

Pakistani Art & its South Asian Identity

The term, Art, as it is understood now was first coined in the mid eighteenth century. Initially used for the skill of painting, sculpture and drawing, these days it encompasses various disciplines and many techniques. The artists of our times, do not have to use the traditional materials such as the paint, brush, turpentine, canvas, wood, stone or chisel, in order to convey their profound ideas and strongly felt emotions, because all of these can be expressed in mediums as diverse as photography, collage, assemblage, computer-generated prints, video, performance, installation and many more.

Once the definition and the limits of art are expanded, it is still categorized in some other manner/terms: often according to its place of origin/practice. Hence the idea of national art remains a favourite concept among the theorists and historians – particularly for those who belong to the countries, which are yet outside of the mainstream art. Because, as the citizen of the first world easily move from one country to other – like travelling within Europe or going to USA – the art, and the artists from those places are not confined to one country or limited to a single national identity. For example, the painter, David Hockney, in his early years was a resident of UK, but now he is an American citizen and lives in California. Therefore his art is not strictly British, nor is it American. It is international!

On the other hand, the more difficulty we face towards moving out of our geographical boundaries, the more we are indulgent in the thoughts about national identities. Which we seek in the Pakistani literature, Pakistani music and Pakistani art. In fact we use these terms (especially Pakistani art) so often, that we never doubt their existence. Thus never ask an important and legitimate question to ourselves, such as: Is there something, which can be called as Pakistani art?

Actually the genesis of the term Pakistani art is in our habit of classifying certain activities within the physical and political boundaries. For example we assume that there must be a Pakistani national language, Urdu – the same language that is spoken in many provinces of India as well as in Bollywood songs. Similarly we have decided about the figure of a Pakistani national poet, Allama Iqbal (who was never a citizen of this country, and whose poetry is used for political purposes, both in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and in secular India). In fact, if we realize, the notions, such as the national flower, national bird, national sport and the national dress – all of these learnt in the elementary schools – do not hold much relevance now. Since we know that there is no special characteristic in these activities or entities, which can be attributed exclusively to our Pakistani nation.

Probably, the only things, which signify national or Pakistani identity – apart from its geography and political set up – are the national anthem, national flag and national passport. All of these, which represent the nation and a country, are manufactured by the state, and can be changed if there is a consensus to do so.

On the other hand the matter of aesthetic expression is different. One can not clearly describe 'what is Pakistani art', since the country is just 58 years old, whereas the artistic practices are older than the short history of this nation. So, much like the Pakistani dance and Pakistani music, Pakistani art is also a loosely defined entity. Actually there is a difference between Pakistani art and the art from Pakistan. It sounds paradoxical, but instead of describing it a specific Pakistani art, whatever is being produced in our society can be called 'art from Pakistan', with all its diversity, contradictions and conflict. Due to this chaos or the absence of a discipline or doctrine, the artists of our country are creating whatever suits their ideas, whims and desires.

In that respect there is not one identity of Pakistani art. Here the art of calligraphy is being practiced as much as the miniature painting is a popular pursuit. Artists are working in diverse mediums, techniques and subjects. You may find landscapes, still life, portraits, figure compositions, abstract surfaces, contemporary works, installation art, video projections, digital prints – all made in the same time and appreciated by the viewers. Probably art in today's Pakistan is a true reflection of Mao's famous dictum – let the hundred flowers bloom. Now in our surroundings, thousand flowers are blooming, but without being obliged to follow a certain course.

That independence, which is a rare phenomenon in our society, is a unique feature of our art. It also spares Pakistani art from having to be associated with the region, which is currently known as South Asia. And particularly not with India, because both countries of subcontinent share a past, but due to less interaction and a lack of information, there was not much contact between the creative people from Pakistan and India. That resulted in separate development of art in the two countries.

Which presents an interesting scenario, because, if the Indian art on the one hand subscribes to its 'Indian-ized' tradition, focusing on the religious iconography and folk motifs, art of Pakistan remained quite oblivious to these concerns and it evolved in an independent manner. When the major Indian artists were busy in fabricating a South Asian or Indian identity, the artists from Pakistan did not feel that urge or pressure to do a likewise act. Fortunately because in the short span of our history, we were unable to decide whether we are part of the vast Muslim world with its centre in the Arabian Peninsula or we should recognize our link with our physical environment – that is the Indian subcontinent. Various artists, including A. R. Chughtai made many attempts to deal with the idea of identity, but by and large this is still an unresolved issue. Another attempt in this regard is visible in the revival of miniature painting, but interestingly, the popularity of this genre has nothing to do with the South Asian context. The movement of modern miniature, emerging from Pakistan, is a totally local product, with no counterpart in India. Similarly the appropriating of popular imagery from the truck and bus painting in our art is a phenomenon, new and unique for the region.

Due to all these factors and flavour, the art from Pakistan, whenever exhibited abroad managed to challenge the preconceived notions about the creative practices of this place. One of its examples is

the exhibition (called 'Beyond Borders': Art of Pakistan), currently being held at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Mumbai. It caused many (pleasant) surprises, because none of the Indian audience was prepared to encounter such variety and diversity in the art of Pakistan. The exhibition transformed their opinions, assumptions and beliefs about the art of their neighbours. They realized that it is lively, imaginative, free and contemporary.

Solely, because the art from our country is not Pakistani nor it is South Asian: It is beyond all these categories. Blissfully!

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