Introducing Abstraction: The Language of Lines, Shapes and Colours

In the simplest terms, an abstract image uses lines, shapes and colours to convey ideas and feelings in ways that don't reflect reality as we see it. While some forms of art depict people, places and objects as they appear to us, artists often challenge such modes of representation by experimenting with their visual language. Their works might sometimes appear unfamiliar to us, but while we may not always be conscious of this, we encounter textures, patterns and designs that form a part of abstract vocabularies all around us in our daily life. These range from shifting patterns on sand and formations on rocks to striped zebra crossings and latticed scaffolding at construction sites.

In the context of Indian art, abstraction has evolved in a number of ways, and we see this emerging particularly in the 1950s, in a newly independent India. At this moment, artists faced a critical question: how could they create a unique visual language that was simultaneously universal and embraced the country's history and traditions? Let's look at the practices of two artists who have contended with this paradox by experimenting with abstraction in distinct ways.

Seeking Solitude and Balance: VS Gaitonde

Beginning in the 1950s, Vasudeo S Gaitonde (1924–2001) began to move away from the figurative style he was trained in at the JJ School of Art in Bombay and started exploring the possibilities of line and colour in his canvases. Inspired by his lifelong study of Zen Buddhism and Indian philosophical systems, he pursued a sense of quietness and solitude in his works. Spending time looking at some of his paintings we might find ourselves falling into a meditative trance. It's easy to be submerged in the stillness of deep tones, the harmony of symmetrical forms or the textured surface of the canvas scratched with a palette knife or thickly layered in paint.

Some of Gaitonde's paintings evoke the feeling of a landscape, and they have been written about that way. While one can certainly read central planes as horizon lines that seem to separate sky from sea and circular forms as the sun or another element of the solstice, his works also conjure a broader sense of balance. In fact, he consciously sought a vision free from representation and cultural connotation, even as he drew from Asian spiritual traditions in his process and approach.

While his practice represents a style that eludes meaning, it is important to remember that this is not always the case with abstraction. Some artists who were clear in their commitment to the figure also invented new ways of experimenting with line and form in their work, while retaining representational elements. Let's turn to one such artist whose works exemplify this approach.

Integrating Diagonals and Fractures: Tyeb Mehta

The Bombay-based artist Tyeb Mehta (1925–2009) is particularly known for his series of oil on canvas paintings, titled *Diagonals,* which integrate his lifelong exploration of the fractured figure with the abstracted geometric form of a diagonal that cuts across the canvas.

The diagonal is a device that Mehta invented but – as the artist pointed out – was inspired by his transformative experience of seeing Barnett Newman's *Onement I* (1948) at the Museum of Modern Art while he was in New York on a Rockefeller Fellowship. Seeing this work that uses a vertical band as we see here to simultaneously divide and unite its composition, made him certain of his own intent to integrate the abstract form of the diagonal and the figure.

'In front of a painting by Barnett Newman, I finally understood that I could preserve the sheerness and radiance of large areas of colour without sacrificing the figure. I came back to India and went on trying it for weeks until one day, I gave up and threw black colour to destroy the canvas. Instead, it all fell into place. The diagonal was the solution. And my painting was never the same again'. (632)

While Mehta was visually inspired by Newman's use of the line, the slashing of the composition simultaneously takes on a very different meaning in his works. Belonging to the generation that witnessed the 1947 Partition, which divided British India into the separate nations of India and Pakistan, his use of abstraction evokes the trauma and violence of this moment. Here, the line brutally bisects the figures and their disjointed bodies are suspended in flat geometric planes, recalling the political division that resulted in major displacement and upheaval across both sides of the border.

Through Mehta's works, we see how abstract forms explore the experimental possibilities of composition while also expressing tumultuous narratives that might be difficult to comprehend in words or through naturalistic representation.

Conclusion

As we have seen through two divergent practices, abstractionists in India have been pioneering in their development of unique visual vocabularies. Whether to explore socio-cultural practices, respond to historical moments or to explore the potential of line, shape and colour, artists from the region continue to use abstract vocabularies to engage with different formal, aesthetic and conceptual ideas.

While not an official member of the Progressive Artists' Group, Vasudeo S Gaitonde (1924–2001) worked in Bombay during the same period and was briefly associated with them. By the early 1960s, he began to gain recognition outside of India and received prestigious scholarships that allowed him to travel across Asia and to New York. A major retrospective of his work was held at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2014–15.

In 1995, the city's name was officially changed from Bombay to Mumbai, as it is known today. Since this video discusses a time period before the official name change, we refer to the city as Bombay here.

Tyeb Mehta (1925–2009) was affiliated with the Progressive Artists' Group. He lived and worked in Bombay for much of his life, initially as a film editor before studying painting at the Sir JJ School of Art. Mehta was among the first

Indian artists to receive critical acclaim through major international exhibitions as well as commercial success, during his lifetime.

The representation of the Partition depicted in this video takes reference from an archival map and is used for illustrative purposes only. We recognise that some of these borders remain disputed to this day, and are interpreted differently by different sources. Additionally, the film makes reference to the Radcliffe Line that demarcated Pakistani territories in the erstwhile Punjab Province in the West, and the erstwhile Bengal Presidency in the East. While East Bengal was known as East Pakistan following Partition, this region has been recognised as the People's Republic of Bangladesh since the Liberation War in 1971.

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