging creative will."[16] It is this eclectic quality that Subramanyan identifies and continues.

A Philosophy of Eclecticism: The Art of K. G. Subramanyan

Subramanyan shares a connection with each of these three artists. He conceives art as a language and stresses the importance of cultivating one's environment. This environment is both one's immediate physical environment and the entire world. It is up to the artist to negotiate this compli-

cated eclectic position meaningfully by understanding dissimilar cultural facts according to his or her own experience. These outside stimuli are beneficial only when they widen one's sensibility and expression. From these, the artist develops a personal language rather than a personal style. In this way, Subramanyan reconciles the two individualistic Tagores with Bose's sense of community.

Subramanyan also strives to be versatile; like Bose and Abanindranath, he has investigated numerous types of artistic creation: textiles, toymaking, mural painting, and other craft forms. He also employs numerous materials: glass, wood, terracotta, tempera, and oil. In addition, he looks to the local environment for subject matter and local craftspeople for training. Thus, Subramanyan connects with the world and his environment.

Although Abanindranath was never able to break fully from realism, Subramanyan utilizes modern expressive devices in post-Cubist vocabulary, representing the eclectic world in which he lives. In works like *Terrace II* (1974) and *Fairytales of Purvapalli* (1986), abstract and representational forms oscillate and are both decorative and expressive of ordinary scenes. *Fairytales* evokes a sense of fantasy and play—the flying angelic form in the upper left-hand corner, the animal's behind as it leaps over the edge, and the talking parrots. These elements blend with a sense of place, Purvapalli being the neighborhood where Subramanyan lives in Santiniketan. One senses that these are both observed and imagined passing facts taken from life and art.

Images like *Ethiopia Nativity* (1988) and *Visions of a Yellow Moon* (1994) are transformations of reality—where a birthing woman is a many-headed/armed goddess and the vision in the window is fantastic myth. In *Ethiopian Nativity*, the artist combines current events—news of aid to the starving nation—with Hindu iconography and the Biblical story of the Magi. The implication of a narrative is complicated by the blend of eclectic forms, some abstract and decorative, others representative and evocative. Underlying these paintings is a debt to European Modernism in their formal spatial and figural arrangements and abstraction; to Indian mythology and techniques in their subjects and tilted spaces; and to folk and popular art in their continuous narration, simplifications, and wry, sometimes naughty, humor. However, one cannot clearly distinguish which characteristic belongs to which cultural tradition. In glass paintings from the 1980s, one can cite *ukiyo-e* prints, Bengali paintings, Cubism, and Matisse as sources—while still being able to locate the images in an Indian setting.

In this way, Subramanyan has used eclecticism as a philosophy and as a working method, borrowing from the world what is valuable to his own expressive needs. These eclectic cultural facts do not make his work uninteresting, derivative, or inauthentic; on the contrary, they add dimension and complexity and reveal images that respond to both the eclectic proliferation of images and the local environments that they infiltrate, inhabit, and transform.

Notes

[1]K. G. Subramanyan, "Eclecticism I," in *The Creative Circuit* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1992), 24–37: 25.

[2]K. G. Subramanyan, "Eclecticism II," in *The Creative Circuit,* 38–52: 51.

[3]Subramanyan, "Eclecticism I," 27.

[4]K. G. Subramanyan, "Models of Modern Art," in *The Creative Circuit,* 3–23: 22.

[5]Subramanyan, "Eclecticism I," 36–37.

[6]Subramanyan, "Models of Modern Art," 22, and "Eclecticism II," 41.

[7]Subramanyan, "Eclecticism I," 33.

[8]In his 1933 biography on Abanindranath Tagore, Rai Govind Chandra provides a general timeline of Abanindranath's artistic training. In 1891, he was introduced to the Italian artist Signor Gilhardy, Vice-Principal of the Government School of Art, Calcutta, who taught him European techniques of chiaroscuro, linear perspective, and life drawing. In 1894, Abanindranath took lessons in oil painting from Charles Palmer, a professor from the Royal College of Art, London. Chandra, *Abanindranath Tagore* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1933), 16.

[9]Ella Dutta, "Abanindranath Tagore: A New Context," in *Contemporary Indian Art: Other Realities*, ed. Yashodhara Dalmia (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2002), 20–33: 22.

[10]In his later Vageswari lectures (1921–29), delivered at Calcutta University, Abanindranath criticized European-modeled art schools because "they work by a form of routine, not the mind's delight." On the other hand, he also warned against blind traditionalism: "to think that our art will find new life, and go spinning gaily around, if only we mould our techniques and skills on the models of a certain people or age, Hindu, Mughal or European, is to put our foot into that old patch of quicksand, tiny but disastrous, that lies in the path of every growing artist. Within it lies that brilliant and attractive stumbling-block called tradition. Fascination for it is like the fascination for an ancient treasure; only when we are resourceful enough to cruise past it will the winds of creativity fill our sails and save us from sinking." Quoted in Subramanyan, "Eclecticism I," 33–34.

[11]See Ratan Parimoo, *The Paintings of the Three Tagores—Abanindranath, Gaganendranath, Rabindranath: A Comparative Study* (Baroda: Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda Press, 1973), 75–76.

[12]Kalighat paintings were pen-and-wash paintings and drawings created by village scroll painters (*patua*s) and sold at the pilgrim center of Kalighat in Calcutta. They were popular in the first half of the nineteenth century and are often categorized as folk art or urban popular art. Characterized by bold lines, simplified forms, bright colors, and secular subjects, the paintings were influential to many modern Indian artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

[13]Parimoo, *Paintings of the Three Tagores*, 118–23.

[14]Ibid., 122.

[15]Quoted in Subramanyan, "Eclecticism I," 35.

[16]Ibid., 36.