

New Art for a New India: The Progressive Artists' Group

In the trajectory of Indian art history, the moment of independence in the late-1940s is often intertwined with the formation of the Progressive Artists' Group in Bombay. Founded by six artists who came from disparate religious, social and linguistic backgrounds across India, the works by the Group have captured values of secularism, pluralism and modernity for the newly formed nation-state. Together they presented a manifesto that aimed to create 'new art for a newly free India'.

Their statement was intended as a rejection of academic art schools and the Bombay Art Society, both of which were cloaked in British colonial legacy. Let's look at a few key examples that reveal the diverse ways in which the Progressives fashioned new aesthetics and roles for artists in India.

Artist as Professional: FN Souza

Born to Catholic parents in Goa in 1924, FN Souza was expelled from the JJ School of Art, Bombay in 1942 for taking part in the Quit India freedom movement. His paintings took the form of commentaries on religion, human relationships and society, and he was most known for his controversial nudes, portraying women and Christ in manners that often appear aggressive or even violent. In his 1949 *Self Portrait*, he holds his apparatus in a Picasso-esque pose that recalls one of his inspirations from avant-garde movements in the West. Declaring himself to be a revolutionary modernist, he appears literally stripped of conventional constraints, including clothing. Serving as more than just a mere representation of a figure or self-portrait, this work shows how Souza prioritises his professional identity as an artist, with his brush in front of his body, in spite of the oddness of appearing to paint while nude.

Reckoning with the New Nation: MF Husain

Born in Pandharpur, Maharashtra, MF Husain emerged as a popular figure, almost symbolic of modern India. His work from 1951 titled *Man* is bold in its deconstruction of the human form, presenting a heroic philosophical individual surrounded by an array of visual elements. In this work, we see masked folk dancers, naked female bodies and the image of the sacred cow. The central figure sits crouched in contemplation, in a pose that refers to the French sculptor, Auguste Rodin's famous work, *The Thinker* (1904). Here, he may be an avatar for Husain himself. While the boldly outlined figures around him suggest a swirl of activity, rectangular borders hint at canvases in an artist's studio, posing somewhat of a parallel to Souza's self-representation as an artist. Surrounded by what we may interpret as either the chaos of a new India or the controlled chaos of the studio, Husain's thinker gazes outward. Throughout his career, ideas of urban and rural, modern and traditional, sacred and secular, in the context of India, remained a central subject of Husain's work. This was also true of other Progressive artists whose approaches were quite different.

Modern Depictions of Folk Traditions: KH Ara

KH Ara was born in Secunderabad in 1914 and ran away from home at the age of seven to Bombay, where he lived for the rest of his life. In his painting, *Bharata Natya* (c.1945), Ara depicts Bharatanatyam, the classical

Indian dance performance featuring the renowned Indian dancer and choreographer Ram Gopal (1912–2003) amidst a large crowd in a temple setting. The dance form originated in Tamil Nadu, although Gopal was known to have melded it with balletic choreography, and this mandapa or temple hall appears to be from the Chola period, representing a peak of South Indian architecture. The performance is depicted from the audience's perspective and great care is taken to show the group that mostly includes women. Ara's energetic brushwork and use of lively colours convey anticipation and movement, befitting the subject while integrating a modern expressive approach towards portraying a classical art form within a traditional setting.

Conclusion

The Progressive Artists' Group left behind an indelible mark on the trajectory of Indian modernism. Although diverse in their stylistic language and visual aesthetics, their works shared a similar preoccupation with new forms of experimentation, a distancing from the colonial schools of art, and a renewed sense of optimism in the newly independent India. The Group influenced younger generations of artists for decades to come.

The core Progressive Artists' Group held its first and only major exhibition in 1949 in Baroda and Bombay. By 1950, all of the artists except Husain went abroad for further training or because they were having a hard time earning enough money in India. The original group disbanded in 1954, though there is a lingering label of the 'Progressives' attached to these artists and their younger colleagues.

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.

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