

Folk and Minor Art in India
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Lecture - 33
Characteristics of Contemporary Collection of
Indian Folk and Minor Art

In the following three lectures, we are going to cover three very crucial topics which are inter related and one is to understand the contemporary characteristic of the contemporary Indian Folk and Minor Art with some examples and we have been watching quite a few examples which are very relevant, they are based on traditional themes and at the same time we have also observed that it had added lot of modern elements in to it, but now talking about this traditional theme and modern element, it might make it very superficial unless we go slightly deeper into the different layers of it and evaluated from a qualitative perspective.

In the next step of discussion, we are also going to evaluate them and their qualitative aspects and then finally, we are also evaluating and moreover seeing quite a few of the examples of the recent works by the individual artists because individuality was not there in the tradition and this is fairly new phenomenon to come of within individual artist into a community and practicing a community is skill which is traditionally a community skill and also we are having some kind of a visual identity which is closely related to that.

Adhering to the old and traditional conventional norms in terms of this stylistic identity of the image making and at the same time coming up with real and pure expressions which is individual in it is characteristic and that is quite a challenge and it has evolved through many different factors during many different ages. Right now, when we try to see the general characteristic, how the face of the contemporary practice is in our countries context.

Then there are quite a few things that may appear to all of our minds that is, the painters who belong to the traditional communities are exposed to global dealing and the traditional no longer is confined or restricted to the peripheries of trait temple and court, but it has spread and it has a very different outreach that has made it all the more important in today's context where there are modern artist, the contemporary artist who

are trained in academic skills who are also getting drawn into the stylistic aspects of folk painting and there are cultural exchanges that are happening and there are researchers who visit the places and try to interview the folk painters and they make videos, short films to document all these cultural knowledge as part of the knowledge preservation activities.

The works are collected and preserved in the museums. So, it has some ichnographic value and at the same time the anthropologists are also taking a keen interest into it and moreover they are liked because of the quality of the paintings they hold and their expressionistic aspects and they reach out to common people and they are liked by many and the expressions are simple, at the same time highly complex in its traditional route.

These are the things that will quickly come into our mind that is, how we look at it, but it is also true that as we know that in the beginning of all this happening, aesthetics and utility were not separated as entities, but it has just happened after the growth of mass production, industrialization and urbanization that art has got separated into these two aspects and we look at aesthetics and utility very separately in today's time. So, folk art or minor, the other kind of habitual art practices for obvious reasons, they may no longer act as utilitarian or aesthetic purpose and it is more like the utility is in the hand of industries. So, we do not really need people to produce craft or art or whatever it is which is related to the daily rituals and ritualistic practices and daily activities, the daily life and it no longer depends on the creation which is done in a small quantity by hand or it is just done as the cottage industry anymore.

It is taken care of by small scale and large scale industries to a large extent. So, what we do now is that all these cultural skills that are available in many people, we try to nurture that and they are just surviving for the purely aesthetic and expressionistic purpose and it does not have anything to do with the utility anymore. So, to justify the use of these paintings is not possible if we bring the utilitarian aspects into the entire topic and it is very important for us to look at it from another perspective and evaluate it accordingly. It is also true that we see the artists are encouraged to make utilitarian products from time to time.

Sometimes, they are asked to draw umbrellas on bags, on lamp shades and they are making lifestyle products using these skills and they are painting on saris and many other

images are painted on utilitarian goods, but that has got nothing to do with the actual utility of the product and these are basically to beautify all those useful articles that we use in a daily basis. It is not that though the art works are not getting associated with utility to get a better market or make it more sellable, but this is also true that it does not depend on that only and it is also equally relevant that if we keep on depending on the market to develop the artistic expression then it may cause something little damaging to a culture.

When we talk about cultural preservation, there are different ways to do that and we will come to all those things after we discuss the different aspects after we get costumed to the basic profile of it and we also are in the position to evaluate it in its qualitative aspect and then slowly as we say that we would also recognize the individual talents, the individual expressions that is coming out and identify the artists and give them the right status that they deserve and again coming back to a quote from K G Subramanian here in the context and try to see it in an academic perspective.

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'today's art galleries come forward to request artists to do something new...paint in the circular or miniature format, design furniture or costumes, even wear the latter and walk around. They set them all kinds of odd themes to respond to...In art magazines, art advisers of various kinds prognosticate the trends of the future, curators stipulate what will go and what will not on the global art scene and the themes and devices that can give one access to its attention.'
(Subramanian, 2007).

He adds further that all these can be seen as a tendency or an effort to make of art, an industry, and force it to perform the dictates of the taste of the times. Whatsoever the intensions may be, it is interesting to view that such efforts are being also carried out to bring the regional folk painters to the forefront.

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So, K G Subramanyan writes, today's art galleries come forward to request artist to do something new, paint in the circular or miniature format, design furniture or costumes and even wear the latter and walk it out. They set them all kinds of odd themes to respond to and art magazines, art advisers of various kinds and prognosticate the trends of the future curators, stipulate what will go and what will not on the global art scene and the themes and devices which can give one access to its attention. He adds further that all this can be seen as a tendency of an effort to make of art, an industry, and force it to perform the dictates of the taste of the times. Whatsoever the intentions maybe, it is interesting to view that such efforts are being also carried out to bring the regional folk painters to the forefront.

Even according to K G Subramanyan, there is one positive aspect to it, when we ask a folk painter to paint something of some relevance that may not come from their own choices, but it surely states one truth that those people are approached and not anybody is coming forward and is able to proliferate that particular message with their artistic expression. So, this is very crucial to realize that why the folk artists or the minor artists are approached to do so and somehow by doing so, they are slowly coming to the forefront. We may criticize it negatively from one aspect that some of the ideas are forced on them and of course, it is possible there are tendencies to distort history, but it is equally relevant to see that whatever is getting counted is also part of the history and the contemporary history which is the history of the present time is also very relevant in that aspect that it is not very easy to make the folk painters agree to do something.

So, we have discussed about all these things in the past that folk painters are very free spirited all over the globe and it is not really easy to make them do something without their consent. This is for sure that they have consent when they act out with the subject matters. We will see some more works and realize that. In 2010, a large scaled group exhibition organized by Devi art foundation in New Delhi titled vernacular in the contemporary.

Now, this two words vernacular in the contemporary, they are very interesting to put together and it is very well can be made out that it took the organizers a lot of time and

effort to come down to the solution why they are using the term called vernacular for folk and minor art? It is an effort to redefine the way we call it and also like in the beginning of the lectures, I mentioned quite a few things that when I call it folk and minor art, I also wonder that why we are calling it so. This is for obvious reasons that the terms are associated to the kind of profile that it has, but the associations can also be highly arbitrary. So, in that way to make it more logical more pragmatic, Devi art foundations made a very prominent mark to the people who take interest to the folk and minor art.

They are insistently calling it vernacular art and now vernacular art is one term which is connected to the religious language. So, it is a parallel language and it could have been the mainstream language, but somehow it is because of the socio political condition and also the economic structure that has played a vital role to make it slightly like what it was not supposed to be done, but instead of taking those romantic notions, we can just concentrate on the contemporary feature of a traditional art that itself gives us a contradictory statement that if something is a traditional form then how can it have a contemporary feature.

So, all our discussions are now going to be concentrated with these issues. It was curated by jackfruit research and design led by Annapoorna Garimella. The first part of this project aimed at working and the part 2 were three aimed at working consciously and reflectively, these are the principle.

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In 2010, a large scaled group exhibition organized by Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi, titled 'VERNACULAR, in the CONTEMPORARY', was curated by Jackfruit Research and Design and led by Annapurna Garimella. The first part of this project aimed at Working, and the part two and three aimed at 'Working Consciously and Reflectively'.

'We felt some parameters for ideating were necessary since it would be difficult to ensure an even platform without actually building one. Prior to meeting each of the artists in Bangalore, we sent them A3 size sketchbooks of archival paper. We wanted standardized sizes so that everyone's ideas occupied the same real estate plot in the exhibition. A noble intention but one that needed to be adjusted several times over.'
(Garimella, 2010)

Contemporary scene of Indian Folk Painting noticeably differs from its early phase in some way. The folk artists today do not and are not allowed to practice in isolation. They are being perpetually cultivated as assets for the nation. The artistic sensibility of them is now being intellectual nurturing that seldom focuses on the required nourishment of the practice. Therefore, it is time to pivot on grounded solutions as how the attention could be shifted from the ethno-maniac preservation of a culture being solely guided by the urban fascination for exotica, to a culture of continuous and serious critical appreciation of the artworks, which they duly deserve.

Now, I will quote from Annapoorna Garimellas writing in 2010 and it is vision catalogue which is very relevant for this topic that she says that we felt some parameters for ideating were necessary since it would be difficult to ensure an even platform without actually building one and prior to meeting each of the artist in Bangalore, we sent them A3 size sketchbooks of archival paper. We wanted standardized sizes so that everyone's ideas occupied this same real estate plot in the exhibition. A noble intention is one that needed to be adjusted several times over.

So, it was not an easy task and as we say the folk artists are free spirited in nature and although they are obliged to the Delhi customs, rituals and many other things, but to be commissioned or to be guided by the external sources are not easy that is for them. Contemporary scene of folk paintings noticeably differs from its early phase in some way. The folk artists today are not allowed to practice in isolation. They are being perpetually cultivated as assets for the nation. The artistic sensibility of them is now being intellectual nurturing that seldom focuses on the required nourishment of the practice

Therefore, it is time to pivot on grounded solutions as how the attention could be shifted from the ethno-maniac preservation of a culture being solely guided by the urban fascination for exotic art or exotic images to a culture of conscious and serious critical appreciation of the artworks which they actually deserve.

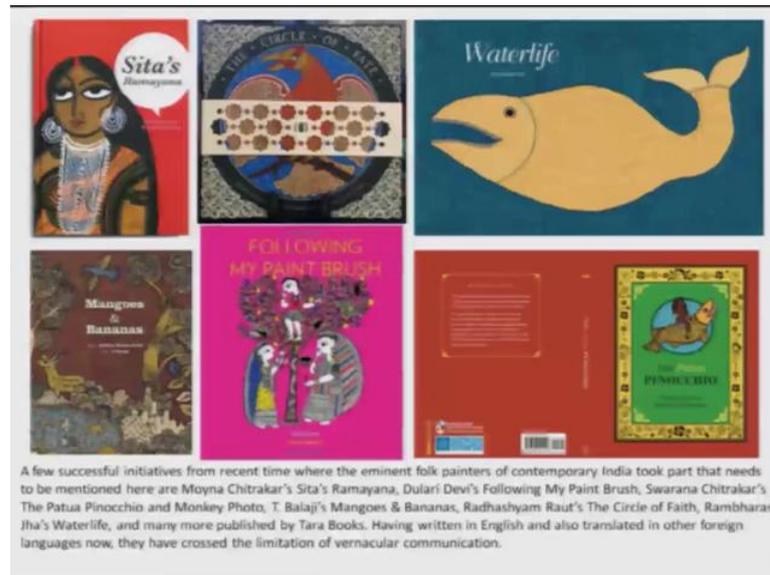
These are some conscious efforts by some of the publisher and writers like namely gita wolf who has tried to engage the eminent folk artist who had the potential to work flexibly. She actually met them, tell stories and she modified them and made it more accessible to everybody because the localized thing made it especially when we talked about the term vernacular that has some limitation and it does not have a total outreach. To make it more expanded and reachable to the common mass, her efforts are quite significant in today's time and perhaps she is the one who could understand the basic lingo and ethos of the contemporary folk art and she used all those images in the book illustrations.

There are numerous publications in the same line and they are initiated mostly by Tara books, but there are other publications also the Tulica books and other people are also coming forward and doing similar things and now it is very important to look at this efforts from another perspective that initially when we go back to the tradition, we see that the folk and manner artists were already equipped with this particular skill of illustrating images.

All the imageries that they made, they executed in the form of paintings and they had a strong literary base. So, all those art works were based on some strong and well known literatures and also the patterns and motives that they came up with which were connected to rituals and they also maintained the strong principle. They always adhered to a strong principle and found out the right elements of visual art to support that. It was there in the practice already and with that it was easier for them to shift their paradigm to book illustration.

We will talk about many other different kinds of paradigm shift in terms of animation and illustrations and other efforts and I will introduce you with quite a few books that are there and which are also found in the market.

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So, few successful initiatives from recent times where the eminent folk painters of contemporary India took part which needs to be mentioned here are Moyna Chitrakar's Sita's Ramayana, Dulari Devi's Following my Paint Brush, Swarna Chitrakar's The Patua Pinocchio and Monkey Photo, T. Balaji's Mangoes & Bananas, Radhashyam Raut's The Circle of Faith, Rambharas Jha's Waterlife and many more published by Tara Books. Having written in English and also translated in other foreign languages now, they have crossed the limitation of vernacular communication.