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ART REVIEW

'The Progressive Revolution: Modern Art for a New India' Review: A Movement Looks Forward

The members of the Progressive Artists' Group rejected the academic realism and sentimental subjects taught under British rule.



Krishen Khanna's 'News of Gandhiji's Death' (1948) PHOTO: RADHIKA CHOPRA AND RAJAN ANANDAN

By Michael FitzGerald

Sept. 20, 2018 4:07 p.m. ET

New York

"The Progressive Revolution: Modern Art for a New India," at Asia Society Museum, explores a remarkable intersection of art and politics in a landmark period of recent history: the early years of India's independence and the arrival of Indian artists in the mainstream of global contemporary art.

The six artists who formed the Progressive Artists' Group soon after Jawaharlal Nehru proclaimed India's independence in 1947 shared Nehru's idealistic goal of a unified nation free of divisions of class, caste and religion, as well as the belief that India should play a prominent role in the postwar world. For these artists, this vision of a new India matched their rejection of the academic realism and sentimental subjects taught under British rule and inspired their engagement with both India's history and Western modernism.

Their spokesman, F.N. Souza, came from an impoverished Catholic family in Goa; S.H. Raza was a Muslim son of a forest ranger; K.H. Ara's father was a bus driver of the Dalit caste; S.K. Bakre grew up in a wealthy family from Baroda; H.A. Gade initially trained as a scientist; and M.F. Husain began his career painting advertising billboards as a desperately poor newcomer to

Bombay (now Mumbai). Within a few years, the group expanded to include V.S. Gaitonde (who received a one-person exhibition at the Guggenheim in 2015), Krishen Khanna and Tyeb Mehta, among other major artists of the postwar period.

The Progressive Revolution: Modern Art for a New India

*Asia Society Museum
Through Jan. 20, 2019*

The first exhibitions of the group in 1949 displayed their commitment to contemporary Indian society. Raza's "Kashmir" (1949) celebrated the beauty of a landscape decimated by the violent response to the partition

of the region between India and Pakistan. Mr. Khanna's "News of Gandhiji's Death" (1948) responded to Gandhi's assassination by capturing the anxiety of a crowd as they combed newspapers for information.

The most controversial work, however, was Souza's "Self-Portrait" (1949), a full-length, frontal nude that deeply transgressed conventional standards and literally portrayed his declaration: "our art has evolved over the years of its own volition, out of our own balls and brains." This life-size painting dominates the first gallery of Asia Society's exhibition of more than 80 works.

The scandal over Souza's painting drove him to move to Britain. By 1954, several of the founding artists had emigrated to Europe or the U.S. and the group dissolved as each artist pursued his individual career. Only one woman, Bhanu Rajopadhye Athaiya, participated in the group's exhibitions. She soon became a leading costume designer for Bollywood films.

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Curated by Zehra Jumabhoy, a lecturer at the Courtauld Institute in London, and Boon Hui Tan, the director of

Asia Society Museum, the exhibition gathers work from across the second half of the 20th century, with an emphasis on the '40s, '50s and '60s. Throughout the galleries, the curators wisely deploy major works of classical Indian sculpture and miniature paintings from the museum's collection to illustrate the Progressives' roots and how they transformed traditions.

Akbar Padamsee's painting "Lovers" (1952) alludes to the Hindu gods Shiva and his consort Parvati (represented by a fine 10th-century bronze), yet far from earning praise for his erudition, Padmansee's depiction of the embracing figures resulted in charges of pornography. This early conflict between religious orthodoxy and intellectual freedom would increasingly influence criticism of Indian art.

Among the artists who remained in India, several of the Progressives spent months in New York on travel grants from the Rockefellers, who also founded Asia Society. In 1964, Mr. Khanna and Gaitonde met Mark Rothko, and this experience blended with Gaitonde's Zen discipline to inspire his subtle, abstract fields of color.

Husain most fully embodied the ambitions of the original movement and its impact on Indian culture. In "Yatra" (1955), a woman and child ride a bullock cart across the countryside on a pilgrimage under the protection of a monumental Hanuman, the powerful monkey god of Hinduism. Husain's rendering of the scene in flat planes of brilliant yellows and greens borrows features of Rajput miniatures, while the full-bodied, twisting pose of the woman seated in the cart evokes the three-dimensionality of classical temple sculpture. To orchestrate this collision of radically different styles, Husain adapted the formal innovations of the European avant-garde and created a richly referential painting that proclaims both India's ancient culture and its dynamic present. Husain's ability to infuse traditional subjects of Indian life with the shock of modernity earned him the support of Indian governments from Nehru through Indira Gandhi in the 1980s.

Although the exhibition lacks some major works, such as Husain's "Man" (1951) and "The Spider and the Lamp" (1956), the curators have included paintings that reveal how severely the

Gandhian and Nehruvian ideals were challenged as years passed. Mr. Khanna's macabre "Anatomy Lesson" (1972) satirizes the continuing danger to India's territorial integrity through wars with Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

Despite Husain's Muslim faith, his commitment to the universality of India's culture led him to explore the great Hindu epics of the Mahabharata and Ramayana. In 1995, this ecumenicalism brought him in conflict with the puritanical Hindutva movement and ultimately drove him into self-exile—issues that are thoroughly discussed in the catalog of the exhibition.

On the walls of Asia Society we primarily see the optimistic ambitions that fueled the careers of this breakthrough generation of Indian artists.

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