

Modern Global Art and Its Discontents

Partha Mitter

Abstract: The growing disjuncture between the diversity of art practices and the narrow focus of canonical art histories has prompted art historians to pronounce the death of art history. And yet very little has changed because the modernist canon still dominates global art. The western avant-garde continues to be a closed discourse, writing the art of Asia, Africa and Latin America out of art history. Marginalization of non-western art is explained in terms of its 'derivativeness'. And yet there have been significant developments in non-western art since the 20th century, many of its artists engaged in creating vital modernist expressions of cultural resistance to colonialism. We need to probe more closely the epistemological framework that fuels the 'universalist' claims of the western canon. Even though western avant-garde has inspired the rest of the world, it is still dominated by the universalism that creates asymmetrical relations between the centre and the peripheries, which is not one of geography but of power and authority, with modernism creating its own tacit exclusions and inclusions. Hence borrowings of primitive art by western artists such as Picasso are judged as mere affinities, unlike the use of the syntax of cubism by non-western artists, which is seen as the influence of the West. This paper proposes certain strategies for 'decentring' the dominant canon. An inflected narrative of global modernity offers us a possible way of restoring the artist's agency in the context of colonial empires, by analysing art practices and reception as a cultural document that is historically situated.

Our infant 21st century is buzzing with the excitement of globalization as the information revolution and the explosion of international travel seek to bring the whole world together in the creation of a brave new world. Art dealers and impresarios have been quick to see the advantages of the new global *entente cordiale* as witnessed in the monster biennales and art auctions, which for the first time seem keen to exhibit the works of Asian and other non-western artists. This has even prompted a leading art historian to predict the demise of art history as a grand Hegelian narrative. As Hans Belting (1987; 2003 – see also Gilmore 2003) argues, there is a growing disjuncture between the awareness of the enormous diversity of art forms and practices and the narrow focus of canonical art histories. And yet things are not really that

different today from what has gone on since the rise of modernism, not to mention the inception of art history in the late 18th century. Even today leading non-western artists seldom feature in standard art history textbooks as the avant-garde canon continues to be a closed discourse that tends to erase non-western art from art history (see, for example, Foster et al. 2000). Such marginalization has been explained in terms of the 'derivativeness' of non-western art, a judgement that continues to exert its power in representations of the art of Asia, Africa and Latin America. And yet there have been significant developments in non-western art in the 20th century, many of its artists engaged in creating vital modernist expressions of cultural resistance to colonialism, as I know from my own field of Indian modernism.

The omission of artists from regions outside the West is not a deliberate act but simply a reflection of a wider problem: the common practice of equating western norms with global values has had the unintended consequence of excluding the art of the periphery from art history. Inspired by Immanuel Kant's aprioristic view of aesthetics, the concept 'art' is often regarded as neutral and disinterested. However, this systematically ignores the implications of race, gender, sexual orientation and even class in art history. Hence in order to grasp this problem we need to probe more closely the very epistemological framework that fuels the 'universalist' claims of the western canon originating in the Enlightenment. Such faith in the universal is not unique to art history but pervades all aspects of knowledge although art history creates its own specific inclusions and exclusions.

The embedded hierarchy implicit in the modernist canon and its impact on contemporary art of regions regarded as the cultural periphery can only be explained in historical terms. The rise of art history as a discipline coincided with European expansion overseas. The colonial powers in the 19th century sought to impose 'good taste' in the subject nations through the inculcation of academic naturalism and classical standards of taste.¹ In the early 20th century, the avant-garde revolution in the West challenged academic art, as Cubists, Expressionists and Surrealists declared war on bourgeois values and bourgeois artistic ideals. These sentiments gradually spread to the colonial world, shaping global perceptions of contemporary art and literature, a transformation to which few societies remained untouched (see, for example, Hughes 1981).² Picasso's radical experiment, *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), encouraged artists to turn to African sculpture in repudiation of classical taste (see Stokes 1978).³ Surrealism, with its distaste for

colonial rule, engaged in a mutually beneficial cross-fertilization with black cultural resistance, as suggested by the friendship between André Breton and the Martinique poet Aimé Césaire (see Linsley 1988: 529–530). Undoubtedly, modernism indirectly encouraged more openness towards other cultures, especially so-called primitive societies.

The enormous expansion of the European cultural horizon in the ‘heroic’ age of the avant-garde cannot be gainsaid, as the modernist technology of art, not to mention the formal language and syntax of Cubism, allowed artists around the globe to devise new ways to represent the visible world. The modernist revolt against academic naturalism and its attendant ideology was openly welcomed by the subject nations who were engaged in formulating their own resistance to the colonial order. Above all, modernism’s experimental attitude that constantly sought to push the intellectual frontiers, its ideology of emancipatory innovation and its agonistic relationship to tradition and authority, released new energies in artists raised in a more traditional mode (see, for example, Mitter 1994; Guha-Thakurta 1992).

Since the 1970s, Marxist, Post-Modern, Post-Colonial and other influential critics of modernism helped temper the triumphalism of the avant-garde, highlighting the fractures and contradictions of modernity, and its complex relationship with tradition, all of which have inspired art practices not only in the centre but also in the periphery. Nonetheless, the discipline of art history is yet to question in any substantive manner the implicit acceptance of non-western modernism as derivative. Two cases highlight, for instance, the glaring contrast in art historical assessments of crossing ‘cultural borders’ and of the different functions of the role of ‘influence’ in an artist: the first is the exhibition “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art. Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern”, held in New York in 1985 (see Rubin 1985); the second is what I describe as the ‘Picasso manqué syndrome’. The MOMA exhibition claimed to highlight the formal similarities between ethnographic art and western modernism, describing the ‘primitive’ motifs in the works of Picasso and other iconic modernists as a reflection of the ‘affinities’ between modern and ‘tribal’ art that transcended time and space. This anodyne view that failed to critique colonialism was castigated in a series of reviews (Foster 1985; Clifford 1986; McEvelley 1984). But in some ways the most telling point of the show was that Picasso’s borrowings from ‘primitive’ societies were not deemed to compromise his artistic integrity.

The same process is evaluated very differently in the case of a colonial artist who borrowed the art of the ‘dominant’ European culture. Gaganendranath Tagore (1867–1938), a pioneering modernist, was the first Indian painter to adapt the revolutionary syntax of Cubism to produce a series of small poetic, jewel-like paintings between the years 1921 and 1928.⁴ In 1959, posing the question whether modern art can be appropriated by Indians, William George Archer – in his *India and Modern Art* – provided his own answer that such appropriation must be “absorbed into the blood stream” of that society to be a genuine item. Archer sought to demonstrate this with an analysis of Gaganendranath’s work:

His style was, at first sight, not unlike the early followers of Braque and Picasso [...] Yet apart from their very evident lack of power – a power which in some mysterious way was present in the work of Braque and Picasso – Gaganendranath’s pictures were actually no more than stylised illustrations [...] weak as art, but what was more important, they were un-Indian. [...] As a result, his pictures, despite their modernistic manner, had an air of trivial irrelevance. (1959: 43)

From his perspective, Archer failed to appreciate Gaganendranath’s objective or his achievement within the context of Indian colonial culture. Analytical Cubism, developed in ca. 1909–1911 by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, rapidly spread from France to the rest of Europe and then to the rest of the world. Interestingly, artists everywhere were drawn more to Cubism’s flexible non-figurative syntax, which could be put to different uses, than to the formal revolution of Analytical Cubism as such (see Golding 1968). The motivation behind western Expressionists such as Franz Marc, Lyonel Feininger or George Grosz, and the Indian artist Gaganendranath was analogous: objects could be distorted and fragmented to produce dazzling patterns. Although all of them shared this formal language, the specific cultural contexts of Central European artists and Gaganendranath were of course as different as their artistic aims.⁵ What they simply reflected was the de-contextualising tendency of modernity, shared as much by artists not only in the centre but also in the periphery: styles past and present could be appropriated to generate strikingly new meanings.

For Archer however, in contrast to Picasso’s use of African sources, which did not compromise his integrity as a European artist, the Indian artist’s use of Cubism resulted in the loss of self as an Indian. Why did Archer fail to appreciate Gaganendranath’s achievement within his own

cultural context? I have ascribed this to the complex discourse of power, authority and hierarchy involved in evaluation of the non-western avant-garde as the 'Picasso manqué syndrome'. The use of Cubism, a product of the dominant West, by an Indian artist who belonged to the world of the colonized, immediately locked him into a dependent relationship, the colonised mimicking the superior art of the colonizer. Archer's analysis of modern art in India rests on a reductionist criteria: while successful imitation was a form of aping, imperfect imitation represented a failure of learning.⁶

When we turn to the West, we cannot fail to notice that a very different criterion operates in the study of the early abstract painters' debt to eastern thought. Because of the painstaking research on the connection between Theosophy and abstract art by Sixten Ringbom (1966), with valuable contributions of other scholars, the facts are no longer in question. The controversy hinges on what value one attaches to the presence of eastern thought in Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich and Vasily Kandinsky, the three iconic figures of the avant-garde (see, for example, Sihare 1967).⁷ Here a few examples may be cited. Based on his reading of the ancient Indian Upanishadic texts, Mondrian was developing in 1914 the idea that art belonged to a higher spiritual realm that transcended the natural, a sentiment that also had parallels in Neoplatonism (see Kramer 1995).⁸ A key concept in Mondrian and other pioneers of abstraction was the metaphysical idea of the absolute, which enabled them to break with what they saw as the last vestiges of mimesis, proclaiming the 'reality' as belonging to 'the spiritual'. Strikingly, the concept of nature was relative to the spiritual absolute, as the perfection of mathematics was to the imperfect material world, an idea that recalls the definition of mathematics in ancient Indian thought, apart from its connection with Hegelian metaphysics. Absolute purity, divested of all the material associations, chief among them illusionism, could not be achieved on empiricist foundations (see Leja 1992).⁹ Kandinsky, who wrote the influential *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (On the Spiritual in Art), was reluctant to speak about his debt to eastern thought in public but he was prepared to express it in sympathetic company, as noted by a contemporary art critic, Michael Sadler (quoted in Steele 1990: 180).¹⁰ I cite only these few examples but there are many others.

The formalists dismiss interest in eastern thought as at best inconsequential and at worst an aberration, viewing it as the "unwelcome religious flavor" of Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*

(Golan 2006: 382).¹¹ Both formalists and their opponents marshal strong arguments in support of their particular point of view. The purely formalist aspects in abstract painting are considered to be part of the art historical continuum, while ‘exotic’ eastern spiritual elements are essentially inimical to and incompatible with artistic progress. The insistence on the truth of one view to the exclusion of the other fails to allow for the co-existence of contradictory elements in an individual’s mental makeup. Néstor García Canclini has aptly commented that the history of the avant-garde has contributed to the disjunction between rationalism and irrationalism (1998: 498–499).

By the mid 19th century the crisis of capitalism gave rise to a host of utopian critics of urban modernity, many among whom searched for alternative intellectual traditions that may yield up answers. Artists often rebelled as much against mimetic art as against Victorian ‘materialism’. Some among them sought to restore the integrated community that had been lost with the rise of urban modernity and had led to the alienation of individuals from society. That is when they turned to eastern, particularly Indian philosophy, which is described by David Pan as “the intellectual context of the abstract method” (2001: 112 – see also Rhodes 1994). Kandinsky and Franz Marc, editors of the journal *Der Blaue Reiter*, were ‘romantic anti-capitalists’ who saw avant-garde art as heralding a new age of spirituality parallel to eastern thought.

In short, the above artistic debate seems to hinge on different assessments of the value of influence, and indeed influence has been the key epistemic tool, in the asymmetrical representations of cultural exchanges between eastern and western art. J.J. Clarke aptly describes this phenomenon:

a persistent reluctance to accept that the West could ever have borrowed anything of significance from the East, or to see the place of Eastern thought within the Western tradition as [...] only a trivial part of a wider reaction against the modern world. For some the Orient is still associated with shady occultist flirtations, the unconscious rumblings of the repressed irrational urges of a culture that has placed its faith in scientific rationalism. (1997: 5)

These exchanges of ideas and technology, however, need not necessarily be interpreted through ideas of domination and dependence.¹² Rudolf Wittkower (1977), the great authority on the migration of symbols across ancient cultures, traced the fascinating story of

how the West received and transformed images and motifs from the ancient Orient. The advent of modernism in Asia, Africa and Latin America could thus be studied as part of the global processes of cross-fertilisation. However, such perception is already defined by what I have called the discourse of power, a political dimension that received reinforcement in the 19th century, in a period of the ascendancy of the West when peoples were ranked within a global hierarchy of race, hierarchy and evolution.

To return to art history, it was as natural for the colonized to imitate, as it was inconceivable for the colonizer to engage in it. Johann Joachim Winckelmann's epithet "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" (quoted in Fleming and Honour 1982: 476) applied to classical art, which reinforced a Eurocentric idea of artistic perfection, swayed generations, including Hegel, Marx and other seminal thinkers. Notions of stylistic influence acquired a special significance for colonial art historians who were obsessed with tracing the western grammar of non-western modernisms and ranking them within a putative world order. Michael Baxandall (1985: 58–62) spoke of the obsession with stylistic influence as a curse because it tended to diminish artistic agency in the production of a work of art. Responding to circumstance, the artist makes a conscious selection from a range of sources. This is a purposeful activity on the artist's part, which involves making conscious choices.

Yet Archer had the whole weight of art history behind him in his evaluation of Gaganendranath. The modernist canon embraces a great deal more than influence, as its powerful teleology constructs a whole world of inclusions and exclusions, the epicentre and outlying regions. Linear art history boasts a long tradition going back to Giorgio Vasari, who created the master narrative for Renaissance art centring on the conquest of visual representation. Additionally, Vasari's stylistic categories, inspired by classical norms, which further motivated his notion of artistic progress, automatically excluded those art forms that did not conform to them (see Gombrich 1966). Vasari defined Florence, Rome and Venice as centres of innovation, categorizing other regions in Italy as sites of delayed growth and imitation. Thus periphery became a matter of geography, not of art history.¹³ In addition, Vasari dismissed the art of other European nations, with Winckelmann reifying these prejudices by formulating climatic, national and racial differences in art as objective facts (see DaCosta Kaufmann 2002: 73–79). Following in his wake, Darwinian art history applied Vasarian teleology to map world art from its 'primitive' base to its triumphal

climax in Victorian history painting, with Oriental art occupying an intervening space. By this token for instance, Indian miniature painting, though charming in itself, was accorded a 'respectable middle rank' in world art.

No doubt, the revolutionary message of the western avant-garde, which challenged academic art and classical taste, offered inspiration to the colonized. However, in the cultural economy of global modernity, art in Asia, Africa and Latin America was inevitably consigned to the periphery as the art of Paris, Vienna, Berlin and later post-war London or New York gained ascendancy. Set against the originary discourse of the metropolitan avant-garde, other modernisms were marginalized as derivative and suffering from a time lag. To paraphrase my previous statement, the centre/periphery relationship is not one of geography but of power and authority, with modernism creating its own tacit exclusions and inclusions.

If we discard stylistic influence as a meaningful category, in what other ways can we study the origins and development of an art form? Additionally what theoretical underpinnings can we deploy to make sense of the transmission of ideas and technology across cultures that are not predicated on the notions of power and authority or on the centre/periphery imbalance? Recently critical post-modernist art histories and studies in visual culture have offered a rich array of strategies of empowerment through new readings of the avant-garde in Asia, Africa and Latin America, which destabilize the modernist canon by challenging hierarchy and the narrow empirical connoisseurship-focused discipline of art history involving analysis and documentation of style and iconography. Studies of visual culture seek to erase the distinction between high art and a range of material objects that had been excluded from the canon, thereby seeking to destroy the exclusivity of the concept of high art that tends to reinforce the global inequality in power relations.¹⁴ Others plead for a more open discourse of avant-garde art that would embrace plurality and uneven edges, and for bringing within art history the critical voices from the periphery. The most exciting aspect of modernisms across the globe is their plurality, heterogeneity and difference. A persuasive tool for unsettling the hegemonic canon has been the concept of hybridity. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) theorizes the concept in order to empower the diaspora thrown up by global migration that automatically creates situations of inclusion and exclusion. He speaks of the 'interstitial' passage existing between fixed identities, which would entertain difference without

imposing hierarchy.¹⁵ Néstor García Canclini (1995) proposes ‘multi-temporal heterogeneities’, while Gerardo Mosquera opts for the notion of a ‘de-centralized’ international culture to argue that the peripheries are emerging as multiple centres of international culture even as they strengthen local developments in a constant process of cultural hybridization (see Sims 2002: 236).

But what about those artists in Asia, Africa and Latin America for whom national identity has been a language of resistance to colonial art, in their struggle to create a counter-narrative to the dominant canon (see Greeley 2005)? Hybridity may not apply so well here and I would like to propose a set of concepts that takes into account the historically situated nature of artistic production and consumption that may enable us to appreciate the strengths and achievements of art from the periphery. But even before we can do that we need to ‘de-centre’ the modernist canon, in order to destabilize Vasarian concepts of artistic centre and periphery, and loosen the linearity of art history, which was given unique authority in Hegel’s theory of artistic progress as the inevitable unfolding of the world spirit. Without privileging any art in particular, and not even western avant-garde, we may investigate art practices in their social and cultural settings, taking into account the peculiar contextual needs and expressions of regional artistic productions and consumptions, and the local assertions of global concerns. Although it is tempting to view western modernism as a universal category that transcends time and space, the greatest achievements of the western avant-garde have been historically situated within its own set of conventions, even though its experience has enriched other traditions. The wide acceptance of the western modernist canon as self-evidently universal does not lend sufficient weight to the role of convention in artistic production.

My approach is a hermeneutic one of textual interpretation, exploring the ‘inter-textual’ character of artistic styles, setting up an active relationship with past or ‘other’ models in a dialectical and even agonistic mode. Such conscious heuristic imitation announces its derivations but defines itself by asserting its distance from these sources (see Greene 1982).¹⁶ However, perhaps no one can offer us a greater insight into questions of cultural intersections than the textual critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1981 – see also Holquist 2002) who coins the term ‘dialogic’ to set up a continuous dialogue with other works of literature, appropriating the words of others and transforming them according to one’s creative intention. This inter-textual process is dynamic, relational

and engaged in endless re-descriptions of one's own world vision. The particular merit of the dialogic method is that it allows for the co-existence of different approaches in a relativist way in a cross-cultural analysis, and does not set up an essentialist hierarchy of ideas and values as in the case of colonial discourse for instance.

Let us return to the Indian modernist Gaganendranath whose works were misrepresented by Archer because of his insistence on tracing a genealogy of style. A specific explanation that probes the reasons for the Indian artist's choice of the syntax of Cubism could learn a great deal from the sociology of knowledge. The concept of 'paradigm shift', postulated by Thomas S. Kuhn (1962) in the history of science, provides a useful tool for the study of cultural change through adoption. As Kuhn seeks to demonstrate, knowledge develops in a succession of tradition-bound periods, punctuated by revolutionary breaks, or in his term, paradigm shifts. These shifts occur when a system breaks down, or when anomalies in one paradigm force new paradigms to emerge. New paradigms function by challenging the norms of a given practice that had become constricting and thus vulnerable to challenge. The new paradigm in its turn marginalizes practices that no longer conform to the new criteria. In India, the advent of academic naturalism during the colonial era was the first great revolutionary break that profoundly transformed art institutions, practices, patronage, genres, materials, as artistic style moved from flat two-dimensional pictures to illusionist naturalism. The paradigm change ushered in by colonial rule simply made the earlier art practice of tied courtly patronage and master/apprentice relationship obsolete. Artists emerged as independent professionals who depended more on public support and critical recognition. This phase lasted from the introduction of academic art to the rise of nationalist art between the 1850s and 1920s. In the 1920s, the tensions between academic artists and the nationalist purveyors of a Pan-Asian 'decorative' mode, known as 'oriental art', forced a second revolutionary break. Gaganendranath and other radicals sought to emancipate themselves from the artificial polarity between these two modes of artistic representation, namely, academic naturalism and 'decorative' orientalism. The language of modernism, signifying changes in artistic imperatives in a rapidly globalising world, offered the Indian avant-garde a new visual means to challenge the previous artistic paradigm centring on mimetic representation.

An inflected narrative of global modernity offers us a possible way of restoring the artist's agency in the context of colonial empires, by

analysing art practices and reception as a cultural document that is historically situated. One serious criticism of 'influence' as an analytical tool is, that it views artists as passive agents of transmission rather than active agents with the ability to exercise choice (see Crow 1999). In my particular field of the rise of the avant-garde in India in the 1920s I have tried to show that its history can be meaningfully mapped within the context of nationalist resistance to the British Empire. It is also possible to formulate concepts that will address the particular interactions between global modernity, artistic production and the construction of national identity in regions that seek to resist the colonial-capitalist cultural dominance.

One of the powerful aspects of modern nationalism has been the interplay of the global and the local in the urban space of colonial culture, led by the western-educated intelligentsia in 'hybrid' cosmopolitan city ports, such as Shanghai or Calcutta, which emerged as flourishing centres of cultural exchange (see Abbas 2000: 775). Modernity associated with European expansion in India gave rise to a globally 'imagined community' based upon the English language and print capitalism. Its global membership was as vast as it was anonymous. The Indian elite now had the opportunity to share the corpus of ideas on modernity without the need for face-to-face communication.¹⁷

Elsewhere I have proposed the notion of the 'virtual cosmopolis' to explain the colonial elite's critical engagement with modernity. This hybrid city of the imagination engendered elective affinities between the elites of the centre and the periphery on the level of intellect and creativity. Their shared outlook was possible not only through the printed media but also through major hegemonic international languages such as English, French and Spanish disseminated through colonial encounters. Against the growing importance of globalization, much has recently been written on the concept of cosmopolitanism itself. Cosmopolitanism is an inevitable consequence of global technology transfers, and communication and transport revolutions. Scholars have used cosmopolitanism to challenge the pessimism about the possibility of fruitful cultural exchanges and offer a corrective to the politics of difference. Nonetheless, the problem of power and authority that confer visibility and inclusion, in the historically uneven relationship between centre and periphery, cannot be wished away. Craig Calhoun (2003) questions the concept of cosmopolitanism as an autonomous entity. Not only does such cosmopolitanism camouflage privilege, he says, it fails to appreciate the importance of solidarity,

especially for those who are bereft of power. A more limited cosmopolitanism that accommodates difference may provide a more effective engine of global change.¹⁸ Wherever we may stand on the particular interpretation of cosmopolitanism, I would point out that asymmetrical power relations do not prevent the free flow and cross-fertilization of ideas on the level of ‘virtuality’, as it happened across the globe in the age of knowledge and communication revolution last century.¹⁹

One of the most creative ideas developed by the Indian avant-garde in the 1920s in their exercise of ‘virtual cosmopolitanism’ was to develop an empowering concept of primitivism. It enabled them to construct their resistance to urban industrial capitalism and the ideology of progress, the cornerstone of colonial empires (see Mitter 2007). Primitivism represents the romantic longing of a complex society for the simplicity of pre-modern existence. The crisis of the industrial age, which was traced back to Enlightenment rationality, made 19th century utopians embrace primitivism with enthusiasm. Though primitivism helped temper the relentless progressivism of colonial-industrial modernity, it has, with some justification, been viewed as aiding and abetting colonial hegemony in its representations of the non-West, and in its consumption of primitive art (see Hiller 1991). Nonetheless, as Hal Foster points out, the avant-garde’s identification with the primitive, “however imaged as dark, feminine, and profligate, remained a *disidentification* with white, patriarchal, bourgeois society” (1993: 76). For the avant-garde, the artistic discourse of primitivism opened up the possibility of aesthetic globalisation as part of art historical consciousness (see, for example, Pellizzi 2003: 8–9).²⁰ These ambiguities, instabilities and fractures within primitivism provided the colonized a weapon to interrogate the capitalist/colonial world of modernity, enabling them to create a counter-modern discourse of resistance (see Lemke 1998). In the West, the very flexibility of primitivism offered endless possibilities, ranging from ‘going native’, to a radical questioning of western positivism (see Xianglong 2004).²¹ What the periphery did was to use primitivism to turn the outward ‘gaze’ of Europe back to the West itself, deploying the very same device of cultural criticism to interrogate the ‘urban-industrial’ values of the colonial empires.²²

Primitivism as a critical form of modernity formed a bridge between eastern and western critics of industrial capitalism that affected the peripheries no less than the West. Primitivists did not deny the importance of technology in contemporary life; they simply refused to

accept the teleological certainty of modernity (see Pan 2001). The leading Indian nationalist painter Jamini Roy (1887–1972) aimed at restoring through art the pre-colonial community that had been severed from national life during British rule, alienating the elite from its cultural roots. The intimate connection between the vitality of an artistic tradition and its mythological richness became the central plank in Roy's theory of collective art, an idea independently developed by German primitivists such as Wilhelm Hausenstein, Carl Einstein and Oskar Schlemmer (see Mitter 2007: 100–122). There were 'structural affinities' between Roy's primitivism and these western avant-garde critics of modernity although they arrived at their respective critiques of modernity through different routes. Roy's belief in political heterogeneity, his insistence on 'locality' as the site of the nation, and his preference for multiple aesthetic possibilities were uncannily similar to the ideas of the German Expressionists. I call these similarities 'structural affinities in a virtual global community', since neither knew the existence of the other.

There were also significant differences between the primitivism of the centre and the periphery. The western primitivists were chiefly concerned with the predicament of urban existence, whereas Indian artists used primitivism as an effective weapon against colonial culture.²³ While western primitivists aimed at merging art with life in a disavowal of the aesthetics of autonomy, they never ceased to believe in the unique quality of aesthetic experience. On the other hand Roy sought to erase it, deliberately seeking to subvert the distinction between individual and collaborative contribution in a work of art. The Indian painter deliberately eschewed artistic individualism and the notion of artistic progress, the two 'flagships' of colonial art (see Mitter 1994: 1–62). Roy's search for the formal equivalent to his primitivist ideology eventually led him to the Bengali village scroll painting, the *pat*, which offered him an ideal synthesis of 'formalist' robustness and political theory. Through intense concentration and a ruthless ability to eliminate inessential details, Jamini Roy created an avant-garde art of a monumental simplicity and radical social commitment.

NOTES

¹ This was accomplished by means of art schools and art societies, which mounted art exhibitions in India (see Mitter 1994; Taylor 2004: 27–34; Poshyananda 1992; Clark 1998).

² One cannot be sure why music was not similarly affected. In India, for instance, if anything, classical music has had a new lease of life that owes nothing to the western avant-garde with the exception of a few outstanding fusions.

³ I am indebted to Stephen Bann for this reference.

⁴ My work, *The Triumph of Modernism* (2007), seeks to revise much of the influence-driven colonial art history. For the early artists, see Kapur 2000, Subramanyan 1977; Parimoo 1973; Kumar 1997. For the late 1940s and fifties, see Dalmia 2001.

⁵ Franz Marc and Lyonel Feininger created an imaginary world of animals and architecture respectively, while the left-wing revolutionary George Grosz puts fragmentations and a distorted perspective at the disposal of a powerful political narrative. Their contents were more revolutionary than those of the classic Cubists.

⁶ One implication of the concept of influence is the usual view of the lack of originality of the periphery, which misreads the centre (see comments about Latin American artists in Sims 2002: 237). A lack of originality is not explicitly stated but influences judgments in writing these artists out of history.

⁷ Kandinsky was called “un prince mongol” by the influential critic Will Grohmann because of his interest in Theosophy (quoted in Sweeney 1944 – see also Fingesten 1961). Ringbom was a contributor to the major show organised by Maurice Tuchman, *The Spiritual in Art* (1986). See a reiteration of the influence of the Upanishadic notions of Brahman and Atman on Mondrian in Welsh’s “Mondrian and Theosophy” (1972), who finds the Calvinist stress on logic in the painter as claimed by M.H.J. Schoenmaekers unconvincing. For the latest popular work on the subject, see Baas 2005.

⁸ Kramer produces impressive evidence in support of Mondrian’s spirituality. In these artists, the Absolute could represent both the Hegelian Being and the Upanishadic Brahman but one need not exclude one for the other. The Hegelian notion of the Absolute or Geist (Spirit) in his dialectical system derives from Plato’s notion of Being as mediated by the Enlightenment, a period when God became secularized as pure Thought or Intellect. However, the Existentialists from Kierkegaard onwards sought to reinscribe individual subjectivity. What would interest the abstract painters about the Absolute or Brahman in the Upanishads, is the notion of a genderless and formless deity (as opposed to the Christian God) and the general unresolved character of existence and human freedom, proposed in the Hindu texts more as questions than as final answers.

⁹ Mondrian’s idea of the female and male elements, nature and spirit, which find their “pure expression, true unity, only in the abstract”, is uncannily similar to the dualistic Samkhya doctrine of *purusha* and *prakriti*. On the context of the *Upanishads*, see Danto 1992; Melville 1992; Overy 1995; Deussen 1960; Deussen 2005. The modernist ideology of ‘purity’ and its critique of representational art were inspired by the

Platonic distinction between truth and appearance. Its extreme form was the notion of the absolute values of abstract art (see Cheetham 1991: 164).

¹⁰ Sadler was a founding member of the radical socialist, Leeds Art Club. Kandinsky's aim of attaining the transcendental by rational means has been described as "rational irrationalism" (Wick 2000: 119–220).

¹¹ The recent exhibition at the Tate Modern on Kandinsky makes abundantly clear the influence of spiritual ideas on the Russian in his most productive period before he began to respond to other non-objective painters and yet the contributors tend to skirt the issue (see Fischer and Rainbird 2006).

¹² This is especially true of the Greeks, despised by the conquering Romans for their lack of valour, and yet revered by them for their art and intellect. Margaret Miller (1997) charts the reception of Persian culture in Greece and the way meaning and function change as outside elements enter a culture (my thanks to Sarah Morris for the reference).

¹³ The centre-periphery bias has contributed to the devaluation of the originality of an artist like Correggio. Hailing from Parma, considered to be a mere province compared with Florence, Rome and Venice, Vasari's three centres of art, Correggio's work has until now been assessed in terms of 'catching up' with the styles of Michelangelo or Raphael, rather than as an independent achievement (see Periti 2005: 7–11 – see also Castelnuovo and Ginsberg 1979).

¹⁴ The literature on visual culture and post-structuralist cultural theory is vast, but among the important works that give a succinct account of the scope and importance of visual culture and its challenge offered to the canon are: Bryson et al. 1994; Moxey 1994; Holly and Moxey 2002.

¹⁵ See also the special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore: Theorising the Hybrid* (445 (Summer) 1999).

¹⁶ Greene regarded the relations of the Humanists to antique sources as a dialogue rather than a passive act and proposed 'heuristic' or 'dialectic' imitation, which advertises its derivations, then defines itself by distancing itself from them. On imitation, influence and invention, see Cropper 2006: 99–127.

¹⁷ Benedict Anderson (1983) proposed the concept of the imagined community of print capitalism as a component of modern nationalism; I extend the notion of print culture to the global scene to explain cosmopolitanism. The members of this community will never know most of their fellow-members or meet them.

¹⁸ Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) views cosmopolitan values as the thread that ties human beings together, rejecting identity politics and the 'majoritarian' nationalist claims to an exclusivist cultural patrimony. James Clifford speaks of 'discrepant cosmopolitanism' to explain globalization from below of the powerless and the disadvantaged (1998: 362–365).

¹⁹ Sheldon Pollock observes: "if we conceive of the practice of cosmopolitanism in literary communication that travels far, indeed, without any obstruction from any boundaries at all, and, more important, that thinks of itself as unbounded, unobstructed, unlocated. [...] the world of writers and readers that Sanskrit produced, on the one hand, and Latin, on the other, are remarkably similar" (2000: 599). What is interesting about

his comment is that this cosmopolitanism in the ancient world was a product of sharing a common language, though admittedly these were languages of powerful cultures.

²⁰ For a useful summary of work that has been done in tracing the complex role of primitivism in modern European art, see Mitter 1996. On its impact on art, see Harrison et al. 1993.

²¹ I am in Joel Kupperman's debt for this reference.

²² The primitivist critique of civilisation went back to the ancient Greeks and Romans but returned with added force in the colonial period (see Boas, 1948; Lovejoy and Boas 1997).

²³ Indian artists were by no means the only ones to valorise primitivism. The Cuban artist of Chinese, African and Spanish ancestry, Wifredo Lam, who 'nationalised' primitivism, offered a critique of colonialism by combining western primitivist aesthetic with contemporary African elements. His Afro-Cuban themes were a form of political assertion (see Sims 2002). On African American modernism, see Lemke 1998.

WORKS CITED

- Abbas, Ackbar. 2000. "Cosmopolitan De-scriptions. Shanghai and Hong Kong" *Public Culture* 3 (Fall): 769–786.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2006. *Cosmopolitanism. Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: Norton.
- Archer, William G. 1959. *India and Modern Art*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Baas, Jacquelynn. 2005. *Smile of the Buddha. Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays* (transl. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; ed. by Michael Holquist). Austin, London: University of Texas Press.
- Baxandall, Michael. 1985. *Patterns of Intention*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press.
- Belting, Hans. 2003. *Art History After Modernism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1987. *The End of the History of Art?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Boas, George. 1948. *Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Bryson, Norman, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (eds). 1994. *Visual Culture. Images and Interpretation*. Hanover: University Press of New England.
- Calhoun, Craig. 2003. "'Belonging' in the Cosmopolitan Imaginary" *Ethnicities* 4: 531–568.
- Canclini, Néstor García. 1995. *Hybrid Cultures. Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (transl. by Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 1998. "Remaking Passports. Visual Thought in the Debate on Multiculturalism" in Donald Preziosi (ed.) *The Art of Art History. A Critical Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 498–506.
- Castelnuovo, Enrico and Carlo Ginsberg. 1979. "Centro e periferia" in *Storia dell'arte italiana I*. Turin: Einaudi: 285–354.
- Cheetham, Mark. A. 1991. *The Rhetoric of Purity. Essentialism and the Advent of Abstract Painting*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, John. 1998. *Modern Asian Art*. Sydney: Fine Arts Press.
- Clarke, J.J. 1997. *Oriental Enlightenment. The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought*. London: Routledge.
- Clifford, James. 1986. "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern" *Art in America* (April): 164–215.

- . 1998. "Mixed Feelings" in Pheang Cheah and Bruce Robbins (eds.) *Cosmopolitics. Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 362–370.
- Cropper, Elizabeth. 2006. *The Domenichino Affair. Novelty, Imitation, and Theft in Seventeenth-Century Rome*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press.
- Crow, Thomas. 1999. *The Intelligence of Art*. Chapel Hill, London: University of North Carolina Press.
- DaCosta Kaufmann, Thomas. 2002. "National Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Aesthetic Judgments in the Historiography of Art" in Holly and Moxey (2002): 71–84.
- Dalmia, Yashodhara. 2001. *The Making of Modern Indian Art. The Progressives*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Danto, Arthur. 1992. "Painting as Model" *Art Journal* 3 (Autumn): 95–97.
- Deussen, Paul. 1960. *The Philosophy of the Upanishads*. New York: Dover.
- . 2005. *Philosophy of the Vedanta in Its Relations to the Occidental Metaphysics*. Delhi: Manohar (reprint).
- Fingesten, Peter. 1961. "Spirituality, Mysticism, and Non-Objective Art" *Art Journal* 1: 2–6.
- Fischer, Hartwig and Sean Rainbird (eds.). 2006. Kandinsky. *The Path to Abstraction*, London: Tate Gallery.
- Fleming John and Hugh Honour. 1982. *A World History of Art*. London: Macmillan.
- Foster, Hal. 1985. "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art" *October* 34 (Autumn): 45–69.
- . 1993 "Primitive Scenes" *Critical Inquiry* 1 (Autumn): 69–102.
- , Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and David Joselit (eds.). 2000. *Art Since 1900. Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Gilmore, Jonathan. 2003. "Discipline Problem. Jonathan Gilmore on Hans Belting – Art History after Modernism" *Artforum* 2 (Oct.): 35–36.
- Golan, Romy. 2006. "Review" *Art Bulletin* 2 (June): 381–382.
- Golding, John. 1968. *Cubism. A History and an Analysis, 1907–1914*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Gombrich E. H. 1966. "Norm and Form. The Stylistic Categories of Art History and their Origins in Renaissance Ideals" in *Norm and Form. Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*. London: Phaidon: 81–98.
- Greeley, Robin A. 2005. "Modernism. What El Norte Can Learn from Latin America" *Art Journal* 4 (Winter): 82–83.
- Greene, Thomas M. 1982. *The Light in Troy. Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press.
- Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. 1992. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art. Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c.1850–1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Harrison, Charles, Francis Frascina and Gill Perry. 1993. *Primitivism, Cubism and Abstraction*. London, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hiller, Susan (ed.). 1991. *The Myth of Primitivism. Perspectives on Art*. London: Routledge.
- Holly, Michael Ann and Keith Moxey (eds.). 2002. *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies*. Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.
- Holquist, Michael. 2002. *Dialogism. Bakhtin and His World*. London: Routledge.
- Hughes, Robert. 1981. *The Shock of the New*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Kapur, Geeta. 2000. *When Was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Kramer, Hilton. 1995. "Mondrian and Mysticism. 'My Long Search is Over'" *The New Criterion* 1 (Sept.): 4–14.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kumar, R. Siva. 1997. *Santiniketan. The Making of a Contextual Modernism*. New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art.
- Leja, Michael. 1992. "Formalism Redivivus?" *Art in America* 3 (March): 35–39.
- Lemke, Sieglinde. 1998. *Primitivist Modernism. Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Linsley, Robert. 1988. "Wifredo Lam. Painter of Negritude" *Art History* 4 (Dec.): 527–544.
- Lovejoy, Arthur O. and George Boas. 1997. *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- McEvelley, Thomas. 1984. "Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief" *Artforum* 3 (Nov.): 54–61.
- Melville, Stephen. 1992. "Matter, Model and Modernism" *Art History* 3 (Sept.): 387–391.
- Miller, Margaret. 1997. *Athens and Persia in the Fifth Century. A Study in Cultural Receptivity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mitter, Partha. 1994. *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850–1922. Occidental Orientations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1996. "Primitivism" in David Levinson and Melvin Ember (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology* III. New York: Henry Holt: 1029–1032.
- . 2007. *The Triumph of Modernism. India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922–1947*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Moxey, Keith. 1994. *The Practice of Theory. Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press.
- Overy, Paul. 1995. "'Here-I-Am-Again-Piet'. A Mondrian for the Nineties" *Art History* 4 (Dec.): 584–605.
- Pan, David. 2001. *Primitive Renaissance. Rethinking German Expressionism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Parimoo, Ratan. 1973. *The Paintings of the Three Tagores. Abanindranath, Gaganendranath, Rabindranath*. Baroda: Maharaja Sayajirao University.

- Pellizzi, Francesco. 2003. "Anthropology and Primitivism" *Res* 44 (Autumn): 5–9.
- Periti, Giancarla (ed.). 2005. *Emilia e Marche Nel Rinascimento. L'Identita Visiva della 'Periferia'*. Azzano San Paolo: Bolis.
- Pollock, Sheldon. 2000. "Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History" *Public Culture* 3 (Fall): 591–625.
- Poshyananda, Apinan. 1992. *Modern Art in Thailand*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rhodes, Colin. 1994. *Primitivism and Modern Art*. London: Thames and Hudson
- Ringbom, Sixten. 1966. "Art in the Age of the Great Spiritual" *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*: 386–418.
- Rubin, William (ed.). 1985. *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art. Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. New York: Museum of Modern Art.
- Sihare, Laxmi P. 1967. *Oriental Influences on Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, 1909–1917*. New York: New York University (dissertation).
- Sims, Lowery Stokes. 2002. *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923–1982*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Steele, Tom. 1990. *Alfred Orage and the Leeds Art Club 1893–1923*. Aldershot: Scolar Press.
- Stokes, Adrian. 1978. "Reflections on the Nude" in *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes*. London: Thames and Hudson: 336–337.
- Subramanyan, K. G. 1977. "Rabindranath and Art. A Personal View" *Nandan. An Annual on Art and Aesthetics* 1/2: 1–5
- Sweeney, James J. 1944. "Piet Mondrian" *Partisan Review* 2: 173–176.
- Taylor, Nora Annesley. 2004. *Painters in Hanoi. An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Tuchman, Maurice (ed.). 1986. *The Spiritual in Art. Abstract Painting 1890–1985*. Los Angeles: County Museum of Art.
- Welsh, Robert P. 1972. "Mondrian and Theosophy" in *Piet Mondrian 1872–1944. Centennial Exhibition*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum: 35–51.
- Wick, Rainer K. 2000. *Teaching at the Bauhaus*. Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz.
- Wittkower, Rudolf. 1977. *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Xianglong, Zhang. 2004. "Heidegger's View of Language and the Lao-Zhuang View of Dao-Language" (transl. by Stephen C. Angle) in Robin R. Wang (ed.) *Chinese Philosophy in an Era of Globalization*. Albany: State University of New York Press: 195–214.

Copyright of Avant-Garde Critical Studies is the property of Editions Rodopi BV and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.