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PIONEERS OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART

At the beginning of 19th century under the influence of the British Raj, Indian art displayed a general decline. The craft and techniques of **fresco** and **miniature paintings** which were unique in the history of art, were nearly lost. Miniatures were ousted by European oil painting. Towards the turn of the century, traditional Indian painting faded out and it was the time for Indian artists to look at their heritage with positive approach and advance from the earlier European Colonial Art.

Raja Ravi Varma of Kerala was famous for his paintings of mythological subjects and portraiture. His works showed western influence in his oil paintings. On the other hand, **Abanindranath Tagore** tried to recreate a new style in painting. **Nandalal Bose**, **Benode Behari**, and few others followed this newly awakened sense of nationalism. Thus emerged the Bengal School in the first half of 20th century. For subjects, they found their inspiration from Indian classics and mythology. They rejected the **western realism** and preferred to use **idealism of Indian Art**. **Jamini Roy** gave a modern form to **folk art** and **Rabindranath Tagore** introduced **expression** in his painting. These artists experimented with traditional water colour techniques using Indian and Chinese styles and also sought inspiration from **miniatures, frescoes and folk art**.

Later, artists like **Amrita Shergil** drew on both Western and Indian traditions. Her contribution in the field of art retains her unique position as the first lady of the modern Indian art. All these artists produced remarkable works in the history of contemporary Indian Art.

MODULE - 3

*Introduction Contemporary
Indian Art*



Notes



HAMSA DAMAYANTI



OBJECTIVES

After studying this lesson, learner will be able to:

- describe the evolution of modern art movements in India;
- explain characteristic features of the enlisted paintings;
- state the name of methods and materials, sizes, themes and places of enlisted paintings;
- tell the name of artists of enlisted paintings;
- identify the works of enlisted artists.

8.1 HAMSA DAMAYANTI

Title	:	Hamsa Damayanti
Medium	:	Oil on canvas
Date	:	1899
Artist	:	Raja Ravi Varma

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Raja Ravi Varma is one of the most celebrated painters of India. His life began in a small village of Kilimanoor, Kerala. **Ravi Varma's** vision as an artist was revolutionary in his contribution to Indian art. A popular and significant artist of his time he was a prominent representative of **Europeanised School of Indian artists**. He gained reputation for his water and oil colour techniques. Vast panorama of India's mythology is portrayed in series of his works that mostly project the heroines as the central figures. His paintings of Indian divinities still survive in many homes and shrines. His works are still visible in prints, calendars, posters, and other popular arts and oleographs. **Ravi Varma** is particularly noted for his paintings depicting episodes from the story of **Dushyanta–Shakuntala, Nala–Damayanti**, and from the epic **Mahabharata**.

“**Hamsa Damayanti**” is one of the most famous works of **Raja Ravi Varma**. It was painted in 1899 in oil and it created a sensation when first displayed at the **Madras Fine Arts Exhibition**. The Western technique which **Ravi Verma** mastered is clearly visible in this painting. The power and forceful expression of European painting fascinated him, which came across to him as strikingly contrasting to stylized Indian artwork.



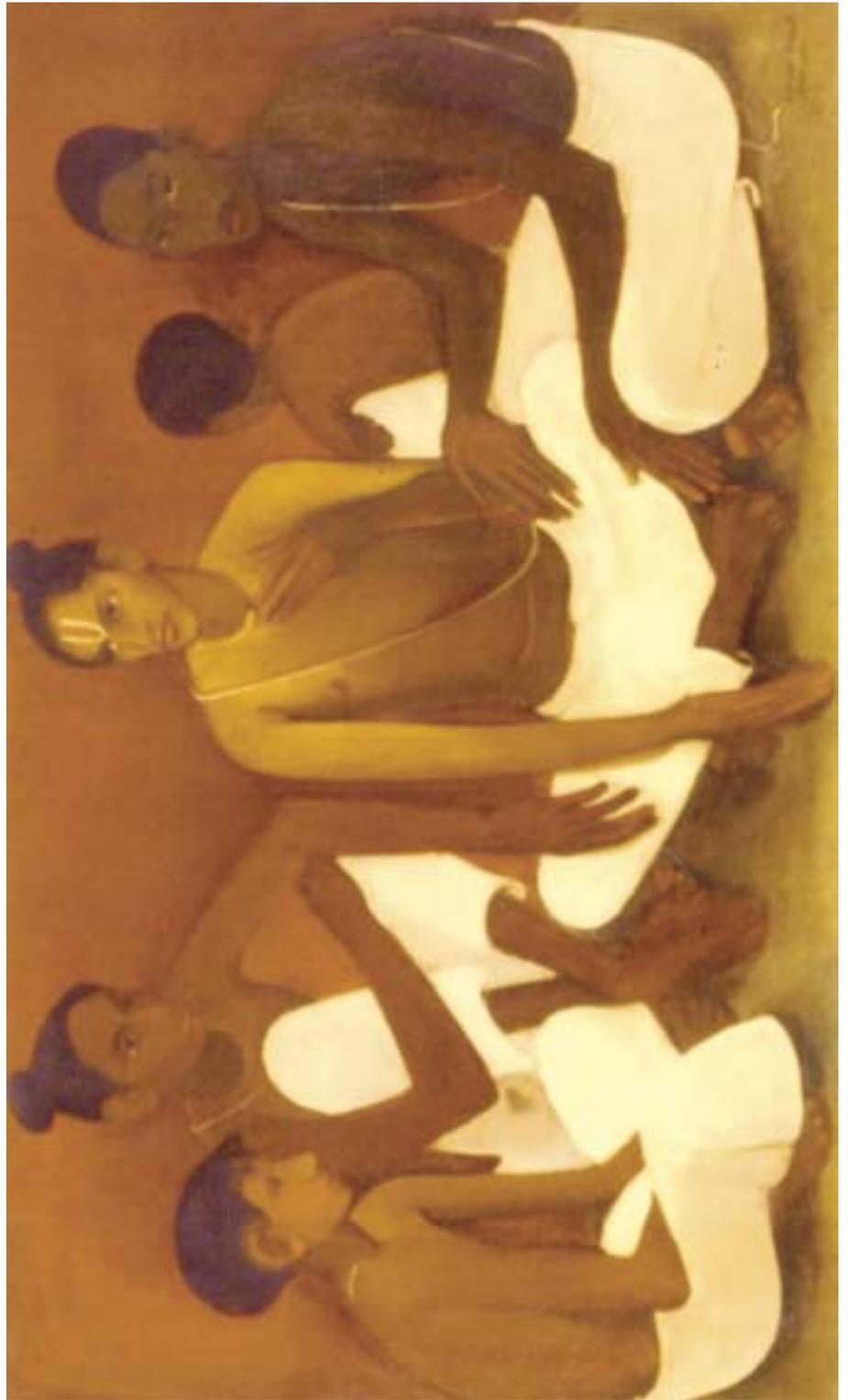
Notes

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Notes



BRAHMACHARIES

The painting depicts **Damayanti**, the most beautiful of **Ravi Varma's** women, who was portrayed as very shapely and graceful. She is wearing a beautiful red **Sari**, lovingly listening to messages from her lover, **Nala**, narrated by the **swan (Hamsa)**. **Hamsa** talks about **Nala** and expresses **Nala's** love for her. The painting shows the silent love of her heart expressing itself in the sparkle of her eyes and the glow of her cheeks, tender, dignified and lovely that makes her so fascinating.

The standing figure of **Damayanti** and her posture itself is very suggestive of the theme **Ravi Varma** selected. He used oil colours in this work also because of the western influence in his paintings. He has shown his excellence in the colour combination and technique.

He provided a vital link between the traditional Indian art and the contemporary between the Thanjavoor School and Western Academic realism. **Ravi Varma** is considered not only one of India's greatest artists, but also a great patriot. **Raja Ravi Varma** breathed his last on 2nd October 1906.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 8.1

1. What is the medium of **Hamsa Damayanti**?
2. What does the painting depict?
3. What was the vital link **Ravi Varma** provided?
4. What printing process he used to reproduce his paintings?

8.2 BRAHMACHARIES

Title : **Brahmacharies**
Medium : Oil on canvas
Date : 1938
Artist : Amrita Shergil
Collection : National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Amrita Shergil's appearance is a great event in the history of contemporary 20th century art in India. Born in 1913, her parents were **Sardar Umrao Singh Shergil** and **Lady Antoinette**, a Hungarian national. **Amrita** spent her early years in Europe and had the best of art education in Paris. She was highly influenced by the post-Impressionists including **Modigliani** and **Gauguin**.





Notes

She came to India in 1921, drew inspiration from the exquisite little miniatures of Kangra and frescoes of Ajanta. The figures she drew with expressions on their faces were her own invention. **Amrita's** paintings were not mere reproductions of what she saw around her but visions born out of the coordination of colour, design and emotion. Visit to South India inspired her to produce the most remarkable works such as "**The Bride's Toilette**", "**The Brahmacharis**" and "**South Indian Villagers going to Market**".

The **Brahmachares** which was painted in 1938 is a fine example of her understanding of the Hindu faith which is still prevalent in the traditionalist South India. The painting shows five male figures. She saw the brahmachari students in an **ashram**. She succeeded in expressing the simplicity of these young Brahmin students as symbols of devotion in the Hindu faith. The painting is composed on a horizontal plane with vertical placement of the figures. Stress was laid on the variety of colour of the bodies. A deep red background, white *dhotis* and neutral foreground of greenish gray do not disturb the calmness of the whole composition. The *dhotis* have variations of whites, though different but so subtle that it gives an impression of uniformity. The off white of the central figure with black and brown bodies around against the deep red background are used with skill.

She is remembered for her paintings done just over a period of seven years. But the passion with which she handled the brush and the genius with which she combined her training in the West and her view of the East, made her most popular. The sincerity of her subject and the uses of colours bring to **Amrita's** paintings a quality of timelessness. Most of her paintings reflect her love for the country and more importantly her response to the life of its people. She was the youngest among the pioneers of contemporary movement and the most short lived.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 8.2

1. Which European styles influenced **Amrita** most?
2. How many figures are there on the painting "**Brahmacharies**".
3. State the main features of this painting composition.
4. In which year was it painted?



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THEATRIUM



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8.3 THE ATRIUM

Title	: The Atrium
Medium	: Water colour on paper
Date	: 1920
Size	: 12.5" X 9.5"
Artist	: Gaganendranath Tagore
Collection	: Rabindra Bharati Society, Jorasanko, Kolkata

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Gaganendranath Tagore was born in 1867 in the Tagore family in Kolkata. He was a leading figure in contemporary Indian painters. His important works from 1910-1921 were the sketches of the **Himalayas**, the life of **Chaitanya** through art in a sequence and the wonderful drawings depicting the Indian life. On one hand he supported his brother **Abanindranath** and on the other hand he showed his inclination towards **Cubist School in Europe**. Later in his career he developed a distinct style of his own and his own brand of **cubism**. The core of **cubism** was to expose in abstract geometric structures. He developed his technique after a long period of experimentation.. He overlapped the flattened geometrical shadow shapes of colour to create a mystery world. He was definitely a master of beautiful composition. He painted images with a dramatic play of light and shade using geometrical forms and simplified figures. He never blindly imitated the western art style. He was also a great critic of his time and his social cartoons were very popular. His cartoons reflected his treatment of the scenes of Kolkata and the funny side of the life of its citizens. He is best known for his political cartoons and social satires on Westernised Bengalis.

One of his paintings "**The Atrium**" is a remarkable work and a fine example of Cubist influence on his work. **Cubism** is the style in art in which objects are represented by putting together geometrical forms and he incorporated this in his works. He created this work with his cubistically broken forms like cubist. This painting particularly shows a fine blend of light and created a dramatic effect with colours. Though in most of his earlier works he used multitude of colours but in this one he has used various shades and tints. The whole composition looks like a combination of various geometrical shapes put together. This work could easily be understood though there is abstraction in the shapes. There was not any artist at that time to experiment with this western concept.

He is still regarded as an artist who made several experiments. He passed away in 1938. But his memory lives on in his paintings and sketches.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 8.3

1. What were the themes **Gaganendranath** chose to paint between 1910 and 1921?
2. Which European style influenced his painting "**Atrium**"?
3. Who do his cartoons reflect?
4. What is the medium of the painting "**Atrium**"?



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

Modern Indian Art is very much related to the history of the country and social conditions in which the artists developed their styles. We see the growth of different schools after the decline of British Raj. The British Period produced significant works under the **Company School**. The Indian artists followed the European techniques in their paintings.

Artist like **Raja Ravi Varma** served as a bridge to revive Indian subjects but followed western style. Later the **Bengal School** established in Santiniketan served as a centre of artistic development. Artists of various backgrounds came together to give a new dimension to Indian art. They either followed western style or far eastern techniques but they somehow were able to project their own individual style. **Abanindranath Tagore** and his disciples contributed on a large scale. **Nandlal Bose, Jamini Roy, D. P. Roy Chowdhury** and others have left their mark in the history of Indian Art. **Bengal School** provided a starting point to the movement to the contemporary Indian Art. The best and most individualistic painter was probably **Amrita Shergil**. Though she didn't follow any Indian school, she was able to produce a good number of remarkable works within a short period of seven years. The technique, the choice of subjects and the desire to bring forward the true Indian life through their work were well received by the next generation.



TERMINAL EXERCISES

1. Write in brief what kind of art evolved after **Company Art** declined in India?
2. Describe the subjects of **Raja Ravi Verma's** paintings.
3. Describe the composition of the painting "**Brahmacharies**".
4. Write a paragraph on **Gaganendranath Tagore's** style of painting.



Notes



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ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

8.1

1. Oil on canvas.
2. **Damayanti** is listening message from her lover **Nala**, narrated by the swan.
3. Between traditional Indian art and Western realism.
4. Oleograph.

8.2

1. Post-Impressionism
2. Five
3. Horizontal plane with vertical placement of figures.
4. 1938

8.3

1. Sketches of Himalayas, life of Chaitanya
2. Cubism
3. Scenes of Kolkata and the funny side of the life of its citizens.
4. Water colour or paper.

GLOSSARY

Fresco - wall paintings done in tempera, water colours

Mythological - legendary

Revolutionary - innovative

Static - motionless

Solemn - serious

Uniformity - regularity

Vividly - strikingly

Colonial Art - an art form established in British rules in India.

Expressionism - an art through which emotion, feeling, etc. are expressed.