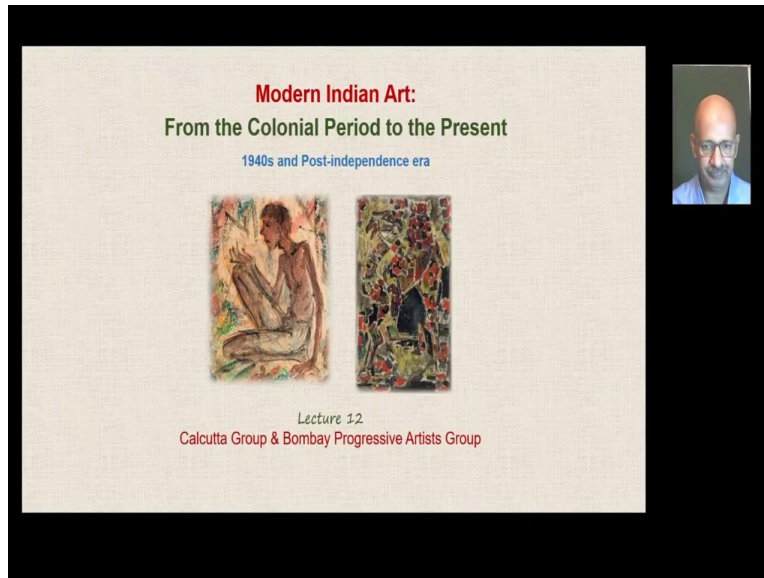


Modern Indian Art from the Colonial Period to the Present
Professor Soumik Nandy Majumdar
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Visva-Bharati
Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur
Lecture 12
Calcutta Group & Bombay Progressive Artists Group

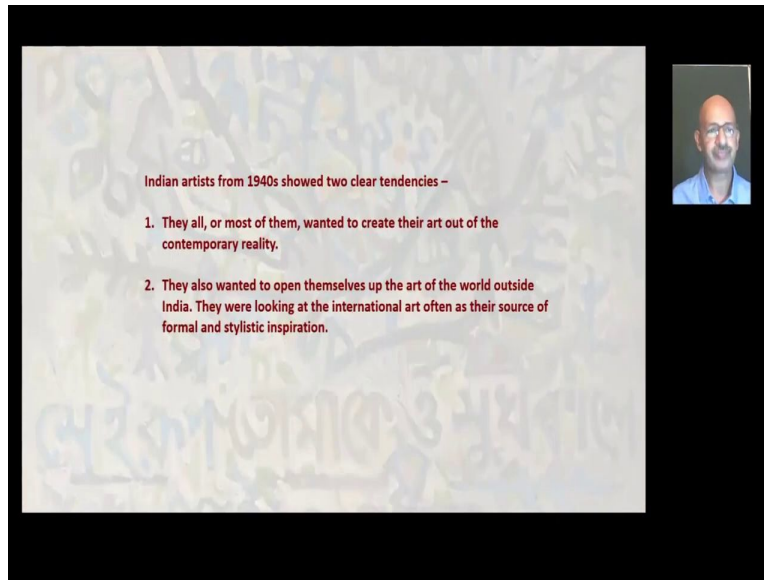
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Hello viewers, welcome to NOC's online course on Modern Indian from the Colonial Period to the Present. This is the second lecture from the third week and third week as you all know is dedicated to the studies of the developments of modern Indian art in the Post-Independent Era and this second lecture from this week is dedicated to the studies of group formations in modern Indian art which started mainly from the 40s.

So, it is interesting to note that from 1940s artists, although working independently otherwise, following their own individual styles, often try to form groups in order to work collectively, sustain themselves within a collective framework, show their works collectively and it is this spirit of collective existence that led to formation of groups- not one or two but, several groups out of which today we are going to mainly focus on two major groups, very significant groups leaving very important and significant impact on the later developments of modern Indian art and those two groups are the Calcutta Group and Bombay Progressive Group.

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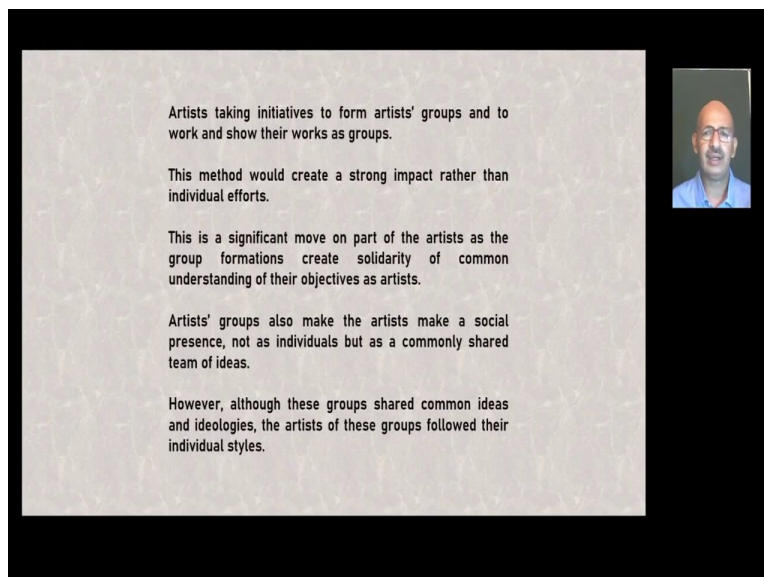


Indian artists from 1940s showed two clear tendencies –

1. They all, or most of them, wanted to create their art out of the contemporary reality.
2. They also wanted to open themselves up to the art of the world outside India. They were looking at the international art often as their source of formal and stylistic inspiration.

So, Indian artists from 1940s show two clear tendencies- they all, or most of them wanted to create their art out of the contemporary reality, they also wanted to open themselves up to the art of the World that is the International art, that is a Global art and not to constrict themselves within the parameters of so-called Indian art or only Indian art. Therefore, they were looking at more and more new sources for stylistic inspirations and for aesthetic ideas.

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Artists taking initiatives to form artists' groups and to work and show their works as groups.

This method would create a strong impact rather than individual efforts.

This is a significant move on part of the artists as the group formations create solidarity of common understanding of their objectives as artists.

Artists' groups also make the artists make a social presence, not as individuals but as a commonly shared team of ideas.

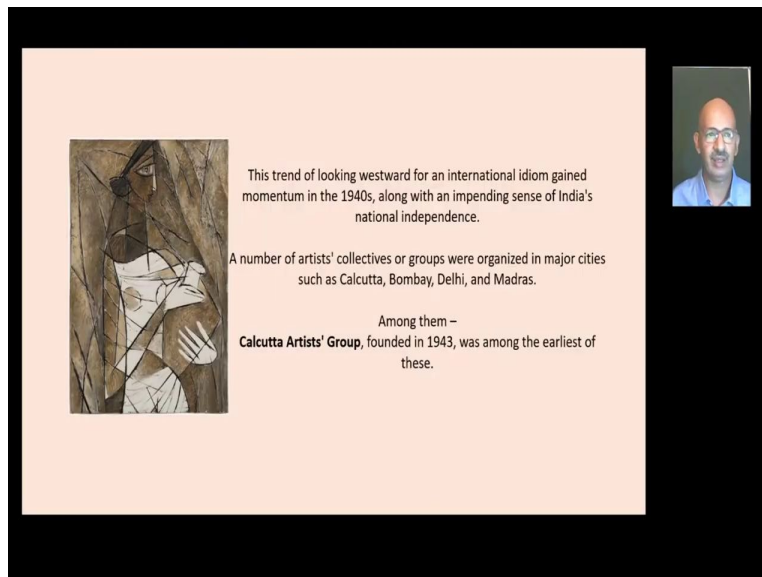
However, although these groups shared common ideas and ideologies, the artists of these groups followed their individual styles.

Now, it is this shared thoughts, shared ideas, it is this shared spirit which ultimately led to the formation of groups. So, now you can see artists taking initiatives to form artists' groups and to

work and show their works as groups. This method would create a strong impact rather than individual efforts, this is a significant move on part of the artists as the group formations create solidarity of common understanding of their objectives as artists.

Artists' groups also make the artists a social presence and not as individuals but as a commonly shared team of ideas. So, it is very important that artists come out from their isolation, they make their social presence felt and groups, artists' groups really speaking, help them a lot to achieve this particular social goal. However, although these groups shared common ideas and ideologies, the artists of these groups followed their own individual styles.

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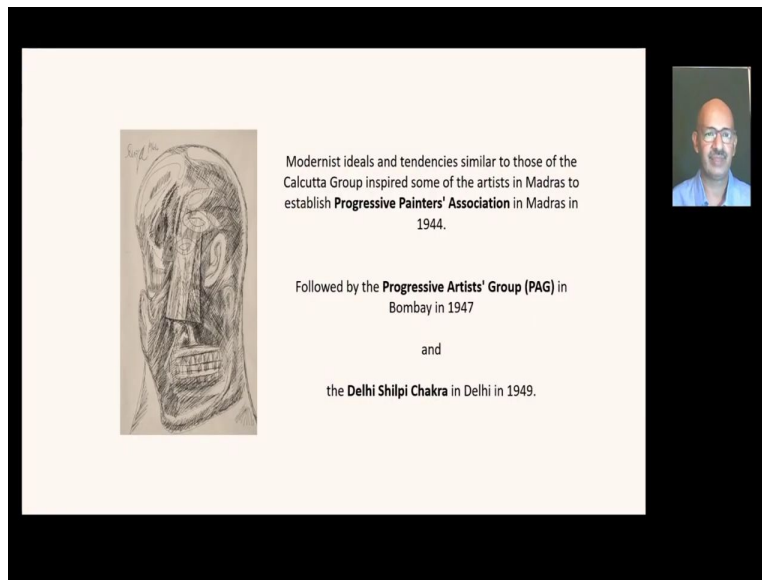
This trend of looking westward for an international idiom gained momentum in the 1940s, along with an impending sense of India's national independence.

A number of artists' collectives or groups were organized in major cities such as Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi, and Madras.

Among them –
Calcutta Artists' Group, founded in 1943, was among the earliest of these.

So, this trend of looking westward for an International idiom gained momentum in the 1940s along with an impending sense of India's National Independence, a number of artists' collectives or groups were organized in major cities such as, Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi and Madras, among them Calcutta artists' group founded in 1943 was among the earliest of these group formations or group initiatives.

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Modernist ideals and tendencies similar to those of the Calcutta Group inspired some of the artists in Madras to establish **Progressive Painters' Association** in Madras in 1944.

Followed by the **Progressive Artists' Group (PAG)** in Bombay in 1947

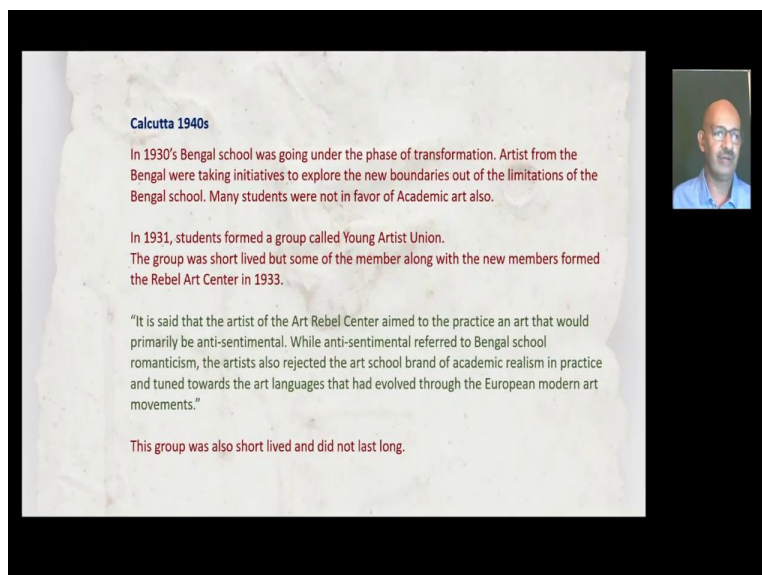
and

the **Delhi Shilpi Chakra** in Delhi in 1949.



Now, modernist ideals and tendencies similar to those of the Calcutta group inspired some of the artists in Madras to establish Progressive Painters' Association in Madras in 1944, followed by the Progressive Artists' Group in Bombay in 1947 and later, the Delhi Shilpi Chakra in Delhi in 1949.

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Calcutta 1940s

In 1930's Bengal school was going under the phase of transformation. Artist from the Bengal were taking initiatives to explore the new boundaries out of the limitations of the Bengal school. Many students were not in favor of Academic art also.

In 1931, students formed a group called Young Artist Union. The group was short lived but some of the member along with the new members formed the Rebel Art Center in 1933.

"It is said that the artist of the Art Rebel Center aimed to the practice an art that would primarily be anti-sentimental. While anti-sentimental referred to Bengal school romanticism, the artists also rejected the art school brand of academic realism in practice and tuned towards the art languages that had evolved through the European modern art movements."

This group was also short lived and did not last long.



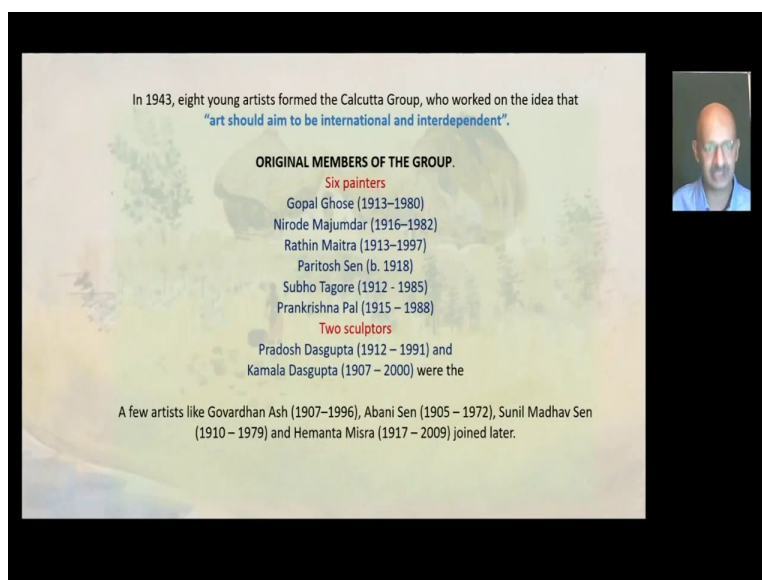
Now, Calcutta in the 1940s- little bit of background once again would help us to understand the basic impetus towards such group formations, now we know that already in the 1930s, Bengal School was undergoing certain transformative phases. Artists from Bengal were taking initiatives

to explore the new boundaries out of the limitations of the Bengal school. Many students were not in favor of Academic art also. So, 1931 students formed a group called Young Artists' Union. However, this group was short-lived but some of the members along with the new members formed the Rebel Arts Center in 1933.

So, somewhere at the back of their mind one of the major impetus to form a group was a rebellious character- to defy certain norms, to defy establishment and the idea of what is progressive was almost integrally connected at least those days with certain socialist ideas. Now, it is said that the artists from the Art Rebel Center aimed to practice an art that would primarily be anti-sentimental. While anti-sentimental referred to Bengal school Romanticism, these artists also rejected the art school brand of Academic realism in practice and turned towards the art languages that had evolved through the European Modern Art Movements.

Because, it is also important to note that these young artists in the 1940s from Bengal and later on from Bombay would find that the essence of modernism lied not in too much focus on indigenous qualities but, an openness and exposure and a wholehearted acceptance of what was happening globally, mainly in the European modern art movements. However, that group was also short-lived and did not last long.

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In 1943, eight young artists formed the Calcutta Group, who worked on the idea that "art should aim to be international and interdependent".

ORIGINAL MEMBERS OF THE GROUP.

Six painters

- Gopal Ghose (1913–1980)
- Nirode Majumdar (1916–1982)
- Rathin Maitra (1913–1997)
- Paritosh Sen (b. 1918)
- Subho Tagore (1912 - 1985)
- Prankrishna Pal (1915 – 1988)

Two sculptors

- Pradosh Dasgupta (1912 – 1991) and
- Kamala Dasgupta (1907 – 2000) were the

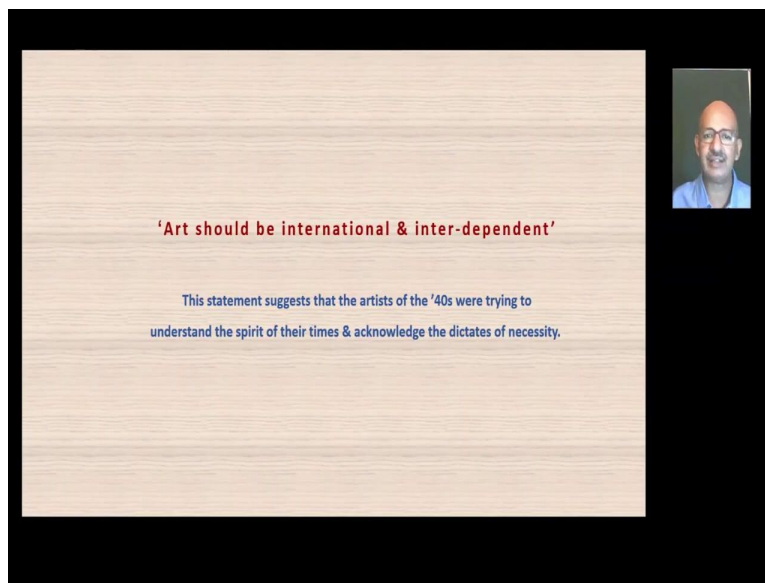
A few artists like Govardhan Ash (1907–1996), Abani Sen (1905 – 1972), Sunil Madhav Sen (1910 – 1979) and Hemanta Misra (1917 – 2009) joined later.

And finally we arrive at 1943 that moment is here when eight young artists form the Calcutta group, who worked on the idea that art should aim to be International and Interdependent. This is

very interesting that despite a very common objective all these six plus two- six painters and the two sculptors who formed this Calcutta group, they followed their own stylistic path, yet shared a common ideology.

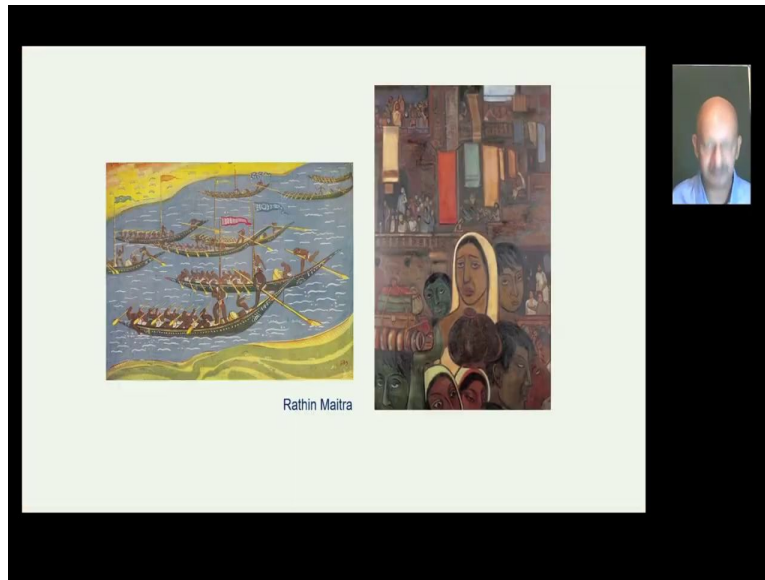
So, the six painters who were the initial members of this group were Gopal Ghose, Nirode Majumdar, Rathin Maitra, Paritosh Sen, Subho Tagore, Prankrishna Pal and two sculptures Pradosh Dasgupta and Kamala Dasgupta. Few artists like Govardhan Ash, Abani Sen, Sunil Madhav Sen and Hemanta Misra joined later.

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Now, art should be International and it should be interdependent- a very important statement made in their Manifesto published by the Calcutta group meant or suggested that these artists of the 40s were trying to understand the spirit of their times and acknowledge the dictates of the necessity almost in terms of a Global Consciousness, an International Awareness of modern art and also of the socio- political situation.

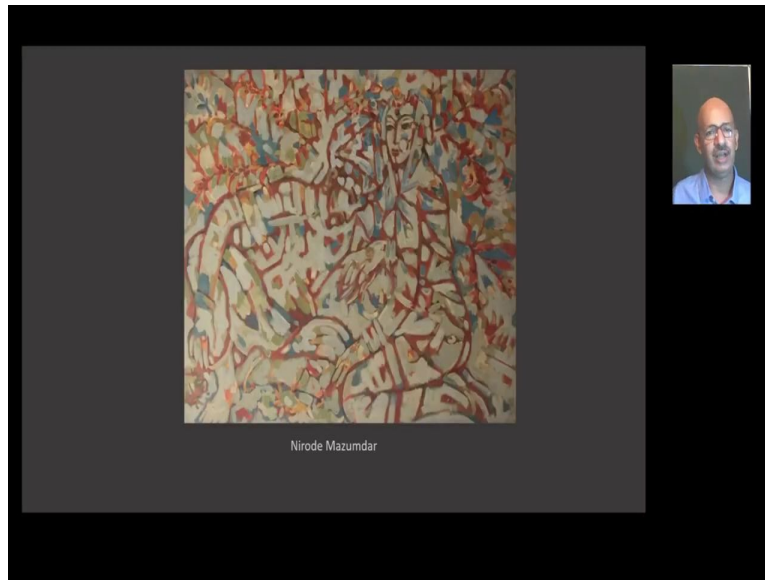
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Now, let us look at some examples of the works produced by the artists of this group. However, the works that they did exactly during the 40s are not available, at least most of the works are not available. What we are looking at right now mostly are the works that these artists did later. But, even in these later works we can already see that certain elements which they must have picked up in the 40s flourished in their works.

They kind of evolved into very important aesthetic features in their works. For example, certain kinds of liberty to play with the form, to play with the style, to play with the composition which is neither too close to Bengal school and absolutely not at all close to the Western Academic style.

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Now, Nirode Mazumdar for example, he definitely absorbed and imbibed a lot of qualities from the modern European art, yet he tried to reconfigure those elements in a way that his paintings evoke a sense of his own country, a sense of Indian ethos either through the motifs that he was using or through the color scheme or through certain abstract quality which he brings up through his textural applications on his canvas.

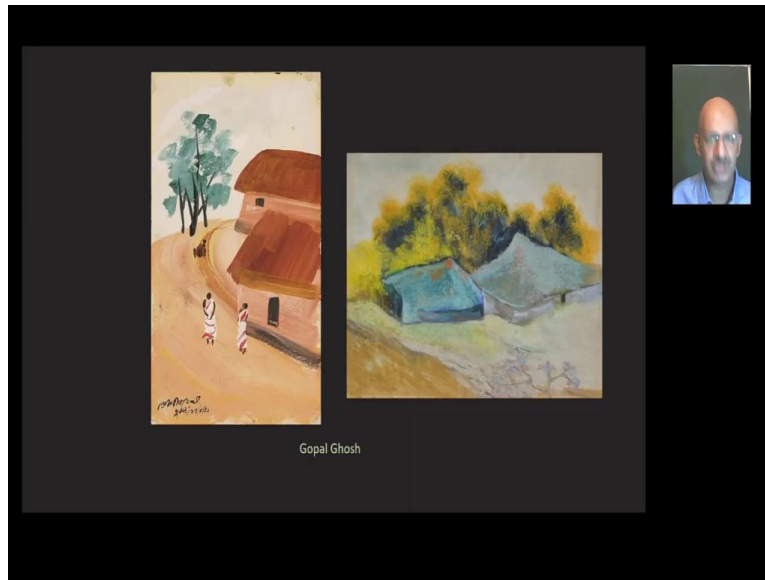
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So, here is one Nirode Mazumdar followed by two more and when you look at Nirode Mazumdar very carefully, you find this particular feature which is not just Nirode Mazumdar's only feature, this is a feature that you find pretty common in many of those artists from 40s who continued to work in the 50s and 60s and 70s as well. What is that feature- to summarize it once again that on the one hand, these artists are imbibing certain features of Western modern art particularly the abstract qualities, the abstract elements, the abstract motifs which the modern Western artists- many of them at least, used freely in their art, on their canvas, in their sculptures and this was a very liberating lesson I believe for most of these artists.

Because, they certainly realized that if they could grasp this idea and also the technique of applying the abstract features they would find themselves in a much more liberating kind of situation as far as their art is concerned. So, it is this freedom to deal with form yet to evoke a sense of one's own culture and in this case the Indian culture that was also very much strong in their minds.

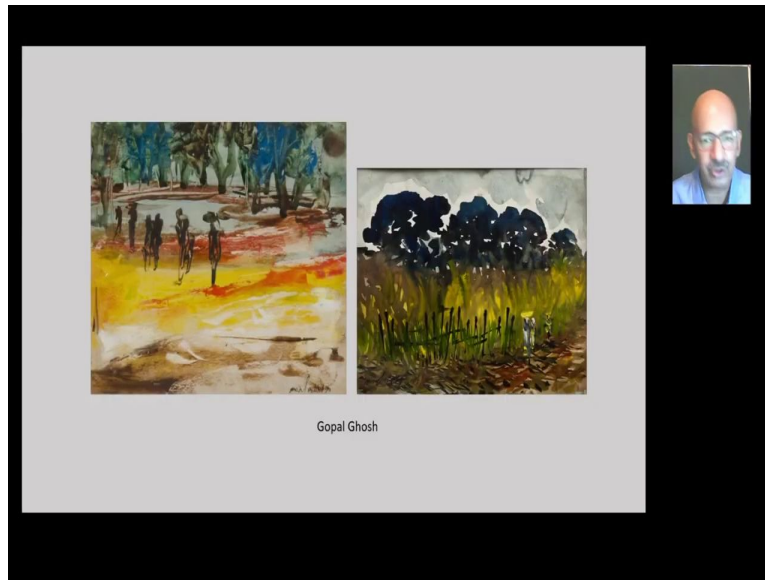
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So, most of these artists after Nirode Mazumdar and Rathin Maitra now we are looking at Gopal Ghosh the one that is on the left is in 1940 so, you can see though the scenarios, the kind of subject matter, the environment, the ambience that you see in Gopal Ghosh paintings are very much Indian, very local but, the treatment of color, of surface which we call the formal treatment- even the textures, the quick brush strokes these are some things which were never there either in Bengal school or in Western Academic norm.

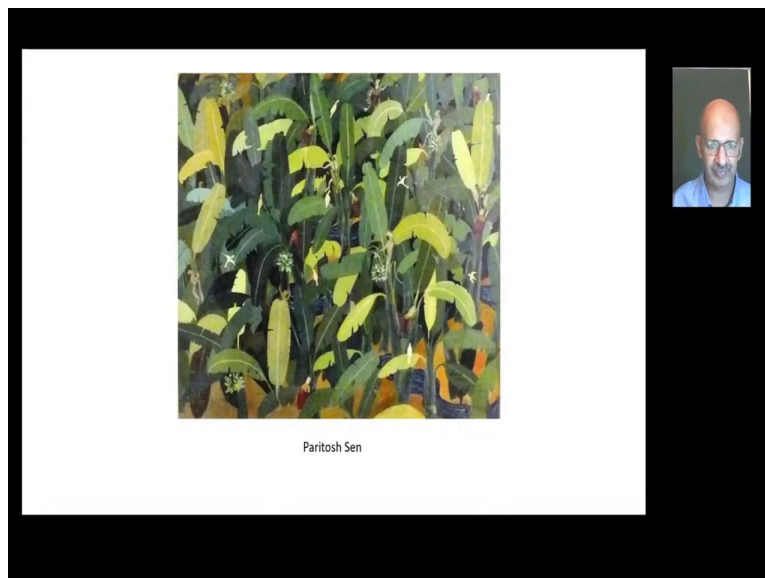
This is something that people and these artists particularly in the 40s learn from the developments taking place in the modern Western art- to free yourself, while you apply the brushwork, to liberate yourself while you are thinking about the color scheme.

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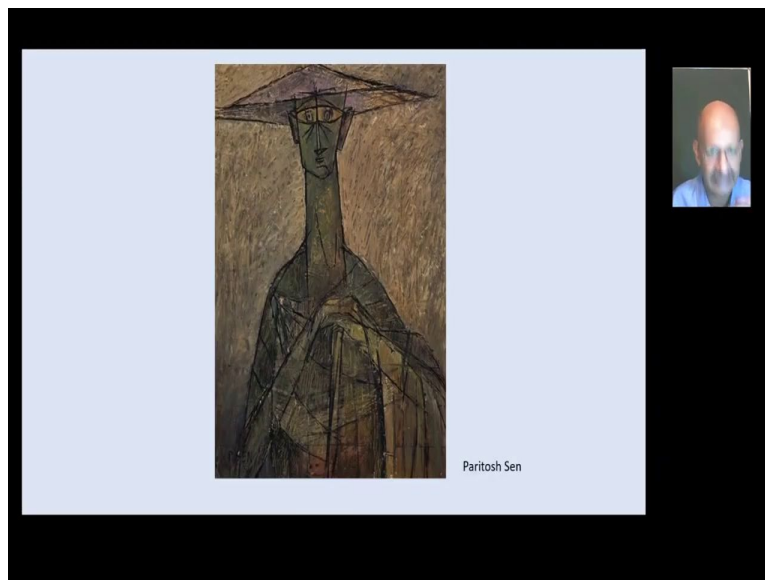
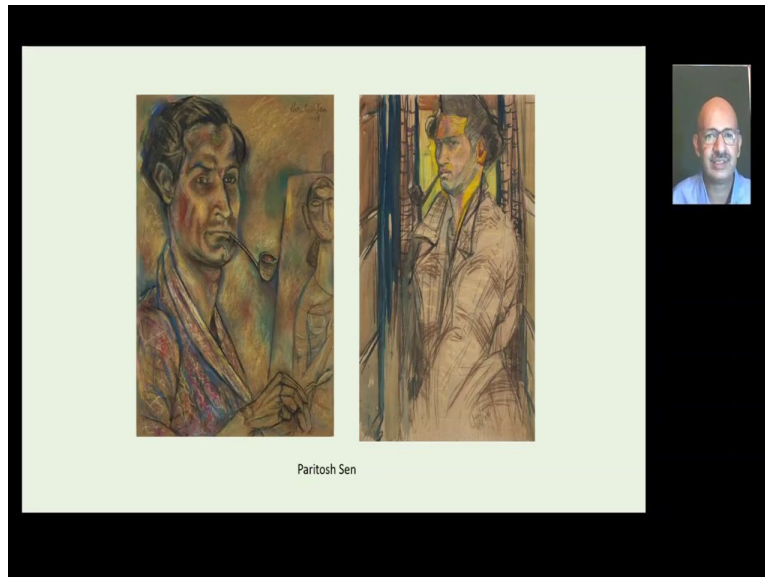
You do not have to necessarily conform to your observation, you observe nature, you observe society but, you can always make up your own mind, you can always create your own color formation, you can always create your own brushstrokes which may not conform to either Bengal school or Western Academic norm. So, it is this third position that made all these artists very free and also very creative in the way they worked out their canvases or also three-dimensional sculptures.

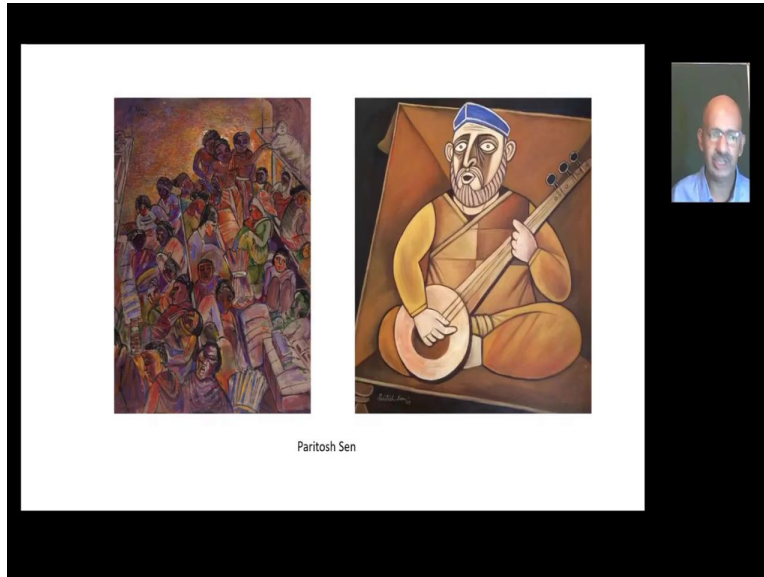
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Here you see Paritosh Sen who studied both the Traditional Indian art and the Modern European art very closely and he tried to develop a new language for his own art which was neither Bengal school nor Western.

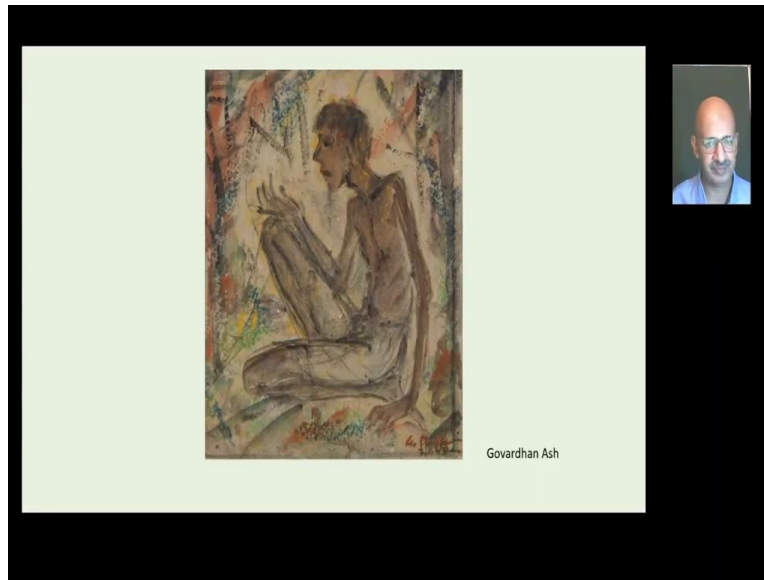
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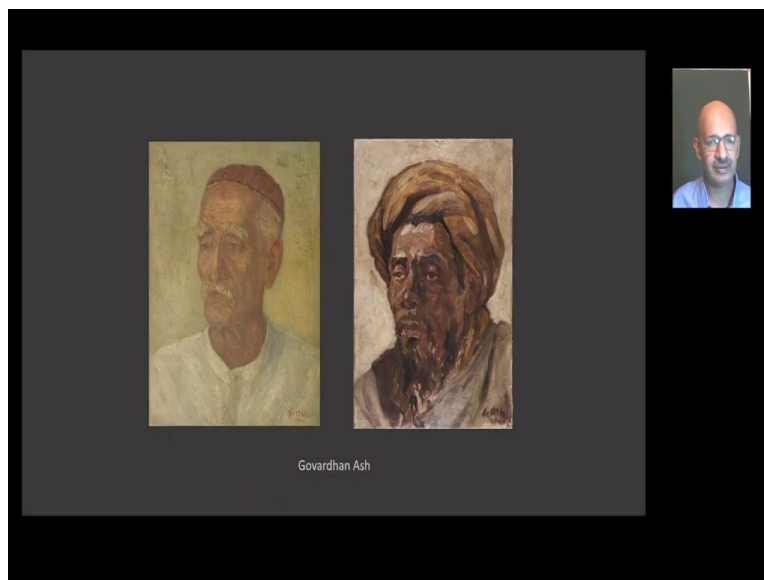
And right from the beginning in Paritosh Sen's work- both these works are from the 40s that is in 1948 you can see the signature and you can also see the date. So, that is exactly five years after the group was formed. And Paritosh Sen in these drawings shows a remarkable sense of freedom although he is conforming to certain study-based naturalistic observation and his training in a naturalistic Academic school is also very obvious here. But, at the same time his attempt to free himself from an Academic norm and take him to a stage like this where he can deal with the anatomy, proportion, the features of human beings with absolute freedom this was something that Paritosh Sen was looking at and he did achieve in his works. You can see that happening even in his later works done many years later. So, the 1940s promised these young artists a freedom, political freedom as well as aesthetic freedom.

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Govardhan Ash, who joined the group slightly later can be seen as one artist who, while on the one hand made himself very free in terms of the application of brushwork, in terms of the depiction of human figures in a very free manner but, at the same time Gopal Ghose was committed to the social reality of his time. Mainly he was depicting the destitutes, the poor and also people who were suffering.

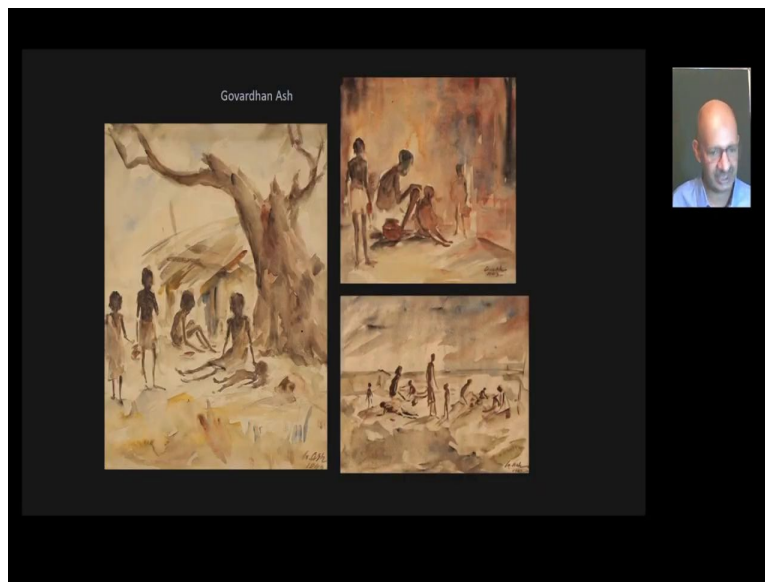
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And these two works once again prove that Govardhan was actually very well trained in a certain Academic style. Most of these artists were actually very well trained in Academic style. Yet,

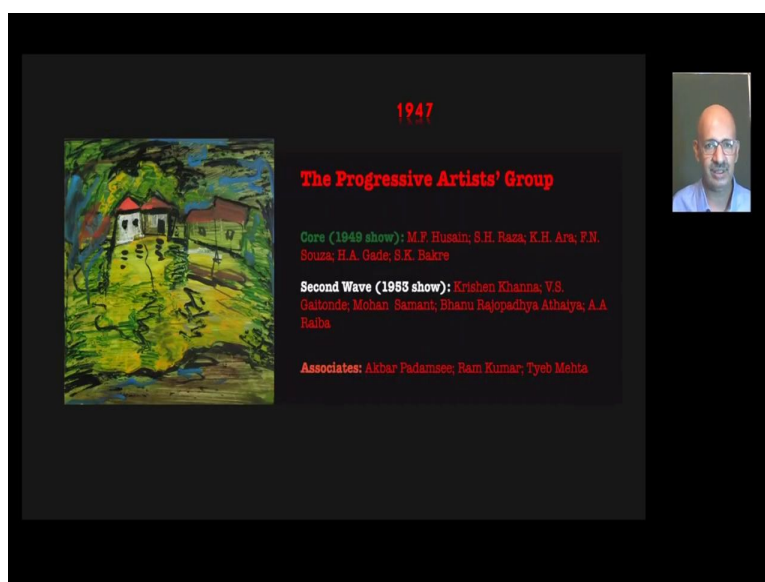
most of them tried to break away from that norm because they realized that training while on the one hand provided them with a strong skill but, on the other hand bound them, captivated them in a certain stylistic grid. So, these artists felt the need to break open that grid and make ways for aesthetic liberation.

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Govardhan Ash again-all of these works are done during the 40s and these are dated works where you can clearly see the date 1943 that is the year when Calcutta group was formed.

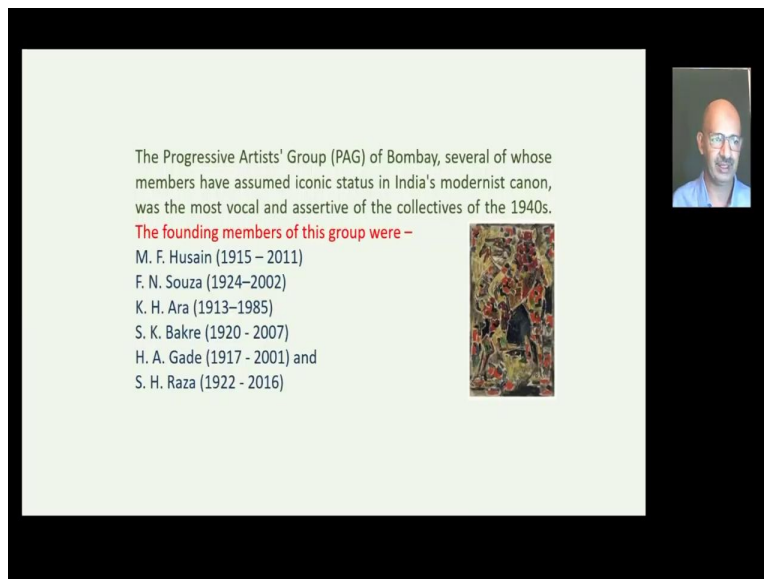
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Now, similarly almost on the same vein but, with slightly different ideas and also slightly later that is after 4 years Calcutta group was formed, in 1947 a new group was formed in Bombay known as the Progressive Artists' Group and the core group which made its first public show in 1949 had members like M.F. Husain- Maqbool Fida Husain, S.H. Raza, K.H. Ara, F.N. Souza, H.A. Gade, S.K. Bakre. All these artists later on went on to become very very famous artists of modern India.

And the second wave of members who participated in the 1953 show were Krishen Khanna, V.S. Gaitonde, Mohan Samant, Bhanu Rajopadhye Athaiya, A.A. Raiba, so on and so forth and there were also very important artists of that time who were not technically speaking part of that group but close friends and associates of Bombay progressive Group like Akbar Padamsee, Ram Kumar and Tyeb Mehta.



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The Progressive Artists' Group (PAG) of Bombay, several of whose members have assumed iconic status in India's modernist canon, was the most vocal and assertive of the collectives of the 1940s.

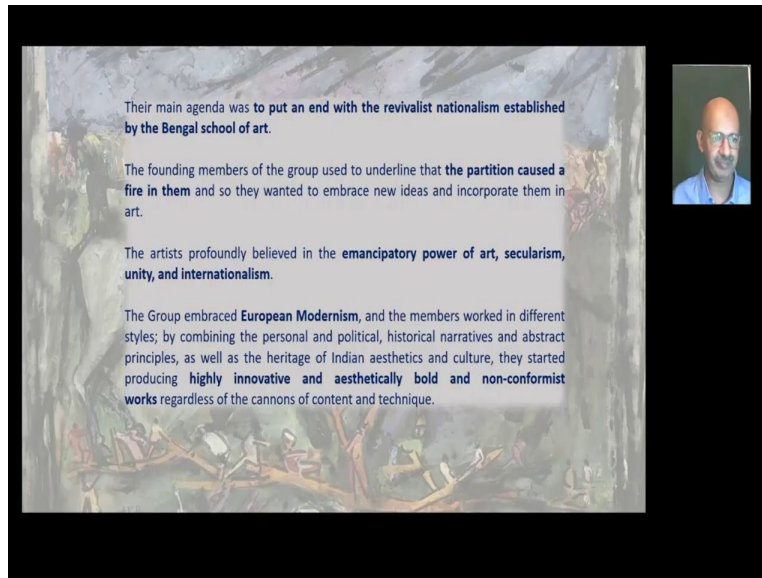
The founding members of this group were –

- M. F. Husain (1915 – 2011)
- F. N. Souza (1924–2002)
- K. H. Ara (1913–1985)
- S. K. Bakre (1920 - 2007)
- H. A. Gade (1917 - 2001) and
- S. H. Raza (1922 - 2016)



So, the Progressive Artists' Group of Bombay, several of whose members have assumed iconic status in India's modernist canon, was the most vocal and assertive of the collectives of the 1940s and the founding members were already mentioned Husain, Souza, Ara, Bakre, Gade and Raza.

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Their main agenda was **to put an end with the revivalist nationalism established by the Bengal school of art.**

The founding members of the group used to underline that **the partition caused a fire in them** and so they wanted to embrace new ideas and incorporate them in art.

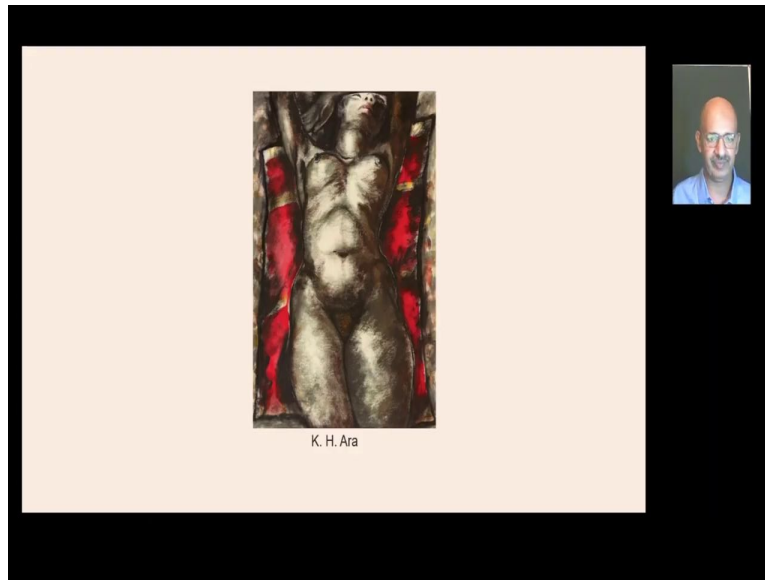
The artists profoundly believed in the **emancipatory power of art, secularism, unity, and internationalism.**

The Group embraced **European Modernism**, and the members worked in different styles; by combining the personal and political, historical narratives and abstract principles, as well as the heritage of Indian aesthetics and culture, they started producing **highly innovative and aesthetically bold and non-conformist works** regardless of the canons of content and technique.

And the main agenda was to put an end with the revivalist Nationalism established by the Bengal school of art. This is something that they did not want, they did not want to carry on with the revivalist Nationalist art anymore, they wanted to make their art global and International and look at ways to exercise stylistic freedom, aesthetic freedom and the founding members of this group used to underline that the partition caused a fire in them, they wanted aesthetic freedom and so, they wanted to embrace new ideas and incorporate them in art.

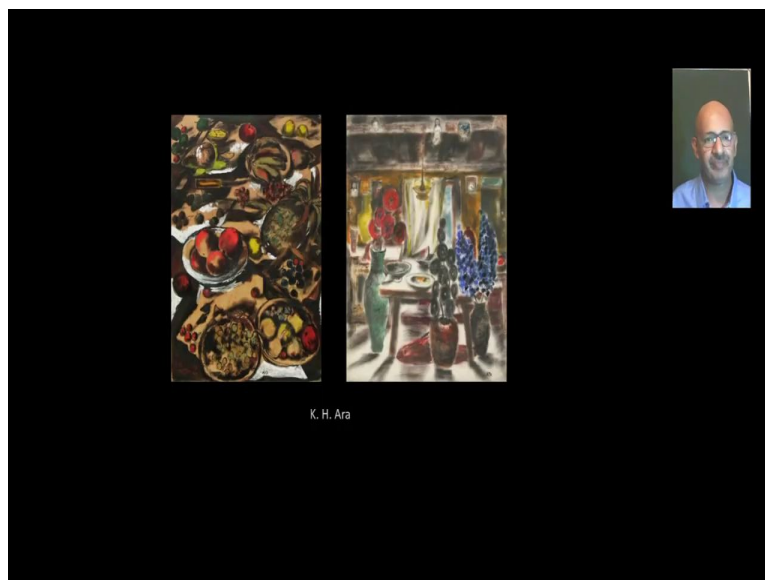
The artists, profoundly believed in the emancipatory power of art, Secularism, Unity and Internationalism, the group embraced as already indicated European modernism and the members worked in different styles by combining the personal and political, historical narratives and abstract principles as well as the heritage of Indian aesthetics and culture. Please note this line 'heritage of Indian aesthetics and culture'- this is something that will come through their paintings although stylistically they were very very Internationally modern. So, they started producing highly innovative and aesthetically bold and non-conformist works regardless of the canons of content and technique.

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Now, right from the beginning when you look at somebody like K.H. Ara's painting you can see that they are focusing the human body as the first and the major motif wherein they can liberate the aesthetic ideas and by the same token they can also liberate the way we look at human bodies without the taboos, without the superstitions, without the inhibitions. So, in many of their works there is a glorification of the human body as it were.

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So, there is also an assertion of the freedom aesthetically expressed in their paintings like in this kind of still lives and interiors which certainly remind us of many Western artists like Matisse

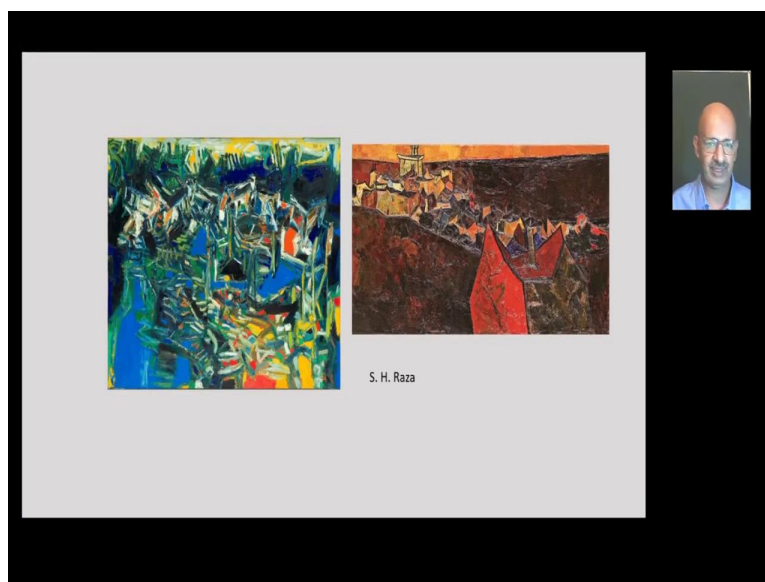
and others but, it is not exactly that they were following Matisse stylistically but, they were imbibing certain features, they were looking at these great modern Western artists as their sources of inspiration.

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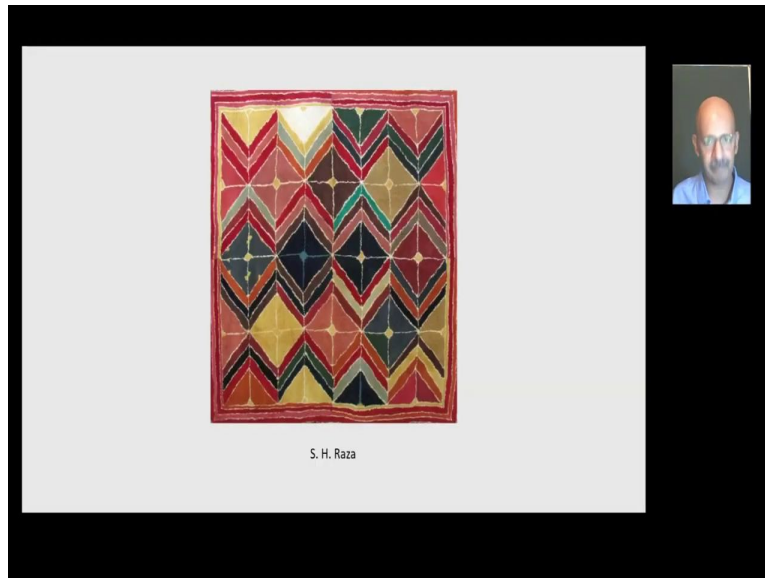
Raza, another important artist from this group completely reconfigured the way we look at landscape, the way we look at city, and he tried to create a new style of representation and a new style of pictorial idea- how do you execute that idea on canvas or on paper.

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So, Raza went on experimenting with the forms with reference to certain realistic observations of real life like cities and landscapes and seascapes but, essentially he was trying to get to the core of an environment or an ambience, he was trying to get the essence of life by means of aesthetic reconfiguration, by means of liberating the pictorial elements from its either academic shackles or from the restrictions of the Bengal school.

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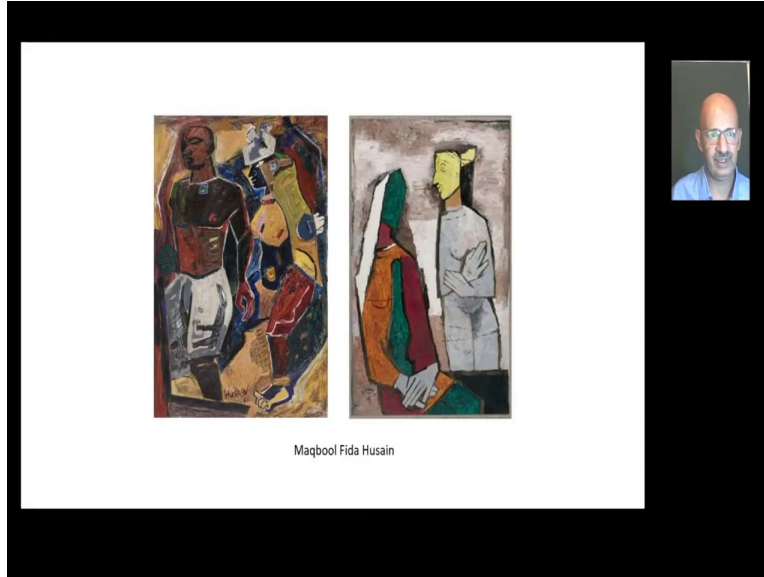
And ultimately Raza found something which is very Indian in essence. He studied India, he traveled all over the country and he realized certain essential elements and certain essential symbolic features of Indian life, Indian culture, Indian ethos and that turned out to be 'Bindu'.

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So, Raza in his later years went on painting hundreds of works based on this idea of Bindu as the core symbolic idea pertaining to the Hindu belief system.

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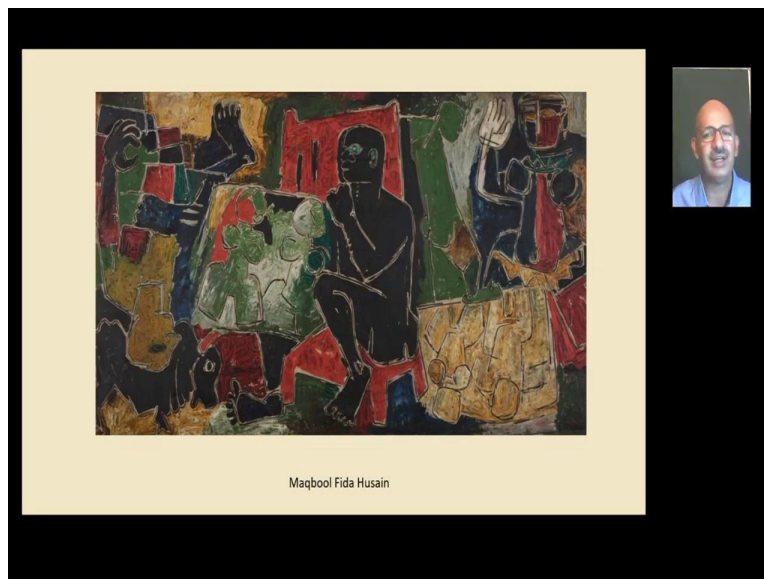
We also have an Internationally acclaimed artist emerging from this period- Maqbool Fida Husain. Husain once again like his contemporaries, looked at human figures, the pictorial spaces in the most creative way as much as possible without conforming to any realistic space or realistic representation of human body, human being, human figures. For Husain, everything was an opportunity to reconfigure in aesthetic terms.

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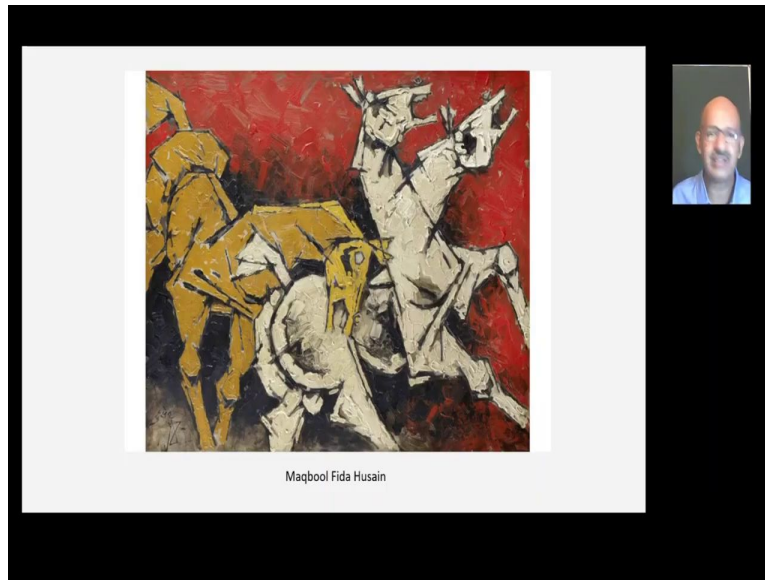
Therefore, in his works you find a tremendous stylization of human figures, of animal figures of the space they inhabit and also the color. So, stylization is almost a kind of signature style in Husain works.

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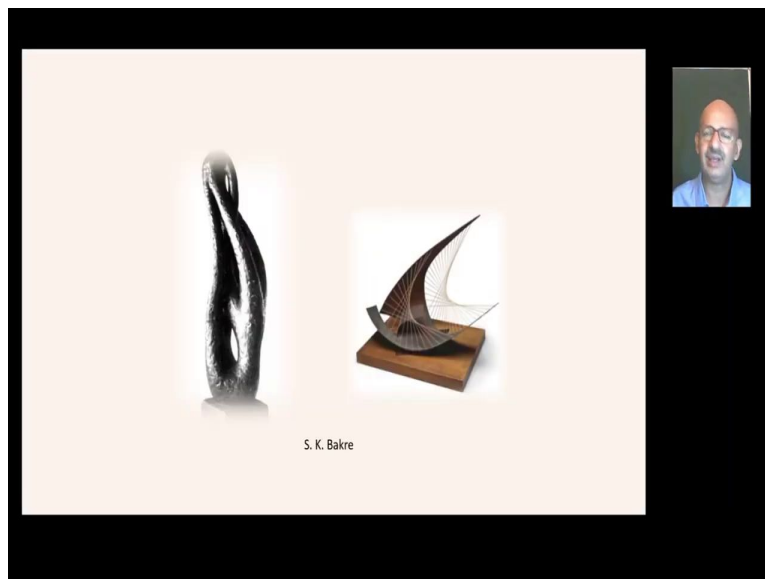
Fine, but, at the same time in most of his works you will find something that can be identified as essentially Indian.

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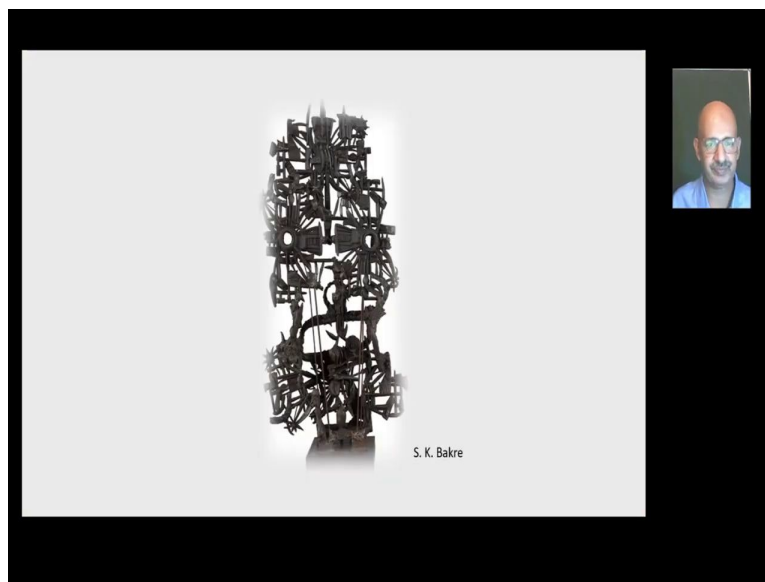
And therefore, he painted for example, horses, animals, various kinds of Indian life and Indian people and Indian society using an extremely warm color palette which again refers back to the Indian cultural, Indian society.

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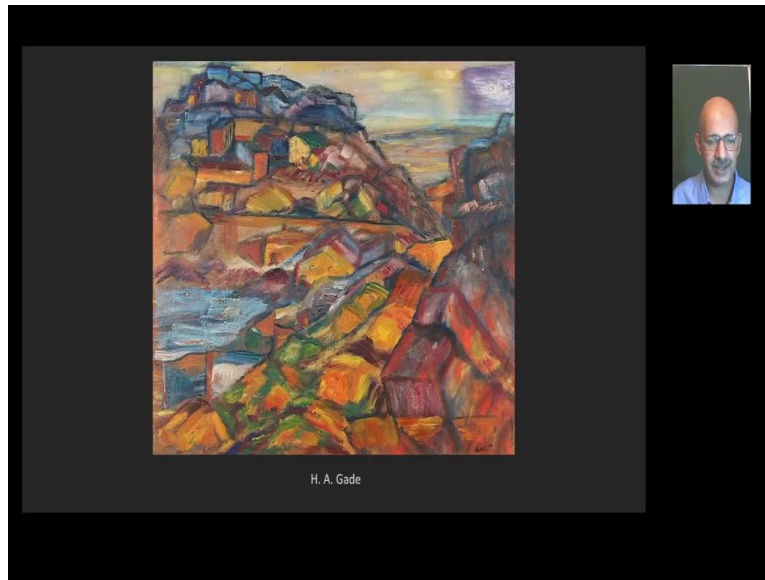
Now, there is another person in this group Bakre, probably the only one who was also sculptor, not exactly only a painter but sculptor.

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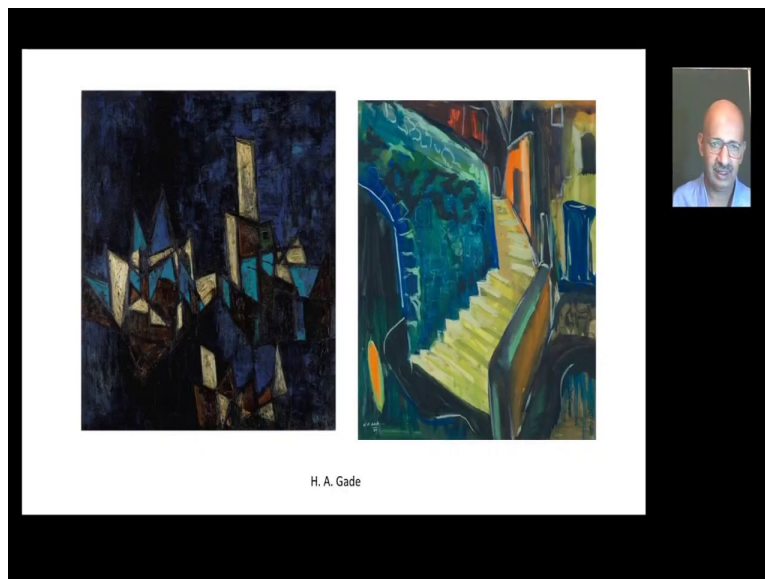
Even in Bakre's sculptures you find that he was exercising tremendous freedom of form, content, shape and three-dimensionality.

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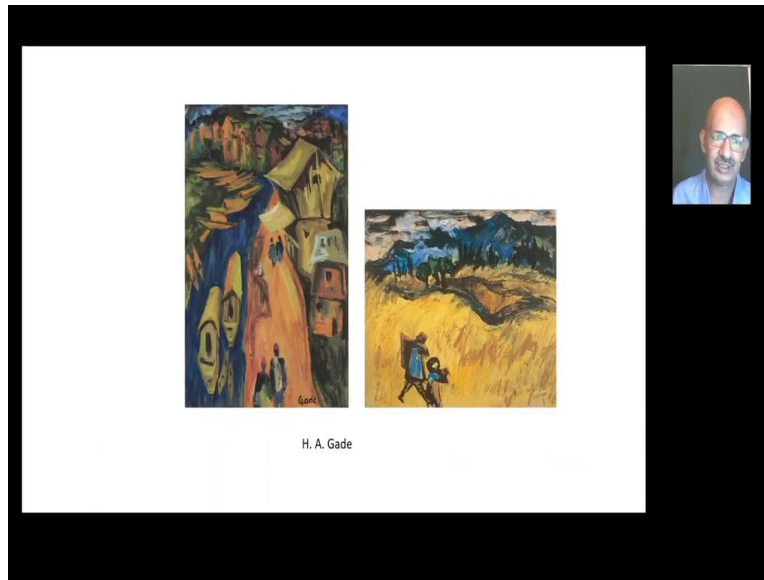
Once again, H. A. Gade, a very important artist who successfully followed certain stylistic avenues introduced by the modern Western artists and he tried to re-invent those styles on the basis of his own observation of the Indian space, Indian culture, Indian landscape, Indian nature.

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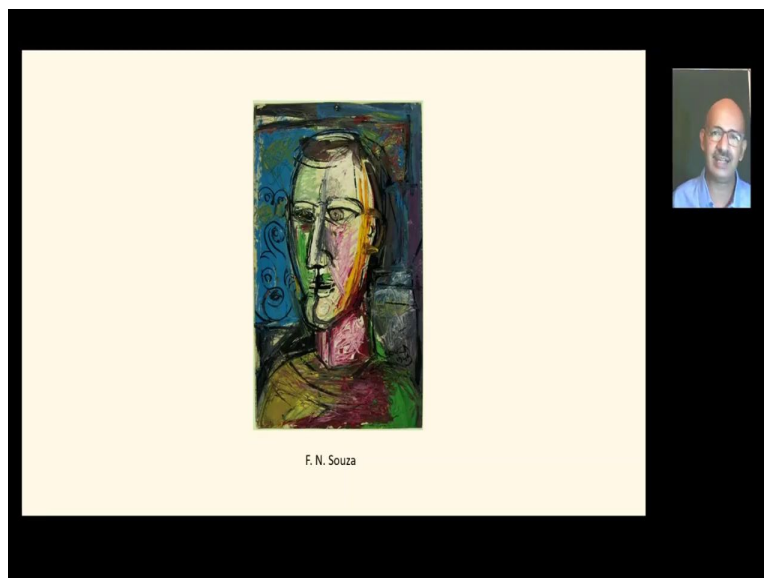
In H.A. Gade's works, what you find, is again a tendency towards an almost abstract character of his paintings which was taken very naturally, accepted very naturally by most of these artists from Bombay.

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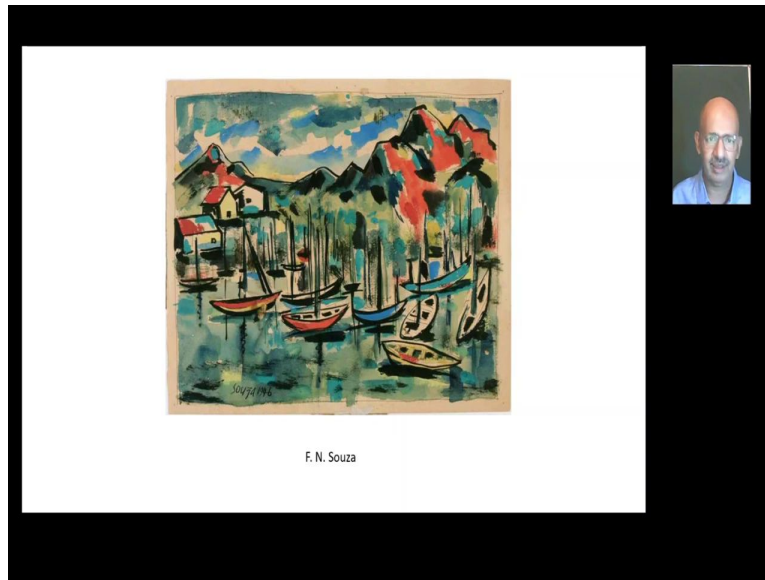
So, on the one hand the styles of these artists might remind you of many modern Western art styles for examples, in these cases the paintings that you are looking at right now, they remind you of German Expressionist painting style but, the content is extremely local, very Indian, very much based on the real life experiences of the artists. So, this is what we need to look at, this is the combination of Western style and local experience.

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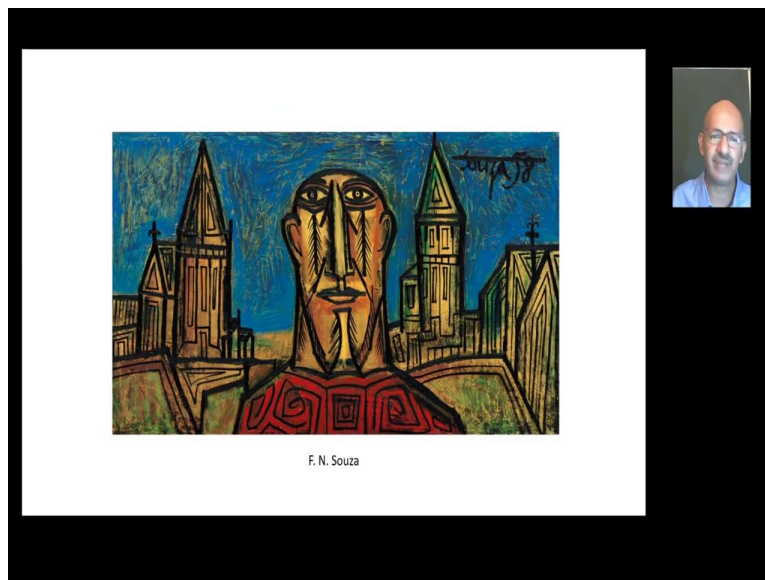
Souza is again another remarkable artist who was successful in combining these two apparently contradictory elements.

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Very very bold Western style where he is breaking down forms into bold colors, bold lines.

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Where he is going for terrible distortion of human forms, human faces, human figures but, at the same time it is this Souza who is also looking very intensely at the Indian culture, Indian ethos. Now, although these artists who were part of these two artist groups Calcutta group and Bombay progressive group emerged in the 1940s.

They obviously continued to do excellent works later in their life and therefore, their presence, their name, their fame, their contribution to Indian art is not restricted to 1940s alone. Therefore, in the last two lectures of this week we are going to look at how the same artists continued to produce some remarkable works, some excellent masterpieces also in the decades following decades of 50s, 60s and 70s. Thank you.