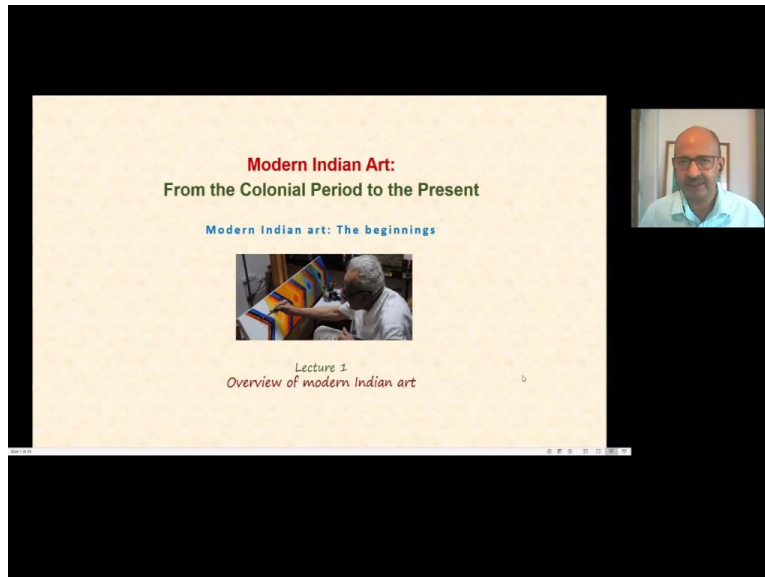


Modern Indian Art from the Colonial Period to the Present
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Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur
Lecture 1
Overview of Modern Indian Art

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Welcome viewers to NOC's online course on Modern Indian Art from the Colonial Period to the Present. As you all know, this course will have a series of 20 lectures divided into four weeks and each week will have five lectures. So accordingly, I have titled each of the weeks separately. For example, the subtitle for the first week is Modern Indian art, the beginnings, because in this week, that is the first five lectures will be the various important moments which we consider as the beginnings of Modern Indian art.

So remember, here we do not talk about one singular beginning, but we talk about 'beginning's. That is, there are several moments, several pioneering moments, several pioneering artists who have contributed to the beginning of Modern Indian art. And it is this beginning that makes the study of Modern Indian art a little critical. Or let me put it this way, to understand the beginning or beginnings of Modern Indian art is extremely crucial to us, because unless we have the clear knowledge about the situation, the circumstances under which Modern Indian art began to take its shape, we will never be able to follow the entire trajectory till now.

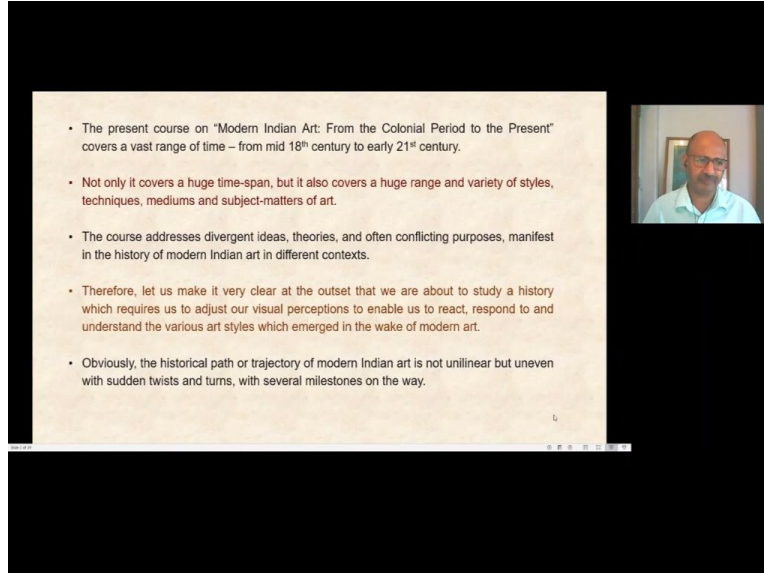
Therefore, we do follow history. We follow a certain chronology in order to understand Modern Indian art. But right at the outset, let me also make it very clear that this particular course is not merely on history. We are here to study Modern Indian art from the colonial period to the present, not to gather data or information, something that is easily available, thanks to the information technology today. So we would like to spend more time and put more emphasis on not the data but on something more important, that is appreciation.

How do you appreciate Modern Indian art? Given the fact that Modern Indian art is full of diverse examples of art, something that is going to really put us into some trouble, trouble of comprehending Modern Indian art within one single trend, which is absolutely impossible. So we need to create different frameworks of understanding as we move on from one time period to another, from one phase to another, this is something that we will be doing all along.

But at the same time, this is also true, that at every moment we need to sensitize ourselves. We need to re-sensitize ourselves to understand Modern Indian art visually, to understand Modern Indian art aesthetically, to enable us to appreciate Modern Indian art in terms of its visual styles, visual language and also the visual propositions. Therefore, at the end of this course, what is expected is this- that the students will have the required amount of ability to understand, appreciate Modern Indian art. In other words, they will begin to enjoy Modern Indian art despite its diversity, despite its historical complications.

Now, let us move on with the slides today. And today, as you can see the subtitle lecture number one is all about the overview of Modern Indian art.

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- The present course on "Modern Indian Art: From the Colonial Period to the Present" covers a vast range of time – from mid 18th century to early 21st century.
- Not only it covers a huge time-span, but it also covers a huge range and variety of styles, techniques, mediums and subject-matters of art.
- The course addresses divergent ideas, theories, and often conflicting purposes, manifest in the history of modern Indian art in different contexts.
- Therefore, let us make it very clear at the outset that we are about to study a history which requires us to adjust our visual perceptions to enable us to react, respond to and understand the various art styles which emerged in the wake of modern art.
- Obviously, the historical path or trajectory of modern Indian art is not unilinear but uneven with sudden twists and turns, with several milestones on the way.

Now, as I have already told you, the present course on Modern Indian art from the colonial period to the present covers a vast range of time, from the mid-18th century to the early 21st century. Now in the context of traditional arts, ancient art, this is really speaking, not a vast range of time, but as far as Modern history is concerned, this is a vast range of time, because things begin to happen very rapidly in succession during the Modern period.

Therefore, whether you study the history of fine arts or you study the history of literature or you study the history of philosophy, science, anything for that matter, when you are studying them in the context of Modern art, there is no way to escape the rapid evolution that is taking place, despite the fact that the time range may not be so vast. So the vastness that we are talking about at the moment is not really about a numerical vastness, we are talking about the density of the happenings that took place during this period from the mid-18th century till today.

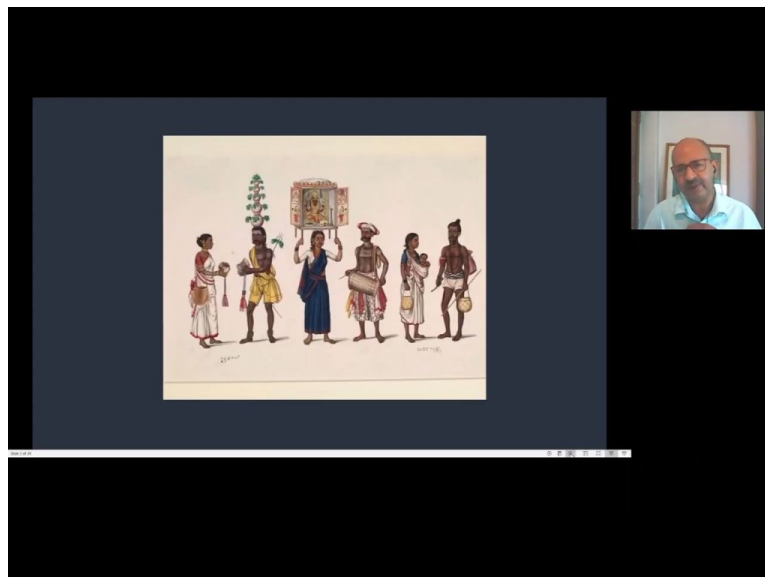
Now this course not only covers a huge time span, but it also covers a huge range and variety of styles, techniques, mediums, subject matters of art. And every moment we need to, as I told you, re-sensitize ourselves to change the framework through which we look at a work of art, that needs to be changed every time. In other words, we need to change our spectacles, through which we look at work of art, because each work of art, age different style also demands a different way of viewing them.

Now this course addresses divergent ideas, different theories, and often conflicting purposes manifest in the history of Modern Indian art in different contexts. Therefore let us make it very clear at the outset that we are about to study a history, which requires us to adjust our visual perceptions accordingly to enable us to react, respond to different artworks, and also understand the various art styles, which emerged in the wake of Modern art.

Now obviously, the historical path or trajectory of Modern Indian art is not unilinear. The trajectory or the journey of Modern Indian art is uneven, often trudging over rough patches, sometimes smooth, sometimes extremely disturbing with sudden twists and turns, with several milestones on the way. And it is because of the several milestones, we do not ever say that we can pinpoint one beginning of Modern Indian art. Actually there are several beginnings.

There are several very significant historical moments, moments which have contributed to the beginning of Modern Indian art. So how the beginning of Modern Indian art has happened, will depend on the variety of moments that we are looking at, not at one singular moment, but different moments.

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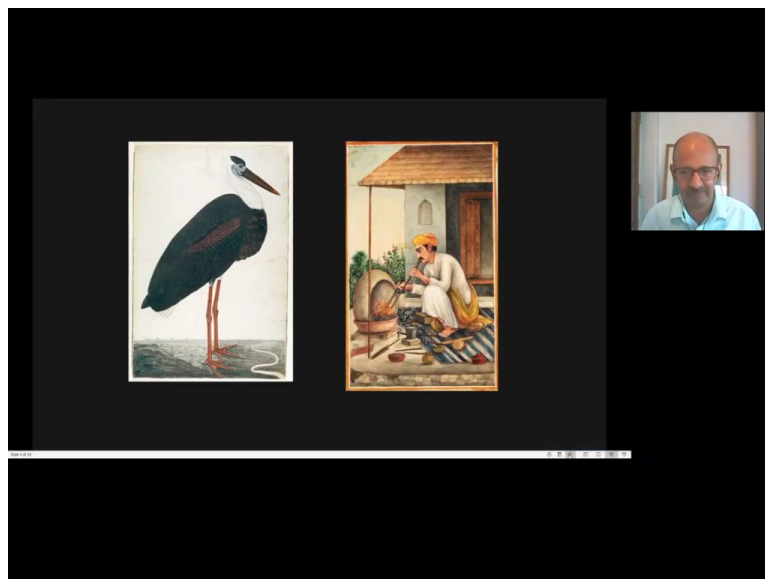


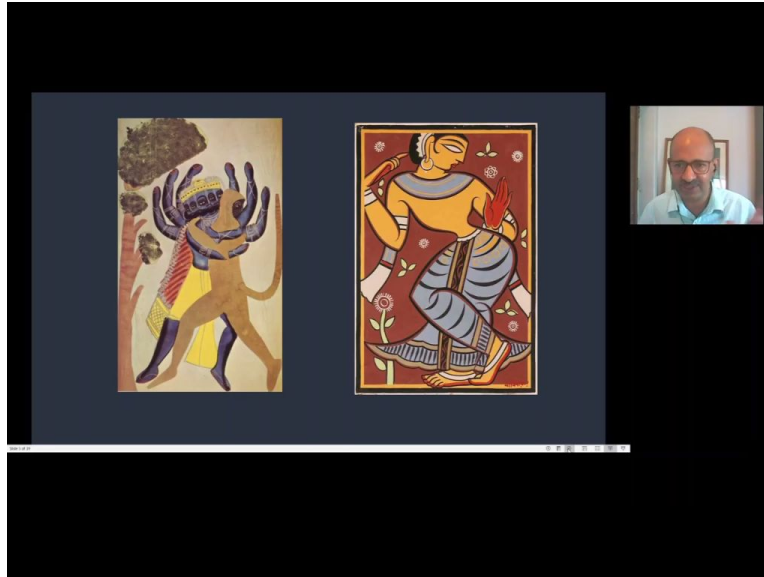
Now, if we try to browse through quickly and chronologically the range of different art forms or art examples that we are going to encounter in this course, we will find that this is, or we are

about to tell you an amazing story. The story of Modern Indian art is truly amazing, primarily because of the variety that I am talking about.

Now, one of the early examples of Modern Indian art that you are looking at right now and let me tell you at this moment, that in today's lecture, that is an overview of Modern Indian art, I am not going to name either the artist or the movement of the face anything. In any case, these are the information that I will be providing you in my subsequent lectures. Therefore, just look at the images and see how your eyes, your visual perception, struggles to adjust from one art to another, from one example to another.

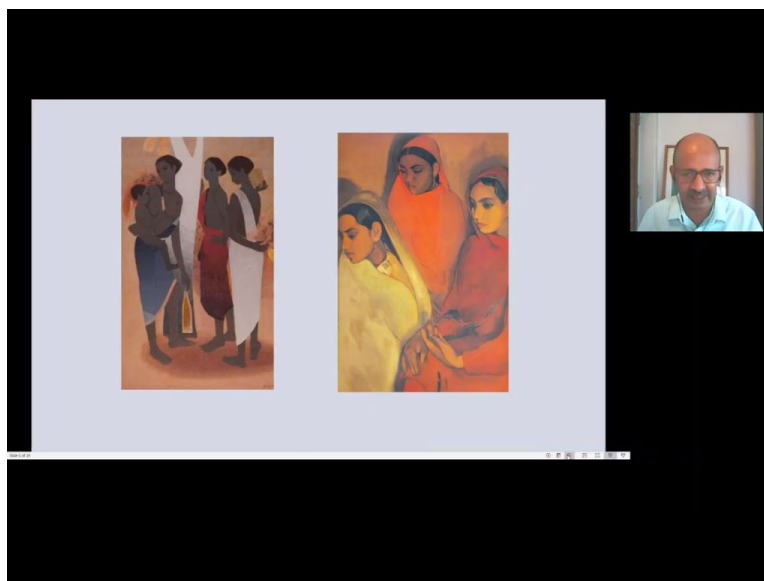
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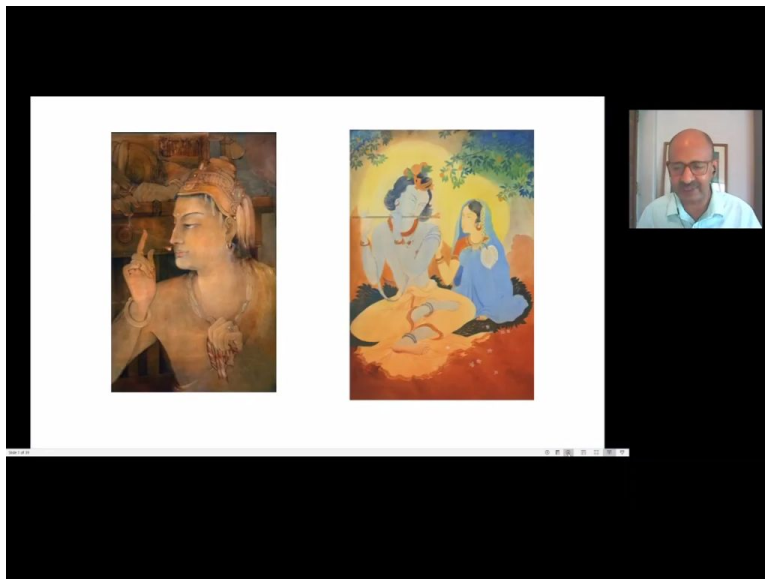
So these are the early examples of Modern Indian art. And then, as you move on, you see, again, these are also from the early phase, but pretty different from what you just saw now. I am not going to explain the differences right now. For that, we have some subsequent lectures dedicated to these subjects, these topics. But I just want you to feel the differences visually respond to the differences that we are looking at in these examples, completely different style, different kinds of color scheme and different looks.

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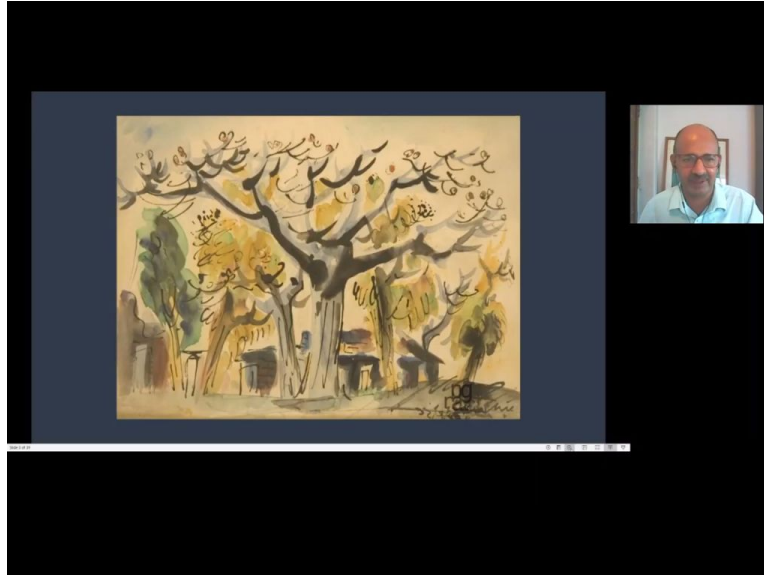
Again, these two paintings are so different from the earlier examples. Again, here we are slowly witnessing the evolution of Modern art. And if you have noticed, it is not only about style, it is also about subject matter. For example, in these two examples by two different artists, but strangely sharing a similar painterly temperament, not exactly same, but somewhat similar. You see that the subject matters, they are clearly derived from the local experience of your surroundings, of your villages, which this is not.

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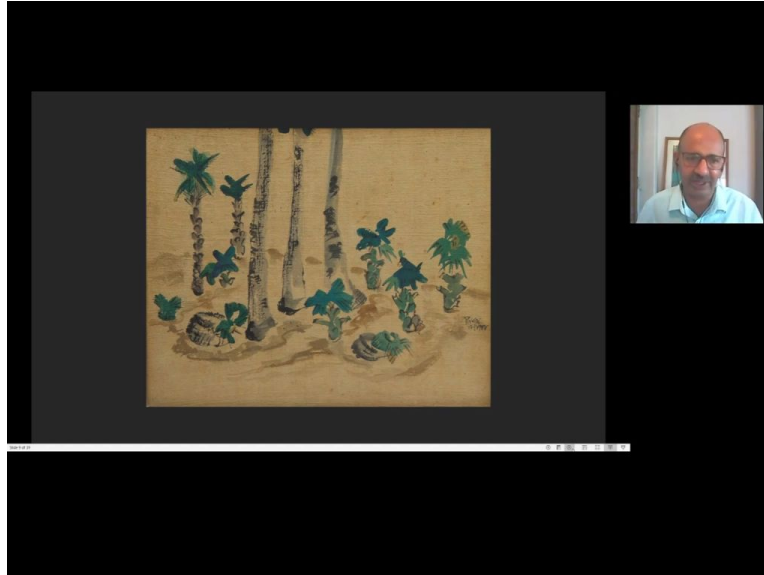
Again from these paintings, when we move on to this, at the first glance, it is difficult to accept that these are examples of Modern Indian art, primarily because of the subject matters, which are essentially very traditional in the sense, these subject matters remind us of the traditional Indian paintings of Ajanta or miniature paintings, where we see the central emphasis on the subject matters is always on the religion or mythological stories. So how come these paintings become Modern? In what sense? We are going to discuss this also in one of the subsequent classes.

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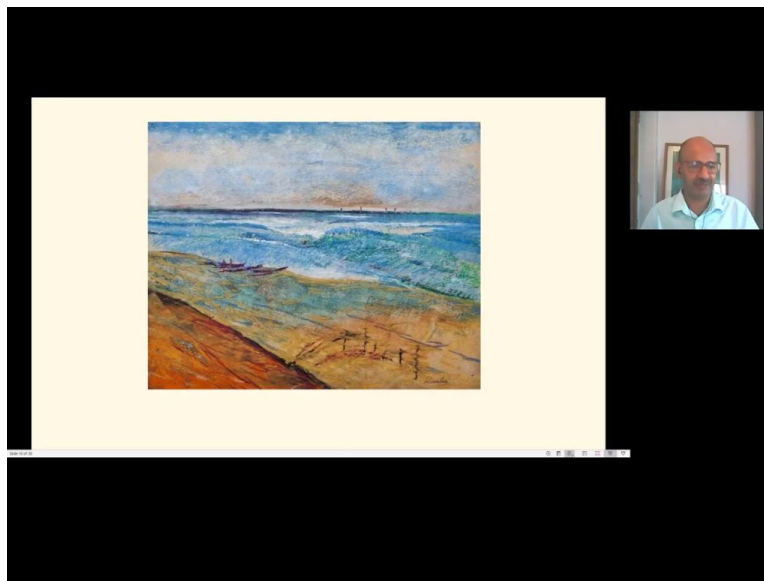
Again, we have a painting right in front of us, where the subject matter has nothing to do with tradition. Obviously, the trees that you see in this painting have been observed by the artist in his own surroundings. But what you rightly notice here is not just what is depicted, that is trees. I am sure that your attention is drawn, not exactly to the objects that are depicted here, that is trees, because you can see that the depiction or the representational character here in this painting is very rough, very quick, very perfunctory, not a detailed drawing of a tree, but a very quick, rough sketchy type of representation of trees, not one tree, but many trees. So you are really noticing here not the objects per se, that is not the trees, but the fact that how the trees have been represented is the main concern here.

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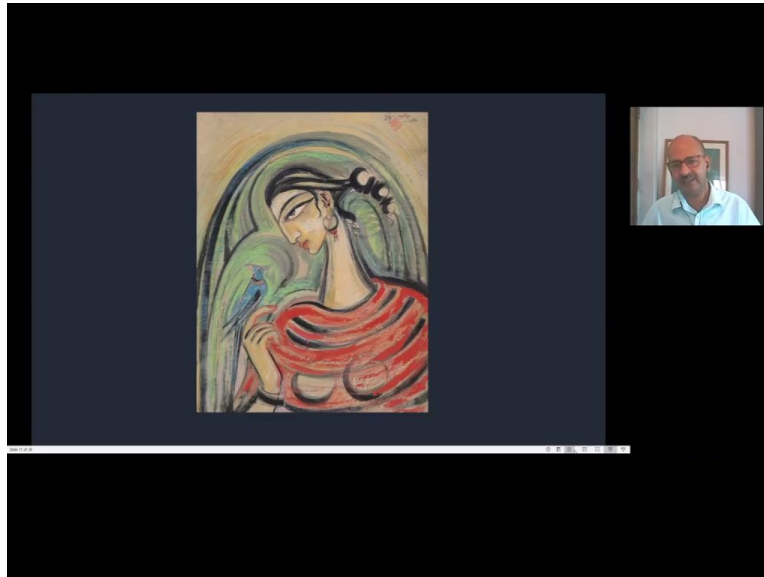
So again, when you look at these kinds of paintings, you actually look at them not to merely identify the objects, or the motifs depicted, but mostly to respond to the methods of painting, the way in which this painting has been done. That is not only the content, but the expression of the content. How you put the content across, that becomes often a very, very important feature of Modern Indian art.

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For example, this seascape by one artist is fascinating not just because the scenery evokes that feeling, that experience of being very close to the sea, but we actually pay attention to the technique of the painting, to the method of this painting, the expression that this painting evokes.

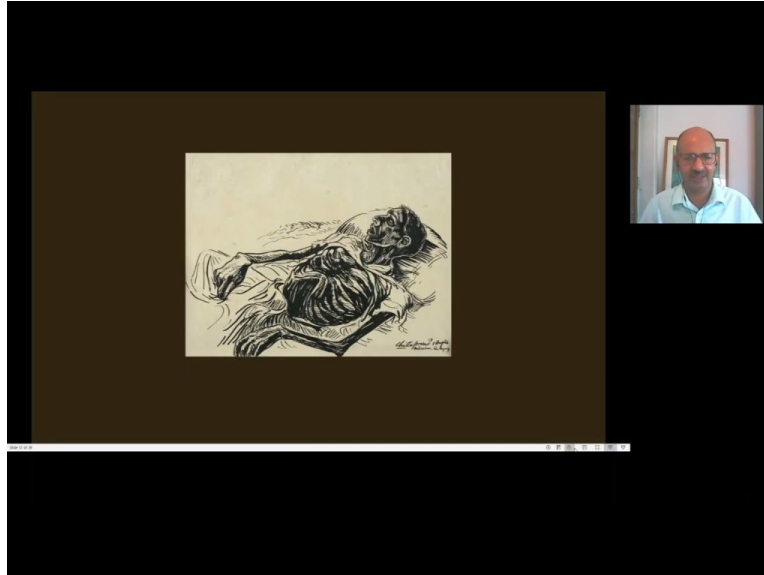
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So in other words, when we look at different kinds of paintings, we not only pay attention to the motifs or the subject matters, or the content, but we at least in the Modern art, we pay more attention to the method of the painting and what in general parlance, we call style, the style of painting, the style of sculpture, the expression of a certain subject matter often becomes more important than the subject matter itself.

For example, the painting that you are looking at right now is so simple that there is not much to talk about the subject matter. But one can go at length describing the style of this painting and this is where Modern Indian art becomes really fascinating for us to look at.

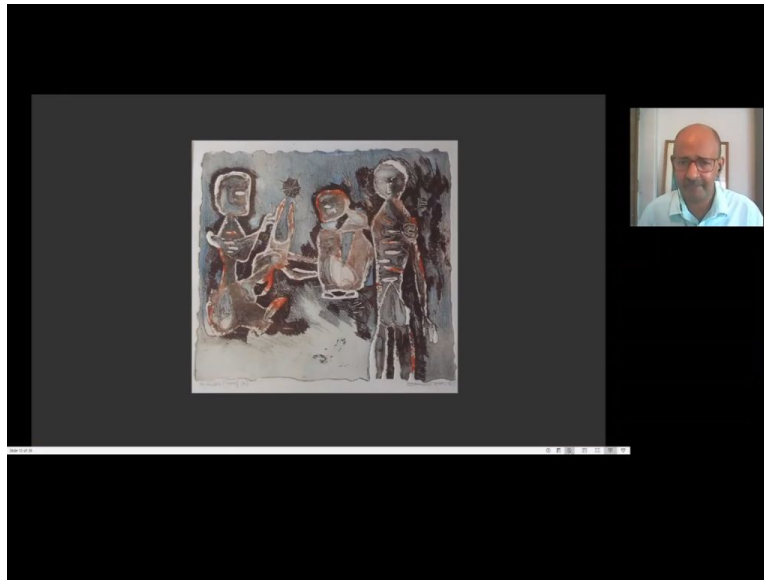
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Now, there are also moments in the history of Modern Indian art, when it is again not the style, but the content that draws your attention like the one that you are looking at right now. I will be talking about the circumstances, the context of this kind of works later in one of the subsequent classes. But right now, even if you do not know the context, even if you do not know the circumstances in which this particular drawing was done, you certainly know there is something about a harsh and hard reality that is being portrayed here.

So in these kinds of works, of course you look at the style, you look at the technique of drawing, but you pay more attention to the content of the art, which is so compelling and often, which is so tragic. So compared to some of the earlier works that we have seen just now like this one, these ones, these ones which are very joyful to say the least, which are very colorful, which are very joyful, which are very pleasant to look at, you may come across works of art like this in the history of Modern art, which are not so joyful, which are tragic, which depict pathetic situations of life.

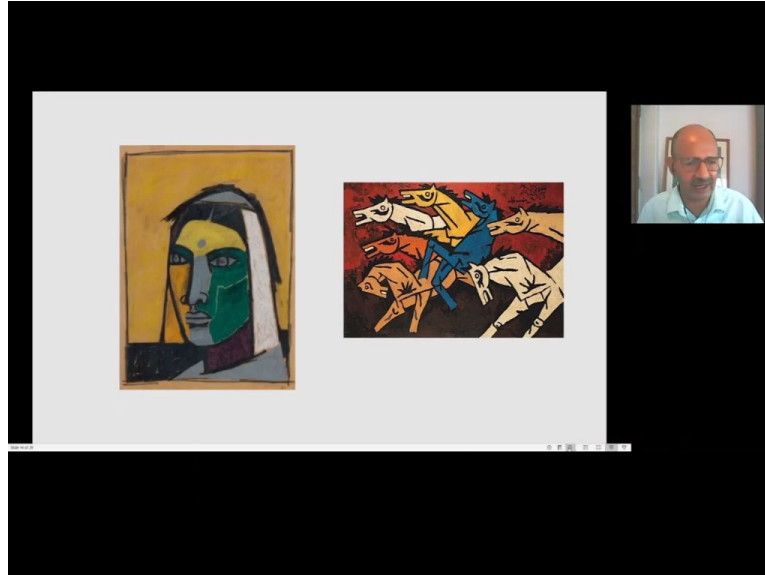
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So we should be ready to accept not only different kinds of styles, but also different kinds of content or subject matters from joyful, pleasant to something very tragic, something very bizarre, something very dark. So the history of Modern art or the range of this history covers every possible emotion that a human being goes through.

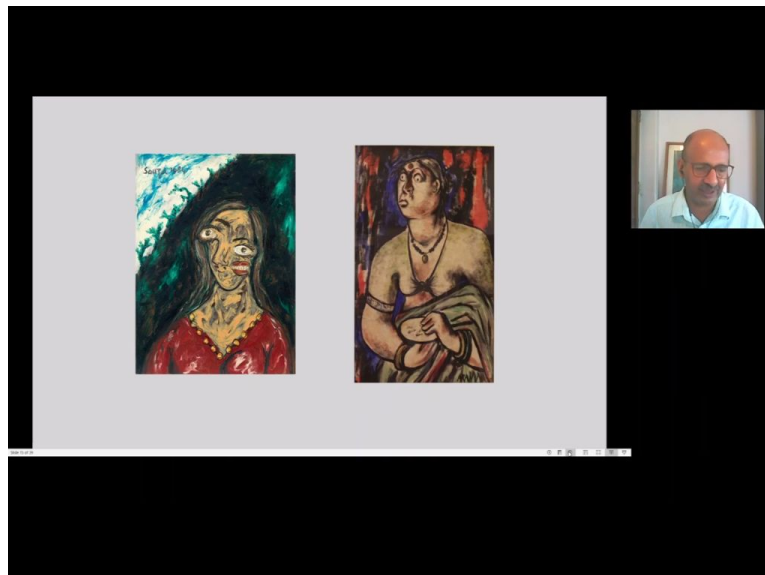
So the whole notion that art or the primary function of art to soothe your mind, to keep you happy, to make the whole act of looking at art very joyful may not be true always. There have been artists, not only in India but throughout the world who have felt that it is their duty to also depict the darker realities of life. Therefore we get both kinds of instances.

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And there are artists like the one here who have explored a very different kind of style or language of expression, where subject matters have often been less important, but how you structure a painting becomes more important.

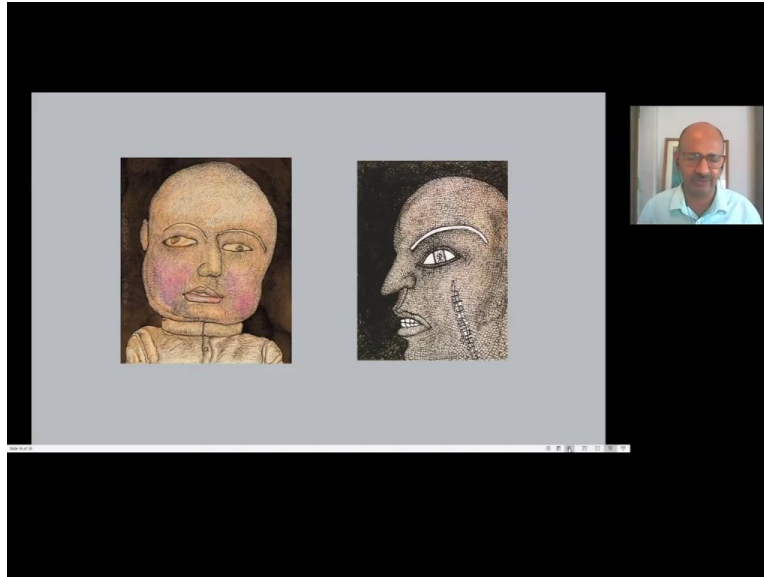
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So there are examples of work of art, where we look at the structural aspects of the paintings or sculptures. And therefore, in Modern art, when you look at these two paintings right in front, right now, you can easily use the word distortion. Now, you would never use the word distortion

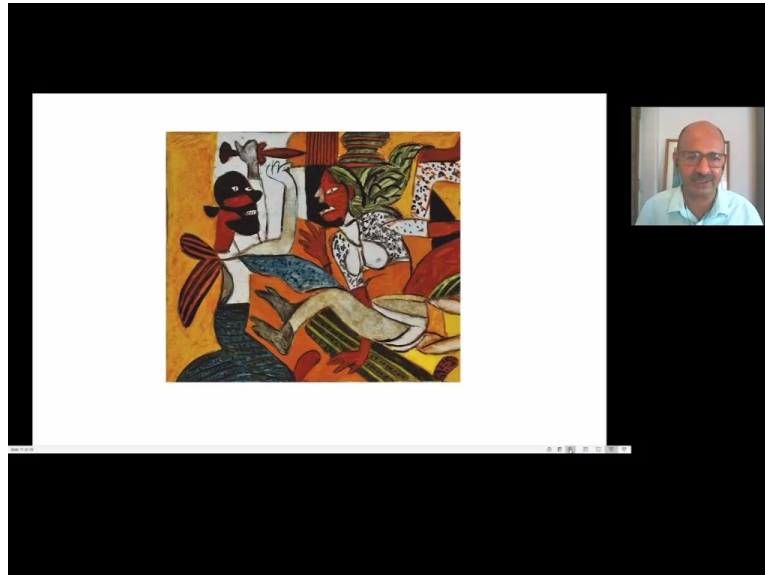
in the context of traditional art. It is only in the context of Modern art, be Indian or Western, you begin to use the word distortion, that often you find terrible distortions of human anatomy, human body, human expression. Now why? Why do Modern artists have to go for all this kind of destruction at the cost of the beauty of the human body? This is also a very, very important issue that we need to discuss and we are certainly going to discuss this in one of our later lectures.

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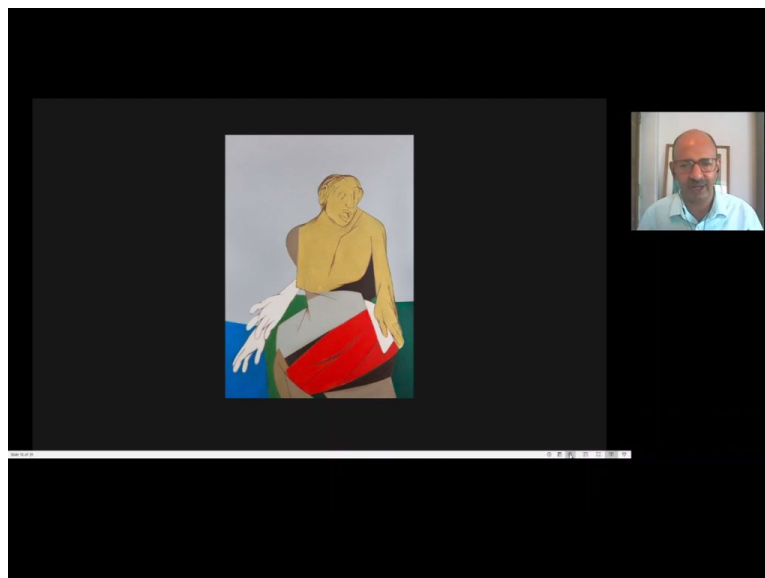
So Modern Indian art is full of ample examples of so-called distortions. Though personally I do not like the word distortion, we are going to find out some suitable word to replace this word distortion. But till then let me use this term, or this word distortion without any derogatory implication. There is no negativity in the way we use that word distortion in the context of certain examples like this in Modern Indian art.

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So it is distortion in the human figures, it is distortion in many other motifs. It is distortion even in the composition of which, there are plenty of examples in Modern Indian art.

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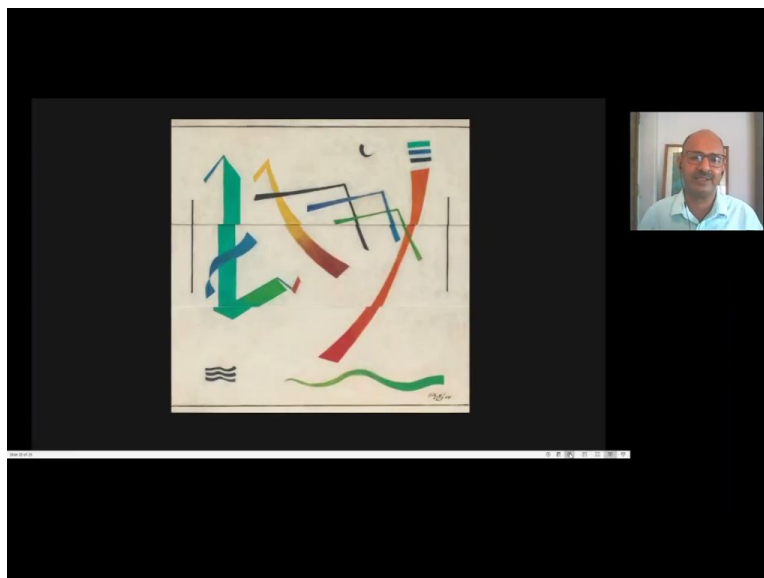
So in Modern art, we have often seen how forms and particularly human bodies have been not just distorted, but fragmented, fragmented into pieces, mutilated in a sense and rearranged in a particular way. Now why do Modern artists often go for this kind of restructuring of the human body? Why can't they remain happy and satisfied with the naturalness of the human body?

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Now, when we say this, we also need to remember that while on the one hand in Modern Indian art, we often see this tendency to leave behind naturalism and move towards a certain kind of restructuring or distortion of forms. On the other hand, we also have examples like this painting or the next one, where it is neither naturalistic, nor distortion, it is entirely abstract.

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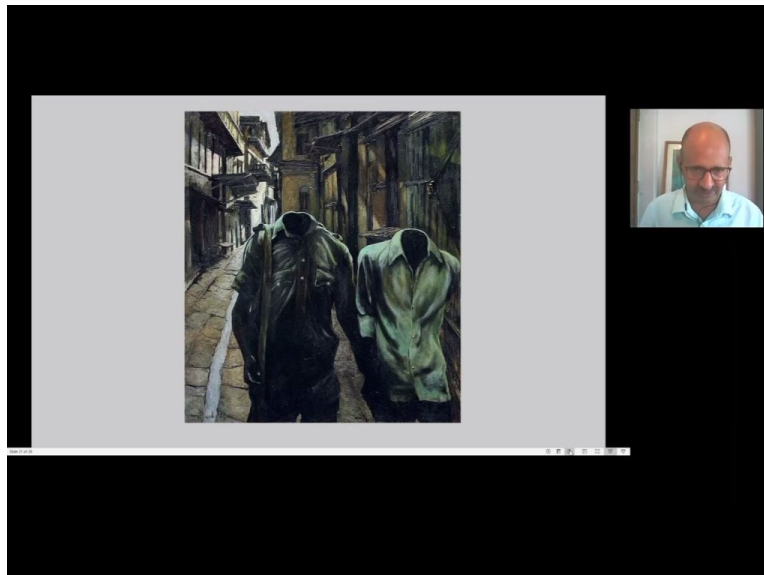


So in Modern Indian art like in Modern Western art, we have brilliant examples of abstract art as well. So basically, the entire history of Modern art in terms of style can be divided into two

categories. Number one, where you find the forms, however distorted they may be- have some identity. They carry some recognition. They can be recognized, they can be identified. Therefore, that category of art is called representational art.

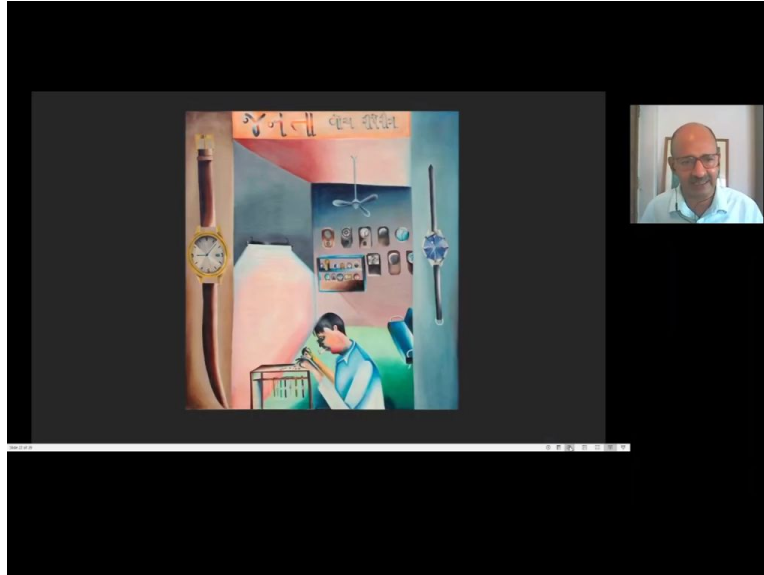
In spite of the distortion still you can make out that it was a woman, that is a man, that is an animal ,so on and so forth. But in this kind of painting where even the artist does not want you to recognize anything, but wants you to enjoy the forms, color, spaces, shapes and lines in their own terms, this kind of art should come under the category of abstract art.

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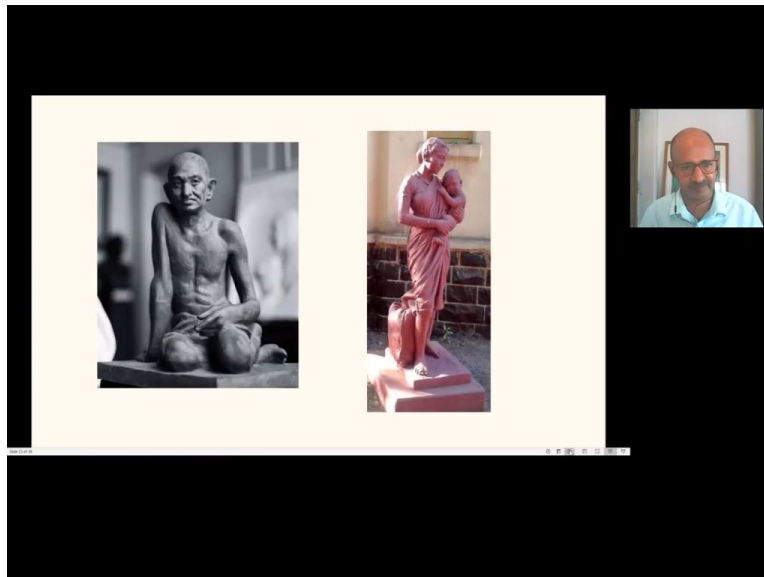
So in Modern Indian art, we see both representational, abstract and sometimes realism is used to again address certain dark and bleak aspects of life and society like this one. And you can also see that how, in spite of realism, there is something unreal about this painting that is the missing heads. What do they indicate- these missing heads? Why do these bodies not have heads? Are they mutilated bodies? If so, how come they are walking? So these are the questions we need to answer when we come back to this phase later in our course.

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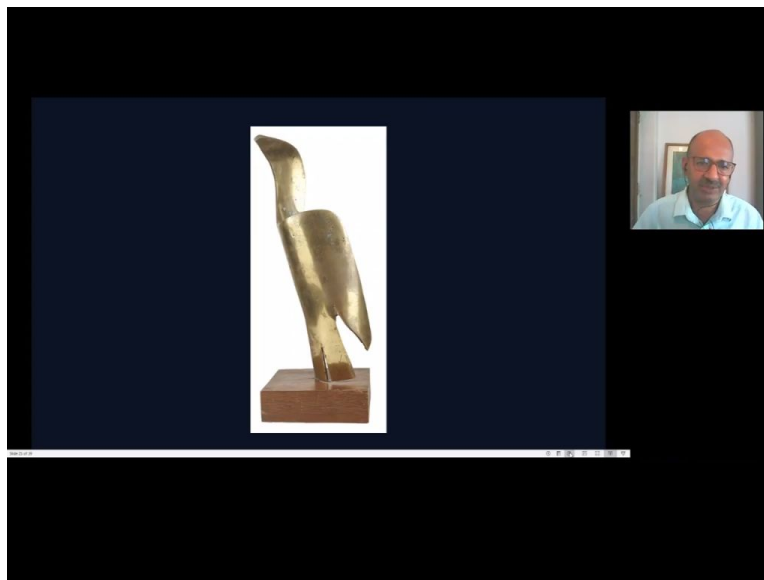
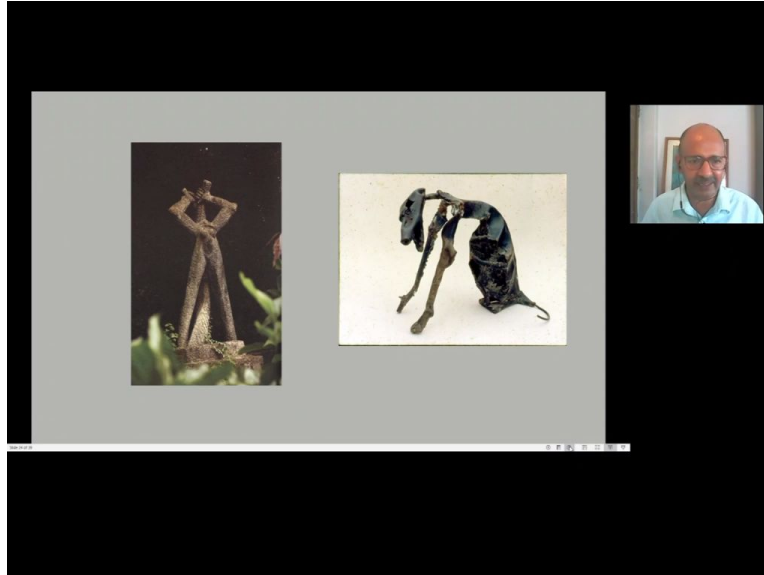
Now there are also paintings like this in Modern art, which are absolutely at least in their appearance, very ordinary, very common place, because of the subject matter again.

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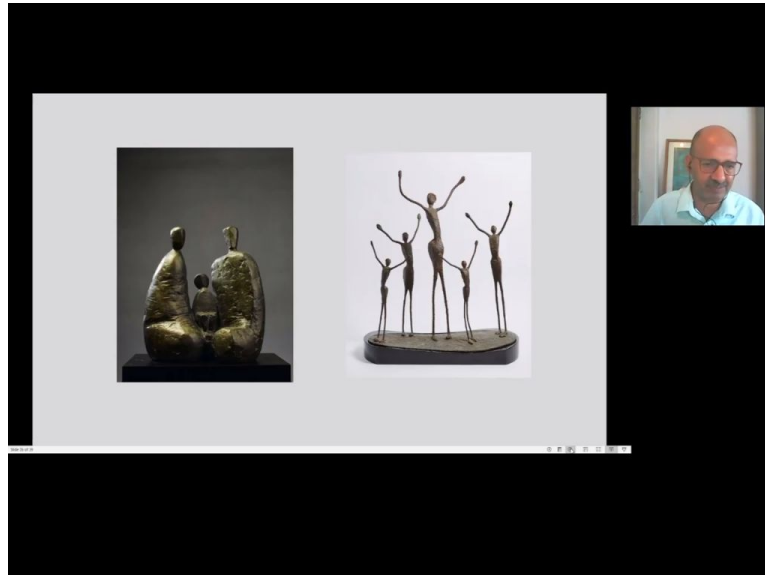
In sculptures too, in the beginning, you get to see quite a few examples of early Modern Indian sculpture, where tendency was to conform or follow the naturalistic, realistic forms of human beings.

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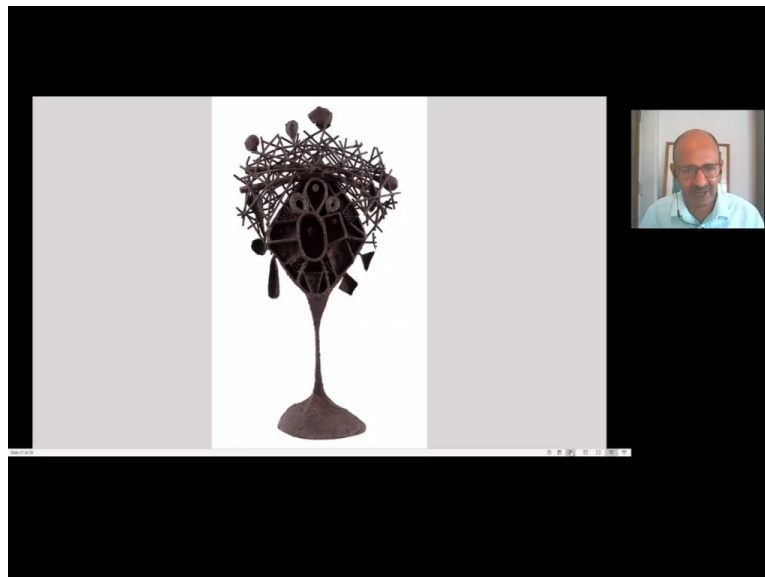
But gradually, again, distortion or restructuring of human anatomy creeps in. It is no more naturalism but it is about stylization. It is about restructuring the anatomy. It is about playing with the body, body of animals, birds and human bodies. And basically, as you can see in this sculpture, the emphasis is not on a realistic or naturalistic representation, but clearly the emphasis is on the shape.

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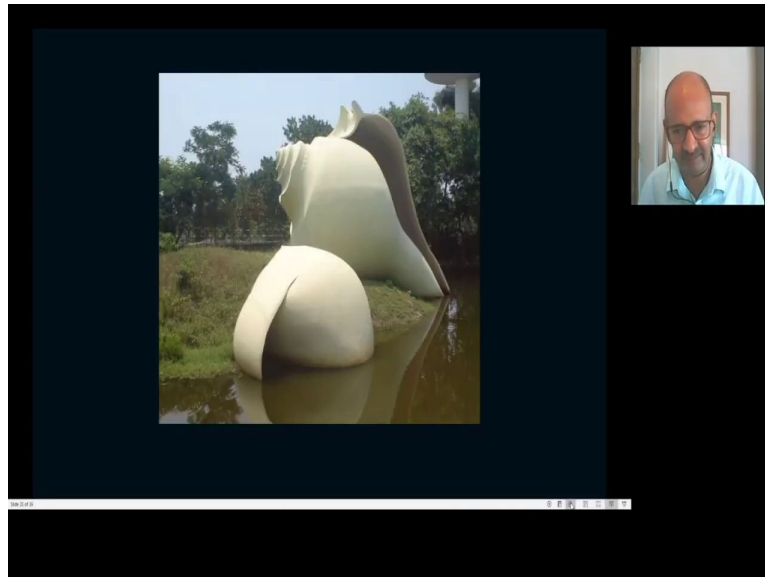
So there are plenty of such examples from Modern Indian sculpture, where shape or different shapes become more important than any naturalistic references.

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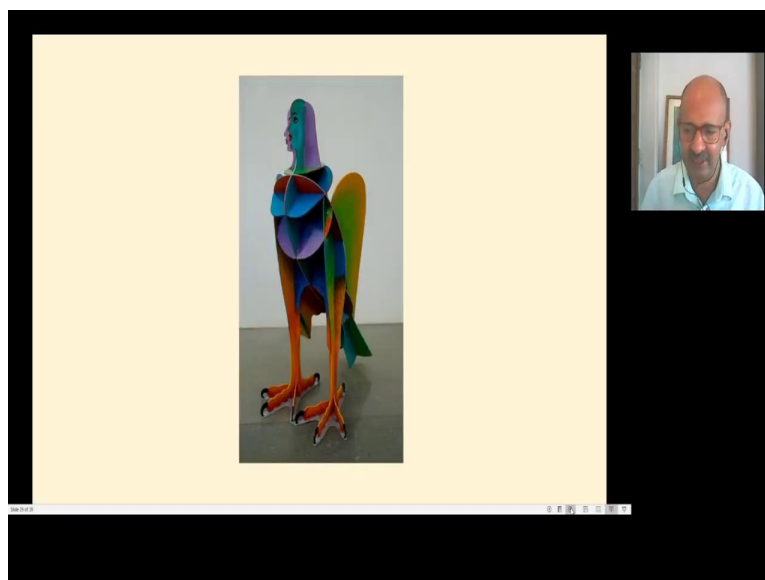
And talking about sculptures, you will also get to see how material and the medium of sculptures undergo rapid, drastic revolutionary changes in the history of Modern art.

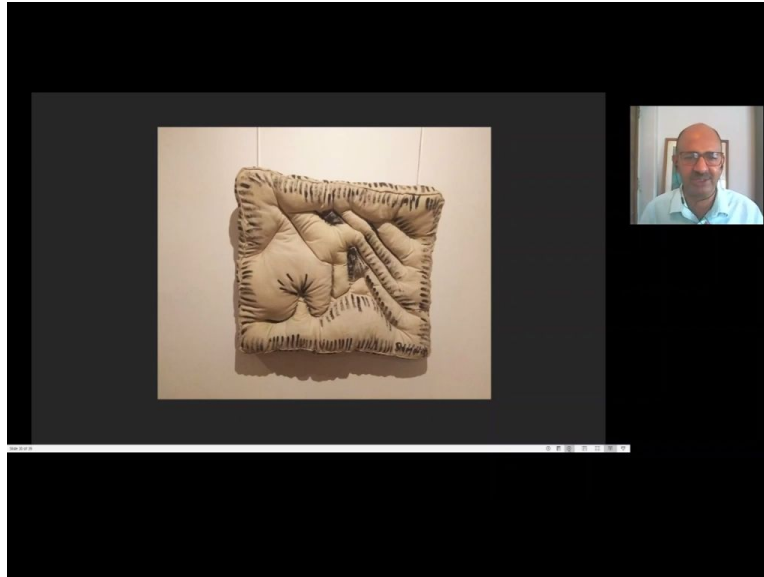
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Therefore, when you look at many examples of Modern Indian art, particularly sculpture, you can clearly see that Modern Indian sculpture refuses to stick only to traditional mediums like stone and terracotta and bronze or plaster, but they explore various mediums like the one that you saw just now- industrial mediums, iron scraps.

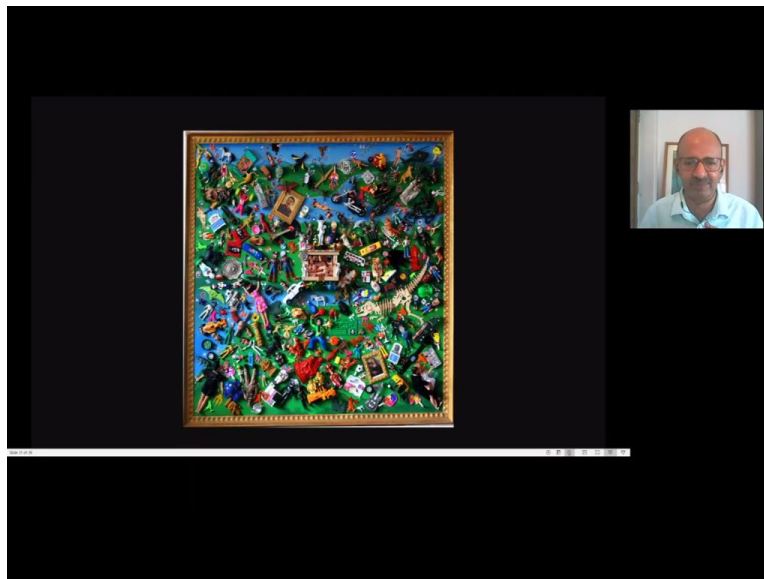
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Then, different kinds of metals, different kinds of industrial materials, even soft materials and therefore we have this term in Modern sculpture, ‘soft sculpture’.

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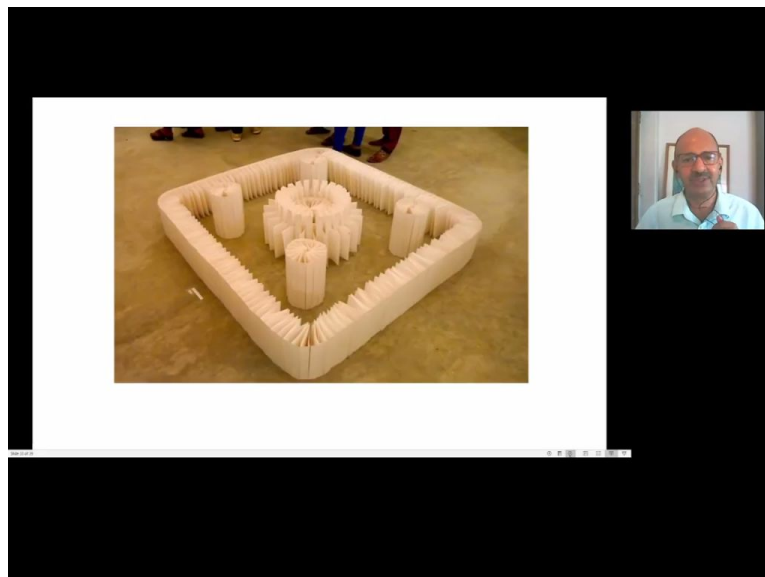
And there can be examples of sculptures, where all the elements have been actually collected or bought from the shop. And then you recreate something out of this collected plastic materials.

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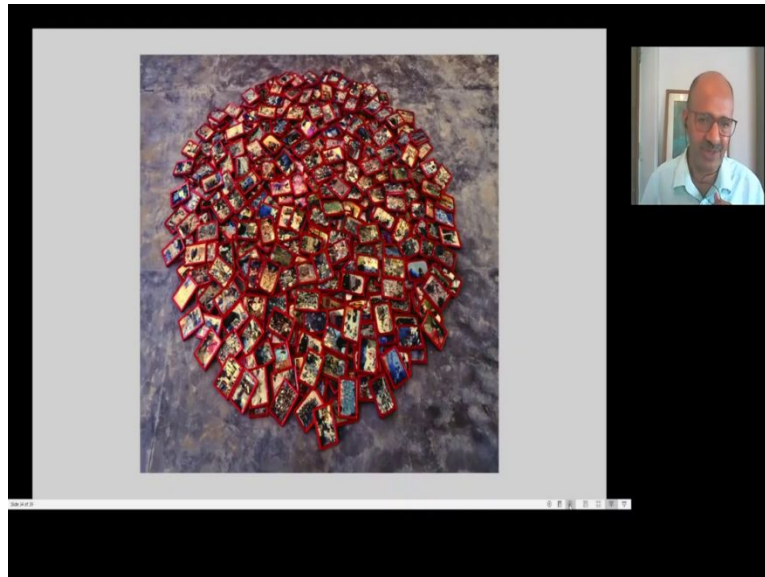
Or for that matter, this sculpture, you see that all these utensils have been actually collected from the shops. So use of industrial materials or industrial technology to create sculpture became a very important and a very significant strain of sculptural activities in Modern Indian art.

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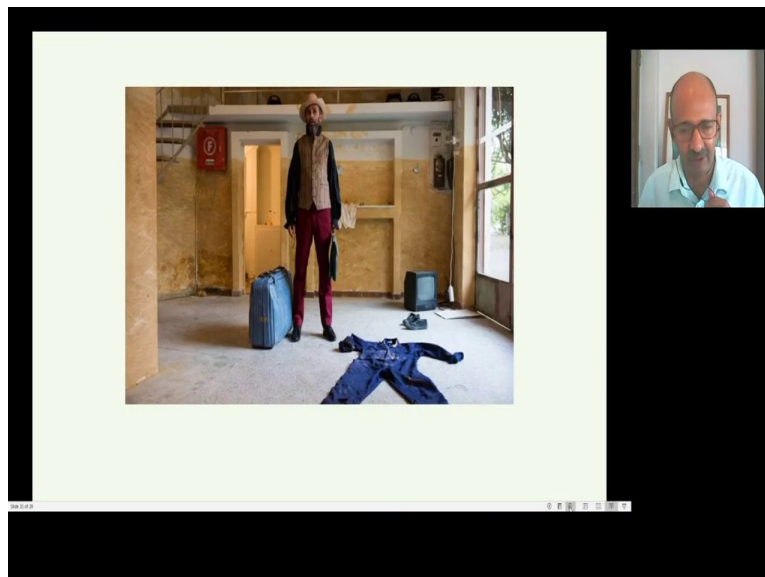
And one can go to the extent of using, as you can see in this example paper, as fragile as weak as paper as the medium or the material for the sculpture.

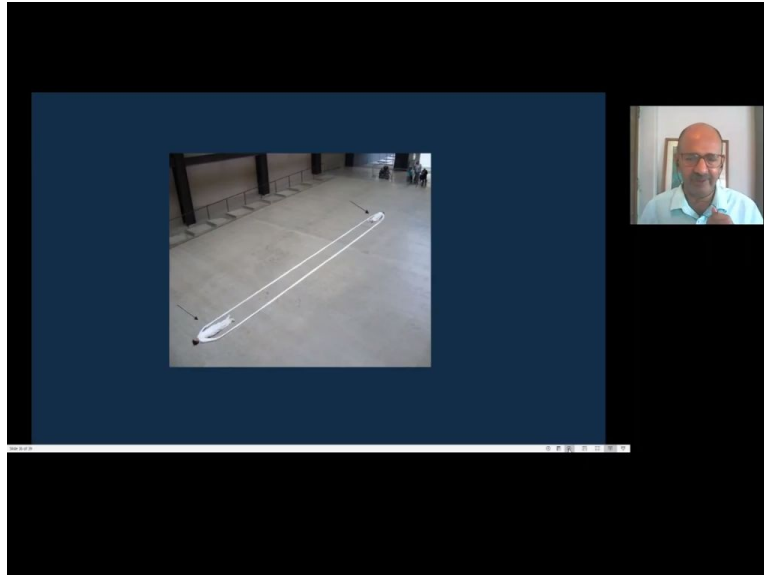
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And then, we also have forms which are neither sculpture, nor painting, but the third category comes up in the history of Modern Indian art that is installation or performance art.

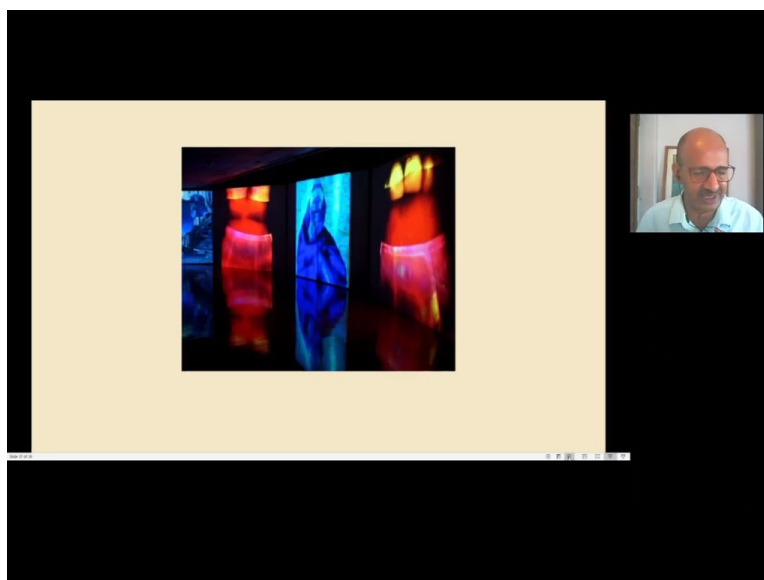
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Like this one also, where the artwork, whether it is a performance art or installation, happens in the real space. It is very difficult to re-install an installation again in another space. Therefore, we talk about site-specific or space-specific art, site-specific installation, site-specific performances, something which cannot be ported or carried from one place to another.

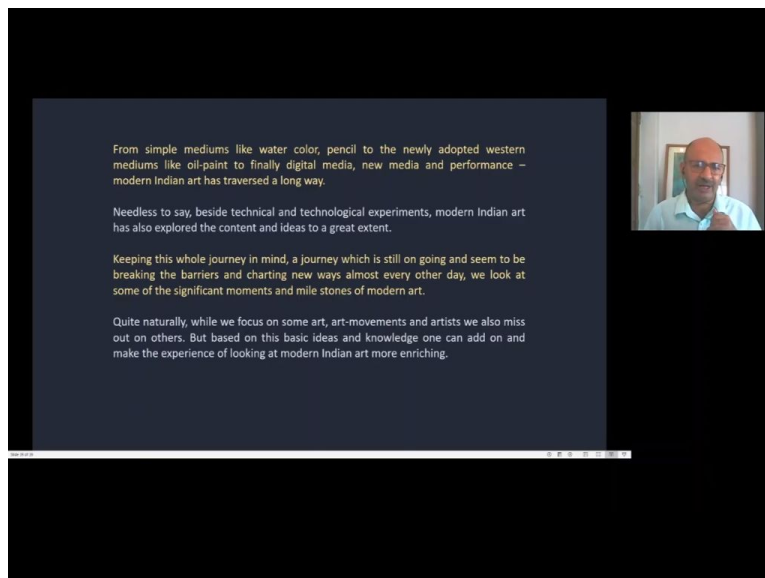
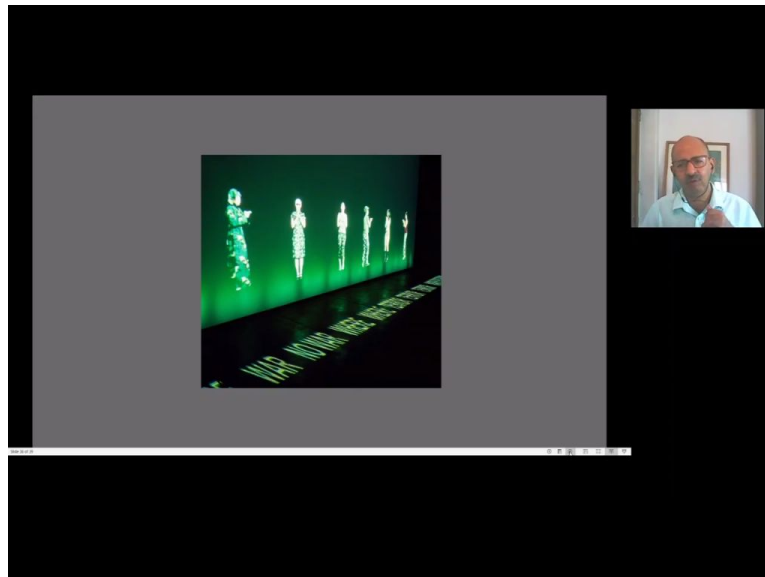
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Then, of course needless to say, that in this digital era artists cannot but get highly attracted to digital technology as a new medium for their expression. And therefore, we have plenty of such

examples, where new media, digital art and different forms of information technology have been used to express their art.

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Now, what is happening now that we have quickly scanned through the range of Modern Indian art is this- from simple mediums, like watercolor, pencil to the newly adopted Western mediums, like oil paint to finally digital media, new media, performance, Modern India has truly traversed a long way. Needless to say, beside technical and technological experiments, Modern Indian art has also explored the content and ideas to a great extent.

Now keeping this whole journey in mind, a journey which is still ongoing and seems to be breaking the barriers and charting new ways almost every other day, we look at some of the significant moments and milestones of Modern art. Yes, it is that rapid. Modern Indian art has become a very happening subject to observe, to study. There is not a moment of lull, a dull time. Every day, every week, there is something new coming up.

So quite naturally, while we focus on some art, art movements and art dates, we also miss out on others. But based on these basic ideas and knowledge, one can add on and make the experience of looking at Modern Indian art more enriching. Now as you see that we may not be able to do justice to Modern Indian art in the span of this course, but we can certainly keep on applying this knowledge. We can keep on applying this perception to extend and expand our knowledge, our examples from the various categories, various artists, various movements, all over the country.

After all, please keep this in your mind that we are talking about the history of Modern art of such a country, which by nature, as you all know, India is full of diversity. Therefore, it is quite natural, its Modern art will also be extremely diverse. And therefore, just one course comprising of 20 lectures is simply not enough, but still we will try to do our best. Thank you.