

Indian Art: Materials, Techniques and Artistic Practices
Prof. Rajarshi Sengupta
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology – Kanpur

Lecture – 52
Multimedia Approaches - 1

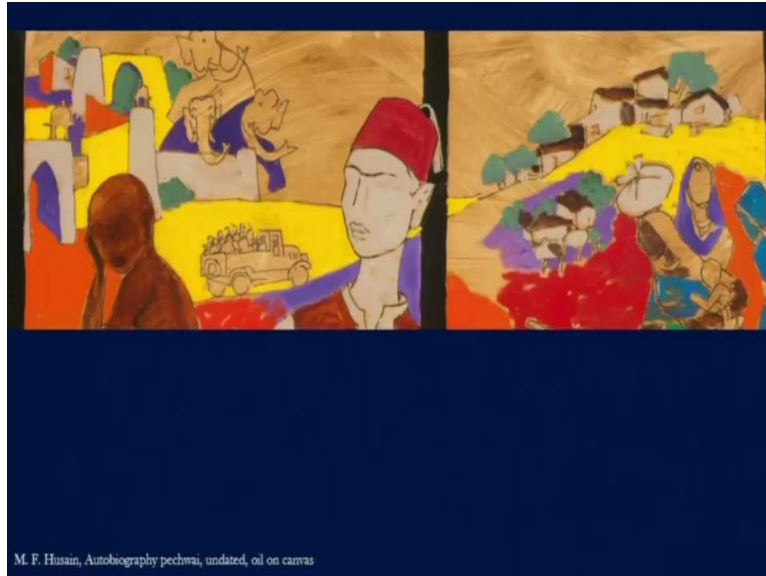
Hello everyone. I am Rajarshi Sengupta and we are continuing our discussion on the multimedia approaches and that had started from 1947 or in the 1940s. So, as we have already discussed Krishen Khanna as part of the Progressive Artists' Group. The other prolific artist from this group would be M. F. Husain and of course M. F. Husain had in his long career, we find that he had experimented his expressions in various different media including painting, making murals and then making videos, making movies and so on.

So, some of the things we find in Husain's practice that might also indicate to something that we had already sort of mentioned earlier about this approach towards bringing different kinds of mediatic expressions together and expanding our practices in different kinds of mediatic expressions. So, M F Husain we find that he had before establishing himself as an artist in India, we find that he had worked for making posters for movies and the large scale posters he had painted for movies.

So, those ones when we see that; from there we see how he already had this superb control over the brush for making the bold strokes, at the same time the kind of lines and this dynamic, at the same time this these rigorous lines that we find in Husain's work. So, all those things perhaps we find that he knew both sides of art making, so for example the kind of practice that contributes to the popular culture.

And the kind of practice that goes to the institutional gallery oriented, museum oriented practice and that is the reason what we find that M F Husain was almost in this crossroad. So, definitely he was very conscious in terms of building his image, but at the same time he was always experimenting with different kinds of expressions.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:58)



So, in this image that we find which is called the Autobiography Pechwai and it is undated and it is an oil on canvas. So now in this particular image what we find that there are many different things to sort of unravelled. And the first thing I would say is that how in the 1948, he went to see this exhibition there where the historical Indian artifacts were present, different kinds of artworks and artisanal works were present in the exhibition.

Which perhaps gave him an exposure to the richness of Indian art and of course that is something that stayed with Hussein for his lifetime. So, we find that in this particular image that what he had done, he painted or perhaps we can say he just painted the canvas with a thin layer of this brown colour which is usually considered as ground. So, in the conventional oil on canvas paintings, we find that there is this midtone which is painted uniformly on the canvas.

And then the dark tones and the light tones are added on the top of the midtone and that is how all the images are executed on the canvas surface. So, in this case what we see that he definitely did not do that, but he carried this convention, this part of the convention where this brownish tone is applied uniformly on the canvas surface. So instead of applying it uniformly, he put these haphazard brushstrokes on the canvas so that the residue of the technique that retains in the final work.

Now at the same time, if we also see that the way he had been closely working with different folk practices, so the practices in the villages and so on, we can also see how the practice of applying mud on the walls which also leaves this kind of the gestural marks of hands on the mud wall that is also something that is reflected on his canvas. And it is not just one thing that

we find from the folk practices that he imbibed, but the colour scheme is also something that he had deliberately learned from various folk practices.

And as we can see that he had chosen the contrasting colours and throughout his career he had been very brave in terms of choosing colour scheme. So, for example if we see this lemon yellow here and that is then complemented by here with this orange, with this bright red, but then also with the shades of blue, purple and the forms of course. So these are some of the ways in which we find that there are narratives, there are context, there are stories.

But at the same time the stories do not really stay as documentation, but they turn into a story of the painting themselves. So, for example if we see the architectural structures here, so the kind of colours that is used, so for example here if we see this purplish colour that is used for the area which is under shadow and the same colour is then used on the body of the elephant. So, it does not really make a logical conclusion about why this colour is used in this way.

But if we see that as a gesture of how to build up the entire narrative, this visual narrative which would have a logic of its own, which would have a logic of the use of colour and complementing the colours on the picture plane, then it makes sense. So, in other words I would say that he was very much interested in textual narratives and as this one is called the Autobiography Pechwai, perhaps here is a representation of himself or someone he identifies with.

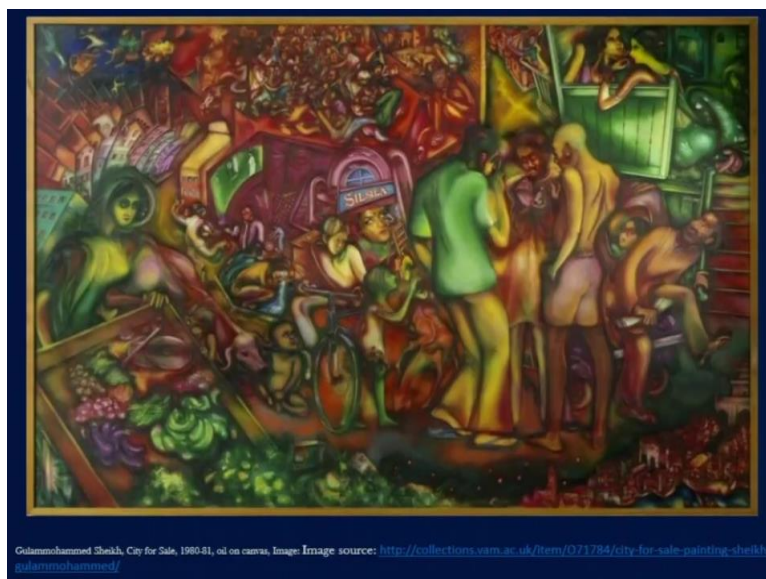
And then we see that this person is almost at the threshold and this is this boundary between like these two worlds and almost he is gesturing towards looking back, but he is almost in the movement of going forward. So in this way we find that he is almost in the crossroad of these two different worlds and so this can be interpreted as the narrative part of the story. However, if we see that the way all the colours are involved here and that tells us this is not just a narrative like a textual narrative or just an illustration of an idea.

But then the use of the colour, the way these complementing colours they sort of compel us to consider the life of the painting to be not dependent on just a textual narrative, but also in its forms and in its colour, in the pictorial arrangement and most importantly in the lines. So that is something I would say Husain had successfully done here to establish how the visual narrative is there, the textual narrative is also there.

They are probably like parallel processes, but still why the visual narrative has an independent life from the textual one. And also, we cannot really deny the importance of this background where all those haphazard lines are there, they almost tell us about the; they actually are in contrast to the solid fields of colour like these places.

So, it is kind of add dynamism to the entire scene and then the movement of the eye of the viewers that will be there from one part of the image to the other. So those are the ones which are directed by these lines which are spread across the canvas.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:51)



So if we see these kinds of practices or these kinds of experimentations were happening from 1940s to 1960s. So, as I have mentioned that they were also trying to establish this new niche for the Indian artists, the artists who are mostly situated in the urban centres and they are the professional artists for sure. And these artists tried to establish this new space for the next generation of fine art practitioners so that the society can understand their importance.

Now, to have this we also find that there were things those were done for example to develop certain ideas about the individual artist where the artist is considered as someone who is exclusive, who is individual and a lot of times that their practices and not quantifiable and not always their practices are rational. Now, if we see that was one of the approaches, one approach that was taken up by this art, the Progressive Artists' Group in Bombay.

And similar kinds of activities we also find like the Progressive Artists' Group in Calcutta and so on. So, if they are the ones who were more or less involved in charting this path in this way, then we find there was another group of artists they came together in 1960s 1970s not in a metropolitan city, but in Baroda. So we find that there are the artists for example Jyoti Bhatt and then Jagadish Swaminathan and then Gulammohammed Sheikh and few other people as well.

So, they are the artists we find that they tried to understand that what is it to be an artist, what is our responsibility to be an artist, and it cannot just be exploration of form, content and to establish the importance of visual through their unique expressions, but there are more to that. And through those discussions, we find that this group of artists as for example Swaminathan, Jyoti Bhatt and Gulammohammed Sheikh they have taken up a different path.

Even though Gulam Sheikh have taken up oil on canvas, but we find his approach was very different from; if we compare it with M F Husain or Ara or Souza or someone else. So, what was happening in Gulam Sheikh's canvas? So, this is one of the examples that we have on screen and this was made in 1980-1981 around that time and this is an image which is called the City for Sale.

And this is an image which was painted after this riot in Baroda in Gujarat and we find that almost there are many things which are happening at the same time and it gives us this large narrative scene, there are many figures, there are architecture, there are vehicles and of course there is this one vegetable seller that we see prominently on the left corner of this image and her vegetable cart is almost spilling out and everything those were arranged and these are almost like spilled out in this city.

So, this is there in this image and of course that what Gulam Sheikh had done, he had studied closely the Indian miniature paintings that can be the Mughal miniatures, the Pahari miniature, Rajput miniatures and so on and then also the manuscript paintings. So, Gulam Sheikh from very early time we find that he is not just involved in practicing, but he was also a teacher and then he is also someone who was a dedicated art historian.

So, we find that from very early times he started talking about the interrelationship between text and images like for example how we understand a textual narration, how we understand

the use of text in images, for example here we find this particular text which is there in the middle of the screen that says Silsila and that is this very well-known 1980s movie starring Amitabh Bachchan and Rekha.

So, this is something we find that how all these references are brought in, so text and visual, he did not really consider them to be separate entities and he also mentioned that how in the major paintings, in the manuscript paintings, text and visuals used to be together. But in the modernist paintings for example the ones we find by the Progressive Artists' Group and many other artists who were busy establishing themselves as the new face of contemporary art in India, we find that they have made a distance from text in their images.

And so this is something that Gulam Sheikh had spoken about and he had justified that why there needs to be more much more inclusive sort of approach towards looking into this problem and how that can also help us to understand the visual culture better. So, what we have here is that he had certainly taken reference from the miniature paintings that there are these multiple perspectival views.

And then also like the scale, the proportion and so all those different kinds of things that, some of the important figures, the figures who have prime importance in this image would be in a much bigger scale than the other ones who are supporting the narrative. So, if that is one thing and also we find how these meandering paths and different elements all of them they come together in one picture plane like the miniature paintings.

However, we also see that he was definitely not having a romantic point of view about the miniature paintings, but he thought that that is a viable way to talk about the contemporary situation in Gujarat and of course in India because he had spoken about the chaotic situations in the bazaars as well as our life, it is not always well organized, but it is a chaos where different kinds of things are happening at the same time, we cannot really just focus on one thing.

So, if there is an event, it can have different kind of impact on different group of people, so all those different approaches need to be brought together in one work. So, that is something we find that Gulam Sheikh was experimenting with and of course this is one of his early experiments and one of the successful experiments to have all those ideas together. Also, we find that the way the forms are constructed and then the colour and everything.

So, we definitely see the use of the complementary colours and use of colour to emphasize certain area, something that we have already seen in the Progressive Artists' Groups' work and the earlier works but here what we see that all the colours are also they are contextual. So, it is not just for making a harmony or making a balance on the picture plane, but they also have almost symbolic value towards understanding the visual as well as the textual narrative, you know, that is layered with the visual that we see on the canvas.

(Refer Slide Time: 18:48)



So, from that approach we also find that there are other people, for example K G Subramanyan and K G Subramanyan he was this artist as well as a teacher and art historian, perhaps to some extent similar to Gulammohammed Sheikh and as Gulam Sheikh had his training in Baroda and later on in Europe, then K G Subramanyan's training we find that to be in a Santiniketan and then later on of course in Baroda.

So, for that reason and then his approach was different in terms of how he looked into various craft practices and that made his work very different from his contemporaries. So, we see 1970s - 1980s, during this time he was working as an art practitioner, as an artist, but at the same time he was also regularly writing about what is modernity, what is tradition, what is craft, what is art; all these debates.

And then we see his inclination towards craft, inclination towards understanding some of the practices which are not considered to be as part of the institutional art practices, so that made an impact on his visuals. So, this is a visual that we find and which is called Inayat Khan

looking at Oxford. And so this was during his first visit to Oxford and he took reference from this very well-known image of Inayat Khan dying.

And that is a Mughal miniature and where we see this frail body of Inayat Khan and he is almost in his deathbed. So, here what we find that in K G Subramanyan's rendering of Inayat Khan, so here we see this particular figure is here and the frail body of Inayat Khan with the skullcap and everything those are evident, but at the same time we do not really see him dying, but we see he is turning his head towards outside and looking at the landscape.

And when asked about this image, then KGS had said that how on his first morning in Oxford, when he looked outside the window of his room and as we can see that there is this tea and it is piping hot assumably because there is a suggestion of the fumes from there. So, if this is something we find in the tea or whatever drink it is that also says something about the morning time.

So, what we find here is that in a way that he brought some of the fragments of history in his experience, it was him who looked out of the window, but he imagined that what if this dying man had the opportunity to look out and then that man encounters this world full of colours and this architecture with this gabled roof and of course with the arched windows and everything. So, there is a way in which we find there is a deliberate playfulness in terms of how to bring different kinds of narratives together.

So, it has its roots in history, but at the same time there are personal narratives which are involved. And then of course if we see the kind of colour scheme, we find this is almost the flat like colours and then the use of lines which are developed over time, more and more we will find in the later times of K G Subramanyan's work. So, they perhaps also referred back to Kalighat paintings and some of the other forms of the folk practices.

So, bringing some of the historical narratives, part of the folk practices and then his own experience and all of them they remain as fragments, when then he made this brave attempt of bringing them together into a narrative, perhaps the narrative is not conclusive, but what does that do to the viewers is to open up new possibilities to think about what is the role of visuals, what is the role of colours and lines in our lives.

And so in this way, we find the almost humorous images of KGS that showed us a different approach towards painting, different approach towards artmaking which was different from perhaps Gulam Sheikh, from the Bombay Progressives. So, these were different ways in which we find that the artmaking had progressed, mostly the painting practices they have progressed in the post-independence India.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:14)



Now, here is another image by K G Subramanyan and as you can see that this is a terracotta relief and in this terracotta relief; this is recent work, it was made in 2008 and it is called Anatomy Lesson. However, these kinds of terracotta reliefs KGS started working with from very early times. So, what we have here this is called the Anatomy Lesson and in this small squarish terracotta plaques we find that he had used clay slabs for making the forms.

And it is almost like a way or almost like a gesture to say that he is not trained in the traditional method of making sculptures or making relief but then he accepts that and then he also sort of stays truthful to his practice which is primarily two dimensional and that is the reason what we find that this clay slabs which transform into various body parts, faces and hands and everything else.

So those things they come to represent his practice or his engagement with this particular medium and so terracotta does not really remain only an expression on clay, but it also remains as a reminder of his practice which is primarily two dimensional. And we also find that KGS has worked on cutouts and collages and for books and everything else, many other things.

So, that way of working with collage or like way of working with a form which will be a cutout and then placing that onto paper is also something we find that to have reflected on this terracotta plaques. So, in some way we find that these kinds of expressions where the artist stays truthful about his own training, his own limitation and then the artist also sort of expands that to different kinds of mediatic expression is something that also came up as a new way of approaching and appreciating art practices.

So, these are some of the things we find that this back and forth between different mediatic expression is something that became more and more evident in the later part of 20th century by the Indian artist and this is this is something we will be discussing in the next lectures as well. Thank you.