



ANANTA KUMAR PANDA : THE MAVERICK SPIRIT OF ODISHAN MODERN ART

Arts

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ABSTRACT

The story of modern Odishan art started in the state a little before India became independent. The Odia artists, educated mostly from Calcutta, Lucknow and Santiniketan started working with the ideology of revivalistic and European academic art or by a few artists the modern movement here was based upon the different major European isms. In this phase of transition an Odia artist, Ananta Kumar Panda emerged as a forerunner of the radical group in the modern art scene of Odisha who inspired the young generation for the subsequent developments took place in Odishan art field.

KEYWORDS

Art, Painting, Modern, Expressionism, Cubism, Contemporary art.

So far as Odishan art and painting is concerned it has a long history of its traditional sculptural activities with temple building, mural, palm-leaf and pata painting. Odisha is known for its rich craft tradition. Another ancient name of Odisha "Utkal" was given for its excellence in art and crafts. Although having such a long and glorious past of art and culture due to the attack of foreign invaders and under their governance since three hundred eighty years of misrule, negligence and plunder the social structure of Odisha was shaken. The story of modern art starts here quite late, a little before the Indian independence against the backdrop of the national modern and contemporary art scenario which saw rapid changes because of technological and scientific developments.

In the early twentieth century the art and artists of Odisha were patronized by the local Rajas and the Zamindars. A few Odia artists were active in the state who were educated from Government Art and Crafts School, Calcutta. They were Basanta Kumar Panda, Bimbardhar Verma, (though Bimbardhar had no formal education in art) Gopal Kanungo, Upendra Maharathi, Muralidhar Tali, Gouranga Charan Som, Bipin Bihari Chowdhury who studied from Royal College of Art, London, Sarat Chandra Devo who also studied from the Heatherly School of Art, London. Later Ajit Keshary Ray also came back Odisha studying art from Visvabharati and Anglo-French Centre of Art, London. As modern art was the resultant of a new socio-cultural system the modern Odia artists unlike the traditional artists started experimenting but not being completely segregated from the art traditions. In such a fluid situation it was difficult to find solid norms of modern art developing in the state. So the contemporary art scene of Odisha was bound to be in the light of the developments that had already happened in the early twentieth century in Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Lucknow. Meanwhile after a decade of Indian independence an art and craft school was set up by the Government of Odisha at Khallikote in the district of Ganjam where the course structure and curriculum was designed as a synthesis of the academic and the revivalistic style in the Calcutta school and Visva Bharati, Santiniketan respectively. Because most of the teachers appointed here were taught either from the Calcutta School or Visva Bharati.

In the year 1961 Ananta Kumar Panda (1934-2017), a young artist joined the school as a lecturer in oil painting who was educated from Kala Bhawan, Santiniketan under the tutelage of Ramkinkar Baij, one of the pioneers of Indian modern art movement. Ananta Panda was born in 1934 at Bhograi, an Odishan village in north Balasore. As a son of another great Odia artist Basanta Panda, Ananta began to draw and paint from the childhood and he had keen interest in art, acting, singing, music and writing. After school and college education pursuing interest in fine arts, he joined Visvabharati, Santiniketan. The liberating intellectual environment of Santiniketan provided him ample scope to know and learn different forms of art, where he became an expert Sitarist also.

In Santiniketan he has been deeply inspired by his teacher Ramkinkar Baij. After obtaining the Diploma in Fine arts Ananta returned Odisha and joined the newly opened Government Art School at khallikote. Very soon the personality of Ananta and his style of painting and sculpture drew much attention to him. As an ardent follower of

Ramkinkar in his initial days at Khallikote School his mind with creative thinking and sheer determination Ananta Panda grew into one of the most distinguished early modernists in the arena of Odishan art.

Greatly emphasizing on the growth of imagination, creative thinking, curiosity of the young mind he tried to ignite a true passion in the minds of the students in Khallikote. As he was seized with passionate enthusiasm for music the resonance of Rabindra sangit in his deep voice and melody of strings of the sitar would transport the listeners into another vista of imagination. Khallikote influenced the themes in his paintings. As he would take the students on outings to Chilika the atmosphere here encouraged him to deepen his ties with Chilika Lake and local fishermen (nolia) that have found expression in his paintings. The simple way of life that the Nolias led attracted him. He worked combining the skills of a modeler and carver. So in his paintings the subjects take on expressionist dimensions like sculpture which are filled with force and vitality and his sculptures convey the true essence of subjects by concentrating on simplified form free from ornamentation. He focused on intuition as his main driving force. While his contemporaries stuck to old ideals and rigidity Ananta innovated and experimented with his highly creative and bold works. Panda's experiments would go on to break new ground paving the way for a new trend in Odishan Art. In this way when Gopal Kanungo and Ajit Keshary Roy's works reflect the impressionistic and cubist style, at the same time Ananta Panda developed his own style in painting which were painted though in the European modernistic way of applying colours but the spirit behind the paintings and the characters against the flaming orange-red background of his paintings in the Fishermen series were drawn with expressive forces from the surroundings around him. Though he was a lecturer in oil painting at Khallikote art school but his creative domain was expanded to the area of sculpture, collage, music and literature. When his sculptures showed the abstract style, his collages with found objects were based on Picasso's style. As the Odia artists had not been able to sever relation with the tradition and go modern fully a few artists were inclined either to the oriental style of the Bengal School of Art or to the European Academic style of the Calcutta school. But he completely rejected both the oriental and academic style of Indian art.

He left Khallikote School of Art and Crafts in 1973 and shifted to the Director of Public Instructions' office in Bhubaneswar as a special officer in art education. When He was based in Bhubaneswar at that time, and the city was itself an important cultural centre Ananta Panda organized his former students and formed an artists' group as Working Artists' Association under his chairmanship and initiated a movement in Odishan art. The group playing a crucial role in shaping the identity of modern Odishan art worked to recognize and support the experiments in the field of contemporary art. His boldness and innovative spirit paved the way for a new wave of artistic expression through the group on subsequent generation.

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