

Interpreting Modern Art and Modernity

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the fundamental problems in understanding modern art and modernity. It analyzes the use of the term modern art by the Pakistani critics and writers and pinpoints some of the anomalies and paradoxes which have created several misconceptions in the minds of younger generation. This paper is basically a theoretical and comparative study, which will look at the fundamental misconceptions in the application of these two terms, Modern and Modernity, in the field of fine arts, mainly visual arts.

In Pakistan, terms, such as modern, modernity and modernism are commonly used to describe a work of art which is abstract or has affinities with the Western / European art. This position, as we shall see, does not hold true, and, has generated misconceptions about the use of aforesaid terms in the mind of younger generation.

Generally speaking, modern is something new. This implies that “something that is ‘modern’ is generally contemporary, up to date, or progressive.”(1) In the history of Western art, the term modern has been considered useful to describe the art of the Renaissance period. Since Renaissance literally means rebirth of knowledge, the artworks produced during this period were modern in many ways; they were modern in style, technique and ideas. The artists of this period overturned the orthodoxy of the medieval period, because they believed that the ideas of the medieval period were not suitable to their age. They also reconsidered the restrictions imposed by the church in order to create a liberal and more moderate society. For instance, when E. H. Gombrich, in his book *The Story of Art*, discusses Brunelleschi’s(2) architectural inventions, he asserts that Brunelleschi

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traveled to Rome in order to draw inspiration, “it was never his intention to copy these ancient buildings outright. They could hardly have been adapted to the needs of fifteenth century Florence. What he aimed at was the creation of a new way of building, in which the forms of classical architecture were freely used to create new modes of harmony and beauty.”(3) Gombrich believes that Renaissance artists were able to make many discoveries in the field of art. They were much more skilled in showing depth on a two dimensional surface. Talking about Masaccio’s painting *The Holy Trinity*, he says that it must have made a hole in the wall due to the deep perspective artists created in the painting; “we can imagine how amazed the Florentine must have been when this wall painting was unveiled and seemed to have made a hole in the wall through which they could look into a new burial chapel in Brunelleschi’s modern style.”(4) In this statement, the word ‘modern’ is definitely an extension of the previously used phrase ‘creation of a new way.’ It is easy to understand that Gombrich is considering modern, not as something abstract or western as it is generally understood here but simply as a new way of seeing and creating. On the contrary, when one reads any book on Pakistani art, one seems to get the impressions that only abstract and Westernized arts are modern. Akbar Naqvi in his book *Image and Identity* looks at these Westernized modern trends. Talking about Company paintings (a painting style emerged after the decline of Mughal miniature paintings), Naqvi inserts a quote by Mildred Archer:

In terms of Indian paintings, it is [company paintings] the last original contribution by Indian artists before the modern deluge. Its use of water-color, as technique, its adoption of Western style perspective, its cult of realism and its concentration on the common people as prime subjects for painting broke sharply with prevailing conventions. In this respect it is a clear precursor of modern trends and the first step towards westernization of style which is now a common place of contemporary Indian art.(5)

The emphasis on categorizing Indian art into Company paintings and European paintings, as described by Naqvi is interesting as well as alarming, because this is how people in our country have started to look at everything new as a Western or European. He mentions an interesting statement by Lord Macaulay, who was Secretary to the Board of Control of India, and while reporting to Lord

Bentick suggested that we should try to create a class in the subcontinent which can bridge the gap between Indians and the British government. A class may be Indian in blood and color but “English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich these dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature and render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.”(6)

This statement suggests that to change the mind of Indian people according to its own taste was the top priority of the British Government. It was an attempt to modify minds of the Indian designers and artists in such a manner that their goods and artifacts properly match with the English taste. With these motives and objectives British government formed many arts schools in India. Not only this, in many schools of Fine Arts, which were opened up by the British Government, Western art courses were taught, with special emphasis on Classical Greek and Renaissance ideology. Although local colors and taste remained a part of process and products, even in so called Westernized institution but overall mode of Indian art in the subcontinent completely changed. Interestingly, it was this combination of Eastern and Western which is mistakenly known as modern, even after seventy years of independence.

In his book *Painting in Pakistan*, Ijazul Hassan, gives the opening statement about Zainul Abedin in these words, “the pioneer of modern art movement at Dacca.”(7) In another statement Hassan identifies Shakir Ali’s paintings with modern, and ironically his abstract style of painting with the modern. He states: “One of the modern painters to make most significant addition to abstract art in Pakistan is Shakir Ali,”(8) Commenting on the modern painting in Pakistan Hassan proclaims, “our modern painting is based on looking at re-production... [and, there is] nothing of the spirit behind it. It is opposite of revolt. It is part of the obedience.”(9) If one accepts the idea that modern painting is based on reproduction and imitation of Western trends, then miniature paintings which depict conventional and traditional style of the subcontinent should be considered mediocre because they do not follow Western trends. However, if an abstract painting can be called modern, as many of our writers suggest, then all miniature paintings are modern because they maintain a sense of abstraction.(10) This suggests that a paradox exists between abstraction and imitation of Western art. If any painting which is abstract can be called modern then miniature paintings can

easily fall under the category of modern. On the contrary, if Western and European trends which were seen in adaptation of realism in the subcontinent can also be called modern. It is also true if one take this term in its general sense denoting and referring to something new. From this perspective every realistic or expressionistic painting should be called modern because it is a clear derivation from the existing style of painting, such as miniature painting. The above mentioned contradiction is paradoxical and enough to confuse to our young generation. This contradiction is much clearer in this statement by Hassan: “The rural landscape is a great favorite with the genre painters who have had their academic grilling at the Punjab University, under the forbidding supervision of Anna Molka Ahmed.”(11) This statement embodies the paradox in question, assimilating genre paintings like landscape with the Punjab University and Anna Molka Ahamed’s supervision as forbidding. It also contains a sense of mockery that Anna Molka trained students in genre paintings specifically realistic landscapes.

Similarly, Akbar Naqvi misrepresents Anna Molka Ahmed when he states that she “was a pioneer of women art education in the country. She had nothing to do with modern art, and did not understand it.”(12) Akbar Naqvi even goes so far to insult Anna Molka Ahmed that she asked one student “to get out of the department because she was experimenting with new materials and methods.”(13) He further states: Anna Molka was supposed to design syllabus when she was only twenty two years old. At the age she was inexperienced which was not good for the Department of Fine Arts. However, “what she had brought to Lahore was a youthful enthusiasm, and dated style of painting to which she stuck and painted local subjects from her adopted land as an outsider. Anna Molka’s art lacked the depth which helped Ustad Allah Bukhsh and, later on, the modern painters, in adapting Europe to their own land, its culture and tradition.”(14) Akbar Naqvi in his book *Image and Identity*, clearly assimilates abstract paintings with the modern, such as, under the heading of “The Modern Angle” he states, “the painters in this section are those who paint in a style which is called non-figurative and abstract.”(15) The studies such as Ijaz ul Hassan’s *Painting in Pakistan* and Akbar Naqvi’s *Image and Identity* are among few books which are written on Pakistani art. Our young generation and even the public are left with no choice but to read these books. From this perspective, it might be one of the major reasons that our people and even the students of fine arts tend to assimilate modern with the abstract and any influences

coming from the West. The problem gets even worse when Akbar Naqvi comments on Anna Molka's style of painting in these words: "Anna Molk's style obfuscated the view to the extent that what one saw was the pigment. A style invented by painters of deep subjectivity was used by her descriptively." What Naqvi is trying to imply is that Anna Molka was just throwing paints on her canvases devoid of any subjective approach. Moreover, it also suggests that her paintings do not contain any deeper meaning nor do they represent any emotional side of the artists but only the pigment or in other words paints applied on the canvas. It needs to be understood that Naqvi is not only disregarding the merit of a great artist but also confusing the reader. Interestingly, when American artist Jackson Pollock's started to throw paint on his huge canvases it was considered artist's expression. In *Art Through the Ages* the author describes Pollock method of painting as action painting. It states, "Pollock would roll out a large canvas on the floor and drip and splatter paint on it while he himself was energetic motion along its edge or sometimes within it. For him, the expression of the artist's whole content, which is inward, is directed by mysterious psychic forces..."(16) In Pollock's case throwing pigments becomes the psychic force, but in Anna Molka case its "coruscation of Van Gogh's surface and texture," which according to Naqvi, has been taken by her as a reference in a poor manner, because she was unable to be "eclectic enough to forge her style from diverse sources."(17)

In a truer sense the term *modern* has been derived from the Latin *modo* (ablative(18) of *modus*). According to Lois Cassandra Hamrick, "the ablative *modo*, denoting way of doing, is closely allied with *modo*,--that is "fashion" or "custom. *Mode* in turn, is a key element in the ... [development of modern and modernity because] that is the idea of belonging to 'a new period, the present time, our own era.'"(19) This statement is important for the understanding of modern and its transition into modernity. It suggests, modern is something new and modernity something that relates that new with the era in which one is living. Hamrick further suggests that the notion of temporality is important because it reflects a sense of transition.(20) What seems important is the notion of transition from one concept to another which lays the foundation of history and imitates the true spirit of one's own time. If one agrees upon this understanding of the modern then even the realistic style cultivated by realistic artist, expressionistic style loved by Anna Molka Ahmed are definitely modern because they broke with the traditional style of miniature

paintings. Moreover, if one realist artist is modern then his/her contemporary can also be considered modern because they are definitely ahead of their existing condition. This is perfectly appropriate to consider that when John Canady wrote his famous book *Mainstreams of Modern Art* and Bernard S. Myers *Modern Art in the Making*, there emphasis was not on what is modern or abstract but what is new to their generation. They attempted to discover the major breakthrough which nineteenth century artists were representing in their artworks. They looked at the broader technical, conceptual and theoretical changes, so that they can trace what is modernism and not what is modern. In tracing the mainstreams of modern art they considered not only the present but also the past and the future. These writers also avoided to explicate who is modern and who is not.

It is fundamental fact, that whenever one analyzes the major artistic styles of the past and present they become more discernible if they are viewed through the cultural condition of that time period. Paul wood in his essay “Writing Art History, Two Snapshots: 1900 and 2000” writes:

Modern art can thus be related to the changing forms of modern life even when it does not depict modernity. In fact, almost no modern art has consisted of straightforward depiction of the characteristics phenomena of modern life: of cars, say, or aeroplanes, or skyscrapers, let alone mobile telephones and computers. Indeed, the art that would for most people stand as the most characteristic type of modern art, namely abstract art, does not depict anything at all. There is a paradox here, or if not a paradox exactly, then certainly a notable state of affairs. (21)

Then he takes Renaissance art as an example, which he calls was mainly about picturing and compares it with the twentieth century art. He believes the discovery of new forms and new means of expression was basically the demand of the period in order to meet the demands of new conditions and new experiences. Therefore, the art which ultimately seems to be appropriated these needs was not the one which comes under the title of modern but modernity. He further maintains, no doubt it is modern because it gave something new to its generation, “precisely to the extent that it did not offer secondary imitations or reflections of modern reality but comes to achieve its own independent reality within the overarching sphere of modern condition.”(22) Woods clears away many discrepancies and paradoxes

by explaining what is modern. He suggests, abstract art can best be defined by the term “Modernism” and not “Modern.” According to Wood: Modernism has been a contested term, but in its most influential sense it has been used to emphasize not modern art’s thorough going implication in modern life but its distinctness within it...the modernism foregrounded the claim for art’s autonomy with respect to the wider modern condition.”(23)

Under the influences of globalization the boundaries between Eastern and Western are defusing. Now the artist’s experiences are broadening, therefore, the terms such as modern are being disregarding in favor of modernism and modernity. As modernity look for ways and traits which controls the conceptual outlook of human being in society. Modernity can also be seen as a loss of unity, loss of sharing and loss of sacrifice for a more general cause. In order to understand a work which is closely related to our own age one needs to understand the aesthetics of modernity. Because only then one can relate some of the fundamental changes with the present day art. According to Jürgen Habermass, “esthetic modernity is characterized by attitudes which find common features in a changed consciousness of time.”(24) This aesthetic change anticipates an undefined future, search for new means of expressions, exaltation of the postmodern society and historical acceleration. Modernity has imposed new values upon us which are transitory and elusive.(25)

At the same time, modernity has catalyzed the loss of individualism. Due to which, anarchy has dominated our cultural and social life. Under such circumstances an artist seems confused between what is traditional, modern, abstract, modernism and modernity. A true understanding of these terms can make each moment, a moment of revelation, a phantom of aesthetic experience of modernity. By many thinkers, Modernity is being taken as a death warrant of cultural and traditional norms. It is also being taken as death sentenced to modern and modernism, because it’s a victory of complete pessimistic forces, it is a death of creativity. Bauman suggests, “Modernity seeks order and stability but ends up creating a social world that is unstable, restless and unresolved.”(26)

Like every other country art in Pakistan is also motivated by the ideas of the dominant class. If one analyzes the art in Pakistan, it becomes immediately transparent that how the ideology of contemporary culture has imbued deeply in the consciousness of those who are overpowering and are being considered the creator of academic knowledge. The Paradox of modernity is basically the

creation of such forces that maneuver the conceptual understanding of art. Consequently, we are seeing an art seen which is faltered due to its not being modern. It is exactly the same paradox which is called 'burden' by Bauman. It is the paradox, which has been failed to preserve the real essence of modernity in form of uniformity and clarity and has been failed to resolute the real problem of the concept of modern as well.

References

- (1) Julain Thomas, *Archaeology and Modernity*, New York : Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004, 2.
- (2) Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446) was a Florentine architect. He was employed to build a cathedral in Florence, generally known as *Florence Cathedral*. Brunelleschi was considered master of Gothic style. He was specifically famous to built high buildings with mighty domes with proper methods of vaulting, with hugedomes. According Gombrich, the architects of America and Europe followed his rules for more than five hundred years. See E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, London: Phaidon Press Ltd. 1978, 169.
- (3) Gombrich, 169
- (4) Gombrich, 173
- (5) Quoted in Akbar Naqvi, *Image and Identity: Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947-97*. Karachi: Oxford University press, 1998.19.
- (6) Quoted in Naqvi, 24
- (7) Ijaz ul Hassan, *Painting in Pakistan*, Lahore: Ferozsons (Pvt.) 1996, 54
- (8) Hassan, 56.
- (9) Quoted in Hassan, 73
- (10) In the general use of the term, abstraction refers to something away from nature.
- (11) Hassan, 75.
- (12) Naqvi, 179
- (13) Naqvi, 179
- (14) Naqvi 180.
- (15) Naqvi, 606
- (16) Horst de la Croix and Richard G. Tansey, *Art Through the Ages*, 8the ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publisher, 1976, 940

- (17) Naqvi 186.
- (18) According to Wikipedia Encyclopedia, in linguistics, ablative is a name given to cases in various languages whose common characteristic is that they mark motion away from something. It means that ablative (adj.) represents a sense of separation between things or ideas.
- (19) Lois Cassandra Hamrick, Gautier as “Seer” of the Origion of Modernity in Baudelaire” in Baudelaire and The Poetics of Modernity, Ed. Patricia A. Ward, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001.31-32.
- (20) Hamrick, 32
- (21) Paul wood, “Writing Art History, Two Snapshots: 1900 and 2000” in Jason Gaiger, ed. *Frameworks for Modern Art*, England: Yale University Press, 2003, 21
- (22) Wood, 21
- (23) Wood, 21
- (24) Jürgen Habermass, “Modernity — An Incomplete Project” in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Ed. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, London: Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1997. 1000.
- (25) Jürgen Habermass, 1000.
- (26) Quoted in, Julian Thomas, *Archaeology and Modernity*, Julian, London: Routledge, 2004, 46.

