

Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur

National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL)

Course Title

Visual Perception and Art: A survey across the cultures.

Lecture - 18

Abstract art 1

by

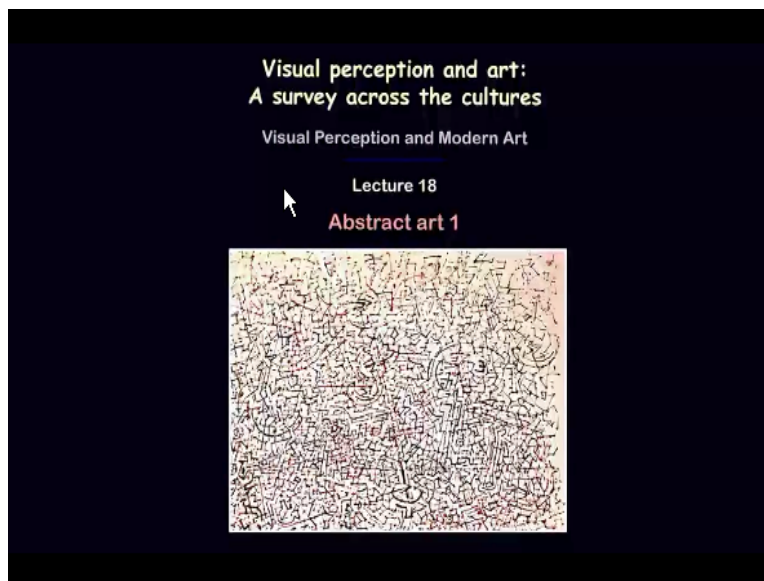
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Visva-Bharati

Hello viewers welcome to mook's online course on visual perception and art a survey across the culture.

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This is the 18th lecture, this one and the next lecture that is lecture number 19, in these two lectures we will be dealing with the idea of abstraction in art and how abstract art appears as a major problematic issue with regard to our visual perception. Now though many of you might be knowing about it, but still for the sake of introducing the subject quickly let me give you a definition of what is abstract art.

Now anything that is difficult in art may not be abstract, because there is a misconception amongst the common people, that when an art ceases to be immediately and very easily understandable, then it tends to be abstract. Now if the term or the meaning of abstraction tends to replace the term like obscurity this is completely down. Abstraction has got nothing to do with obscurity.

Abstract art or abstraction is as clearly understandable as realistic art or realistic representation. Yes, representation is the issue here, whereas in most of the other paintings no matter how stylist, how distorted, how alternative, how different they are. Most of the art works tend to represent something, in their art it is not difficult to identify okay, this is a glass, this is an object, this is a tree, this is a landscape whatever.

In abstract art and I am talking about pure abstract art like the one that you see on the titled page here, there is no chance of identifying anything. And this is where it became very problematic and difficult for people to understand that if a painting is not representing anything, if we are not able to identify any element in the painting then what is the whole purpose of this painting, we will come to that later regarding the purpose of abstraction paintings.

But right now we are talking about the look, appearance and the basic character of abstraction. The very basic character of a abstract painting or abstract sculpture or abstract art in general, is the denial of any representation. The idea is not to represent anything and rather to get rid of any kind of references to the real world, to get rid of any representation of the real world, to get rid of any sign or any identification marks that help us to read the painting and look at the objects, no it actually provides us with certain pictorial painterly experiences, visual experiences where nothing is represented, but there is a whole lot to feel, to understand, to even interpret.

And obviously our normal process of visual perception is not always ready to face, but encounter this kind of art works.

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Abstract art jeopardizes our normative visual perception
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Yet, most of the examples of abstract art are deeply
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So abstract art jeopardizes our normative visual perception more often than not, abstract art defies any form of representation. Hence, abstract art is also known as non-representation art. Often abstract art is absolutely beyond any recognition. Hence, abstract art is also known as non-referential art. Apparently, abstract art carries no reference to the real visual world or any object around.

Though there might be a few movements in abstract art, there might be a few artists belonging to the realm of abstract art who begins their process of abstraction from known objects, from recognizable objects, but many do not. Yet, most of the examples of abstract art are deeply rooted and secretly connected to the visual perception we experience daily.

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Piet Modrian -- the famous abstract painter -- has often begun his paintings from a recognizable form like a tree; and then gradually moved towards abstraction.



So it is highly possible that for many abstract art is the process has to be started from the visually known and recognizable world. And one of the greatest examples of this kind of Piet Modrian, and because he has often begun from a very recognizable form like a tree here. As you can see these three paintings the first one on the left hand upper side you can see the that the blue tree a blue composition in tree the form is pretty close to how we visually perceive I mean it is very recognizable then he moves on to the one on the right hand side and comes down to the third painting that is below you can see a gradual progression from the known form to an unknown form from a recognizable form when unrecognizable, painting or a composition.

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Abstract art or abstraction in visual art can also be understood as a tendency. A tendency to reduce the recognized visual forms into basic fundamental units like line, color, shapes etc.



Now this procreation progression happens because the artist begins to drop slowly and gradually drop all the recognizing elements, abstract art are abstraction in visual art can also be understood as a tendency, there are many abstract artist for whom abstraction is not a heart core agenda, we will see works by such artist for whom abstract they began with abstraction they end in abstraction.

But for many other artist it is possible that it is a matter of tendency but for us it is very important but even if it is a matter of tendency these artists like the one that you looking at here they do produce certain paintings where our visual perception needs to adjust your visual perception needs to continuously negotiate this new form of representation, which is abstraction so tendency to reduce the recognized visual forms into basic fundamental units like line color, shapes etc...

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Can be seen in the works of many artist for example this one so when you look at this painting you can clearly see that this painting has 4 gown and discarded right at the beginning any probability of recognition. Straight away it moves into the real morph abstraction it plays with various shapes and colors it places them not to create a visibly recognizable form but to create a pictorial arrangement or composition which by it is very nature is completely abstract.

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So if our brain try to make a sense of that kind of abstraction pure abstraction like the one that we just saw is going to be very, very frustrated it is a frustrating experience for a brain when it is trying to make a realistic sense of abstraction and cannot because in that case we need to tell our brain know that painting does not expect in a realistic interpretation what you see is what that painting is all about but in a sculpture like this by Brancusi though the form is pretty abstract in that sense.

But what he is trying to convey though this sculpture and since we know about the process through which he has gone to reach a stage like this we know that Brancusi is trying to convey a sense of light that he observes in birds, so basically this sculpture is about a bird in flight but what you see is neither bird flapping it is wings nor a very realistic representation of a bird in flight.

But you see a form a shape that aspires to go up move up and it is this sense of direction and movement inherent in the abstract form is what Brancusi associates with the realistic experience of bird in fly.

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Barbara Hepworth

Pendour

1947-48

painted plane wood

12 1/8 x 29 3/8 x 9 3/8 in.

So this is a probability that you have felt or sense something in real life then you captured the essence of that experience and you express that experience once again through your art but not going back to the representational aspect again you do not show that bird again but you show the flight or at least make the viewers feel the flight you cannot even show the flight, how can you show flight you cannot if you say that yes I can show the flight actually you have to show the bird but when Brancusi decided not to show the bird but yet to show the flight so he takes recourse to this kind of abstracts forms.

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Barbara Hepworth

Pendour

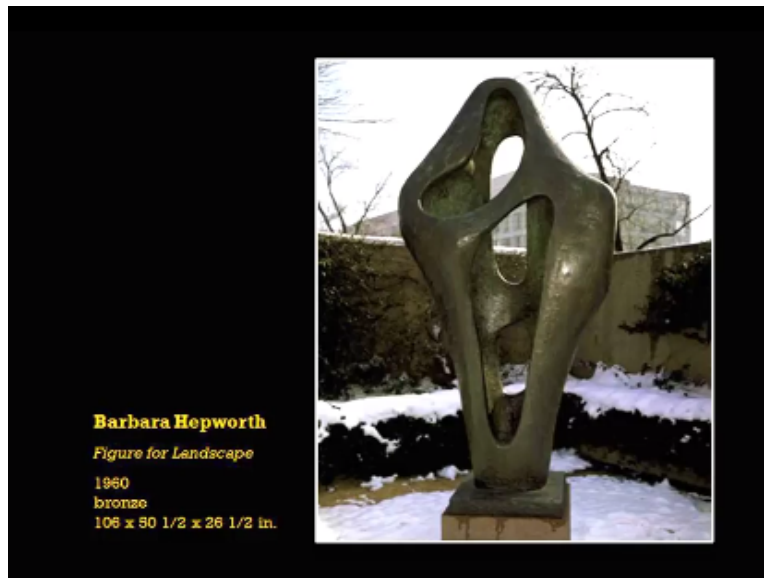
1947-48

painted plane wood

12 1/8 x 29 3/8 x 9 3/8 in.

Similarly when you look at this sculpture by Barbara Hepworth where she is dealing with abstract shapes and forms it is once again highly possible that she derived this idea from some organic world from organic visual experiences from organic forms but what we see here in this ultimate stage off this sculptures is not even in its faintest way that is no association with the real world it is all about the rhythm, shape, feel, movement, surface and that tactile quality of the sculpture itself.

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One most sculpture by Barbara Hepworth, similarly because what she is trying to say is that this because there is a title and the title reads figure for landscape now both these things figure and landscape a real entities in our real life. But what exactly she means when she could cystitis, thus she want us to read a figure here which is not completely impossible I would say as far as this sculpture is concerned if one tries one can read.

The faint form of a figure but at the same time when she says that it is a figure for landscape in a way this figure is a homiest to landscape say it means that we need to also feel a natural space embedded by this two not figures but impressions of figure. Now this own idea that you have a faint impression of figure which is supposedly embodying a sense of landscape it is such a conceptual idea that if you show it a through some literal depiction it might load very flimsy.

And too literal and too light hearted but to make it to give it a very profound visual statement probably abstraction is the best method or the best language but our visual perception needs to be informed about this possibility that how abstraction can become a vehicle of such ideas.

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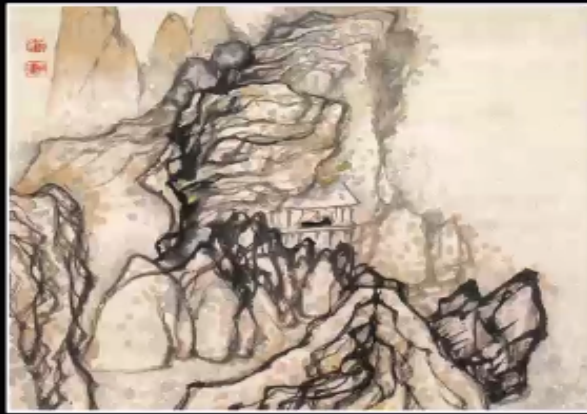
In other words, abstraction makes us see things in basic units, as a raw file, in a state preceding any recognition moment.



Now in other words abstraction makes a see things in basic units as a raw file, in a state preceding any movement of recognition, in fact when you look at abstract paintings I do not know if it happens to you but it happens to most of us that hardly we can check the temptation of locating seen coat on coat and identifying objects even when in that painting there is no such thing intended you cannot help it.

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On the other hand, a fairly recognizable picture may have a dominant abstract value.



Because this is how our brain or our visual perception is steamed it always tries to identify it always tries to recognize it always tries to give an abstraction an identity, a kind of tangible reality and this is what makes the whole experience of abstract or little problematic for us because and also particularly for this sculptors and painters who work abstract arts because they really speaking they want the viewers to enjoy that abstraction.

They do not want us to begin the process of recognition then on the other hand a fairly recognizable picture may have a dominant abstract value like this Chinese landscape when you look at this painting very carefully of course you can find out all the natural shapes forms rocks, hills even the presence of a very simple hut or an architectural framework over there etc, so on and so forth. But when you look at the painting overall from a distance what you are drawn to is not really those details of objects and nature and space but the overall quality of abstraction.

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Even for that matter in this beautiful water color drawing by Vinod Khanna you can actually though you can see the details of a Benares cart, the steps leading to the river then all those make shift kind of shades and arrangements and the crowd and the architecture behind yet, what dominates your attention, what actually captures your attention is not this very, very suggested details but the overall presents of abstract elements in this case it is lying, diagonal lines, vertical lines, horizontal lines various kinds of lines creating and or linear arc station, creating a kind of visual music and you enjoy that at the same time you are suppose to enjoy that. Otherwise as for as the depiction of banaras is concerned, banaras cart is concerned actually it does not make much sense it is a fairly a simple drawing. But the moment you begin to enjoy the abstraction that is an inherent part of the construction of this painting then you actually begin to enjoy the painting as well.

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Similarly, in a painting like this despite all the recognizable elements what when you learn to look at a painting what you tend to enjoy is the abstract quality of the brush marks of the directions of the brush mark of the space division even the small buildings and architectures that are visible at the back ground can interpreted as abstract shapes of colors and forms.

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And in fact it is up to us to steer our visual perception away from its constant habit of recognizing and identifying forms to a different habit of experiencing this kind of visual abstractions like this one.

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Here of course there is a possibility of looking at abstraction where directly in terms of the fragments of the bodies and the dresses but at the same time it is highly possible and it is perfectly okay, if you look at this painting or this collage also in terms of fragmented abstract units of shapes and colors.

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Abstract pictorial units are not entirely conceptual.

They are part of our visual perception but less recognized or not identified at all.

But artists can perceive that, with the help of their visionary capacity, technical skills and experiences,



In fact, there are many such paintings in the world created by Indian artist as well as Western artist where there is I would not say ambiguity what an amvy valance, because the language method and the style of the painting tend to address both abstraction as well as recognition. So abstract pictorial units are not always entirely conceptual they are part of our beneficial perception but less recognized or not identified at all.

Now this is to draw you attention to the fact that abstraction itself is not entirely a pictorial innovation. I am sure we have all had this experience of noticing abstraction in our real life when everything that we come across in our real life visually speaking may not be always recognizable, so the chance of encountering abstraction of real life may not be may it may be less. Yet, the possibility makes it possible for us to connect real life and abstract painting.

For example, this painting and so if we cannot perceive this abstraction in the real visual life artist can perceive that and with the help of their visionary capacity technical skills and experiences they can actually express that.

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We recognize that or not, abstraction or the experience of abstract visual elements are part of our natural visual experiences.



Artists once again begin to rely on the fundamental visual components like colours, shapes and composition.

So we recognize that or not abstraction or the experience of abstract visual elements are part of our natural visual experiences. Artist they once again begin to rely on the fundamental visual components like colors, shapes and composition so much that though their primary intention is to depict the real nature, the real figure the real object but the end of making a painting.

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Which is pretty abstract like this one though we have used the same painting in one of our previous lectures to illustrate the idea of alternative realism but we can see the same painting here also to illustrate the idea of the tendency towards abstraction, though this painting may not be a complete abstraction as such.

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We have talking about abstraction in real life real nature these are the kind of a counters that we have daily our daily life no doubt about that.

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Even when you are going very fast through a very busy street in a very busy city and when it is raining all around what you can see through the rain raised car windows or bus windows or train windows glass windows I am talking about is very close to something like this so very known familiar visual objects running cars walking people the shops and everything they get blurred, they turn in to abstract shapes and colors and it is in these moment that ion real life too we can actually at we do experience abstraction.

So when you look at a painting like this then it is not surprising if you recall this memory of abstraction that we go through in our real life.

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Visual experience and other sensory experiences may often lead an artist like Ramkumar to paint the city of Banaras in a purely abstract visual language.



Now visual and other sensory experiences of a busy city like Banaras can certainly lead to this kind of abstraction on the one hand.

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And you also have painters painting nature, our experiences of nature that has straight back in their memory like an *Austalgia*.

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Like this painting by Ganesh Haloie where he keeps on recalling and remembering his past the idyllic natural landscape in which he grew up and he misses that and it is this memory coupled with those paint images of the landscape that he has left behind many, many years back is a wonderful kind of material to create abstract painting and that is why.

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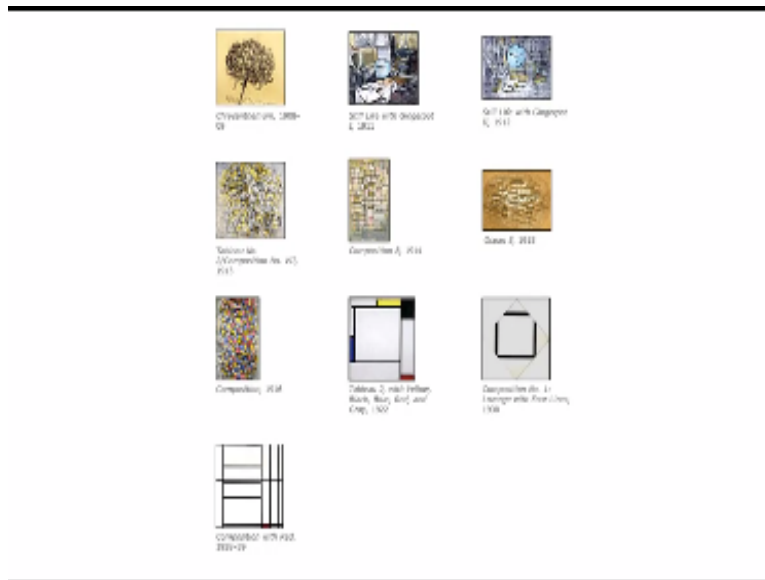
This very well known artist called Ganesh Haloie keeps on doing more and more such abstract paintings which actually have a deep protect connection to the land that he has lost that he had to leave behind due to patrician in 1947.

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So a real life experience like this of loss of memory of nostalgia can lead to this beautiful abstraction as demonstrated by this paint.

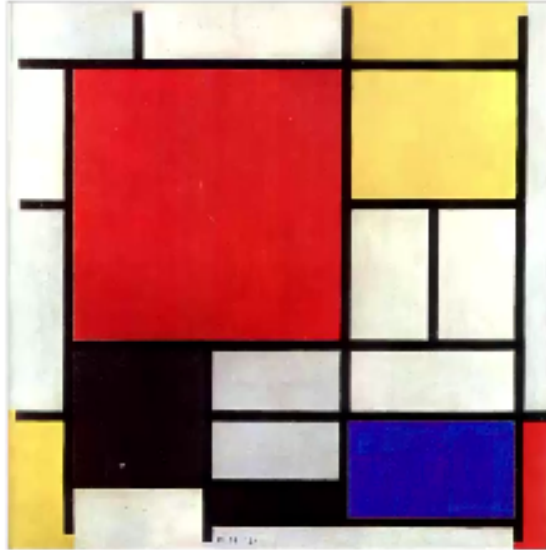
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And coming back to once again Peat Mondrian these diagram will give you a clue that how he would progress from a real familiar recognizable visual form to a completely unrecognizable abstract visual composition. You look at this slide very carefully and find out this progression yourself and if possible you can yourself carryout and experiment I mean I we can wait a particular object and try to take it to and abstract form and see how you progress.

And that will help you to experience this process of reaching an abstract form from real form to some extent the way Peat Mondrian experience.

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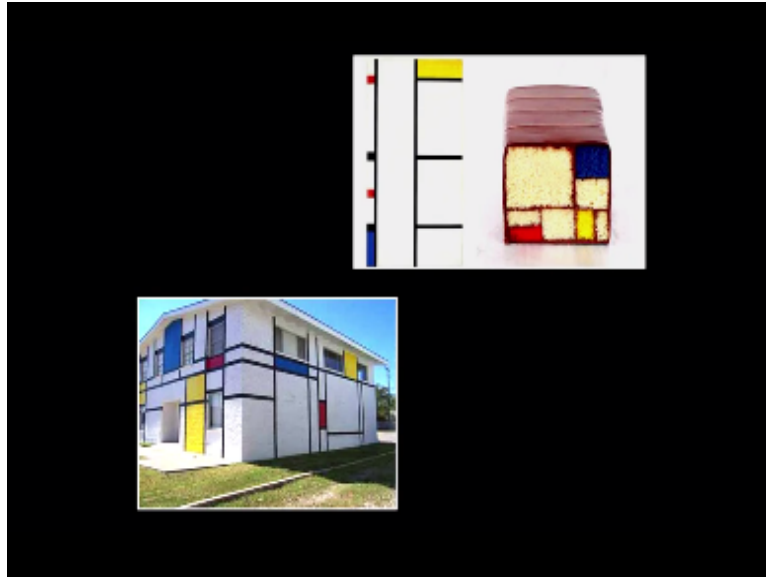
So finally Mondrian would arrive back this kind of experiences this kind of compositions.

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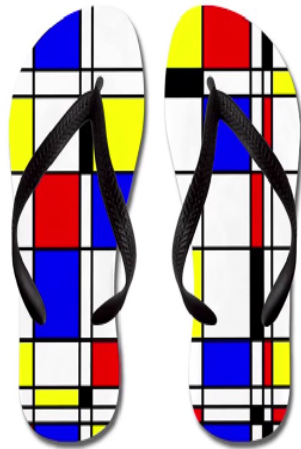
And it become, so popular so well accepted that Mondrian's abstract paintings became a very much sort of turn design expression for the designers all over the world whether somebody is designing shoe.

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Or a building or you have this Mondrian cake, it can be any object so it is very interesting also to study that on the one hand we are trying to say that abstraction or abstract are challenges are visual perception and also on other hand the designers, designers who design product designers who design architectures the designers and the product designers and architects and accessory designers, designers are various kinds found monstrous version of abstraction very handy very useful.

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To create some stunning design products for this it was not challenge visual perception or it rather potential design possibility in the world of commercial designs.

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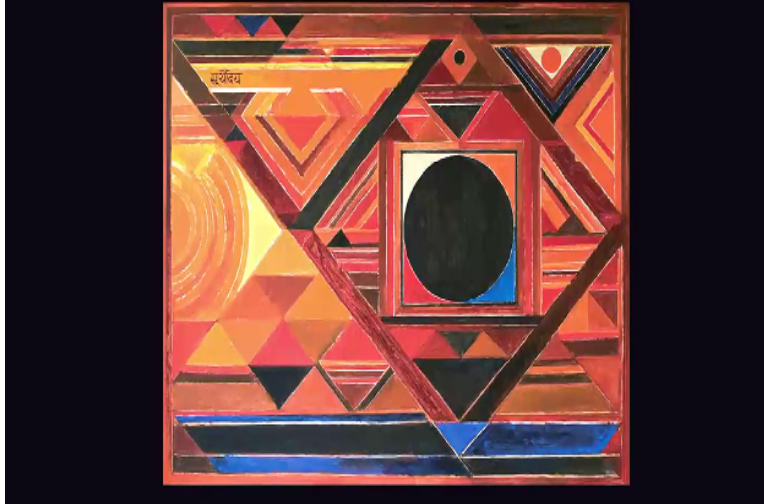
In the Western world, abstraction emerged as a fashion statement.



In fact in the western world abstraction emerged as a fashion statement to a great extent till today it is a much softer much loved and much explored and experimented kind of visual language in the fashion world.

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Raza -- a famous modern Indian painter -- used abstraction to convey a spiritual statement.



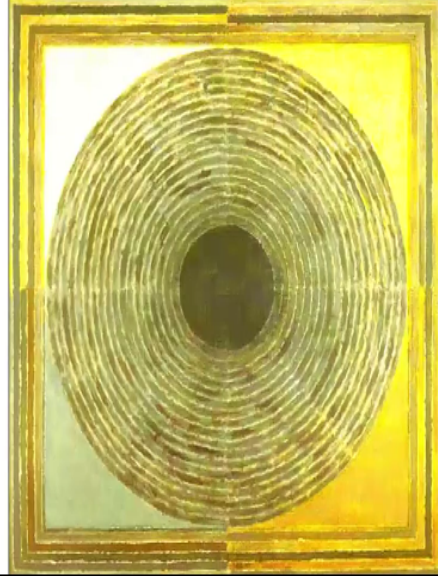
And finally you may also come across abstract paintings was ideas are routed not in the processing from familiar to unfamiliar not in the play of geometry and shapes and forms but in certain ocean of spiritualism so when I look at this paintings by famous Indian painter Raza.

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You can say but how is using abstraction to convey a spiritual concept or a spiritual idea like this one and its very Indian concept that he explored, explored the idea of wind.

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For example and for him wind has to have an abstract entity pictorial speaking otherwise it won't be able to convey the real assay the philosophical assay that this idea we shall see the philosophy contained.

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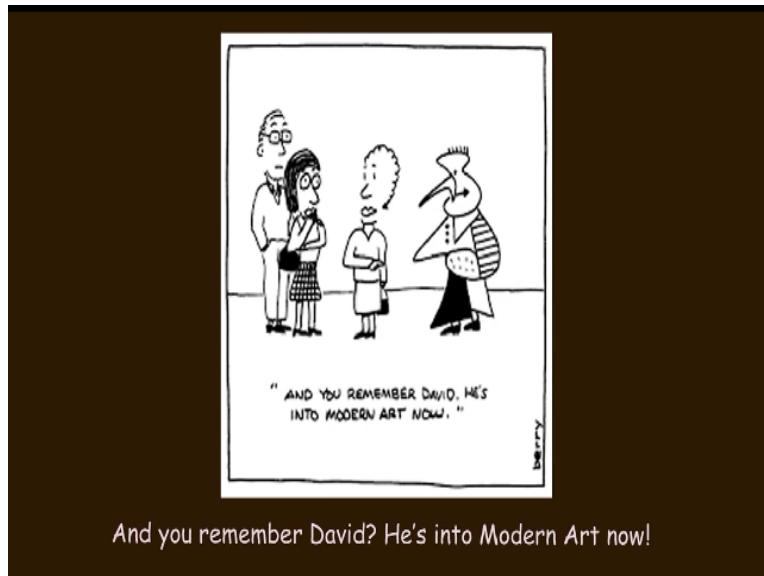
So Rasa's abstraction has to rate not just by altering our visual perception.

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But also by our knowledge of certain aspects of Indian philosophy and Indian spiritual history like this one.

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In fact for many on a lighter note abstraction like fashion statement is also a modernist statement it has got no real substance because till appoint of history of modern art there was a whole school or more than whole school which never took abstract art seriously for them it was a rather easy way to get an entry into a modern art or kind of trendy thing to do.

So in this cartoon looking at this is how a particular artist called David is we introduce to a couple who might have see him before when David was very young but David has changed his appearance has changed completely because he is into modern art now so modern art has not only gave birth to the abstraction but it also a loved abstract art to have various ki8nds of routes associations meanings and purposive so more of this purposive meanings and associations will be studied on next lecture thank you.

Acknowledgement

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