



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**Arts**

**ARTISTS HAVE THEIR OWN UNIQUE WAY OF VIEWING THE ENVIRONMENT OF THEIR COUNTRY: A CASE STUDY OF TWO SUCH SETS OF MOVEMENTS, 19TH CENTURY IMPRESSIONISTS AND 20TH CENTURY BOMBAY PROGRESSIVE ARTISTS GROUP.**

**KEY WORDS:**

**Adhiraj Singh**

**ABSTRACT**

The paper studied the circumstances under which these group of artists arose. The influence of the environment played an extremely important role in the type of art form that they developed. They are extremely popular even today because their work was so realistic that it is relevant in this day and age. They come under the umbrella of evergreen art work. **Research Question:** The paper will attempt to analyse the growth of these two schools of artists. Were they a break away from what was 'normal' at that time? Were they a school of painters that had a common thought, mission, or an agenda? What was the reasons for their popularity? These would be some of the questions that would be answered during the paper.

**1)INTRODUCTION**

Art is normally considered to be on the opposite side of the spectrum as opposed to science. It tends to be more subjective and leans more towards the aesthetic part of human nature. Artists are more sensitive to their surroundings. They find joy and sorrow, beauty and joy in places that other people may not. This is often indicated by the phrase 'defamiliarisation of the familiar'. This really means that ordinary normal people who are not artistic perceive their surroundings as normal mundane and something that they see almost every day. It is the nature of an artist to see and feel much more in his/her surroundings. They look at things in a different light. What they see is so different that a normal person is at times quite perplexed at the artists vision.

It is this vision which sets the artist on a different pedestal. He/she visualises the ordinary in a different perspective. All artists are very highly sensitive people. Their creative personality most likely contains layers of depth, complexity, and contradictions. Art in fact denotes the process of creating. All artists use some type of physical product, to produce something visible. As quoted by Pearl. S. Buck, the American Novelist and recipient of the Pulitzer Prize as well as the Nobel Prize "To him.... A touch is a blow, a sound is a noise, a misfortune a tragedy, a joy is an ecstasy, a friend is a lover, a lover is a God, and failure is death."

**2. Definition**

Art is defined as a medium to communicate ideas and thoughts, it could also be used as a tool for self-expression, a form of therapy and even as a means to find beauty in life. The manner in which this is portrayed is different for different genres of artists. It depends on the time, the place, and the environment in which they are in. Most artists perceive things in a manner which they want to express in any form, be it a novel, a sculpture, a painting, a photograph, music or even a poetry. A number of times they discover art in the mundane, as also see things beyond what is apparently portrayed. It is this heightened sensitivity which sets them apart.

They are essentially creative thinkers who provide the world with joy, interaction and inspiration, besides all of the above they could be concerned critiques to the political, economic and social systems, starting a train of thoughts which, they feel will improve situations in their country or even the world.

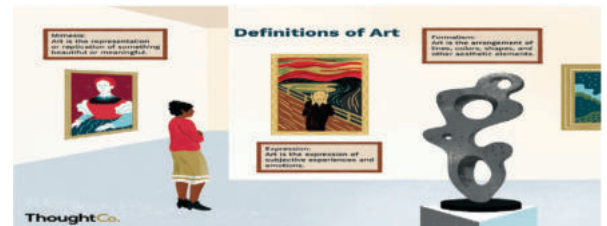
Art could be defined or classified according to the dimension that they specify; it could be modern or conventionalist. This definition too changes over time, as art itself changes. Art depends on art genres, art history etc., as well as the heterogeneity of the class of artworks. There exist various types of definitions, the more traditional, less conventionalist one makes use of a broader, more traditional concept of aesthetic properties, and emphasises on arts pan-cultural and trans historical characteristics.

Arts are always changing just as the rest of culture changes, due to the fact that artists experiment creatively with new art forms, new genres and new mediums. It is the manner in which one views the environment also impacts the type of art that is being made, these could be sunsets, landscapes, flowers, shadows, human beings, abstract theories etc.

It is extremely difficult to give a precise definition to 'art', as artworks engage an unstable, lower part of the soul, art is subservient to moral realities, which are more properly understood, and more important than 'beauty'. Philosopher Kant defines art as an act of genius it is "a kind of representation that is purposive in itself and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication" (Kant *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Guyer translation, section 44,46). Kant defines 'art' as an aesthetic judgement. Hegel definition of 'art', harbours on his definition of 'beauty'.

Conventionalist definition, do describe 'modern art'. Aesthetic definitions better define 'art', as they account for art's traditional, universal features, but maybe less towards revolutionary modern art.

The definition of 'art' is as varied as the aspects that it entails. There would never be a complete image of all the myriad aspects of the subject.



**Figure:2 Simplistic Definitions of Art**  
Source:ThoughtCo

**2.1 Impressionists**

This was a style of painting that developed in the latter third part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The style was characterised by short brush strokes of bright colours, in a manner that indicates the effect of light on various objects. It was developed in France, the strokes of paint that are used just barely indicate the bare impression of form, unblended colour as well as an emphasis of natural light. They hardly used neutral white, greys, or blacks, most of the shadows and highlights were depicted in colour.

It was Monet's painting titled Impression, Sunrise (1872), who the famous art critic Louis Leroy accused his paintings, of not being a painting but an impression. There whole idea was that the artist quickly moved outdoors to paint lightly obscured, loosely defined impressions of landscapes, people, as well as

fleeting scenes of nature. Prior to this style of painting, the overriding themes were typically grandiose historical or mythological ones, while impressionists typically portrayed what was visible outside. They could be still life, landscapes, as well as depictions of everyday life as well as leisurely activities. This helped in appreciating familiar things in a new light, it is truly a form of 'defamiliarising', the familiar. This was an attempt to depict the familiar everyday life, instead of just grandiose objects.

The techniques that they used are:

- Broken Colour Technique
- Natural Light
- Minimal Colour- Mixing Strokes
- Undefined Painting
- Minimum Black and Dark Colours.

Ten most important Impressionists artists are:

- Claude Monnet, the legend....
- Auguste Renoir, the intimate friend....
- Edgar Degas, the friendly misanthrope....
- Berthe Morisot, the independent...
- Camille Pissarro, the elder....
- Alfred Sisley, the underrated.....
- Frederic Bazille, the cursed....
- Mary Cassatt, the American expatriate



**Figure 3: Painting by Monnet**

Source: Google image

In the figure above one can clearly see that it is everyday activities that are being depicted. This definitely was a break away from the ornate style of paintings that was in existence.

### 2.2 Bombay Artist Progressive Group

This group was founded in 1947, and it wanted to create an Indian form of modernism, that celebrated traditional Indian painting, as well as taking into account the then developments in art that were taking place in Europe and America.

The founder members were K.H.Ara, M.F. Husain, S.H. Raza, F.N.Souza, along with S.K.Bakre, H.K.Gade, Krishen Khanna, and V.S.Gaitonde. They practiced an eclectic set of styles which drew from Indian folk tradition as well as from Western Modernist practices. These artists signature theme was a vision of modernity unencumbered by religion, it celebrated the plurality of India and challenged the dominance of tradition. They were committed to secularism, pluralism, as well as representing the type of society that these artists came from. They struggled to find their place in society in the similar manner that India an infant independent nation was struggling to find its feet. This group served as a force for these set of artists who envisioned a form of art that was in conflict with what was in existence.

All the artists from the group came from diverse socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds. Though their style differed vastly from each other, the thread that was common amongst them was an orientalist and nostalgic nationalism that was inspired by famous figures like Rabindra Nath Tagore. These were extremely important icons in our struggle in attaining Independence.

Their art form did take inspiration from the composition of 17<sup>th</sup> century Mughal and Pahari miniatures to the sensuous

carvings of Khajuraho temples. In their art they took elements from Hindu and Jain imagery as well as Muslim tradition, all pointing towards secularism, this is exactly the path that was sought to be treaded on for free independent India. They were incorporating various themes: from spiritual, metaphysical themes to the histories that led up right to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their main aim was to delve into the rich heritage that is 'India'.

As the artists did not limit themselves in boundaries, they also took inspiration from Asian paintings, that included Korean landscape, Japanese ink painting, vernacular and folk and tribal traditions, along with the rural life of India. Some of these artists did attempt to contrast the traditional pastoral life which existed in the villages with the modern urban life that was emerging in new Independent India.

The group disbanded in 1954, but by then they had left their indelible imprint on the development of international modernism, with respect to subjects, perspectives and aesthetic vision.

They used India's Independence as a reference to their style. Their new art style was based on absolute freedom with respect to content and technique. They were governed by some basic rules like elemental and eternal laws of aesthetic order, color composition as well as coordination. They were adept in coordinating and mixing new styles with traditional art elements. In spite of disbanding the group in 1954, their influence was so immense, that it still seems to be prevalent even today.



**Figure 4: Bombay Progressive Artist Group**

Source: artisera.com

### 3. Impact of Surroundings on their Artistic Expression

The impressionists created a model for freedom and subjectivity that promoted artistic freedom. This is something which the earlier artists longed for. Impressionism rebelled against classical subject matter and embraced what was natural, relevant and prevalent, to the world that all lived in. Vibrancy was depicted in the play of natural light.

They always depicted real life scenes. Some of them prefer to be called 'realistic', rather than 'impressionists.' Poets and writers too of that era used realism in their writings. They preferred to work around the essence of a subject rather than just reproducing it, this trend was also seen in musicians who preferred to work with the essence of emotional themes of their work.

There a number of paintings of that time which reflected concerns about the environment. Artist William Turner way of shrouding his vistas in fog and smoke lucidly reminds one of tracking air pollution. They painted during the time that Britain was industrialising. The use of fossil fuels and other carbon emitting materials, was anticipated to create a haze across the country. This was depicted in the paintings by the impressionists' artists. As the industrial haze grew over the years, so did the colour of the sky in their paintings. They were extremely sensitive to changes in light as well as changes in environment.



**Figure 5: Morning Haze by Monnet**

Source: Fine art America

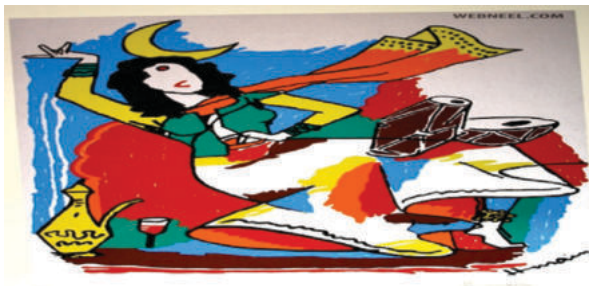
The impact of surroundings was also apparent in the paintings that were made by the artists that formed the Bombay Progressive Artist Group. These artists formed their association in 1947, which ironically coincided with the year of India's independence, it signified a year of transition and optimism. The fact that they started from Bombay, itself had a meaning. Bombay at that time had emerged as a centre of cotton trade. This meant that it attracted a large number of people from different regions, religions as well as castes. The development of the city into a cosmopolitan port centre, as well as India's commercial capital, and the fact that India was a new independent nation, helped these artists to develop and thrive. Ara was a Dalit who worked as a car washer, Souza, Hussain, and Raza were a part of the underprivileged marginalised communities.

The timing of their paintings, opened up new and far-reaching possibilities, it brought in its wake the need for building the nation, as well as the freedom for artists to freely respond to social and political experiences as individuals. They could through their paintings critique both the state and society, as well as give importance to one's subjectivity as Souza did. India's path was one of a modern secular nation. Its aspiration was to become a world player, with international ambitions, and preferred abode for individual artists. A large number from this group decided to settle abroad to become a part of international modernism as well as to represent India in the international cultural arena. This group became inactive, and disbanded itself in 1956.

Hussain amongst this group, combined modernist art language with formal elements and bright colouring which he took from Indian art. He was influenced by Nehru, who embarked on building a new resilient, industrialised modern India with elements from the modern technical world to be adapted to the traditional elements, and heritage that India was so proud of. The aim was to achieve a perfect blend of both.

Just the way that over the years India's inclusive modern society was being challenged so was Hussain's depiction in his paintings. The back lash by right wing political activists against his paintings led him to move to another country.

The main thread for these artists were that they embraced the subcontinents heterogenous, multi religious heritage.



**Figure 6: Controversial Painting by MF Hussain**

Source: Google image

The above picture clearly indicates the controversy that Hussain got into, due to the sudden uprising of the right movement in India, and lack of tolerance towards all religions, this led him to leave the country, and stay abroad till his demise, it was a sort of self-imposed exile. Clear reaction towards the environment.

#### 4 Assessment and Reasons of their Popularity Decades Later

The reasons that impressionists' paintings are still popular is because they have effectively incorporated familiar day to day scenes in an extremely innovative manner. It enables the audience to see familiar everyday objects in a different light. This is an extremely refreshing change. The fact that these paintings seem unfinished and rushed, appeals to the art lover. Though these paintings are straightforward, they invite questions, and mostly the answers are also found in the art. This is the main reasons for their popularity, today and for future centuries.

Though the Progressive group lasted only for a few years, each member of the group, had exemplary international careers. The differences in their backgrounds led them to follow distinctive styles e.g., Souza used Goan folk art with Primitivism, Hussain on the other hand blended folk-art influences with mythological figures. All of them were anti-imperialist as they were formed when India attained independence. It was their distinctive style that led to furthering India's image even after the group had disbanded and had settled all over the world.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The two schools of art the Impressionists and the Progressive art School were game changers of their time. Both absorbed the current environment that was prevalent and depending on the artists back ground they attempted to 'defamiliarise' the familiar. Both used very realistic surroundings whether it was the environment or Indian Goan Folk Art or Hindu Mythology. All of them were influenced by the type of situation that their country was facing at that time. For India it was a time of Independence, and it amalgamated the thought process as well as the sentiment. In the case of Impressionist artists, they wanted to portray realism and not ornate, historical people and situations. The popularity and relevance of their paintings still exists even today.

#### 6. REFERENCES

1. Gerch-Nesic, B. (2018), Art History Basics: Impressionism from 1869 to the present. *Impression Art Movement*.
2. Golcha, R. L. (2003). A review on significance of progressive art movement in India. *IJAR*, 10(2), 144-156. <https://doi.org/10.1093/clipsy.bpg016>
3. Impressionism the movement that went against the French art academy. (n.d.). *Artland Magazine*.
4. Kalra, V. (2022). On the 75th Anniversary of the Progressive Artist group remembering their seminal role in shaping Indian Art. *Indian Express*.
5. Milner, J., & Rewald, J. (1976). The History of Impressionism. *Leonardo*, 9(3), 251. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1573588>
6. Noor, T. (2019). The Legacy of Progressive Artist Group. *Indian and South Asian Modern and Contemporary Art*.
7. Sumer, M. (2004). Impressionism: Art and Modernity. *Metropolitan Museum Art*.
8. Teufel, T. (2012). What Does Kant Mean by 'Power of Judgement' in his Critique of the Power of Judgement? *Kantian Review*, 17(2), 297-326.