

## Artistic Engagements with Art History: Revisiting the Past

Across modern and contemporary Indian art, we often find references to figurative imagery from paintings and sculptures that date back to the subcontinent's historical past. These have served as pedagogical tools as well as sources of inspiration for artists. Let's examine how representations of early medieval sculptures and bronzes, among others, have informed the practices of Indian artists in unique ways.

### Tracing Lineages

Mumbai-based artist Sudhir Patwardhan (b. 1949), known for his rich portrayals of urban life, has also created a number of paintings that focus on the artist's studio. His painting, *The Eclectic* (2005), shows us how the subcontinent's past serves as inspiration for his artistic practice.

The painting features the artist standing in his studio, looking out of a window facing a surreal landscape. Among the various pieces of furniture and canvases that line the walls of this space, we find a sculptural head discreetly propped on top of a cabinet in a corner. A closer look reveals that this is a representation of the Hindu God Shiva that seems to be based on the front face of a three-headed Pratihara sculpture from the 10th century. On the other side of the room, we see a painted canvas of a Chola bronze sculpture angled against a bookshelf on the floor.

By including a self-portrait within the composition he traces a direct trajectory from the 10th century to the present day.

Let's now look at how the artist, LN Tallur (b. 1971), known for his large-scale installations references historical South Asian sculptures to critique contemporary society.

### Recontextualising Histories: Subverting Traditional Meaning

Tallur's works, *Obituary Note* (2013) and *Unicode* (2011), both reference traditional iconography of the Nataraja, a depiction of the Hindu God Shiva in the role of a divine cosmic dancer, encircled by a flamed halo. In *Obituary Note*, Tallur places charred wood taken from funeral pyres in India. This wooden core invokes notions of world destruction, while cleverly nodding at the cremation ground upon which the Shiva Nataraja dances. Similarly, in *Unicode*, the artist places a concrete ball embedded with coins, critiquing the negative effects of capitalism and urban development on history and tradition.

In another work, *Milled History* (2014, 2016), Tallur features a replica of a temple sculpture, resembling Vishnu figures from Tamil Nadu, that has been infested with termites and ants. Here he comments on the decay and destruction of tradition more literally by representing a slow wreckage of history.

From serving as direct sources of inspiration worthy of replication to rich referential material in more conceptual works, the diverse ways in which artists engage with art history reveal the importance that the past continues to

hold for our present and future. Traditional forms of art furthermore lend themselves to constant experimentation and redefinition, allowing us to look at history in more imaginative ways.

---

*Sudhir Patwardhan is a self-taught artist, and a practising radiologist who was born in Pune in 1949 and currently lives and works in Thane, in the greater Mumbai area, India.*

*LN Tallur was born in Karnataka, India in 1971 and divides his time between India and South Korea.*

### **Bibliography:**

Mitter, Partha. *Indian Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Sambrani, Chaitanya and Gary Garrido Schneider. *Tallur L.N.: Interference Fringe*, Marquand Books, 2020.

“The Influence of Ajanta on Indian Modern Art.” Accessed March 15, 2023.

[https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3534&context=isp\\_collection](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3534&context=isp_collection).

Vali, Murtaza. “Murtaza Vali on Tallur L. N.” The online edition of *Artforum International Magazine*, November 30, 2019. <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201909/tallur-l-n-81143>.

This document is part of an online course on Modern & Contemporary Indian Art. Click [here](#) to access.

© 2023 MAP Academy, all rights reserved. The MAP Academy is a project of the Museum of Art & Photography (MAP), Bengaluru.

<https://mapacademy.io/> | [instagram.com/map\\_academy/](https://www.instagram.com/map_academy/)