Primitivism and Modern Indian Art

GILES TILLOTSON
Primitivism and Modern Indian Art

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COVER: Rabin Mondal, Untitled, Gouache on paper, 1972
FOREWORD

As you travel around India, you will discover that primitivism can point to several connotations of the term that might differ from its understanding in both Western—and by extension—Indian art. Folk and tribal are too often represented as primitive in our Anglicised understanding of its usage that tends to be condescending of anything that is indigenously rooted. And yet, these cultural and art markers represent a way of life and have a longer civilisational history than modern art can claim. Whether it is the totems of the north-east, the folk art of Warli, Gond or Madhubani, the terracotta horses of Aryanar, the phads of Rajasthan, or aspects and images associated with Devi worship, these forms of practice convey a complex set of ideas that 'sophisticated' art may sometimes lack. Indeed, the abstract that India has constructed around even a simple stone with a daub of colour, and the meanings it effortlessly communicates to so-called art-uneducated audiences, and its easy acceptance by them, speaks volumes of our understanding—or its lack—when it comes to deciphering the artistic, cultural and architectural nuances of our forebears.

What, therefore, does primitivism mean in respect of modern Indian art? This interesting—and provocative—premise lies at the heart of this exhibition: a first-ever exploration of how the expression applies to twentieth century Indian art, and whether it can be formalised as a style that readers, or viewers, can judge modern works by.

The term, at best, communicates an idea of how simplification runs parallel to the academically trained. Some of the artists included for this purpose were unschooled in art, and their work—innocent of the rigidity of art school-learned grammar—is spontaneous, perhaps even naïve, but no less erudite for this; Rabindranath Tagore, Sunayani Devi and Madhvi Parekh. On the other hand, Jamini Roy’s attainment of the folk-like style is premeditated, a deliberate resistance to academic Western art in favour of the regional vernacular. The grotesque might appear to be a reason we choose to apply the primitivist label to works by F. N. Souza and Rabin Mondal, though that would be a simplification. These artists and others like K. G. Subramanyan, M. F. Husain, K. S. Kulkarni deliberately shed their training to embrace aspects of the childlike. In this, the way was shown even earlier by the likes of Amrita Sher-Gil and George Keyt, whereas the tribal way of life was to provide inspiration for Ramkinkar Baij and J. Sultan Ali. Mohan Samant and Jogen Chowdhury took deliberate stances in their approach to their practice. Himmat Shah proved the timelessness of his sculptures when he chose to locate them in the excavated site of the Indus Valley Civilisation—a segueing of the past and present that, however, refused any identification via history or geography. Each artist in the exhibition defies any common visual link between them, but taken together, they provide an overview of the overarching language of primitivism in India.

This exhibition, therefore, looks at the diverse range, moods and styles primitivism in India has taken, some artists practicing entirely in that style, while others experimented with it in part, or sporadically. One can count simplicity and a move away from sophistication as key components, as also an inclination or at least a nod towards the folk. The exhibition does not attempt to be a comprehensive survey of India’s primitivists—there are others who would bear inclusion—but is an attempt to understand a body of work and how, given its Western countenance, it can be understood in the Indian context. More than anything else, it offers a clearer view than in the past of what primitivism might mean in the context of modern Indian art.

Giles Tillotson, who has curated the exhibition, had his task cut out for him, and right from the beginning resisted the idea of turning it into an exhaustive survey. The litmus test of a primitivist could understandably be an acknowledgement of lack of modernity by others, but it is equally true that any inclusion or exclusion is arguable at best and must not be viewed as definitive—Mrinalini Mukherjee and Bhupen Khakhar come to mind. Giles’s curatorial approach has been to undertake a theoretical understanding of primitivism as applied to Western art, and how the same rules might not hold for the subcontinent’s art practice—at least partly because the West’s approach was based on the discovery of civilisations vastly different from their own, of which India would have been one. For us, on the other hand, what the West saw as exotic was merely the familiar.

What interests me is how primitivism in Indian modern art translates into a language that almost everyone instinctively understands. This, in turn, shows how it is aligned to what we have previously ignored as indigenous art. That the two might share a deeper link is something I hope this exhibition will help us explore further.

Ashish Anand
CEO and Managing Director
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‘THE GRAND CAVALCADE OF THE VISUAL WORLD’: Primitivism and Modern Indian Art

Giles Tillotson

‘Primitivism’ is one of those words—‘liberalism’ is another—that people use as if they were confident of being understood, that it has an agreed and settled meaning, and that they are pointing to a known entity. If challenged to define it, to avoid dispute they would have to suggest something sufficiently vague and inclusive—‘Oh yes, and that too, I guess’. While there can be no hope of agreeing on a definition of ‘liberalism’, fortunately for the present purpose, ‘primitivism’—at least as I am using it here—has a more focussed range of use. This exhibition and book explore primitivism in the context of twentieth-century Indian painting and sculpture. We have chosen a number of works that illustrate, as my commentary will seek to show, two phenomena in particular: first, a tendency to identify with or attend to elements of society that are deemed ‘primitive’, and secondly the simplifying of technique and reducing of the formal means of expression to a ‘primitive’ state. Our project is to explore when and how these phenomena connect, and what else they connect with, in order to arrive at (or at least propose) a fuller and clearer understanding of ‘primitivism’ in modern Indian art.
The term itself is borrowed from discussions of Western art, and although I will argue below that the meanings and experience of primitivism in the Indian context differ markedly, we will need to begin with Western art history and theory, if only to show how and why this is so. Indian primitivism may have grown away from its Western counterpart, but at least in part it grew out of or alongside it, so we need to understand what that counterpart is. And some of the disputes in Western art theory about form and ‘the innocent eye’ share common ground with Indian discourse, so exploring them will equip us with tools to think with.

**Primitivism and Illusionism in Western Art Theory**

Enthusiasts of modern art may not remember that art historians first labelled as ‘primitives’ those artists of the early Renaissance (before about 1500) whose efforts at linear perspective and the naturalistic treatment of light were far surpassed by the later masters of the High Renaissance such as Raphael. The term was chosen to refer to their imperfect illusionism, their inability to make their paintings match the experience of the eye looking at the world. In his treatise of 1435, *Della Pittura*, the Italian theorist Leon Battista Alberti detailed practical methods that would enable an artist to master single-point perspective and the treatment of colour in light. The diligent student who followed his methods should be able to make his work a perfect illusion, like a window onto the world. Alberti presented this ideal not as his invention but as something recovered from classical antiquity. His text is full of anecdotes (culled from classical literature) of the mastery and trickery of Greek and Roman artists, like one who painted grapes so realistically he fooled the birds which came to eat them. This ideal was to be re-established, and the ‘primitives’ were those of Alberti’s predecessors and contemporaries who were later deemed to not quite match up to it. But the term is not wholly pejorative. If it hints at failure, it points equally strongly to elements in their works of simplicity, of innocence, and purity.

This original use and ambiguity are both important because the term was later applied to—and even adopted as a badge of honour by—artists in the early twentieth century who deliberately rejected the illusionism of post-Renaissance art and the elaborate technical methods that made it achievable. They set out to unlearn the lessons of Alberti’s diligent student in pursuit of a response to the world that was not governed by mimesis. A full account here would be disproportionate, but to get our bearings one might point, for example, to the simplifications admired in works by Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920). English contenders for the title include L. S. Lowry (1887-1976), Winifred Nicholson (1893-1981) and Kit Wood (1901-30). The term could also apply to artists who were unschooled, who had never mastered the mysteries of the life class in the first place and so had nothing to unlearn, and whose naïve representations the term justified as simple and honest. Among such in England was the Cornish fisherman and artist Alfred Wallis (1855-1942). The distinction between trained
and untrained, or between professional and amateur, at one level scarcely mattered. The point was their common cause. A whole tradition of pedagogy, marching from Alberti to Sir Joshua Reynolds and beyond, the centuries-long gradual improvement of technical knowledge, nurtured and propounded in the academies of Europe, was cast aside without ceremony. Consider the changing meaning of the word ‘academic’ as applied to art—from ‘accomplished’ to ‘outmoded’—and you put your finger on a moment of revolution in Western art.

If it was not to be based on the art of the academy, what would the new art look like? Well, for one partial answer that is ready to hand, we might look at the works of the first two artists included here, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Sunayani Devi (1875-1962). At a first glance, they all have a certain child-like quality, arising in part from the artists being, like Wallis, unschooled. The absence of linear perspective and shading, and the lack of context around these looming faces, are qualities reminiscent of drawings made by children. But does that make them innocent? Or conceptual? We will return for a more considered look at these works later, but for the moment I need to turn from the artists back to the theorists, to tease out a confusion regarding the relation between seeing and knowing, between childishness and the conceptual habits of vision.

In his Reflections on British Painting, published in 1934, by when modernism was established even in Britain, Roger Fry offered the following summary of Western art history:

‘From one point of view the whole history of art may be summed up as the history of the gradual discovery of appearances. Primitive art starts, like that of children, with symbols of concepts. In a child’s drawing of a face a circle symbolises the mask, two dots the eyes, and two lines the nose and mouth. Gradually the symbolism approximates more and more to actual appearance, but the conceptual habits, necessary to life, make it very difficult, even for artists, to discover what things look like to an unbiased eye. Indeed, it has taken from Neolithic times till the nineteenth century to perfect this discovery. European art from the time of Giotto progressed more or less continuously in this direction, in which the discovery of linear perspective marks an important stage, while the full exploration of atmospheric colour and colour perspective had to await the work of the French Impressionists.’

Exactly where Fry himself stood in relation to this process and its perfection is a point I will get to. But first, I wish to note that Fry was pre-empted, not in the history but in the theory of his comments, by another English critic, John Ruskin, in 1856:

‘The perception of solid form is entirely a matter of experience. We see nothing but
Dance is a large, decorative panel which Henri Matisse had painted for Russian businessman and art collector Sergei Shchukin, with whom the artist had a long association. The painting shows five dancing figures, painted in red, set against a green landscape and deep blue sky. It reflects Matisse’s fascination with primitive art and uses a classic Fauvist colour palette: the warm colours against the blue-green background and the rhythmical succession of dancing nudes conveying a sense of liberation.

Amadeo Clemente Modigliani, inspired by art from countries such as Cambodia, Egypt and Ivory Coast, painted and sculpted at a frenetic pace, keen to capture on his canvas and shape through his material, figures (above, left) that haunted his mind; if Modigliani’s work was motivated by art from around the world, L. S. Lowry’s visually charged images of ordinary, working class people were driven by the artist’s personal experiences (above).

Sculpture image: Pinterest
Above: Small Boat in a Rough Sea by Alfred Wallis, a Cornish fisherman and artist, is an example of ‘naïve’ art—the artist never having trained formally in painting.

In both, Sunayani Devi’s art (facing page) and Rabindranath Tagore’s paintings (right) there is a childlike, almost uncomplicated quality that is distinctive. Unschooled in art, these two members from an illustrious family gave us the earliest examples of modern Indian primitivism.

Collection (Sunayani Devi and Rabindranath Tagore paintings): National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi
flat colours; and it is only by a series of experiments that we find out that a stain of black or grey indicates the dark side of a solid substance, or that a feint hue indicates that the object in which it appears is far away. The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify.  

The connections are startling: both see a process of experiment and discovery, guided by an innocent or unbiased eye, leading to the perfection of illusionistic art. The main point of divergence is that while Fry sees childish art as akin to the starting point, Ruskin sees ‘childish perception’ as akin to the goal.

These two passages were seized on by the later theorist, E. H. Gombrich. He quotes both while introducing the core argument of his most significant treatise, *Art and Illusion* (1960). Profoundly influenced by Karl Popper’s account of the history of Western science (as he proudly acknowledges), Gombrich presents the history of Western art as a comparable process of discovery by experiment over time, the ultimate goal being works of art that present illusions of reality. His central argument is at one level quite modest: he seeks to make a small but significant correction to a traditional theory about the relationship between seeing and knowing.

The traditional theory goes like this. How we see the world is influenced by what we know about it. We are always interpreting and classifying the things we see. Even in art there is a tendency to paint what is known and understood rather than what is actually seen. So the artist who seeks to replicate our actual vision, to create an illusion of the world, must attempt to suppress this knowledge, to recover an innocent or unbiased eye. But this is hard to do and the process towards it is gradual. The history of art is therefore a series of incremental steps towards the expulsion of intruding knowledge. Gombrich quotes Ruskin and Fry as proponents of this traditional view, and comments:

> ‘To Ruskin, as to Roger Fry it is our knowledge of the visible world that lies at the root of all the difficulties of art. If we could only manage to forget it all, the problem of painting would become easy—the problem, that is, of rendering a three-dimensional world on a flat canvas.’

Leaving aside, for the moment, the accuracy of his summary of his predecessors, let us consider Gombrich’s proposed revision. The original theory is all correct, according to Gombrich, except for one crucial bit. Yes, there is an incremental process over time towards successful illusionism. And yes, it depends upon a series of experiments. But it is not about the suppression of knowledge—quite simply, because that is impossible. Fry himself described ‘conceptual habits’ as ‘necessary to life’ so, self-evidently they cannot be given up. The innocent eye is a chimera. No one can separate what they see from what they know about what they are looking at. Vision is intrinsically interpretive. So no, the process...
of the discovery depends not on the suppression of knowledge but on its invention; on the development of a new kind of knowledge: knowledge of pictorial means, which he calls \textit{schemata} and include perspective, shading, and colouring. So, to give a simple example: the child knows that the top of a wall is level, so she draws a level line, but that does not accord with what she actually sees. As she improves her art, she does not forget that the top of the wall remains level but she learns the methods of perspective and so she draws a sloping line, and then her picture accords more closely with what she sees.

Well! He is not wrong but he is not fair. And the unfairness matters to the wider reaches of this argument, so let me unpack it.

When Fry called our conceptual habits ‘necessary to life’ he didn’t mean they were an oxygen mask and that we would immediately expire if they are snatched away; he simply meant we use them in everyday life. As you read these words, you are focussing on their meaning, not their shape (at least I hope you are). Before writing them, my vision was focussed on not getting run over as I walked home from my local store. This is how we ordinarily live. But in calm interludes in our busy lives it is possible temporarily to suspend our otherwise ceaseless interpretation of visual stimuli, and to gaze at the world as we might gaze at an abstract painting, without concern to objects’ meaning or utility. Such interludes were described by Kenneth Clark, in an essay rather less rigorous than Gombrich’s, as ‘moments of vision’—not the vision of a seer or prophet but a ‘moment of intensified physical perception’. It is a moment when the colour configuration of seen objects seems to convey something significant, not about the objects but about itself. What that significant thing is cannot be expressed in words, the closest analogy being feelings aroused by music. Well, if Kenneth Clark had them (and I’ve had them), I’ll wager they are not uncommon and that Gombrich had them too, as perhaps have you.

So, yes, Gombrich’s larger point is taken. Our vision—generally speaking—is always interpretive. Ruskin was wrong. We do not (step one) see patches of colour and then (step two) recognise them as objects. To see is already to know. But by insisting on this as a universal condition, Gombrich misses an interesting possibility: that by temporarily suspending our conceptual habits we may see the world as some artists learn to see it—agnostically, with a view to colour and to form more than to meaning. The challenge of illusionism is only partially a problem of perception; much more it is a problem of image-making. More than the innocent eye, it requires the skilful hand. Success in the brain—a Clarkian moment of vision—is necessary but insufficient; you also have to learn how to transfer that vision to the canvas. And that is a process of a quite different kind. I think this shift in emphasis is vitally important, firstly in itself, because without it—if we fail to foreground the role of technique—there is a tendency to equate perception with representation. The traditional theory implies that we show as we see. Gombrich points out that we don’t; that the \textit{showing} involves an act of making that has to be learnt.

The point has value, secondly, in the present context because it is precisely this body of learning, this accumulation of painterly technique through centuries of experimentation, that modernism in general and primitivism in particular calls into question. Primitivism (the clue is in the name) takes us back to an earlier stage in the process, perhaps the very beginning, casting aside as useless all that has been patiently learnt, rejecting it as unnecessary to art.

Since each of our three theorists described the drive towards illusionism, it is worth asking where they stood in relation to that challenge. John Ruskin (1819-1900) did not live to see it but we can be in no doubt that he would have been appalled. He admired artists of his own time as diverse as J. M. W. Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites, but he saw and praised the same qualities in both: the realistic depiction of nature.

Gombrich’s characterisation of Ruskin and Fry is unfair, secondly, because neither of them failed to see the process of the invention of new pictorial means. Neither suggested (as he says they did) that the process involves only the expulsion of conceptual knowledge. It is not a case of either/or, but both. The suppression of knowledge is a necessary preliminary to allow the possibility of the invention of new technical schema. For example, ridding the mind of lazy conceptual formulas about colour (‘the sky is blue, grass is green et cetera’) enables one to look more carefully, and then to experiment with pigments to match what one has actually seen.

So Gombrich’s revision is really not so much a change of explanation as a shift in emphasis. The challenge of illusionism art is only partially a problem of perception; much more it is a problem of image-making. More than the innocent eye, it requires the skilful hand. Success in the brain—a Clarkian moment of vision—is necessary but insufficient; you also have to learn how to transfer that vision to the canvas. And that is a process of a quite different kind. I think this shift in emphasis is vitally important, firstly in itself, because without it—if we fail to foreground the role of technique—there is a tendency to equate perception with representation. The traditional theory implies that we show as we see. Gombrich points out that we don’t; that the \textit{showing} involves an act of making that has to be learnt.

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Review for yourselves the history of art, and you will find this to be a manifest certainty, that no great school ever yet existed which had not for primal aim the representation of some natural fact as truly as possible.10

He had some harsh things to say about Indian art but we can pass over that here.16 Primitivism—whether Western or Indian—would not have made it onto his list of great schools. Gombrich (1909-2001) was not so much an advocate of illusionism as its theorist.
He saw and analysed an historical process. But his description implies that the process reached fulfilment in Impressionism. Where then was art to go subsequently? He was unclear on this point in *Art and Illusion*, as well he might be, since as an art historian he must have noticed that the quest for illusionism was abandoned almost as soon as it was accomplished.

The most interesting case is that of Roger Fry (1866-1934). Anyone who is not familiar with his ideas, and goes by how Gombrich characterises him, might not suspect that, far from welcoming the perfection of illusionism, Fry was vehemently opposed to what he called 'the fervid pursuit of naturalistic representation.' His passionate advocacy of the Post-Impressionists (a term he coined) was based on aesthetic principles which he believed artists like Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and Vincent van Gogh (1853-90) shared with the Italian primitives. He had some difficulty in persuading English audiences of this, because of the 'deep-rooted conviction, due to long-established custom, that the aim of painting is the descriptive imitation of natural forms.' His firm belief that this was not the aim of painting led him, with Clive Bell (1881-1964), to develop a formalist aesthetic that was influential among artists and critics in India. It is to formalism, therefore, that we now turn.

**Formalism from Bloomsbury to Bombay**

The formalism that Fry and Bell developed together in the second decade of the twentieth century—let us for convenience call it Bloomsbury formalism—also began as a revision of an existing theory. Early on (as he later recalled) Fry rejected the notion that the key question of aesthetics was the search for 'the criteria of the beautiful, whether in art or nature.' He abandoned, in effect, that tradition of thought that is best embodied for English readers in the *Discourses* of Joshua Reynolds. Reynolds had most eloquently pushed forward the Renaissance view that conflates the natural and the ideal, to the point where Nature merits a capital letter only when she has corrected her defects, and attains the degree of beauty that one sees in the works of Michelangelo. Fry didn’t think that art was necessarily about beauty at all. There was no denying that art can be beautiful, but he felt that beauty is not what it is primarily about.

The turning point for Fry was reading Leo Tolstoy’s essay *What is Art?*, which was first translated into English in 1898. Tolstoy thought of a work of art as a means of communication between two people: the artist and the viewer. Art was a language of emotion. A work of art is not a record or replica of beauty that already exists in the world; it is the expression of an emotion that the artist feels in response to something in the world and seeks to convey to the spectator.

Reading this made Fry ponder about the nature of this ‘language of emotion’. A story (such as Tolstoy wrote) or a poem conveys the author’s emotion through words; it is ‘language’ quite literally. But a painting does not (usually) contain words; it is made up of areas of colour, and of assorted lines and shapes. This is what Fry meant by the ‘form’ of a work of art. So visual art had the unique property of employing form—line and colour—to encode or express an emotion, and convey it from an artist to the viewer.

Sensibly, he undertook a simple practical test. Having encountered the work of the French Post-Impressionists, and sharing his enthusiasm for them with artists of his acquaintance, he discussed this idea with them in the light of these works. And he received a shock:

'It became evident through these discussions that some artists who were peculiarly sensitive to the formal relations of works of art, and who were deeply moved by them, had almost no sense of the emotions which I had supposed them to convey.'

This was awkward. There was an apparent agreement on the mechanism or apparatus—that is, the form of a work of art as the vehicle or expression of emotion—but disagreement about the content: the emotion that was being conveyed. At this point he took on board an
idea derived from Clive Bell’s book *Art* (1914): that the emotion which so excited artists was not in fact an emotion that one might experience in life—a feeling like love, anger, pity, delight or whatever—but a special kind of emotion that is *sui generis*, that arises only from the contemplation of form. So, ‘however much the emotions of life might appear to play a part in the work of art, the artist was really not concerned with them, but only with the expression of a special and unique kind of emotion’, which they therefore agreed to call ‘the aesthetic emotion’. Revising his earlier formula, Fry concluded that works of art had the unique property of conveying the aesthetic emotion, and they did this by virtue of having ‘significant form’.  

Bell’s distinction between emotions of life and the aesthetic emotion—what Fry called ‘Mr Bell’s sharp challenge to the usually accepted view of art as expressing the emotions of life’—had an extraordinary effect: ‘It has led to an attempt to isolate the purely aesthetic feeling from the whole complex of feelings which may and generally do accompany the aesthetic feeling when we regard a work of art.’

The idea of the aesthetic emotion, as articulated by Fry and Bell, is well known to art historians. I have taken the trouble to review their path towards it in order to focus on one nuance that is important for my present purpose but that is generally taken for granted and is thus overlooked: the point that the ‘attempt to isolate the purely aesthetic feeling’ described by Fry was unsuccessful. Fry’s own comment subtly concedes the point. One

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The eighteenth century European artist Joshua Reynolds, seen here in a self-portrait (c. 1750), promoted the concept of ‘idealising the imperfect’.

Leo Tolstoy thought of art as a language of emotion, a means of communication between two people: the artist and the viewer.
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The parallel he drew between Giotto and Cézanne was to prove profoundly influential, as we shall see.23 So too was his simple insistence that art was about creating, not imitating, form. His ideas are echoed most clearly in India in the early writing of Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004). The title of Anand's book The Hindu View of Art (1932) echoes A. K. Coomaraswamy, but he called Part II of this book 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis' in deference to the combative opening section of Clive Bell's Art. In his book, Anand argues that art should be understood as a language of emotion, as a method of communicating an emotion.

'Let me illustrate the point by considering the history of a work of art. (1) The poet or the artist has been stirred, say by the sight or thought of lovers embracing each other into recognising the presence of a feeling or emotion of love; (2) he is possessed by this emotion and sees it as a coherent experience with the inner eye; (3) then he translates his internal experience, or his vision ... into an external form ... (4) and then is produced ... a perfect work of art, embodying the emotion of love, which the spectator or critic who has himself had the experience of being in love ... is stimulated into enjoying as an abstract, universal experience ...'24

This is almost a paraphrase of one stage in the development of Fry's thinking, before he tried to let go of the emotions of life:

'I conceived the form of the work of art to be its most essential quality, but I believed this form to be the direct outcome of an apprehension of some emotion of actual life by the artist, although, no doubt, that apprehension was of a special and peculiar kind and implied a certain detachment. I also conceived that the spectator in contemplating the form must inevitably travel in an opposite direction along the same road which the artist had taken, and himself feel the original emotion.'25

Mulk Raj Anand, the author of novels of social realism, was never going to try and suppress the emotions of life; but his view of art as a language of emotion focusses the attention on form, as the medium of that language. And it helped him to understand—and as a critic to promote—the work of an artist like Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-41) who was seeking to move beyond naturalistic representation and to achieve 'significant form'.

The Noble Savage and the Indian Peasant

So far my discussion has been confined to primitivism as a deliberate return to an earlier stage in the development of Western art, the rejection of illusionism and simplifying of formal means. The second thread of primitivism is a selective engagement with civilisations that were deemed primitive as a source of inspiration. The high-profile Western examples of this include the use of African sculpture, especially masks, by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) in the period 1906-09, and images of Tahiti and its people made in the 1890s by Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). At first sight this might appear to be a very different meaning of the term, but the two threads of primitivism are connected. I referred above to simplifications in the work of Matisse, and it is worth recalling that his use of flat patterns and arabesques was first inspired by a visit in 1910 to an exhibition of Near Eastern art. He later travelled in North Africa and Oceania. Modigliani, like Picasso, was inspired by African sculpture. Gauguin did not just live in Tahiti; he further developed there his distinctive Post-Impressionist style, founded on the absence of perspective, shading and naturalistic colour. So, seeking inspiration in a 'primitive' art or society, and developing a primitivist technique, often went hand in hand.

They also share a common underlying cause: a disenchantment with the sophistication of contemporary life. Gauguin was disgusted by what he considered to be the artificial and conventional nature of the modern world, and he sought a simpler life in a paradise of purity and innocence. This was not exactly an original idea of his: it is often said that a dissatisfaction with civilisation is as old as civilisation itself. It is certainly a recurring theme in classical writing. Even in modern times, it is a trope in Western thought that harks back to the noble savage delineated by the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-
Jacques Rousseau (1712-78). Rousseau’s purpose was not to find paradise but to upset the complacent certainties of the Enlightenment, which is why Isaiah Berlin identified him as one of the sources of Romanticism. Berlin offers us this handy, if cheeky, summary of Rousseau’s perspective on the matter:

“All that Rousseau said is this: We live in a corrupt society; we live in a bad, hypocritical society, where men lie to each other and murder each other and are false to each other. It is possible to discover the truth. This truth is to be discovered not by sophistication or Cartesian logic but by looking within the heart of the simple uncorrupt human being, the noble savage, or the child, or whoever it may be. Once this truth is discovered, it is an eternal truth, true for all men, everywhere, in all climes and seasons, and when we have discovered this truth, then it is important that we should live in accordance with it.”

So it is not really about ‘them’ at all; it is about ‘us’. Furthermore, as Berlin comments later, it is all an illusion:

“Of course, if you think you can actually become a noble savage, if you think that you can actually transform yourself into a simple native of some unsophisticated country, living a very primitive life, then the magic is gone. But none of them did. The whole point of the romantic vision of the noble savage was that he was unattainable. If he had been attainable, he would have been useless, because then he would have become an awful given, a frightful rule of life, just as confining, just as disciplining, just as detestable as that which it replaced.”

The noble savage is an elusive ideal that is thrust onto the unsuspecting native to help the West come to terms with its own sophistication. Outside the scope of Berlin’s discussion of Romanticism, but important here, lies the complication of colonialism. When Gauguin visited Tahiti, it was a French possession. Since 1880 it had been part of French Polynesia (indeed, it still is). Whether or not he was sincerely trying, and whether or not he succeeded in transforming himself into Rousseau’s noble savage, he was gazing at a subject people. And the women in his paintings especially—as has long been recognised—are both ‘orientalised’ and highly sexualised.

All of this translates to India a lot less easily than Bloomsbury formalism. Amrita Sher-Gil studied art in Paris, at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière and at the École des Beaux-Arts, before returning to India in 1933, her head filled with images of the French school. Many critics have drawn parallels between Sher-Gil’s depiction of India and Gauguin’s of Tahiti, prompted in part by the colouring of works such as Red Verandah (1938) but extending to her representation of Indian people. Her parentage and her upbringing were both mixed: part Indian, part European. Whether she is therefore to be seen as an insider

Though Pablo Picasso, according to several art scholars and critics, rarely credited the influence of African art in his artistic practice, especially during the later years, it is no secret that his discovery of tribal art from the region allowed him to engage deeply with primitive art, a truth that reflected in several of his paintings.
Paul Gauguin's move from Paris to Tahiti in the South Pacific in 1891 and his emerging art from the time illustrated the artist's desire to search for a simpler, more basic way of life away from Western urban sophistication and social restrictions. Seen here is Three Tahitian Women, painted in 1896, which is on view at The Metropolitan Museum, New York.

The simple, primitive life of Tahiti, its lush landscape, along with the rituals and the appearance of the Tahitians, equipped Paul Gauguin with tremendous material to work with. Woman Holding a Fruit shows a Tahitian girl with a fruit in her hand, almost resembling the eastern version of Eve in paradise, and illustrates the artist's keenness to reject the rules of traditional painting in order to create his own individual style.
or an outsider is a point that even some of her friends and contemporaries, like Mulk Raj Anand, couldn’t make up their minds about. ‘She had seen the Indian people from the point of view of the outsider, who wanted to become an insider,’ he remarked; and yet he credited her with considerable insight, especially into the condition of Indian women.

I shall return to Sher-Gil’s hybrid character later. It is something she had in common with George Keyt (1901-93). He spent most of his long life in his homeland, Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), and he was steeped in both Buddhist and Hindu thought, to the point of translating Jayadeva’s Gita Govinda (1940). But he was born into a Burgher family, part of the nation’s Westernised Eurasian elite. Does that make his engagement with South Asian culture that of an insider, or of an extraordinarily knowledgeable outsider? Gauguin’s sexualisation of Tahitian native women finds a counterpart, perhaps, in images of Santhal girls taken in the 1940s by the photographer Sunil Janah (1918-2012); and another in the homo-erotic photographs of Sri Lankan youths taken by another Burgher, Lionel Wendt (1900-44). The gaze of such images is at best questionable.

But Mulk Raj Anand exonerated Sher-Gil of any charge of condescension towards her Indian subjects by concluding that she was typical of ‘the new young intelligentsia from big houses of that time, charged with indignation against injustice and full of human concern.’ Anand here points to a larger social context that has been neatly summarised by Partha Mitter as ‘the elite discovery of the peasant in the 1920s as the “authentic” voice of the nation.’ A form of cultural primitivism had emerged earlier, even before the turn of the century, marked by Rabindranath Tagore’s rejection of the sophistication of colonial urban life, and his move to Santiniketan in 1899, like a hermit retiring to the forest.

By the 1920s, this cultural stance was overtaken by a wave of political primitivism, as India’s elite nationalism was transformed by Mahatma Gandhi into a nationwide popular movement based in the villages. This was partly a matter of necessity: the nationalist movement needed to garner the support of a large body of people, indeed the majority of the population. But more than that, it was about an ideal: a growing perception among India’s urban elites that in the countryside—in the villages and even among the tribal communities in the hills and forests—were people they could admire for what Mitter has called ‘their robust innocence uncorrupted by colonial culture.’ The villager was the urban dweller’s purer self, his alter ego. Village India was the keeper of a flame, the guardian of a soul, India’s true self.

So, it appears that India discovered, in the 1920s, its own ‘noble savages,’ living close at hand, not in the remote South Pacific but just out of town. There are parallels with Rousseau (and with Berlin’s comment on him) that make one pause. The perception of the Indian peasant as unchanged, and therefore uncorrupted, was an idealisation. It was a myth that

Amrita Sher-Gil was motivated by a spirit of exotic discovery or primitivism in India, very similar to that which informed Gauguin during his time in Tahiti. Seen here is Red Verandah by Sher-Gil, which captures the charm of ordinary people in India.

Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi
everyone needed to believe in. And the urban dwellers’ admiration for the peasant was again founded on self-disgust—on a rejection of colonial culture—and did not indicate a desire actually to live a peasant life. Gandhi may have thought he could build an entire nation’s economy around the spinning wheel, but few of his contemporaries saw it as more than a totem (later to be put on a flag). Even so, the crucial difference was their ability to identify with the peasant. Gauguin was never going to become Tahitian (even had he wished it): he was on the wrong end of the colonial gaze. A gulf divided him from his subjects. But the Indian urban dwellers sat on the same side of the colonial divide as their rural compatriots. This is the vital difference in the Indian experience of primitivism in its socio-political sense.

There is a corresponding difference in the Indian experience with regard to the visual arts. Indian artists from the beginning of the twentieth century began to reject academic naturalism because it was seen as Western and colonial (which were not Cézanne’s reasons). Some sought alternative inspiration and guidance in Indian art of the past: in Mughal miniature painting or the murals of Ajanta. Others looked to folk and tribal traditions, but they saw them not as primitive exotics (as Picasso, Matisse and Modigliani did) but as un-Westernised, un-colonised continuities of the authentic self. In turning to Santhal art, for example, Jamini Roy (1887-1972) was exploring a tradition that was both Indian (indeed Bengal) and living—as was he. There was no obstacle to his identification with it.

Finally there is a difference in what it took to be a primitivist. For Cézanne (at least as seen by Fry) or for Matisse, it took the overturning of four centuries of accumulated academic training, and the ability to find constructive design in an Italian Old Master or colour patterning in a bit of Islamic decoration. For the English primitives who followed them—I have mentioned Lowry and Nicholson among others—it required overcoming the expectation of your audience that figurative art should be naturalistic and get them to focus on formal values (a tough call). In India, the academic tradition had shallower roots. It had been introduced in the schools of art in the Presidency towns in the late nineteenth century, and it had prominent proponents like Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906), but it was never the dominant art practice across the country; and although urban elites learnt to admire it, even they could not have lost sight of alternative visual traditions.

Primitivism in twentieth century Indian art and sculpture takes many and various forms, as we are about to explore. Some of them came out of the West but many more were about reconnecting with local visual languages. The two core components—an engagement with tribal art and the simplification of form—are common to Western and Indian primitivism. So too is the underlying cause: a disaffection with the over-evolved trappings of modern urban life. But as I hope I have shown above, when all these elements are seen in their proper historical context, it becomes obvious that the Indian experience of them was bound to be radically different.
Jamini Roy’s art (above, left) drew on Kalighat pat paintings and emerged as a visual symbol that evoked an ‘authentic spirit of the nation’. Roy, in fact, rejected the Bengal School movement, which, in turn, moved away from Western academic art and took its inspiration from Indian art, including miniature paintings (above, right).

Collection (Jamini Roy painting): Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh

The Ajanta murals have inspired scores of artists for a long time, urging them to look beyond conventional European artistic practices. While the Bengal School movement emerged from this line of thought, several modernists from India went further towards understanding art at a deeper level.

The Bathers by French artist Paul Cézanne is considered his finest work and one of the masterpieces of modern art. He worked on the painting for seven years, and it remained unfinished at the time of his death in 1906.
About Giles Tillotson

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