

Contemporary Art Currents between Japan and India

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Contemporary Art Currents between Japan and India

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Recent decades have seen increasing interactions in contemporary art between India and Japan marking a renewed fervor in a field which had been somewhat in hiatus since Okakura Kakuzō and Rabindranath Tagore had formed a strong cultural bond, at the turn of the 20th century. This movement has come about due to promotion by the respective governments, cultural organizations, art museums and galleries. India's most important international art exhibition, the Triennale organized by the Lalit Kala Akademi (National Academy of Art) has seen representation from Japanese artists from its very first exhibition in 1968, while the Japan Foundation since its inception in India in 1994 has done substantial work to foster cultural relations between the two countries. The Fukuoka Art Museum has consistently hosted exhibitions of Asian Art including Indian artists, while more recently the Mori Museum in Tokyo has been showcasing Contemporary Indian Art. A number of Japanese artists, some on a personal level, have made repeated visits to India resulting in images of India filtering into their works.

However, these efforts do not encompass the broad canvas and most vibrant of Contemporary Indian Art; and Contemporary Japanese Art is yet to garner substantial attention in India. The art of both countries has faced similar issues, whereby on the one hand it is expected to draw on its rich historical past and "eastern" situation and on the other to compete on a global level. The problem of identity and the indigenous image is being increasingly questioned by both Indian and Japanese scholars, curators and artists, attempting to release art from the "hegemony of western concepts". From the 1990s onwards Asian art, including Japanese and Indian art, has been making its presence felt globally, with increased participations in international biennales and art exhibitions. The role of the arts of the two countries in the larger framework of Asian art is a hotly debated topic today.¹ I have been impelled to touch on this issue (however briefly) by the cornucopia of discussion and information on this buzzing around the world.

This paper traces the cross currents in art between Japan and India particularly in the contemporary context and presents the opinions of scholars, curators and artists, discusses the role of various agencies that have supported art activity between the two countries and their mission statements, investigates into the inspiration, expression and aspirations of Japanese and Indian artists involved in this process, questions whether there is a common aesthetic, dwells on the problem of identity and image and

¹ As the scope of this paper does not allow wider investigation, Asian art would be discussed primarily in relation to Japan and India.

inquires into whether continuing efforts in progressive exchanges can lead to mutually gainful artistic appreciation and movement.

Interactions in the Modern Period

Interactions between Japanese and Indian thinkers and artists in the modern age can be traced to have begun with the Japanese scholar, Okakura Kakuzō's (1863–1913, also known as Okakura Tenshin) visit to Santiniketan, in West Bengal, India in 1901–02. Okakura, the former director of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts encountered Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) whose teaching of *advaita* was shared by Okakura, who made it a theme of his first book in English, *The Ideals of the East* (1904)². Through Okakura Japanese painters Yokoyama Taikan (1868–1958) and Hishida Shunsō (1874–1911) were invited to India by the Tagore family. Mutual influences followed through Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951) adapting Yokoyama's "water dripping technique"³ in his own wash technique, while the Japanese artists portrayed Indian Goddesses in their paintings, though these images "may have frightened the Japanese public with their unfamiliar iconography."⁴

Due to Okakura's initiative, information about new Bengali painting was transferred to Japan through the journal *Kokka* founded by Okakura. An exhibition of Indian contemporary painting was held at the Nippon Bijutsu-in (Japan Art Institute founded by Okakura) on the occasion of Rabindranath Tagore's first visit to Japan in 1916. Tagore was accompanied to Japan by the Indian artist Mukul Chandra Dey (1895–1989). During his stay in Japan, Rabindranath Tagore met many scholars and artists, including art historian Yashiro Yukio (1890–1975) and artists Shimomura Kanzan (1873–1930) and Arai Kanpō (1878–1945); Tagore invited the latter to India as a teacher. Arai's most important endeavour during his stay in India was the execution of copies of Ajanta mural paintings⁵, which strongly influenced his later creative work. In turn Nandalal Bose who is known to have visited Hōryūji with Arai Kanpō in 1928, experimented with the Japanese "dripping ink" or "splashed ink" technique of *haboku* or *hatsuboku*.⁶

Cultural Exchange in the Post-war/Independence Period

Though cultural exchanges between the two countries continued through the 1950s, yet it is post 1990s and specifically in this century that activities have picked up. In the 1950s The International House of Japan played a leading role in the process of development of cultural exchange. It invited a

2 Inaga Shigemi. "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus in the First Half of the Twentieth Century (1901–1945): Rabindranath Tagore, Arai Kanpō, and Nandalal Bose", *Japan Review* 21, Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2009, p. 150.

3 Though according to Inaga (Inaga: *Japan Review*, 2009, p. 152) this technique called *mōrōtai* was short-lived and atypical in Japanese art.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 151.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 161.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

number of prominent Indians including Indian Prime Minister Nehru for its lecture program and supported activities of Japan-based Indian researchers. A Cultural Agreement between Japan and India signed in 1956 took effect the following year. The Japan-India Mixed Cultural Commission, an inter-governmental forum for wide-ranging exchanges of views on cultural exchange, was also established around that time; however despite these efforts activities were limited and sporadic.

The 1980s saw greater frequency of cultural activity “with Japanese local governments becoming involved in exchange activities with their Indian counterparts.”⁷ A major step was an agreement made in 1985 between the Prime Ministers of the two countries which fructified in the largest-scale cultural-exchange ever, the Japan Month in four Indian cities in 1987, featuring various cultural events including an exhibition of modern Indian art and a show on Rabindranath Tagore; an year later, the Festival of India in Japanese cities, staged events in Indian classical dance, folk music, theatre, films and architecture, paving the way for future exchanges. Similarly a number of cultural events were held in both countries in 1992 to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations.

The opening of the Japan Foundation office in New Delhi was an important milestone, heralding a new era of exchange activities. The Foundation has held several important and path-breaking exhibitions of Japanese art in India and brought the art of Indian artists to Japan. Several symposia on Asian Art in Japan have discussed issues of contemporary arts of both countries. Indian artists and scholars have been hosted for visits to Japan and for several years now the Foundation organizes a Japan Cultural month in autumn in India.

The Japan-India Friendship Year 2007

Through an agreement between the prime ministers of the two countries the Japan-India joint statement was signed “in order to strengthen cultural and academic exchanges and to promote people-to-people contacts”. The year 2007 was designated as the “Japan-India Friendship Year” to mark the 50th anniversary of the Japan-India cultural exchange agreement the aim being “to raise more awareness of Indian people towards Japan, and to deepen mutual understanding between the Japanese and Indian people.”⁸

This has been the largest scale initiative and the highest point in cultural relations. A string of cultural events were held in Japan and over hundred in India; among the art exhibitions held were included “Sketches from Madhya Pradesh” by the Japanese artist Yōichi Yamagata at India International Center, New Delhi; “The Second Mother Ganga Exhibition of Paintings by Japanese artist Tatsuko Hirakawa and “Indian Hanami” by this author at the Tenshin Okakura Gallery, Japan Foundation, New Delhi; the most spectacular exhibition of the Friendship Year “Vanishing Points” was held at National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi and at Mumbai. In Japan an exhibition titled “Indiart 2007, Tokyo” was held

7 <http://www.mofa.go.jp> website of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, accessed August 5, 2009.

8 www.in.emb-japan.go.jp/Friendship_Year2007, accessed August 5, 2009.

at the Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo, on display were 120 paintings by 56 Indian artists. While “Vanishing Points” was remarkable in that probably for the first time a show of this magnitude was held in India (this important show is discussed later in this paper), “Indiart 2007, Tokyo” showcased the works of some of India’s senior-most and eminent contemporary artists like Satish Gujral, Krishen Khanna, M. F. Hussain, Akbar Padamsee and S. H. Raza, probably seen by Japanese viewers for the first time.

Showcasing Contemporary Indian Art in Japan

From 1980s onwards an increasing number of exhibitions of contemporary art of Asian countries were organized in Japan which included the work of Indian artists, foremost among these was by the Fukuoka Art Museum, which has continued in a sustained effort towards promoting Asian Art. In 1999 the museum changed its name to Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, its mission statement declared that it is “the only museum in the world that systematically collects and exhibits Asian modern and contemporary art” and “there is no other collection of this quality and quantity in the world with over 1,700 works (as of March 2004) covering various aspects drawn from 21 Asian countries and regions.” Further it states that “the works in the collection of the museum are not imitation of Western art or repetitions of traditional works. Instead they seek to overcome the existing framework of art, being made by artists living in ‘contemporary’ Asia. These artists attempts acutely express their message in and about this changing world of Asia.” This statement is indeed interesting because it draws attention to the situation of Asian Art(which includes Japanese and Indian Art) and the problem of identity which is a deeply felt topic of debate today. The museum has over two hundred works of Indian art in its permanent collection ranging from paintings of the Kalighat style, Company school, oleographs, even a rare Rabindranath Tagore to works of Contemporary Indian artists including stalwarts like Satish Gujral, G. R. Santosh, Jehangir Sabavala and Manjit Bawa.

To go back to the Fukuoka Art Museum’s inaugural show, a path-breaking exhibition in 1979 titled “Modern Asian Art—India, China & Japan.” The exhibition catalogue threw up some pertinent issues which identified the problems assailing the art movement and gazed into the future. Kazuma Shintō, the city’s mayor’s statement in the exhibition catalogue: “to promote friendly relations between these Asian countries and to deepen their mutual understanding”⁹ anticipated the events in the future which in fact the Fukuoka Art Museum would enable, by following up with a string of shows of Contemporary Asian Art through the 1980s and 90s. The aim of the 1979 show as described by the director of the museum, Toshihiro Kennoki was to trace modern Asian art in these three countries, how traditional and modern art have interacted and “how these nations have been able to maintain and develop their own national characteristics while undergoing modernization and a transfiguration of their art.”¹⁰

9 Shinto Kazuma. “Acknowledgement”, *Modern Asian Art: India, China & Japan*, exhibition catalogue, Fukuoka Art Museum, 1979, p. 4.

10 Kennoki Toshihiro. “Acknowledgement”, *Modern Asian Art: India, China & Japan*, p. 6.

Dr. Laxmi P. Sihare, the then director of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi was chosen, quite appropriately, to write the essay on Indian Art. Dr. Sihare was an exemplary scholar, a visionary, a stalwart, a radical and a rebel in the annals of Modern Indian Art, who wrought about tremendous positive innovations, and whose early demise prevented his contribution to further progressive action in Indian art, that may have occurred and about which we can only wishfully conjecture. Dr. Sihare wrote that the British had “degraded Indian aesthetic norms,” and that it was Abanindranath Tagore who started a new school of national art in the early twentieth century “partly exhorted by Kakuzō Okakura” and “deeply encouraged by E. B. Havell”¹¹ so as to bring about a renewed interest in “ancient literary themes and the transformations of blending of various oriental techniques.”¹² He concludes that the “evolution and development of Modern art in India is unlike that in the West” as it was the inorganically introduced academic oil-painting style that had initiated “modern” development; and that while the “modern International style” was now dominant, “the issue of evolving its own cultural identity has always been the concern of Indian artists.”¹³

Remarkable to note is that two Japanese contributors to the catalogue—Kawakita Michiaki of the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto and Koike Shinji, sub-committee chairman for the exhibition have also exalted Okakura and through giving his example derided the incursion of western influences in the art of their country. Kawakita, citing Okakura’s famous quote “Japan is at once a museum of Asian arts” from his book *The Ideals of the East* enunciates how Okakura, along with his mentor Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908) reacted against Western influences and strove towards the revival of “Japanese-style painting.”¹⁴ Koike Shinji describes Okakura as having had great influence on Japanese modern art and cites how he (Okakura) after his sojourns to the west, India and China made his famous quote “Asia is one.” Can Asian art be thought of as a unit like Western art? Do all Asian countries have common aesthetic sources or values? Or, is the Asian art world today in such a chaotic state characterized by a diversity of styles unrelated to each other?” and states that the purpose of the show emerged “from such honest enquiries.”¹⁵

Inaga has alluded to the same issue by questioning that “could it be that the dripping of ink spots in *haboku* or *hatsuboku* manner by Indian, Chinese, and Japanese artists was an appeal for a Pan-Asian challenge to the overwhelming domination of Western modernism?”¹⁶ That this issue persisted and haunted other cultural fields too, can be gauged from the holding of the famous Literary Symposium

11 E. B. Havell (1861–1904) was superintendent of the Government College of Art, Madras, and supported the movement to resist foreign influences in Indian art.

12 Sihare, Laxmi P. “100 Years of Modern Indian Art”, *Modern Asian Art: India, China & Japan*, pp. 22–23.

13 Ibid., p. 25.

14 Kawakita, Michiaki. “Modern Japanese Art”, *Modern Asian Art: India, China & Japan*, p 38.

15 Koike Shinji. *Modern Asian Art: India, China & Japan*, p.11.

16 Inaga Shigemi. “The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus in the First Half of the Twentieth Century (1901–1945): Rabindranath Tagore, Arai Kanpō, and Nandalal Bose”, *Japan Review* 21, Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2009, p. 171.



Fig. 1. Manjit Bawa. *Goat, a Girl and a Tree*. 1982.

“Overcoming Modernity” in 1942 in Japan. Three main intellectual groups were involved, “the *Bun-gakukai* (Literary World), the *Nihon roman-ha* (Japanese Romantic school) and the Kyoto school, and they all discussed the theme of how to take a position against Western hegemony over Japan and Asia. The many participants defined modernity in various ways, as Westernization, capitalism, colonialism, even the promotion of Protestantism, and held that it had become a cultural dead-end which must be overcome by Japanese tradition.”¹⁷

An initiative by the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, the “Creativity in Asian Art Now Part 1 & 2” exhibition in 1994 displayed among others the works of renowned Indian artists Ghulam Rasool Santosh and Manjit Bawa. The oeuvre of both Santosh and Bawa have firm roots in indigenous Indian culture. Santosh drew on tantric art for inspiration while Bawa consistently portrayed Indian subjects, using a palette often inspired by Indian miniature paintings and interpreting them in a contemporary idiom. However consistent exposure of such Indian artists did not continue. Part 3 of this exhibition series titled “Creativity in Asian Art Now Part 3: Asian Installation Work” curated by Fukunaga Osamu and Miyatake Hiroshi, featured the work of Indian born Anish Kapoor who now lives in England. In his installation “Oblivion” Kapoor has left the stones largely in their original state and

17 Isomae Jun’ichi. “The Kyoto School and ‘Overcoming Modernity’: Modernity, Empire and Universality”. Keynote address. International Symposium *The Kyoto School and ‘Overcoming Modernity’: Modernity, Empire and Universality*, International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Kyoto, 2009. p. 1.

arranged them as such so as to emphasize their material quality and mass. Miyatake compares Kapoor's stone installations to "Hindu cave temples, not simply because of their formal similarities, but also because of the eastern cosmological world" Further Miyatake describes: "While depending of the western modernist context, Kapoor's art induces a sense of the essence of the traditional culture of his homeland India and is rooted in the question of the artist's own identity."

Japan Foundation's Initiatives

The Japan Foundation has played a highly dynamic role, engaging in new ideas, in its pursuit of exhibiting Asian Contemporary Art, organizing a consistent stream of large scale exhibitions in India and Japan. Each show is strong in that it has clearly demarcated convictions, draws attention to the sense of the contemporary and encourages usage of new media for artistic expression. The Foundation's goals are clearly enunciated in the foreword of the catalogue of its "Vanishing Points" show:

The Japan Foundation has made a serious effort to introduce contemporary Asian art in Japan and encouraged artistic exchanges within Asia through a series of shows that have met a positive response from both art professionals and the general public. There have been relatively few opportunities, however, for exposure of contemporary Japanese artists in India, with the important exception of the Triennale-India¹⁸.

The first major show of the Foundation in India "Tastes and Pursuits in the 1990s" featuring Japanese Art, was held at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi in 1998. As the show's title suggests, on display were newer trends in contemporary Japanese Art. In the same year the work of eight Indian artists were displayed at the Tokyo center, The Japan Foundation Asia Center, in the show "Private Mythology: Contemporary Art from India". The show's curator Tatehata Akira states: "It is possible that what we call 'tradition' may have been politically fabricated to overcome the identity crisis of modern times.....Resistance to a politically fabricated tradition is inevitably political." He explains the choice of the title "because the statements these artists are making are no longer part of a communal mythology.....they are not attempting to revive images from the past that create a romantically utopian vision of India."¹⁹

The Japan Foundation's Asia Center, Tokyo in its second exhibition in the series—solo shows to introduce artistic talent of the Asian region in 2001, presented the works of Indian artist Atul Dodiya in "Bombay: Labyrinth Laboratory". Later two shows "Under Construction: New Dimensions of Asian Art" 2002 and "Have We Met" 2004–2005" were the products of an innovative concept that emphasized

18 "Foreword", *Vanishing Points: Contemporary Japanese Art*, exhibition catalogue, Japan Foundation & National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, 2007, p. 3

19 Tatehata Akira. "Finding Salvation in Mythology", *Private Mythology: Contemporary Art from India*, The Japan Foundation Forum, exhibition catalogue, ed. Furuichi Yasuko, The Japan Foundation Asia Center, 1998, p. 83.



Fig. 2. Tomoaki Ishihara. *Self-Portrait—Nijo Castle # 4*. 2003

the role of the curator. The curators for the shows, drawn from the exhibiting Asian countries, collaborated together in research and discussions, their efforts culminating in the exhibitions, an amalgam of various viewpoints placed in the context of globalization. “Have We Met” drew attention to the transformation of the socio-cultural climate through economic development of the late 1980s which accelerated in the age of digital technology in the 1990s and emphasized how young people share common interest in anime, manga and pop music and highlighted how experimental artistic expressions that extend beyond the conventional framework of visual arts and the confines of institutions, cross over various media, including video, film, photograph, architecture, design, music, performance, and images, are setting a new trend.

“Vanishing Points” organized by the Japan Foundation has been the most imposing and thought-provoking show of Japanese Art held in India. Held with the hope that “the stance of artists who are vigorously engaged in making art and questioning subjective ways of seeing and expression will have a strong impact on artist and the public in India.”²⁰ Ten Japanese artists addressed “such perennial issues as the nature of the viewer and what is seen, metaphorically developing the rule of the vanishing point in the linear perspective system of perceiving images”²¹

The curator of the show Tadashi Kanai comments on the progress of Japanese Art: “In Japanese art, the avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s, the anti-art movement and dissolution of genres that occurred from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, and the return of painting from the mid-1970s to the 1980s were for the most part conscious or unconscious imitations of the Western art scene. From the 1990s on, however, this excess of imports over exports underwent a change, fueled by the ‘export industry’ of

20 “Foreword”, *Vanishing Points: Contemporary Japanese Art*, p. 3.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

manga and animation, which proved to be very competitive internationally.”²²

“Discover India” with the Mori Art Museum

The Mori Art Museum, Tokyo has recently started showcasing Indian Art and purports to bring to the Japanese viewer a new perception of the contemporaneity of Indian art. “Chalo! India: A New Era of Indian Art” in 2009, was the Museum’s 5th anniversary exhibition. Curated by Miki Akiko, on exhibition were works by Indian artists largely in modernistic constructs, some with a propensity towards “Indianness”. The press release proclaims: “‘Chalo’ is Hindi for ‘Let’s go’ With the words.....we invite you to discover an explosion of creativity and vitality in Indian contemporary art... one of the largest exhibitions of Indian contemporary art ever held in Japan... Come face-to-face with the real and new energy of India.” The Museum’s defining statement on the show is a succinct essay on the development of Contemporary Indian art:

“After the country gained independence in 1947, India’s art exhibited an aesthetic influenced predominantly by Western Modernism and a homegrown form of expression linked with the process of building a national identity. However, over the last 60 years the nation’s art has gradually come to tackle potentially controversial topics—such as sexuality—and also to incorporate political and critical ideas...taking their themes from familiar objects and ideas in daily life and society—often as though to transform them into a theater of life...pop and colorful paintings brimming with an urban awareness... interactive works of media art, drawing on state-of-the-art technology that befits an IT giant.”

Supporting its endeavour to promote appreciation of Indian Art the Museum has held a lecture series “Discover India” the self-explanatory titles being “Lifestyle and Society in Contemporary India: Observations of the Urban landscape” and “Dhoom! India: Thinking about the cool youth of today”. The description of the content of the lectures is somewhat repetitive of “Chalo! India”’s statement, nonetheless pithy and pertinent, a reflection of the Japanese perception of India today: “Along with religion, philosophy and traditional forms of lifestyle, the new faces of India—information technology, the stock market, low-cost cars, biotechnology—are impressing people the world over. Now these new concepts of “Indian-ness” are inspiring a contemporary culture that is fresh and cool. We explore fashionable Indian society and culture, from film and literature to the spiritual realm and contemporary art.”

The same museum in its show “The Kaleidoscopic eye” in June 2009 displayed futuristic high-tech works by international artists, contrarily the Indian representation, a video film titled *Some Questions on the Nature of Your Existence* (excerpts, part 1 and 2) by Ritu Sarin & Tenzing Sonam was a rather traditional video featuring a standard debating practice by Buddhist monks. However the exposure

22 Tadashi Kanai. “Range of Vanishing Points: Contemporary Japanese Art”, *ibid.*, p. 4.

was tremendous with the video being shown for long hours on giant screens; display of such magnitude would definitely have had huge impact on the viewing public.

I have dwelt at length on the mission statements and events of the Mori Museum, as these are remarkable on two counts: large scale and powerful exposure to Contemporary Indian Art and very importantly the introduction of a new player in the promotion of Contemporary Indian art, the private art museum, a major development which will surely open doors to frequent and valuable art exchanges of ever expanding scope.

“East” Meets “East”

The Indian landscape and its people has had an irresistible appeal for some Japanese artists and drawn them to its shores, may it be the vibrant visual experiences, the philosophy, or the religion. In the post independence era among the infrequent travel of Japanese artists to India, Akino Fuku (1908–2001), professor of the Kyoto Municipal Special School of Fine Arts, was probably a pioneer. Akino Fuku, an exponent of *nihonga* or Japanese style painting, was invited to teach at Vishvabharati University in Shantiniketan, in 1962. In Santiniketan she interacted with several artists including A. Ramachandran²³ (1933–) who took her to Santhal village for sketching and watched her style of working. Akino found the light in India far more brilliant than in her native country; this observation and her absorption of the vibrant colours of Rajasthan and Orissa were poured into her painting and in turn she guided Ramachandran towards a celebration of colour. As Ramachandran says “she had a very acute sense of colour. She was deeply observant about the subtlety of colour that gave me insight into colour.”²⁴

A brief word on *nihonga* as it has been a favoured medium for several of the Japanese artists discussed here. *Nihonga* is one of the earlier schools of painting still practised today. Japanese painting was channelised into two streams in the late nineteenth century: *nihonga* which was executed using traditional media and formats and *yōga* or that made in Western style, so as to distinguish the cultural distinction and national identity of Japan as a nation-state since the Meiji period. *Nihonga* holds a special place and coexists with innovative idioms which have emerged in recent times.

Tatsuko Hiraoka (1936–) has repeatedly visited India over three decades: a sensitive and gentle artist she says “my relation with India began when I read Rabindranath Tagore’s poem ‘Flower of Champa’ when I was sixteen. The poem is still echoing in my heart.” Varanasi, the river Ganga and life on the river’s banks has left a deep impression on her. She has made three collections on the theme of Ganga and the images of women praying: “after bathing in the Ganga, women grasp the earth tightly and make God Siva, Ganesha and other gods....it is a samskara [tradition] they hold every morning. The naturalness of their samskara is the reality of their life.” “While painting, I experienced the same peace

23 A. Ramachandran has been illustrating Japanese children’s books for several decades.

24 As told in conversation between Mr. Ramachandran and this author, 18 September 2009.

of mind as they would have had in making their gods.”²⁵ Strong linearity and robust forms are gentled by the play of yellow of the sun shining on these serene images. Like Tatsuko Hiraoka, Nishida Shunei (1953–) has also made several trips to India and has found Varanasi fascinating. His painting “Flower Mandala” was inspired by the sight of a cremation on the banks of the river Ganga in Varanasi. Many other paintings emerged from his fascination with the faces and curious gaze of the people of Rajasthan. His character filled portrayals are rendered in bright colours, yet gentled by washes and gentle lines.

Yamada Masami has not just visited India, but lived there for several years. His imagery is rich in Indian themes, and portrayed with rich hues exemplified by a stunning image of a Kathakali dancer made on the *byōbu* (Japanese style screen) format. An advocate of *nihonga*, in his exhibition at India International Center, New Delhi, in 1997, he demonstrated the use of *nihonga* pigments and expressed his wish that many Indian artists may also adopt this technique. Another Japanese artist Yuriko Lochan, married to an Indian, has been living and working in New Delhi for two decades. Yuriko’s gentle and charming personality reflects in the delicacy of her paintings, wherein she combines Japanese sensibilities of softness and colour washes to render the subjects which she primarily takes from her Indian environment, a unique blend of maintaining Japanese essence with Indian ethos. Similarly in her glass etchings, the Japanese love for nature emerges, expressed through delineation of Indian trees.

Hatanaka Kōkyō (1947–) professor of History of Indian Arts, and *nihonga* artist “developed ultimate use of colours which he learnt from India miniature painting. Female figure in his paintings are not only sensual as human figures in Indian art, but also very delicate as ‘*bijin-ga*’.”²⁶ His paintings made with *nihonga* pigments, sometimes on *byōbu* format, strike the viewer with the richness of colour bodies much like in ukiyo-e, as for example in his ethereal painting “Buddha speaking at Sravasti”, that displays a starlit night background entirely in azurite blue, the empty seat signifies the Buddha, while the silent trees listen attentively. Hatanaka’s fascination with India bespeaks through his words: “maybe in my before life I am born from India.”²⁷

Location, Identity and Image

A problem that haunts both Japanese and Indian artists today is of location, identity and the artist’s image. This issue was identified a century ago by Okakura Kakuzō; Kakuzō along with the other great luminaries of Asian Art—Ernest Fenollosa and Ananda Coomaraswamy had argued for “the rightful place of Asian art in the field of art history.” Each of them “shared two things—their love for premodern traditions against the modernist impulses, and their visibility as a true bridge between East and West. Fenollosa argued for the beauty of pre-Western Japanese art, Okakura Kakuzō sought to make a case for the pan-Asian sensibilities of traditional art, and Coomaraswamy articulated the spiritual dimensions of

25 Tatsuko Hiraoka, exhibition catalogue. *The Second Mother Ganga*, Tenshin Okakura Gallery of The Japan Foundation, New Delhi, 2008.

26 Yamamoto Midori. <http://picasaweb.google.co.jp/mid2008/KokyoHatanaka1947>. accessed August 2009.

27 As told in conversation between Mr. Hatanaka and this author, 13 October 2009.

Asian art.”²⁸

The views expressed a century ago still hold true for today, yet they need to be reinterpreted, as Art is dynamic and ever-evolving. Sakai Naoki’s excellent speech is an emphatic statement of the issues that assail Asian societies and culture (and I would add, in turn the Visual Arts):

Until a few decades ago,...For many people in many parts of the world well beyond so-called ‘developed countries’...modernization was Westernization”...“It is safe to say that today the West as an analytic concept is bankrupt and generally useless in guiding our observation about certain social formations and people’s behavior in many loci in the world...By positing the West as ‘over there’ away from Asia as ‘this side’ they invent an optic that is Orientalist in reverse. Just like the Orientalist one which posits the Occident as this side and the Orient as over there, this voyeuristic optic re-invigorates a fleeting sense of a distinction between Asia and the West, an ephemeral extenuation for not submitting things Asian to the same analytical fields of investigation as things modern and Western; as if the appreciation of things Asian, which for some miraculous reasons are all supposed to be immediately ‘traditional,’ could in due course redeem us from the evils of modernity.”²⁹

Desai describes the stage that the development of Asian art has reached in this new century as being “at the edge of a whole new world” and Asian contemporary art is taking center stage “in terms of museum acquisitions and as a preferred field of inquiry” however “the spiritual or unique contrasting qualities of Asian art, so prized by our early predecessors, are now of lesser interest. The globalizing nature of the world and the resultant movement of artists between East and West make it difficult and even undesirable to seek an ‘authentic’ voice for a particular cultural group.”³⁰

In the present day globalization has impelled the Artist to globalize his vision, a fact which should be accepted by all involved in the field of Visual arts to free artists from grappling unnecessarily with coming to terms with their identity which on demand is required to be traditional in keeping with the historical heritage of their country and contemporaneity perceived as international.

The “Dance of the Dumroo”

The truly talented artist with strength and conviction is able to liberate himself from the trammels of this ongoing debate, but the weaker ones succumb to the need to “perform”. To avoid being

28 Desai, Vishakha N. ed. “Introduction”, *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century*, Williamstown, Massachusetts: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2007, p. viii.

29 Sakai Naoki. “Keynote speech”, *Asia: Co-figurative Identification*, The Japan Foundation 30th Anniversary International symposium 2002 “Asia in Transition: Representation and Identity”, The Japan Foundation Asia Center, 2003, pp. 230–231.

30 Desai, “Introduction”, *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century*, p.viii.

dubbed an anachronism the artist strives to be contemporaneous with contemporaneity. Acclaimed contemporary devices are “exoticification”, video art, performance art, installation art. A formula to success seems to be the implementation of the “ramp effect”, a device used in fashion shows to rivet the attention of the audience, through bombast rather than beauty. Hereby the “dance of the *dumroo*”³¹ replaces the “dance of Shiva”.³² What better method than the “Installation” about which a view has been expressed in the west: “we have already dealt and finished with it, now its their (Asia’s) turn.” To contradict this viewpoint, I cite the views of Manjit Bawa (1941–2009), an artist who was completely “modern” yet whose inspiration was rooted in Indian heritage and the tenets of the *Vishnudharmottara*.³³ In Bawa’s opinion: “installations have always been part of our heritage, if we only look at some of our festivals in India—they are a spectacle of colour and creativity e.g. the Ramlila with its effigies and accompanying performances.”³⁴ I may add to what Bawa said by giving a Japanese example—the Daimonji with its giant formation accompanied by fire—its an installation incorporating light and energy through its dynamic, magna scale fire. Supplant these traditional examples of festival creations to art today, they will match up to being not just “contemporary” but also intensely pleasing, unlike many examples of installation art.

In contemporary times the role of museums and art galleries and the intervention of the curator has become paramount in shaping the course of the exhibiting of art and exchanges; the opinions of art critics too has borne down on the artist. The artist must perforce cater to the “pulse of the time” and compromise his innate sense of the aesthetic. Poshyananda has warned of the “urban shaman” seen in international expositions, involved in “commodification of the exotic” where “the notion of strangeness is normalized so that art can be spoken in the same breath as entertainment...They can be interpreted as ‘urban shamans’ who offer sensational experience through their inventiveness and theatricality. But unlike troupe performers, acrobats and indigenous dancers seen in international expositions, these artists are elevated to a prestigious status due to curatorial guidance and art institutional endorsement.”³⁵ Poshyananda recommends: “we should look at Asia as a gigantic tank full of artistic resources. There are cultural resources here which have not yet been thoroughly researched or discovered. Only part of them are known. We need to discover them. And we need to create new art based on this vision of Asia

31 Before animal rights activists had them abolished, the dance of monkeys to the sound of a *dumroo* or small drum was a common entertainment for children at India Gate in New Delhi.

32 In the ethereally beautiful classic Indian sculpture *Dance of the Shiva*, the Hindu God Shiva beats the *dumroo* as a symbol of eternal time.

33 *Vishnudharmottara* is an ancient Indian text which enunciates the canons of art and lays emphasis on the *rasa* (mood) in artistic communication.

34 This observation was originally made by the Indian contemporary artist Manjit Bawa in conversation with this author in 1994.

35 Poshyananda, Apinan, Chulalongkorn University. “Asian Art and the New Millennium: From Glocalism to Techno-Shamanism”, *Asian Art: Prospects for the Future*, ed. Furuichi Yasuko, Report of the International Symposium 1999, Japan Foundation Asia Center, Tokyo, 2000, p. 166.

and, in some sense, on contemporary conditions.”³⁶

The economics of the exhibition of art today cannot be ignored. The contemporary art of both Japan and India has undergone changes in a fast-forward mode in this decade; today globally both command extremely high prices. Desai says “The rising economic clout of Asia, from China and India to Japan and countries of Southeast Asia, plays an important role in the way works from these countries are now perceived or collected.”³⁷ While Eric Chang, Christie’s International director of Contemporary Asian art, opines “The market for Japanese Contemporary Art has seen an incredible explosion in interest as of late, growing threefold...[from] the Spring 2007 sale of Asian Contemporary Art... just one season later in Christie’s Fall 2007 sale. As Poshyananda cautions “that artists tend to get into the trap of this stick-and-carrot policy. If they get backed up and supported, they will create works according to the demand of those particular organizers, sometimes they lose their visions and they lose their main ideas.”³⁸ Prof Nakamura has said “It is not appropriate...to make excessive demands on government institutions and museums...Fundamentally, the demand for greater knowledge of Asian art must come spontaneously from Japanese artists and critics.”³⁹

In the maelstrom of incessant debate and argument and powerful divergent forces tearing at art: western and eastern, out-dated and contemporary, technique and performance, acceptability and saleability, I fear that the victim may be “true art”, art that is “honest”. The true artist has to follow his own creative instincts and guard himself against all debates. Ramachandran aptly says “we are facing a kind of dilemma, we want international fame, but where is modern Indian visual language? We don’t need to change just because the world is changing. We need to change equivalent only to our own modernity, technology and science.” Kōzō Mio’s, (1923–2000, exhibited at the Triennale in New Delhi in 1975) words are revealing “I find that my path now falls into a sphere that surpasses the confines of *Nihonga* or oil painting. After a long search for my own individuality through repeated trial and error, I believe I have finally found my true self in my present work.” And to quote Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki “architecture must not only express its time but survive it.”⁴⁰ We may well apply this philosophy to art, where art is not just a product of its time but in the instance when art is honest, its vitality will make infinite ripples.

Art is a product of the environment from which it is born and exists, nothing can take away from any Japanese artist the precious value of his “Japan-ness” or from any Indian artist his “Indian-ness”,

36 Nanjō Fumio. Discussion of Session III “General Debate: In a Global Context: Asian Art in the 21st Century”, *Asian Art: Prospects for the Future*, ed. Furuichi Yasuko. Report of the International Symposium 1999, Japan Foundation Asia Center, Tokyo, 2000, p. 186.

37 Desai, “Introduction”, *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century*, 2007, p. viii.

38 Poshyananda. Discussion of Session III “General Debate: In a Global Context: Asian Art in the 21st Century”, *Asian Art: Prospects for the Future*, p. 175.

39 Nakamura Hideki. “Who ‘Introduces’ What to Whom and Why?”. Trans. Anderson, Stanley N. *Asian Art: Prospects for the Future*, p. 150.

40 Taylor, Jennifer. *The Architecture of Fumihiko Maki*. Basel, Berlin, Boston: Birkhauser—Publishers for Architecture, 2003, p 11.

subject to the condition that is “honest” art, a true expression of the artists inner voice, an expression which must bear fruit, because for the artist the meaning of life itself is dependent on it.

In Conclusion

Japanese and Indian creative expression shares commonalities—in the implied, the unsaid, the mysterious—abstraction is a natural concurrence. Though the number of Japanese artists who have displayed inspiration from India in their visual communication is not so many, yet perhaps the vision of these artists in seeing India may help Indian artists in how they see India. The reverse may take more time to emerge, as fewer Indian artists have looked at Japan for their creative inspiration. Having said that it would be progressive to go beyond stereotypical perceptions of each other. Contemporary Japanese art embraces elements such as anime, manga, fantasy, science fiction; while as Mori Art Museum’s statement has enunciated, there is more to Contemporary Indian art than imagery of Gods and Goddesses, cow-dung and elephants. We look forward to the day when a retrospective of Indian stalwarts like Satish Gujral or Himmat Shah will take place in Japan, and Indian viewers can be treated to the work of Takashi Murakami.

The problems in exchanges between two countries are manifold: logistics in the organization of the scale of transnational shows or artist’s workshops, monetary implications, role of the curator as an essential mediator, in most cases laudable but in some instances subject to personal biases, limitations of material considerations, to name a few; however the good the bad and the ugly will coexist together, and should be treated as challenges to encourage improvement and to be accepted forthwith for mutually gainful rewards.

In this age of fast paced technology, economy, communication which is hurtling everyone forward, the artist cannot remain isolated or unaffected. Contemporary art cannot remain indifferent; but this has positive implications; this dizzying pace is influencing and making cross currents between Japan and India an exciting, dynamic area, ever evolving and steadily expanding; wide open in possibilities for progressive action. In the last few decades, The Japan Foundation and Fukuoka museum, have paved the path with sustained efforts, while the Mori Art Museum has opened up stimulating new avenues. Surely this momentum will be seized upon by more agencies to tap the possibilities which are tremendous.