The style EVOLUTION

These painters, known for their mature vocabulary, had tasted success earlier for work in a style that was radically different

BY **KISHORE SINGH**

A JOURNEY THROUGH PAIN

SATISH GUJRAL
b. 1925

Satish Gujral is hearing impaired, yet this has little bearing on his art, for which he trained in Lahore and Bombay. His early work resonates with a feeling of loss, the result of Partition that sundered the country and created geographical barriers which left emotional scars on the people who bore the physical burden of its violence. This series, one of the rare voices that lent to the country's visual documentation of Partition's horror, would continue to be enriched after a trip to Mexico and a meeting with Diego Rivera.

His return to India after a stint in America saw Gujral's work change in more ways than one. Though he remained experimental, the palette became more decorative, the context more affirmative. It was as if he was struggling to project a voice that was celebratory, moving beyond the negative to ideas that found a resonance in what might be considered hopeful. Musicians, dancers, jugglers, athletes: These were components that defined his painterly universe, resulting in his popularity in a society that no longer had space on its walls for laments of despair.

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I ENJOYED MY BEER. A COLD ONE ON A WARM AFTERNOON, after a couple of laps in the pool or, maybe, a hard-fought game of cricket. This was when I didn't know what hops meant, about top and bottom fermentation or even the right way to pour beer into a glass. I drank beer because I was thirsty, because it made me happy and because I could feel it slosh down my gullet and, then, radiate its frothy, chilled goodness from the pit of my stomach.

Such simple joys elude me today. When I sip a beer these days, I am hunting for hidden, often rumoured, flavours—caramel, perhaps, or clove. Or I am wondering whether the brewers have been a bit too generous with the hops. Or, worse still, if it's one of those fancy Belgian beers, I have to worry about making sure I've got the right glass. And, at such times, I sit up and wonder whether I might be slowly turning into a beer snob. And a whisky snob. And a wine snob. Exactly like the very people on whose heads I'd love to pour a concoction of warm, stale beer, cloying Indian Made Foreign Liquor and acrid wine.

Just who are these liquor snobs? These are men—and they are mostly men—who can suck the joy out of a Saturday brunch or ruin a contemplative evening with their relentless pedantism. Men who know the lay of Scotland better than the contours of their own country, who think all industrial beer tastes like glycerine (even the perfectly acceptable Hoegaarden), snigger at people who like to have their whisky with lots of water and ice and won't ever open a bottle of Indian wine.

Thanks to my line of work, I am, unfortunately, familiar with this kill-joy kind and, over the years, I have attempted a taxonomy of the species to help me deal with them better—and puncture their pomposity at opportune moments.

Of the lot, I find vodka snobs to be the silliest. Unless you are a spirits expert, all vodka tastes the same, especially if there are mixers around. But there are people I know who swear by certain brands of overpriced classic vodka which, by the way, is supposed to be neutral and without distinctive aroma, character, taste or colour. So whenever I have to entertain them, I take out this large 4.5-litre bottle that once held pricey vodka, pour some relatively inexpensive Indian vodka into it and present the contemporary flagon with a suitable flourish as the night progresses. Upon hearing their appreciative murmurs, I allow myself a slight, mocking smile. QED.

Whisky fanatics are a more evolved lot, and some of them do know their stuff. They know the correct pronunciation of Islay, can speak at length about the U-shaped lyne arms at the Talisker distillery and have a tendency to turn particularly verbose when describing the aroma and mouth feel of their favourite whiskies. But despite their loquaciousness, these are not men who suffer ignorance about whisky gladly. So I steer the conversation away from Scotland to neighbouring Ireland, to honest, triple distilled Irish whiskies that don't need the often frivolous sensory paraphernalia of nosings, and snifters and what have you. Irish whisky, they ask? Really? Well, one in particular; I tell them about Tyrconnell Single Malt.

Tyrconnell, a 100-year-old unpeated whisky named after a champion racehorse, is a pleasant dram made by the low-profile Cooley distillery, which is located in rain-soaked Kilbeggan. Pure pot still single malt, I tell them, a couple of notches above both Jameson and Bushmills. And, most importantly, it even manages to affect the complexity of Scottish single malt. They like the back-handed compliment I bestow on the Irish whisky. Their condescension towards it softens a touch. Maybe, someday, they will try it.

Wine is a vast subject, a labyrinth full of tricky trapdoors, and it never pays to bluff about it. There is only so much you can talk about chalky soil, varietals, the devastation wrought in 19th century France by the phylloxera epidemic. Discretion is the better part of valour on this terroir, and I endure, with the patience of a saint, the sadly amusing sight of my fellow countrymen meticulously aping French pronunciations, swirling their wine in goblets and talking about the ridiculousness of blended wine. But when it all gets too much, I tell them what a wise man once said, a philosophy I aim to apply to every spirit I drink, about there being only two kinds of wine—the ones which you like and the ones you don't.

Who are these liquor snobs? These are men who can suck the joy out of a brunch or ruin an evening with their pedantism

The writer is managing editor, Man's World

LOSS AND LONGING

RAM KUMAR
b. 1924

A student of economics in India who fraternised with the communist intelligentsia in Paris where he studied art, Ram Kumar's stint in London resulted in works that featured the homeless. In India, this found expression through his work on the widows of Varanasi. Even during this phase, when his figures were rendered similarly to Modigliani's, Kumar grappled with himself, drawn to a language that was more abstract than figurative; his initial stint created a riverfront mass of huddled buildings, gateways, arches and paths.

Even though his work was highly regarded, Kumar moved into a language of formless abstract paintings—something that did not enjoy a premium in the market at the time. He continued to paint Varanasi, but it was no longer identifiable, represented by a corpus of colours and a sense of animation and movement. Later, he was drawn to the landscapes of Ladakh, but for most part he devotes his energy to Varanasi, giving India one of her few practitioners of the non-representational that enjoys a critical following.

THE LONG ROUTE HOME

SH RAZA
b. 1922

Among India's most popular artists and a founder member of the Progressive Artists' Group in Bombay in 1947, SH Raza began his career as a painter of impressionistic landscapes, something that would characterise his work when he shifted to Paris in 1950. While there, and as a result of a trip to New York, his work developed into a style that came to be known as 'gestural abstraction'. It consisted of thick impasto applied with a sense of energy that gave it movement, and though he often worked with a dark palette, a sense of his Indian roots was betrayed by the use of vibrant colours as accents.

A third and final career change saw him reach towards his Indian heritage from Paris when he began to work, from 1979 onwards, on a series that would develop into his popular Bindu, Mandala and Germination body of works. They evoked the discipline of meditation and the harmony of the five elements, and were a celebration of colours that had resonated with him ever since his first glimpse of Basohli miniatures. Gradually, thereafter, he moved his oeuvre to this new found vocabulary and has been entirely consumed by it to this day, even if the bulk of that journey was realised in France.

FOLK MODERNIST

JAMINI ROY
1887-1992

No one represents the transition in an artist's mid-career oeuvre better than Jamini Roy. Trained in the realistic style prevalent in art institutions such as the Government College of Art in Calcutta, and growing up in the midst of the Bengal School at its zenith, his early works are impressionistic, inspired, no doubt, by Monet and Matisse.

But Roy found existing tropes claustrophobic and wanted to create something that was Indian but without the sentimentalism of the Bengal School of art. His inspiration came from the Kalighat *pat* painters whose bold outlines and simplistic renderings he adopted. His subjects were often the Santhals, musicians and dancers, popular Bengali myths that introduced the parable of the cat and the lobster, and his affinity to Biblical iconography. These folk-like renditions have come to be viewed as India's earliest tryst with modernism. Wanting to make art accessible to a wider public, Roy created an atelier where his works were copied by disciples and acolytes, resulting in a prolific output.

LONELINESS AND FEAR

TYEB MEHTA
1925-2009

Tyeb Mehta was permanently scarred from witnessing a man being killed during the Partition riots. As a result, he devoted his life to the struggle between individuals for power, without taking a view on the morality of right or wrong. His early works are characterised by the influence of Western modernism, but the strife of the lonely figure remained an indelible part of his work. His expressionistic technique was subject to his perfectionism, and he often destroyed canvases he was unhappy with.

The transition in the '80s saw his style becoming more minimalistic, paring away all but the essential in flat colour fields. The subject of his articulation was still violence, but the figures were no longer anonymous. Indeed, in many, it was his representation of Kali, the avenging goddess, in a melee with the demon Mahisasura, that exemplified his best works from this period. The represented figure of these protagonists is horrifying—or is it horror that they, in turn, see? The strong outline and the use of only a few colours peels these works down to communicate without artifice.

A BRIDGE ACROSS CONTINENTS

AMRITA SHER-GIL
1913-41

Born of a Sikh father and a Hungarian mother, with roots in India and Europe, where she studied at the Beaux-Arts in Paris, Amrita Sher-Gil was flamboyant and impetuous, as passionate about life as about art. In her Paris salon, she painted in the style that was current at the time—studies of young people that lent beauty to their youth and dalliances. Within this enchanted world, she might have prospered but for a visit to India that saddened her sufficiently to return here to create a new language of Indian modernism.

In part, this was a rejection of the Bengal School, and Sher-Gil launched on her career somewhat deliberately. She rejected realism in favour of the Ajanta palette, and evoked the world of miniatures in her flat renditions, although her subjects were chosen from an India she discovered on her travels. A first for Indians, she used models for her paintings, and looked around to spot everyday scenes of life that captured her imagination. She died at 28, but has left her indelible stamp on Indian art in the 20th century.

STUDENT, ARTIST, TEACHER

NANDALAL BOSE
1882-1966

Along with Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose was one of the foremost exponents of the Bengal School style that had its genesis in a 'national' idea of art inspired by the Ajanta frescoes and Indian miniature paintings under Tagore. Evolved in the Japanese wash style, its subjects were chosen from Indian mythology and a romanticised past. Elegantly rendered, Bose's paintings of this period catered to an imagined glory and became a tool of resistance against the colonial power occupying India at the time. Bose's role as an art teacher further consolidated this idea as a legacy.

It was in his later years in Santiniketan that Bose began to change along with his students Ramkinkar Baij and Benode Behari Mukherjee, drawn to an expressionistic style and moving away from idyllic notions to the reality of the countryside and its people. It was this transition that would provide the fillip to the genesis of what would develop as modernism as the country grappled to find a painterly language that was its own and not influenced by the West.

FROM FORM TO FORMLESS

VS GAITONDE
1924-2001

V S Gaitonde's is a parable of posthumous success that re-enacts the popular concept of the struggling artist in a garret who fades away in penury. The tragedy is that he was recognised in his lifetime for the excellence of his work but could not find a market for it. Like most artists, his early works were figurative and drawn to the idea of Nehruvian socialism and the development of a resurgent India.

His works began to change even before a stint in New York, where he was inspired by the colour fields of the artist Mark Rothko. Considered India's foremost abstract painter, he preferred the term 'non-objective' for his non-representational paintings. He developed a style of layering that added depth and luminescence to his canvases, and though they were static in the absence of any form, a zen-like movement nevertheless animates them. Gaitonde's excellence is only now gaining global recognition and has fetched him record prices and, later this year, a retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

A RAMACHANDRAN
b. 1935

A Ramachandran's was a dark world bereft of optimism in his early years as an artist. He painted scenes that were rampant with grief and violence, macabre scenes of mankind's depravity. In part, this arose from a communist rejection of beauty in life, but it was also a result of his upbringing in Kerala and the forces that held his imagination hostage.

But the transition couldn't have been more dramatic. On a visit to the countryside outside Udaipur, in Rajasthan, Ramachandran found himself drawn to a temple beside a lotus pond. Mesmerised by its beauty, as by the tribal women who inhabited the area, the artist found his resistance to what modernists rejected as decorative, melting away. He has been back to that spot scores of times since then, painting the enchanted world of nymphets, dragon flies, water-lilies, often painting himself within the paintings too. Viewed by many as escapism, Ramachandran's sonnet to loveliness and beauty emerges from the finest tradition of Indian art having the ability to inspire and heal.

All images Courtesy Delhi Art Gallery

(À La Mode)

By **NONITA KALRA**

The Scent of a Woman

Coco Chanel in Paris, 1937. She enjoyed flouting convention

Getty Images

IT IS A VERY PARTICULAR FRENCH SUMMER MORNING, THE KIND WHERE THE SKY is so blue that it looks as if it has been inked into exaggeration. The air is fresh, the sun is beautifully mild as it delicately highlights the picturesque drive from Nice to Grasse. I find myself inhaling deeply over and over again. I don't want to miss the first sign or smell of the May Rose. After all, my job today is to visit the perfume capital of the world and see how the iconic fragrance Chanel No 5 gets its distinctive notes. The amber-coloured liquid with its "art-deco inspired, classic square-faceted" design holds a special place in my life. It was my grandmother's favourite perfume. A bottle always lay on her dressing table. Today, I don't leave home without generously dousing myself with it. Somehow, Chanel No 5 manages to remind me of my childhood even as it makes me feel all grown up and womanly. I am not in a minority. Every 30 seconds, a bottle of Chanel No 5 is sold somewhere in the world. Rather impressive for a product that was launched in 1921.

Its most discernible ingredient is being gathered today. In the early hours of the morning, when the May Rose blooms. Done the old-fashioned way by pickers who have worked in Grasse for decades, it is a delicate, time-consuming process. Each flower is twisted off gently, never snapped, one by one. And when the bag is full, the precious cargo is taken to the factory and processed within the hour. Standing in the fields you can feel the fragrance clinging to your clothes. It is magical. The blooms have an uncontained beauty, nothing like the manufactured, almost antiseptic, roses you see in flower markets in big cities.

We head to the refinery to see how the concentrate is made.