

Symbols of Change: Visual, Iconographic, and Contextual Pathways in the Making of Modern Indian Art

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Abstract

Indian modernism evolved through a dynamic, at times contentious, merging of the country's experience of colonization, the world's modernist movements, and the native visual culture that underwent a revival. Instead of merely replicating the modernist paths of the West, this Indian experience evolved through a pluralism of meaning-seeking within a transforming culture. Critics such as Partha Mitter trace this development to India's pursuit of a modern artistic vocabulary that was worldly and native.

In this piece, we shall discuss how these four prominent figures of modern Indian art, Amrita Sher-Gil, Jamini Roy, M. F. Husain, and F. N. Souza, developed new images to address these conflicts. Each of these artists had a different manner of articulating sensitive humanism, folk revival, pluralism, and expressionism.

Employing visual, iconographic, and contextual analysis, this research examines eight selected artworks to illustrate how stated tradition responded to the colonial legacy and articulated a new definition of cultural identity. The result, indicative of pluralism within Indian modernism, underscores its broader significance and broadens consciousness.

The study finding first from the visual modulations of each of these four artists strongly indicate an intention to move beyond European naturalism, second in Iconographically speaking, it can be concluded that every artist draws on symbols derived from cultural traditions, These symbols differ greatly among artists but share a common theme of struggling with modernity as it is shaped by culture and from the Contextual Analysis what emerges for all four artists was their engagement with the forces of colonialism, nationalism is shaped by colonial transformation, postcolonial colonial Orientalist representations, postcolonial realism. These research insights suggest that modernism in India was forged through interrelated yet distinct engagements with historical transformation and was therefore multidimensional and culturally informed, rather than unitary or singular modernization.

Keywords: Indian Modernism; Cultural Identity; Postcolonial Art; Visual Analysis; Iconographic Interpretation; Amrita Sher-Gil; Jamini Roy; F. N. Souza; M. F. Husain.

introduction

According to Partha Mitter, “regarding the development of modernism in India, a 'syncretism' emerged,

incorporating diverse forces such as colonialism, international art trends, and a Renaissance' of Indian visual arts. In this case, contrary to the trends that developed modernism in Europe, "the search for meaning became a diverse quest reflecting India's effort to create its own modern visual language open to global influences but rooted in local cultural tradition," (Mitter, P. 2001.p231

This study shall discuss how artists dealt with cultural, social, and political conflicts through their unique modes of representation. In contrast, Aamrita Sher-Gil addressed conflicts through a humanistic, psych actively charged approach. Souza dealt with them through an aggressively expressive distorting mode that attacked religious and social authority. Jamini Roy developed folk styles into a modern mode of representation that declared cultural independence, while M. F. Husain combined pluralistic signs to articulate the dynamism of postcolonial India.

Using methods of visual analysis, this research examines eight selected artworks to discuss their reinterpretation of artistic traditions and reconstruction of cultural identity.

explore how these four important, modern Indian they shape the identity of essential or under different analyses, researching one another, applying an interdisciplinary approached model of analysis (**Visual, Iconographic, and Contextual**) to selected works of Sher-Gil, Roy, Husain, and Souza. A comparative study using three-tiered parameters across all four artists would not only show how their works share specific degrees of similarity and difference, but also reveal how their works differ in other respects, of one another it would offer a conceptual framework for understanding how the genre of modern art in India coincides with different ideologies and backgrounds.

Originality:

This research offers an integrative and comparative tool that situates four leading figures of "Indian modernists" within a conceptual framework .

This paper illustrates how visual practices, Iconographic, and contextual resolutions mutually intersect and contour a multiple map of "modernit" conceived and interpreted within "modern India". By providing an interlocking interpretation of visual and contextual analysis tools applied to these fourartists" production.

this research paper not only advances an original reading of these works but also proposes a conceptual matrix formulated around "negotiated symbolism" which can define how these artists selectively interpreted, readapted, or resisted cultural or religion symbols either derived or reexpressed on different historical occasions. By uncovering "Indian modernism" as not only multiple but also dialogically related to historical transformations and choices within "modernity," this research paper advances original research within modern art historical studies.

Method and Materials Methodology

In this research, I adopt qualitative art-historical methodologies that combine visual analysis with knowledge of icons and context to investigate how modern Indian identity can be read in carefully chosen paintings by artists such as Amrita Sher-Gil, Jamini Roy, M. F. Husain, and F. N. Souza. These methodologies offer complex frameworks for understanding painting through surface composition and the underlying cultural significations associated with modern India.

The visual analysis focuses on readily observable aspects of each painting: composition, color, line, texture, spatial organization, and style. It is at precisely this level of analysis that it becomes possible to examine closely

how each artist's meaning was derived using visual forms arranged in specific ways. It is because of this attention to form that it becomes observable how each artist approached modernity differently, using aesthetic devices.

“The iconographic aspects of the methodological approach rest upon Erwin Panofsky's well-known model of interpretation. Panofsky sets forth three closely related but distinctive levels of interpretation: (1) pre-iconographic description a description of visual motifs that lack any particular or symbolic significance; (2) iconographic analysis a reading of visual motifs that manifest specific or particular symbols; and (3) (iconological) interpretation a determination of traditional or intellectual subject matter associated with scholarly knowledge of history or other areas of culture related more broadly to human knowledge or intellectual traditions.” (Panofsky, 1955. p141). “To aid these symbolic interpretations, the research applies contextualization techniques grounded on principles outlined in *Introduction to Art: Design, Context, and Meaning*”. These techniques hold that works of art must necessarily exist within societal, political, historical, and cultural milieus that contextualize when and how they were produced”. (Pamela J. Sachant. p129)

These types of contextual analysis investigate factors like artist biography, colonial or postcolonial milieus, postcolonial factors, and postcolonial postcolonialities under which these works were created. These factors occur in particular contexts, especially in modern art, late Indian art, and cultural Revivalism, Gender Politics, and other aspects associated with comprehensive societal changes.

By integrating these three methodological traditions of visual form, symbolic meaning, and socio-historical context, this study has constructed an interdisciplinary model of interpretation that emphasizes how modern artists in India responded to their tradition and modernity. By so doing, not only can more be learned about these particular works of art, but patterns can now be identified among identity formations in modernism.

Material Source Base

The works of art discussed (analyzed) :

1. **Amrita Sher-Gil: Three Girls (1935), *Haldi Grinders* (1940)**
2. **Jamini Roy: Musicians (1943), Three Pujarins (1937)**
3. **M. F. Husain: *Mother Teresa Series* (1989), *Lightning* (1975).**
4. **F. N. Souza: *Indian Family* (1947), *St. Sebastian* (1955)**

Primary materials would range from museum catalogs to artist monographs, archives, and more recent studies of art-historical.

Discussion. It's not difficult to see why this discussion can define conceptual interconnections between form and symbolism, grounded in the historical context of how Sher-Gil, Roy, Husain, and Souza constructed modern visual identity for India.

1-Amrita Sher-G

According to Partha Mitter, “Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941) occupies a primary place in the evolution of Indian modernism as one of the earliest leading woman exponents in this domain. Amrita was born in Budapest in a cosmopolitan setting that exposed her artistic sensibilities from the outset. After pursuing her formal training in Paris, Sher-Gil returned to India in 1934 with the firm intention of changing the orientation of modern Indian art by drawing on Indian life experiences, that her own interest in impressionism was influenced by her exposure to the Tahitian paintings of Paul Gauguin. Side by side with her Gauguinesque period, Sher-Gil's exposure to Hungarian artists' interest in interlaced textures linked to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* influenced her own painterly style in this mode. At the end of her life, Sher-Gil had been working towards the development of another distinct

style typified by 'strong color contrast' and 'reduced forms.' (Parha, M.2001.p193)

Mitter argues that “Sher-Gil's importance lies not only in her style but also in her complex identity. Sher-Gil's mixed background and cosmopolitan upbringing position her both in and out of cultural context in terms of the conflicts embedded in discourses regarding nation, ethnicity, and cultural authenticity.” (Parha, M.2007.p50).



fig1, Amrita Sher-Gil, Haldi Grinders, oil on canvas 1940 <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/haldi-grinders-amrita-sher-gil/4gEWMfCIUAEwuQ?hl=en>
 source: Mitter, Partha. 2007. *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922–1947*. p 64

Amrita Sher-Gil, Haldi Grinders

1. Visual Analysis

Haldi Grinders depicts a group of women from a rural setting gathering around a typical gathering in a traditional Indian home. Sher-Gil's composition is dominated by solid forms and simplified contours, typical of her mature Indian period after studying in Europe. In this piece, Sher-Gil primarily uses warm colors, such as yellow, ochre, brown, and earthy reds.

The figures are arranged in a circular, rhythmic composition, giving the effect of a well-coordinated movement. These figures' bodies lean toward the grindstone, suggesting unity. The background is reduced to minimal details, hence creating space for the women's movements to take center stage. The figures' textures are smooth, with slight shading, giving the piece a two-dimensional quality that is expressionistic through color. This is a quality of Sher-Gil's pursuit of a modern indigenous aesthetic. (Partha.M.2007.p64)

2. Iconographic Analysis

Iconographically, this painting reveals much more than a household task. Turmeric, known as 'haldi' in Indian

culture, symbolizes purity, prosperity, health, and good luck, especially at weddings. Through this painting, Sher-Gil foregrounds the importance of women as guardians of culture. The collaborative attitude of the women portrayed here raises notions of sisterhood, communal work, and a shared identity among women of the rural areas. The women's conservative attire, the bare background, and their absorbed expressions exude a sense of grace even in mundane activities. The grinding stone here is a metaphor for continuity, something that dates back a long, long time, a tool passed down from one generation of women to another.

3. Contextual Analysis

In context, *Haldi Grinders* falls within Sher-Gil's most illustrious period, “from 1935 to 1941, when she deliberately shifted from depicting European themes to the realism of India's social setting. After her Paris experience, Sher-Gil was moved by the sight of the poor, intense, and emotional India of the villages”. This artwork is a testament to Sher-Gil's desire to depict 'India as it is' rather than 'India as imagined' by European artists. (Prasno, Ramlin 2009 p475).

The artwork is created within the context of colonial India, which was grappling with questions of national identity, cultural revival, and modernism. “The bicultural experience Sher-Gil brought to her work enabled her to fuse Western modernism with Indian content, neither replicating academic realism nor idealizing Indian culture. In its place, a humanist, socio-cultural modernism that was centered on women was brought forth.” (Prasno, Ramlin 2009 p.475).

Haldi Grinders, therefore, is a significant document of early Indian modernism. It brings to the fore the invisible labor of women, resists the colonial gaze, and parallels Sher-Gil's larger artistic agenda of giving a voice to marginalized communities through a modern artistic language.

Amrita Sher-Gil's "Three Girls"

Visual Analysis

Three Girls (1935) features three girls tightly composed vertically and taking up almost the entire pictorial field. Sher-Gil's muted earthy colors, brown and reddish earths, convey a contemplative and somber mood, because of which no details of the space around these girls could draw the viewers' attention to themselves; instead, everything relates to the girls' faces and figures.

“These figures are realized through semi-allegorical models of simplification and idealization, using contoured lines and solid volumes that represent Sher-Gil's integration of European modernist training with an awakening of India's visual consciousness” (Vyas, Chintamani p73).

These figures' oval faces, lack of detailed anatomical features, and drooping eyes convey an unobtrusive emotional appeal. The absence of chiaroscuro reveals an unembellished surface with structural and value features related to Post-Impressionism. These figures stand vertically close together to emphasize their unity or togetherness, and their introspection or inner unity. There's no ornamentation to emphasize the heightened psychic intensity Sher-Gil wanted to project in this artwork.

Iconographic Analysis

Iconographically, *Three Girls* can well signify the inner emotions associated with Indian womanhood and, more specifically, the emulated endurance exhibited by young girls. “The downward gaze and reserved poses exude classic signs associated with themes that dominate Sher-Gil's works, such as waiting, uncertainty, and the unexpressed emotions of women”. (Prasno, Ramlin 2009 p.477)

The triadic repetition of nearly mirror-image figures allows the painting to function as a metaphor for the experience of womanhood rather than as individual portraiture. The modest dress of these figures and their lack of ornamentation reinforce the notions of modesty and limitation. “By the symbols, the figures' expressiveness becomes the source of meaning, and the painting becomes an iconic representation of introspection and suffering”. (Prasno, Ramlin 2009 p.477).

Contextual Analysis

In terms of context, “the Three Girls painting falls within Sher-Gil's formative years, just after her return to India from Paris in 1934-1935. After being molded by Cézanne, Gauguin, and the École de Paris, Sher-Gil now found it necessary to shift her focus to themes related to India and to move into what art historian Kapur would define as her Indian modernism phase” (Kapur. 2000 .p7).

The painting reflected the socio-cultural context in India in the 1930 significant class disparities, patriarchal traditions that stifled women's roles, and the dawning need for national identity among Indians under colonial rule. “It was during a period when Indian artists were struggling with conflicts between European aesthetic traditions and India's own renaissance that Sher-Gil brought a humanistic touch to her paintings of ordinary Indian women, neither idealizing nor exoticizing Indians”. (Mitter 2001.p193).

Therefore, Three Girls not only marks an aesthetic watershed but also serves as cultural commentary on the dignity and complexity of emotions expressed by Indian women at this transformative phase of societal shift. It still has importance as an exemplary contribution of Sher- Gil's Attempt at constructing an Indian modernism with empathy and introspection.



Fig. 2. Amrita Sher-Gil, *Three women*. (1937), oil on canvas .

source Mitter, P. 2007. *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922– 1947*.p50

2. Jamini Roy (1887–1972)

“Jamini Roy was a leading pioneer of modern Indian art who sought to build an indigenous modernist language grounded in Bengal's folk and village traditions. Although he received formal academic training in European naturalism at the Government College of Art in Calcutta, he later rejected this colonial style because it did not represent Indian cultural identity” (Mitter 2007.p 100).

“In the 1920s–30s, Roy turned to the Kalighat *patachitra* tradition, adopting its bold contour lines, flattened forms, and restricted color palette to construct a distinctly Indian modern aesthetic.

His recurring subjects, village women, devotional figures, mother-and-child themes, Baul musicians, and rural scenes, reflect a visual simplicity that expresses emotional clarity and strong graphic structure.” (Shukla,2022 p156).

“Beneath this simplicity, Roy's work engages more profound questions of identity, spirituality, and cultural belonging, aligning with broader nationalist efforts to revive indigenous artistic practices and to resist colonial visual hierarchies” (Mitter 2001.p194).

“Today, he is recognized as a central figure in Indian modernism, whose work demonstrates how folk idioms can be transformed into a sophisticated modern visual language rooted in local traditions and cultural self-definition.” (Kapur 2000.p302).

a-) Jamini Roy Musicians Visual Analysis

“Jamini Roy's Musicians is representative of Jamini's distinctive visual style, in which a deliberately flattened visual space coexists with robust curvilinear forms and a limited yet intensely chromatic color range. The figures are deliberately stylized rather than anatomically detailed; almond-shaped eyes, cartoonish facial expressions, and geometrical bodies evoke the visual language of *patua* painting, popular among Bengali artists of Jamini's period. The cyclical repetition of the musician's positions and the parallel alignment of their instruments imbue the visual image with a rhythmic pulse that echoes the painting's musical theme. Jamini's perspectival denial also reinforces this two-dimensional quality while celebrating his rebellion against Western perspectival realism” (Shukla,2022 p155). The visual harmony achieved through Jamini's paintings' opposition between robust linearity and chromatic vitality negotiates an expressive harmony with profound native folk tale influences.

Iconographic Analysis

“Musicians come into meaning through the vocabulary of symbols and stories inherent in rural Bengali culture. The figures signify not specific individual musicians but archetypal figures

guardians of oral tradition, ritual music, and traveling stories. Their props would signify ektaras, khol, or other village drums, representing communal ritual or the cyclicity of rural life patterns. By depicting these figures as symbols, there has been a stress on communal identity rather than individuality. The large eyes, head positions, and dramatic gestures resemble those found in pat scroll paintings, which emphasize aesthetic communication or storytelling and place great emphasis on expressive simplification” (Tuli, N. p .192.) Thus, this painting can well serve as an icon of cultural tradition that of celebrating the life and spirit of India's oral storytelling traditions.

Contextual Analysis

In context, Musicians can be understood as part of Roy's larger artist statement, which opposes colonial academic naturalism and instead emphasizes Indian visual traditions in modernist art practice. Early to mid-twentieth-century artwork like *Musicians* demonstrates that Roy's oeuvre was part of a nationalist project that sought local manufacture and an economy. By featuring village musicians a class of persons relegated to the lower reaches of colonial societies as fitting subject matters for fine arts paintings, *Musicians* promotes an aesthetic saying that "culture matters" and that "grassroots creativity" counts too; at the same time, *Musicians* asserts an anticolonial vision of India's identity. *Musicians* thus works simultaneously at an aesthetic level and at an ideological or visually rhetorical level, “his paintings asserts cultural authenticity while celebrating grassroots creativity and an anticolonial vision of India's identity”.(Prasno, Ramlin 2009 p.450)



Fig. 3 Jamini Roy , Musicians. Tempera on paper; 30 x 43 cm. Collection of Nirmalya Kumar. source: Shukla Sawan, Readings on Modernism: From 75 Years of Marg" P156

b-Jamini Roy Three Pujarins

- Visual Analysis

Three Pujarins features three female bhaktas lined up closely, captured with Jamini's distinctive stylization and line economy. The vertically composed image lends to these figures a grave presence and absorbs notions of spiritual ascendance. These figures are expressed with strong black outlines that define their faces, almond-shaped eyes, and dense fabrics, testifying to Jamini's expertise with line as an aesthetic element.

“His restricted yet intensely chromatic range usually earthy ochres, indigo, brown, and white achieves tonal harmony without resorting to naturalistic chiaroscuro. His long faces, frontal pose, and geometrical simplification derive from the tradition of Kalighat pat paintings, but are heightened by a more balanced composition and restraint” (Mitter 2007.p108)..

Slight differences in these figures' gestures and head positions create rhythmic variations while supporting an overall lack of movement inherent to their iconicity. The removal of spatial depth, caused by the unadorned backgrounds, draws visual attention to the reflective unity among these three women. By providing visual clarity and symmetry with well-managed brushstrokes, this painting embodies a sense of meditation between visual simplicity and devotion.

Iconographic Analysis

These three figures signify pujarins, that is, female believers whose ritual presence was grounded in the vernacular tradition of devotion in Bengal. These figures" modest dress code and demure bearing signify humility and spiritual purity. Their large brown eyes mean inner worlds of experience and spiritual vision that pertain to bhakti or devotional traditions (*Shukla.2022*)

These figures personify spiritual experience at the human level. The employment of triadic composition relates

to scroll painting traditions in which groups of attendants or believers appear in successive episodes to portray ritual roles.

By foregrounding the active role of devoted women, the painting underscores their importance to culture. It can therefore be said that the icons position the pujarins not just as passive entities but rather as participants of a real world of devotion.

• Contextual Analysis

"Three Pujarin" was produced during Roy's mature phase of life and work in the 30s and 40s, and can be regarded as his response to his own break with colonial realism at AJC school and to his efforts to establish an "Indian school of art." It was an era of surging cultural nationalism. There was a penchant for "Swadeshi" or rural aesthetic (Mitter 2007. p109.).

The focus on these folk subjects: village women, craftsmen, and ritualists was aesthetic and ideological on the part of Roy. His preference for these pujarins challenged the values of traditional colonial art and was a statement of Gandhian ideals of simplicity and self-sufficiency. The painting also represents part of the folk renaissance in Bengal, in which artists sought to create a modern visual identity independent of Western academic traditions. In this case, *Three Puja-rins* not only represents a stylistic form of devotion but also represents an identification with culture and national consciousness. It means evidence of Roy's desire to create an innovative aesthetic tradition, grounded in modern Indian principles of art and authentically cultural.



fig 4 Jamini Roy's "Three Women," 36.5 X 70.5 cms

source: collection at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) 00063, New Delhi, India.

https://museumsfindia.gov.in/repository/record/ngma_del-ngma-00063-5

3. Maqbool Fida Husain

“Maqbool Fida Husain was viewed as one of the leading figures of modern India. Known commonly as

"Picasso of India, "Husain was to define twentieth-century courses of modern India's art scene with his works. Born and brought up in the small town of Pandharpur in Maharashtra, Maqbool Fida Husain was essentially a self-taught artist in nurturing his painting talents. His interest in painting was painting cinema billboards in Bombay" (Mitter 2001.p .196).

"In 1947, Husain was part of the Progressive Artists Group (PAG). This significant movement broke away from the academies of colonial naturalism and created an independent visual language for modern India. Solid black outlines, simplified and strong figures of humans and animals, and vibrant chromatic contrasts characterized his mature style. His style was in tune with modernist trends worldwide; however, his subject matter largely remained rooted in traditional Indian stories: mythology, folklore, history, and life" (Goldie, Kasturia.S 2018. p30).

The significance of Husain's legacy cannot be overstated in research on South Asian modernism. His uniqueness lies in his ability to combine Indian cultural consciousness with modern visual language to create an oeuvre that is at once modern, historical, and culturally meaningful. His work continues to influence research on contemporary Indian art, decolonial aesthetics, and visual narratives in the postcolonial context.

a- *M. F. Husain — Mother Teresa Series*

Visual Analysis

"M. F. Husain's *Mother Teresa Series* is characterized by strong contouring, two-dimensional space, and muted but vibrant colors with whites, blues, and earthy hues predominant. Figures simplify into abstract arcs suggesting refuge, intimacy, and spiritual warmth rather than realism. Mother Teresa's image rarely appears in fine portraiture; instead, it's her white sari with blue edges that serves as her defining visual sign, a leitmotif throughout this series" (Dalmia 2001. p101)

Sometimes these compositional designs position the dominant figure boldly in the foreground, with children or featureless human figures grouped around it, using large, gestural brushstrokes. Omitting these features helps achieve the universalistic quality of empathy; instead of focusing on individuality, these paintings point towards the symbolic significance of empathy a lesson conveyed by Husain when he shifts focus from individuality to the iconic importance of compassion. Coloring occurs on flat surfaces rather than transitioning naturally from one color to another, adding to an air of antiquity and icons. The contrast between vertical and curvilinear shapes promotes harmony, emphasizing nurturing, suffering, vulnerability.

Iconographic Analysis

Iconically speaking, however, Husain renders Mother Teresa as an emblem of motherhood and sacrifice and humanitarian commitment beyond cultures In this painting or rather print-out of an actual painting, MotherTeresa'ss",white sari with blue strips iconic among Missionaries of Charit"serves as her ""symbolic halo"" which replaces any need for portraiture .

Important recurring themes included:

- Children cradled or embracing others, indicating innocence and the main objective of the Missionaries of Charity.
- Open hands or uplifted protective arms signifying blessings or nurturing and maternal protection.
- Circular or halo-like figures that exalt Mother Teresa to a quasi-same status, with similarities to Christian icons but still with modern abstraction.
- Mother and child symbolism that calls to mind either the European tradition of pietà or the idea of maternal love found in India.

Through these overlapping symbols, Husain merges Christian devotional imagery with Indian visual traditions, creating a universal image that transcends religion. His artwork transforms Mother Teresa from a Catholic sister into an icon of compassion universally understood, regardless of religion.

Contextual Analysis

In context, the Mother Teresa Series can be understood as deriving from a particular era in Husain's life (1970s to 1990s), during which his work increasingly addressed matters of spirituality, suffering, and ethics. It was indeed during these years that Husain was struck by the problems faced by India's social fabric: matters of displacement and communal turmoil, and herein can be found his significance related to Mother Teresa .

It was part of an ongoing concern with feminine archetypes such as goddesses, mothers, and nurturing figures, which Husain chose to examine through themes of creation, protection, and endurance, drawing on South Asian contexts. In these terms, Mother Teresa offers the more recent example of the mothering figure, which was at once spiritual, philanthropic, and strongly Indian in her socio-cultural presence.

His own inability to show her face can well be said to be an ethical gesture with a strong emphasis on the universality of her compassion. His refusal to show her face tends to reduce her to a representative sign: "every mother, every caregiver." His ability to synthesize a modernist aesthetic with culturally specific symbols demonstrates how well this artist could create something meaningful and visually innovative at once.



fig5. *Mother Teresa Series*. M. F. Husain. oil on canvas 1988

source:<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/mother-teresa-maqbool-fida-husain/HgHBJP2WaoT-5A?hl=en>

a- M. F. Husain, *Lightning* (1975)

Visual Analysis

“*Lightning* (1975) is monumental and comprises twelve panels that spread over a continuous visual surface. The painting derives its vitality from ten white horses galloping synchronically towards the viewers. The artist holds the composition together with a chromatic scale that ranges from blues to greens, gradually moving from darker shades at the far end of the painting to lighter ones that accompany the horses' movement towards the viewers' positions. The horses are described in Husain's characteristic black-and-white style, with stress on movement and clarity” (Susan S Bean.p.109). Although large-scale paintings were produced, the lines' quality of clarity ensures that these can easily be read at a distance a consequent experience of the cinema billboards of his youth.

Throughout this composition, symbols and imagery abound: a red semicircle around a foal's head, the emblem of military power with its red tank, symbols of agriculture, and figures such as axe-wielding workers. These pictorial elements disrupt and vitalize this composition while underlining the urgency of movement derived from galloping horses. “The visual surface with these elements transforms into an electric space with movement, symbols, and politics interplay.” Husain combine his Indian heritage with the modernist to create innovative ideas. Through bold use of colour. His paintings are known ability to explore themes of cultural history and legacy in a context of explosive colour and beauty.” (Susan S Bean.p.11).

Iconographic Analysis

Iconographic significance: “The theme of galloping horses is among the strongest and longest-surviving in Husain's works. Iconographic significance: The horse is associated with monarchy, cosmic power” (Susan S Bean.p.7).

For M F Husain, the horse was associated with creativity and passion; hence, the horse was described as "strength combined with beauty."

In *Lightning*, white horses signify speed, the transformation of national identity, and unstoppable forces driving India toward modernization. The nuclear sign on the foal's head refers to India's induction into the nuclear club. The tank with bright-red paint refers to the persistent shadow of Partition, past conflicts with sister countries, and Cold War politics. Details including bundles of wheat, "farmers "agricultural tools, agrarian labor ", social rebuilding, or dreams of the new India

The iconography thus incorporates ancient mythical symbols, modern politico-realities, and the artist's own symbols into a layered text of transformation and national destiny.

Contextual Analysis

In context, “*Lightning* was produced in 1975. According to Husain himself, this painting was done in the Indian style and rapidly with the intention of providing visual commentary on Gandhi's speech delivered at Shivaji Park in Bombay; it was not commissioned but was more of an artistic offering or presentation at a tense, politically savvy time” (Susan S Bean.p.11).

The appearance of the eleven horses in these versions of the story has been interpreted as representing Gandhi's eleven years of leadership. At the same time, other imagery speaks to a nation facing industrialization, state control, and development plans. The monumental scale and billboard lines relate to Husain's knowledge of public visual culture, which demanded images conveying immediate emotional value to the public at large.

It can thus be inferred that the painting fits into Husain's oeuvre on national identity and modernity, marked by mythic symbolism. Lightning can be said to occupy an intersection in politics and art related to the concept of nation-building.



fig.6 M.F. Husain. *Lightning*, 1975. Oil on canvas. Twelve panels, overall: H. 3 m. x W. 18 m.
<https://asiasociety.org/asia-society-museum-new-york-presents-mf-husain-art-and-nation>

4- Francis Newton Souza (1924–2002)

“Yet Souza is now acknowledged as one of the pioneers of modern painting in India and a leading artist of the Progressive Artists Group (PAG), founded in Bombay in 1947. Souza was born and brought up in Saligao, Goa, with strict Catholic parents; hence, church imagery, rituals, and Gothic architecture became part of his environment and aesthetic experience from childhood onwards “.(Kurtha, Aziz.p4) After entering Sir J. J. School of Art in Bombay, Souza soon abandoned academic realism at the school and set out to develop an aggressive style in painting .

Aggressive, militant brushstroke patterns and distinctive figures with distorted bodies, and an intense, volatile emotional content characterized Souza's mature style. Souza's chosen subject matter was remarkably diverse and included human figures, religious icons, saints, priests, and eroticized bodies . Souza's coarse figures with enlarged features and black humor resonate with European Expressionism and Picasso's works because Souza's paintings were ever grounded in his upbringing in India and Goan culture with Catholic traditions.

Souza relocated to London and then to New York in 1949, becoming one of the first Indians to gain international recognition. His unswerving vision, guided by both recognition and moral pr, made him a revolutionary artist in modernism .His significance comes into focus through his incorporation of rebellion, religious criticism, and modernism into his visual vocabulary, which redefined Indian art in the postcolonial era.

Today, postcolonial artists are seen as innovators, opening hip, postcolonial avenues for artists to explore freely in India's modern art movement. His works can still be referred to for analysis of psychology and cultural significance, with particular emphasis on India's early phase of modernism.

“It is essential to identify that Souza's practice has been extensively characterized by his engagement with and exploration of religion, especially Catholic traditions. Even with his rebellious attitude towards Catholicism and the traditions that irritated him so much, Christianity remained an essential semantic foundation for Souza's work.” (Ramlin, p.p489)

Many interpreters of Souza's practice have pointed to his Catholic upbringing in Goa and remember works like *Crucifixion* (1960) and *Two Saints in a Landscape reflecting Souza's ongoing engagement with Christian icons but with a critical modernist twist that reveals the contradictions hidden among these icons.

a- F. N. Souza's *St. Sebastian* (1955).

Visual Analysis

*In *St. Sebastian** (1955), “Souza offers a half-length male figure with a strongly expressionist visual vocabulary. three arrows stuck on the left side on his neck reflecting an immediate quality of tension and psychic significance. The typical range of deep reds, ochres, and warm yellows creates an intense emotional environment. The grid of reds on the torso suggests both bodily incarceration and spiritual suffering. The backing vegetation of disturbed ochres and yellows adds to the psychic distress that typifies mid-century expressionism” (Kurtha, Aziz.p73)

The asymmetrical face, with large, troubled eyes, systematically shifts the focus to this composition's centerpiece. The texture and tense brush marks add to the emotionally intense environment of this painting because Souza's concern was to lay bare the stresses of human experience.

Iconographic Analysis

Classically, *St. Sebastian* appears in Christian icons as an ideal type of martyred saint transpierced with arrows. Souza breaks dramatically with this classical tradition. Instead of an upright and beautiful nude figure serenely posed, Souza shows a fragmented and jagged figure with intense

psychic anguish. The black marks on his torso suggest either scars or metaphorical arrows indicating internal suffering rather than external persecution (Kurtha ,Aziz. 2006 .p73).

The simplistic arrow motif at the neck strongly supports these notions of persecution and righteous struggle. Souza's reading of this painting emphasizes emotional and spiritual pain and transforms the saint into an allegory of psychoanalytic suffering and vulnerability. Instead of the pious veneration associated with religiosity, there is now a more modernist interpretation of suffering, in which Souza's saint reveals sharp edges of human vulnerability rather than the idealistic endurance or beauty associated with religiosity. The saint now transforms into an image of endurance, with sharp edges associated with human vulnerability, but without idealism attached.

Contextual Analysis

St. Sebastian, painted in 1955, marks Souza's encounter with *St. Sebastian* at a time when Souza and other artists of that age were aggressively reworking traditional subjects to express their own subjective disruptions. Souza's Catholic upbringing in Goa introduced him to the religiosity depicted in the church; however, his rebellious stance against the church strongly influenced his portrayal of *St. Sebastian* (Kurtha,Aziz.2006 .p74.)

St. Sebastian, with his experience of suffering and his ambiguous stand, was Souza's ideal subject to express his own experiences of alienation, injury, and internal conflicts.

The harsh linearity, ruptured forms, and chromatic vocabulary position the painting within European and Indian expressionisms of the mid-20th century. In these works, figures of religious significance were often used metaphorically to express broader fears about human experience, especially after war and identity shifts caused by colonization .There is perhaps an attitude of compression and tension emanating from this painting that can also express concerns about power and individuality within a rapidly changing cultural landscape under postcolonial pressures.

In the postcolonial story, Souza transposes not only into a univerpostcolonialentative image of endurance but also into the subjective experience of turmoil and challenges posed by life itself. It serves as an exemplary instance of how Souza derived his distinctive visual language from religiosity, but with far more assertive,

modern overtones.



Fig.7 Francis Newton Souza. St. Sebastian. 1955. Oil on board.

source: Kurtha, Aziz. *Francis Newton Souza: Bridging Western and Indian Modern Art*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2006. Plate 80

A- F. N. Souza's *Indian Family*.

F. N.Souza'ss. Indian Family

F.N. Souza's *Indian Family* shows how his expressive, jagged style of depicting the human form was a quintessential part of his visual language. His composition emphasizes a compact group of figures conveying familial bonding, yet aggressive lines also convey an undercurrent of strain. Souza's bodies are composed using thick black lines, which Souza learned while studying church icons painting in Bombay (Kurtha 2006).

The denser, brown, and earthy hues saturate the canvas, creating a dramatic, almost oppressive ambiance. The features with stiff mask-like expressions and large staring eyes establish an ambivalence associated with Souza's commentary on human relationships (Bharucha 2005). The simplified, abstracted environment emphasizes the psychological significance of figures rather than their physical context. Altogether, these works encode Souza's revolt against idealization and his preference for an expressive modernism associated with instability (Dalmia 2001).

Iconographic Analysis

Iconically, Indian Family becomes more than just a realist depiction of a familial unit. Souza transforms the familial unit into a sign for a vulnerable social structure and an anxious spiritual experience. While these figures adopt hieratic poses and mask-like faces that evoke Catholic icons Souza himself was raised with in Goa, “the spiritual complacency typically conveyed by icons is now transformed into tense bodies and rigorous emotions” (2007 Mitter). Souza's comment on the ideal of “the harmonious Indian family” commonly extolled in

nationalist rhetoric." "Angular bodies," "enlarged heads," and "thick outline" can be understood metaphorically to refer to structural forces at work within Indian society, a moral structure, familial responsibility, and the weight of modernity" (Kapur 2000). The fractured geometries embodied in Souza's figures imply "unstability" inherent in notions of identity, intimacy, and power within" he household".

Contextual Analysis

Introduced against the backdrop of major anti-art and societal transformation in independent India, IFamily exemplifies Souza's desire to establish an alternative modernist vocabulary that departed from traditional academic European models of modernism prevalent under British rule. Souza's alignment with the Progressive Artists' Group (PAG), founded in 1947 with other artists like M.F. Hussain and Ebrahim Ali Kamoni, with whom Souza's alignment with a modernism that stemmed from intense psychology and experimented with forms that drew inspiration from Expressionism but remained true to Indian experience (Kurtha, Aziz. 2006 .p23)

The painting can also be related to Souza's own experiences: his puritan Catholic upbringing, his struggles with conforming to conservative ideologies, and his eventual migration to Britain had formed his critical perceptions about power relations, family units, and religious ethos (Bharucha 2005). It can thus be said that Souza's *Indian Family* can be read in this broader ideological trend where the painting itself reveals commentary on how India had been struggling with maintaining balance between tradition and modernization at a relatively fast pace during the mid- twentieth century, and how India was simultaneously working with readjusting itself into the global map with different definitions of identity with those ever-rapidly changing times.



Fig. 8. Francis Newton Souza: Indian Family. 1947. Oil on board

source: Francis Newton Souza: Bridging Western and Indian Modern Art. By Aziz Kurtha. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2006. Plate 9.

Results

On close analysis of these eight works of art selected for visual study in this project, essential insights can now be derived into the creation of modern India's identity. First, it can be inferred that the visual modulations of

each of these four artists strongly indicate an intention to move beyond European naturalism. Sher-Gil's expressions of figures now become flattened and muted, conveying psychological complexity; while those of Roy portend strong features with native geometry to reclaim Indian aesthetics; Husain's splashes of expressionist lines convey national vigour; while Souza's figures now distort with sharp edges to subvert power and convey inner turmoil.

Iconographically speaking, it can be concluded that every artist draws on symbols derived from cultural traditions. Sher-Gil draws on symbols of women that express nurturing and adaptability; icons like musicians and believers which express national identity for Roy; symbols like horses, Mother Teresa's sari, and rural symbols which explore national identity and transformation for Husain; while symbols of Christianity and dissected bodies which express dissent with religion for Souza. These symbols differ greatly among artists but share a common theme of struggling with modernity as it is shaped by culture.

In context, what emerges for all four artists was their engagement with the forces of colonialism, nationalism is shaped by colonial transformation, postcolonial colonial Orientalist representations, postcolonial realism; Roy's practice postcolonial cultural awakening and Gandhian ideology; Husain's paintings express the hopes and conflicts of India's independence; while Souza's practice critiques Western institutions with a transnational viewpoint. Collectively, these research insights suggest that modernism in India was forged through interrelated yet distinct engagements with historical transformation and was therefore multidimensional and culturally informed, rather than unitary or singular modernization.

Conclusion

The analysis of works by artists such as Amrita Sher-Gil, Jamini Roy, M. F. Husain, and F. N. Souza shows how modern art emerged in India not necessarily through stylistic developments but through multiple dialogues that occurred at different times and among various artists. While Sher-Gil addressed modernity through human emotions, with elements of warmth and touch, Jamini Roy addressed it through folk emotions. In contrast, M. F. Husain addressed it through nationalist emotions, and F. N. Souza addressed it through rebellious emotions related to religion and society at large.

In conclusion, this paper contends that modernism in India can be adequately understood only by recognizing how symbols and forms in art shift with historical circumstances at different levels of interpretation: visual, iconographic, and contextual. It thus seeks to show how structural similarities can be found among individual artists at these various levels, using these different types of interpretation together, and how these results demonstrate that modernism was not an innovation of European modernism but an intellectual movement independent of its own influence or input.

In conclusion, this study not only sheds light on how modern identity can be constructed with multiple layers but also expands how modern Indian art can and should be perceived with these artists at its core because these artists offer insights into modern identity that can relate to debates on modernism and decolonization.

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