

Aesthetic Sensibilities of India and Europe

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ABSTRACT-

The rich history of Indian painting, which dates to prehistoric times, will be explored here. After finishing study, you will be able to:

- Acknowledge the aesthetic principles that define Indian painting.
- Gain insight into the key principles, themes, and historical background that shaped its evolution.
- Explore the prominent schools and regional centres of Indian painting across the nation.

INTRODUCTION

India boasts a rich and diverse tradition of painting. In the early period, artworks primarily depicted religious myths, though scenes from everyday society were also commonly portrayed. Over time, the focus of many paintings shifted toward courtly life. Throughout these periods, artists received patronage either from royal courts or religious institutions. Initially, paintings were largely wall murals created collaboratively by teams of artists. The practice of illustrating manuscripts emerged much later. It wasn't until the Sultanate and post-Sultanate periods that we begin to find references to portrait paintings credited to individual artists.

The main objective of this paper is to highlight the unique features of paintings from different regions of India. Given the vastness of the tradition, it is not feasible to cover every school or centre of painting that has flourished in the country.

As we will see in the following sections, Indian paintings differ significantly from Western or European art in terms of both aesthetics and subject matter. This distinctiveness makes Indian painting a major attraction for cultural tourists.

AESTHETICS

Painting is a form of artistic expression that conveys ideas and emotions through aesthetic elements arranged in a two-dimensional visual format. This visual language is composed of shape, line, colour, tone, and texture, which are skilfully organized to create a sense of volume, space, movement, and light on a flat surface. These components come together in expressive compositions to represent real or imagined subjects, tell stories, or explore abstract visual relationships. Through the medium, technique, and form they choose—each with its own sensory appeal and limitations—artists communicate with their audience.

Historically, the craft, style, imagery, and themes of painting were shaped by the traditions of tribes, religious institutions, artisan guilds, royal courts, and regional cultures. These influences also defined the purpose of the artwork, whether it served a ritual, devotional, decorative, entertainment, or educational role. In such contexts, painters were typically regarded as skilled craftsmen rather than independent creative minds. It wasn't until later—particularly in Renaissance Europe and parts of the Far East—that the notion of the "fine artist" emerged. These individuals, often scholars or courtiers, gained higher social standing, signed their works, and had more control over their artistic choices. While they developed more direct relationships with their patrons, those relationships were not always harmonious.

During the 19th century, painters in Western societies began to see a decline in their traditional social standing and the steady patronage they had once relied upon. Instead, they increasingly relied on commercial galleries and public museums to connect with an audience—institutions that ultimately broadened their reach. Financial support could still come from industry or the state through awards and commissions. However, the decline of

traditional patronage gave artists greater freedom to create their own visual language and to explore new forms, materials, and techniques.

Definition-

The fundamental questions of what should be painted, how it should be painted, and why it should be painted are central to the field of aesthetics. These questions lead to differing perspectives, and to better understand them, it is useful to explore the meaning and implications of the term "aesthetics."

Aesthetics is often defined as the science of the beautiful, suggesting a structured body of knowledge focused on a specific area of inquiry. More broadly, aesthetics can be defined as the study of beauty, and to a lesser extent, the study of its opposite—ugliness. It encompasses general or theoretical examinations of the arts and related experiences, including the philosophy of art, art criticism, and the psychology and sociology of artistic expression. The term "general" is important here, as a narrowly focused analysis of a particular artist or artwork typically does not fall under the domain of aesthetics.

Although aesthetics may involve the study of the arts, it should not be equated with art itself. Rather, it approaches art from an intellectual or analytical perspective. Because craftsmanship involves intentional activity, audiences often judge art based on assumed purposes, while artists tend to evaluate their work based on qualities that go beyond those intended functions. If, in the end, it is artists who collectively define what belongs within the realm of art, then artistic value must lie in something that transcends even the artists' own conscious intentions.

Consequently, works of art cannot be fully understood solely in terms of their explicit or intended functions. When art serves only as art, it also fulfils a hidden, unintended function—one that may not be consciously recognized but still meets essential emotional or psychological needs. If this interpretation holds true, art can be seen as a societal mechanism that fulfils latent, often unacknowledged, yet necessary psychological and cultural roles.

The autonomy of art from its social context follows directly if we accept that a piece of art can only be judged by its aesthetic functions. In this context, aesthetic function is linked to culture and psychological experience, independent of any specific intention. This conception of aesthetic function gives rise to several consequences:

- If the essence of art arises from performing functions that are not immediately recognized, art must be less self-conscious, less "nationalized," and less professionalized than other cultural activities.
- Since art must be capable of fulfilling unrecognized functions as they emerge unpredictably, the art system cannot be overly specialized or tailored to specific circumstances. It must remain generalized, somewhat maladapted to the current state of society, and able to operate in various ambiguous contexts.

The survival and possibly the aesthetic value of artworks depend on how well they can perform a range of unintended and unrecognized functions. It is because of their broad aesthetic potential that great works of art continue to resonate with us, even when we do not fully understand their original meaning, as with prehistoric art. The latent function of a work of art does not rely on a clear understanding of its intended meaning.

Indian painting has a unique character when viewed through the aesthetic values. Symbolism in Eastern art, particularly in Indian painting, aims to enhance the mood and spiritual experience of the viewer. This symbolism is more generalized, and poetic compared to Western art. Indian symbolism tends to be visually emotive, with images like snakes, plantain leaves, twining creepers, and rippling water often conveying a subtler, less sexualized meaning. Although symbolic attributes and colour codes are used to identify mythological figures in Indian art (such as the four arms of Kali or the blue skin of Krishna), the overall design and colour scheme of a scene generally reflect the emotional tone of the narrative. For example, dark blue, vibrant skies, and purple-black glades might evoke feelings of amorous anticipation, while red grounds express passion, whether in love or war.

In contrast, Western symbolic systems are more intellectually focused, with imagery carrying precise literary meanings. The use of colour codes in Western art is typically aimed at narrative or devotional identification.

For instance, the early Christian church developed complex iconographic formulas dictating the postures, gestures, and facial expressions of religious figures. Christian iconography adhered to these formulas for centuries. Similarly, traditional methods still exist in identifying saints and archangels through their attributes and symbols of martyrdom, such as distinguishing St. Peter by his white beard and St. Paul by his black beard. Western Christian iconography also inherited and adapted Greco-Roman and Jewish symbols, like the vine and the fish, as well as the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd, based on earlier pagan themes. Medieval and Renaissance writings further expanded a vast vocabulary of symbolic images, such as the crescent and the owl, which were used to signify heresy.

INDIAN PAINTINGS

In understanding Indian paintings, the religious and philosophical ideas within the social context of art at any given time are of great importance. When considering the major and advanced religions of ancient Eastern civilizations, such as Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Jainism, it becomes clear how diverse the artistic inspirations must have been. These religions, each flourishing at different times and places, produced art in various phases of activity, both long and short. While the idea of religious evolution is debated, many scholars agree that these religions went through stages of animism, magic, and realistic polytheism, with their expressive imagery, before progressing towards monotheism and pantheism. Indian paintings can be understood within this broader religious context.

Much of Indian art was clearly influenced by religious themes, as seen in:

- The portrayal of countless myths and legends, such as the stories of the ancient hero Krishna and the cowherd girls.
- The openness of artists, rulers, and the public to fantastical depictions of the supernatural, such as the multiple arms of Siva, a prominent Hindu deity.
- The strong emphasis on mystical symbolism in the arts, including paintings.



In cultures as expansive as those of Greece or India, the arts initially developed largely for magical and religious purposes, with theoretical discussions emerging only later. Philosophical debates about the aims and standards of art came after its practical and spiritual applications had already been established.

While some historians argue, and others contest, that all Indian art is religious, it is true that much of Indian art can be interpreted religiously by those with a positive perspective. However, this was not necessarily the intention of the artists or their audiences. Religious interpretations can be applied to both humble, utilitarian objects and grand, ornate structures. Art can be appreciated on multiple levels, with one level being supernatural or spiritual, while another may be more naturalistic.

Indian aesthetic theories tend to view sensory experience as mere illusion, yet Indian artists continue to use sensory materials and present them for others to experience. Super-naturalists often believe that art reflects a divine creator, while naturalists see it as a reflection of humanity alone.

Mystic symbolism is another core concept in Oriental art. In general, symbolism involves using a recognizable image—such as a lion—to represent a completely different idea, like the abstract notion of courage. In Indian art, the figure of the dancing Shiva is a well-known symbol of the deity, representing the cosmic rhythm of creation and destruction, with the drum signifying this rhythm—particularly its destructive aspect—emphasized by the element of fire.

Theory of Rasa: Aesthetic Flavour

In the realm of art psychology, which is a key component of modern Western aesthetics, India offers significant insights, particularly through its theory of *rasa*, or aesthetic flavour. While recent Western psychologists have focused heavily on behaviourism and externally observable phenomena, often neglecting the inner world of individual subjective experience, Indian philosophers have highlighted the importance of *rasa* in both the creation and appreciation of art, especially the visual arts. The different types and components of *rasa*, as they are experienced and nurtured, enhance the overall value of the artistic experience.

The concept of *rasa* was first introduced by the mythical sage-priest Bharata around 500 A.D. and later expanded upon by Abhinavagupta around 1000 A.D. It was used to explain the forms, techniques, and varieties of poetry and visual art. Bharata identified the primary human emotions—delight, laughter, sorrow, anger, heroism, fear, disgust, and astonishment—and explained how these emotions are transformed through art into specific *rasas*: erotic, comic, pathetic, furious, terrible, odious, marvellous, and calm. These qualities offer a way to analyse ordinary human emotions.

Such psychological studies were not merely mystical. Bharata suggested that the ability to feel and comprehend beauty (or to "taste" *rasa*) is a reward earned from merit in a past life.

General Characteristics

Inspired by the beauty of the natural world around him, man has made repeated efforts to express his appreciation through art. This instinct dates back to when he was still in a primitive state. Art has had a transformative, softening effect on humanity. The earliest paintings from the prehistoric era, found in caves across the world, provide stunning examples of a keen, observant eye and a skilled hand, even in man's most primitive form. The choice of colours, the depiction of movement, and the emotions conveyed in these works are truly remarkable, even if not all of them reach the level of the masterpieces at Ajanta. The prehistoric cave paintings in India provide insight into the lives of early humans who lived there in ancient times.

Kalidas beautifully captures a profound truth when he observes that even the happiest person feels uplifted upon encountering beauty or hearing harmonious music. While both music and art deeply move the heart, it is the visual impact of beauty that often leaves a stronger impression on us.

In Chinese art, the focus is primarily on depicting what the eye sees. In contrast, Indian art conveys both what is seen and what is felt through touch, suggesting a sense of depth and dimension. Indian paintings often strive to model the form, giving a tactile quality to the visual experience.

This is supported by the idea that the highest form of artistic representation in India is seen in the fully three-dimensional figure, known as *chitra*. A figure shown in relief—whether shallow or deep—is called *ardhachitra*, while a painting that mimics the qualities of sculpture is referred to as *chitrabhasa*. The term *chitrabhasa* itself suggests an intention to convey depth through visual modelling. In the *Shadanga*—the six fundamental principles of painting described by Vatsyayana in the *Kamasutra*—modelling holds an important place. The other five principles include: the differentiation of forms (*rupabheda*), accurate proportions (*pramana*), the expression of emotions (*bhava yojana*), the rendering of grace and charm (*lavanya yojana*), the depiction of likeness (*sadrisya*), and the blending of colours to enhance the sense of form and volume (*varnikabhang*).

The expression of emotions in painting is powerfully demonstrated in masterpieces like the depiction of the mother and child before Buddha or the scene of Nalagiri's subjugation at Ajanta. The former beautifully conveys *karunarasa* (the emotion of compassion), while the latter transitions from *bhayanaka rasa* (the emotion of terror), shown through the chaos of the elephant's rampage, to *shantarasa* (the emotion of peace), as the once-enraged animal lies subdued at the feet of the Buddha.

The *Vishnudharmottara* emphasizes *suggestion* (*dhvani*) as a vital element in visual art. It outlines various symbolic techniques to imply natural settings and moods:

- Blooming lotuses and sages rushing to bathe suggest dawn.

- Prowling thieves and lovers on their way to secret meetings indicate night.
- Aquatic plants and creatures evoke the presence of water.
- A cloudy sky with white cranes flying signals the monsoon season.
- Lush, flower-filled gardens recall spring.
- Weary travellers affected by the heat imply the summer season.

These symbolic cues are thoughtfully applied in traditional Indian painting and are essential for interpreting their deeper meanings—especially in later miniature paintings from Rajasthan, *Baramasa* artworks, and romantic depictions of *nayakas* (heroes) and *nayikas* (heroines).

Spatial Distribution

Historical texts clearly indicate that painting was a well-developed and esteemed art form in ancient India. Palaces and affluent homes were decorated with elaborate murals, while smaller artworks were created on specially prepared surfaces. Painting was not limited to professionals—many educated men and women were also skilled in the art. Although most ancient paintings have deteriorated over time, the surviving examples, primarily cave temple murals, still offer valuable insight into the artistic accomplishments of that era.

Prehistoric Period

India's earliest known paintings have been discovered in ancient caves and rock shelters located in various regions, including:

- Mirzapur and Banda in Uttar Pradesh,
- The Mahadeo Hills of the Vindhyan range in Bundelkhand, and the Larimur Hills in the Bundelkhand region,
- Singanpur in the Raigarh district of Central India,
- And Bellary in the southern part of the country.

These prehistoric paintings primarily portray hunting scenes, capturing the interaction between humans and wild animals. Though simply executed, the scenes are strikingly expressive. Red pigment is commonly used, though some images have faded over time. One well-preserved panel features a dynamic hunt involving a bison and a sambhar deer. The human figures are stylized, often simplified to basic forms—the torso occasionally appears like a stepped ladder, while other figures are shown in silhouette, with large heads and limbs reduced to straight or bent lines. The depiction of hunters wielding pikes and javelins is particularly energetic and lifelike.

One notable example in which shows a dog in full sprint, barking and captured in motion with its tail stretched out and limbs emphasizing speed. This realistic depiction stands in contrast to the more abstract representation of human figures.

Due to their lack of decorative elements, these artworks attract limited tourist attention. Consequently, the sites have minimal tourism infrastructure and are not actively promoted for visitors. Interest in them mainly comes from historians and archaeologists. Located in isolated mountain ranges with limited links to major cities, these sites remain largely inaccessible. However, given their cultural significance and visual appeal, these prehistoric sites hold strong potential for tourism development and deserve greater attention and investment.

Ajanta

The earliest historical paintings in India date back to the Satavahana period (2nd century A.D.) in the Deccan region. This era saw the creation of remarkable Buddhist rock-cut caves, particularly in Western India, including those at Nasik, Bedsa, Bhaja, Karla, and Kondane. The earliest caves at Ajanta also belong to this period, with significant paintings found in Caves 9 and 10.

These paintings decorate the walls, pillars, and ceilings, illustrating scenes from the life of the Buddha as well as stories from his past lives, known as the Jatakas and Avadanas. Intricate floral and animal designs are also skilfully rendered. Cave 9, a chaitya hall with a striking facade, features a nave, apse, and side aisles formed by rows of pillars extending the full length of the hall. This cave contains two layers of paintings: one from the

original construction period and another from the 5th century A.D. The artworks here include depictions of the worship of the Bodhi tree, the Sama Jataka, and the Chhadanta Jataka.

After the decline of the Satavahanas, the Vakatakas emerged as a dominant power in the Deccan, and several Ajanta caves contain inscriptions dating to their reign. By this time, the paintings at Ajanta had expanded to fully cover the walls, pillars, and ceilings, forming an extraordinary visual narrative of Buddhist themes, especially episodes from the life of the Buddha.

The technique used in these paintings is tempera, created with simple, natural materials. As described in traditional *śilpa* texts, five main colors are present: red ochre, yellow ochre, lamp black, lapis lazuli, and white. The process began with a base layer of clay mixed with rice husk and gum, followed by a lime coating that was smoothed and polished. On this prepared surface, artists drew initial outlines using dark brown or black, then filled in colors.

To create depth and realism, artists employed techniques like *patravartana* (layering), stippling, and hatching using fine dots and lines to simulate light and shadow. The brushwork at Ajanta is confident and expressive, with flowing lines that convey form and emotion—much like the aesthetic ideal described in *Viddhasalabhanjika*, where minimal lines yield maximum visual impact.

The painters at Ajanta closely observed the world around them, capturing natural scenes with deep empathy and appreciation. They showed a particular interest in depicting plant and animal life with great care and affection. Examples of this gentle portrayal include the elephants beneath the banyan tree in Cave 10, the geese in the *Hamsa Jataka* from Cave 17, and the deer in the *Miga Jataka* from the same cave. The artists skillfully depicted a range of subjects, from the splendid grandeur of royal courts to the simple charm of rural life, as well as the peaceful existence of hermits surrounded by forested landscapes.

Ajanta cave's mural is the best example of all six limbs of Indian art which is called 'Shadanga'. The variety of forms depicted is truly remarkable. The artists adeptly portrayed the intricacies of human, animal, and plant forms, while also expressing their creativity through imaginative designs. The master painters at Ajanta demonstrated not only precise control over the proportions of individual figures but also a strong ability to arrange them into well-balanced compositions. The emotional expression reaches its peak in the storytelling of legendary scenes.

These cave paintings have gained widespread recognition, making Ajanta a popular tourist destination. Tourism infrastructure has improved significantly, making access convenient. Many guided tours operate primarily from Aurangabad, the nearest district headquarters.

Ellora

During the eighth century, the Western Chalukya dynasty weakened, and the Rashtrakutas, led by Dantidurga, emerged as the new power. He was succeeded by his uncle Krishna I, a notable ruler and the visionary behind the remarkable Kailasnatha temple at Ellora, which was carved directly from solid rock. The paintings at Ellora adorn the ceilings and walls of the mandapas, featuring not only religious iconography but also intricate floral patterns and depictions of animals and birds woven into the designs. The Nataraja figure is a stunning example of Chalukya art, showcasing a multi-armed form in the chatura dance pose. Its anatomy, details, and ornamentation closely mirror the sculptural style, including fine elements like the jatamakuta pattern and decorative elaboration. This panel is among the best-preserved at Ellora.

The Jain cave, located at the far end of the Ellora complex, is completely covered with detailed paintings on its ceilings and walls. These include scenes from Jain scriptures alongside rich decorative motifs featuring flora, animals, and birds.

Tourism infrastructure at Ellora is well-developed, partly due to its proximity to Ajanta, making it easily accessible for visitors.

Bagh Caves

The Gupta emperors were distinguished patrons of art and literature, with Samudra Gupta particularly celebrated for his refined aesthetic sensibilities.

This vibrant artistic era is clearly showcased in the Bagh Caves, located near the village of Bagh, close to Gwalior. These caves are hewn into the Vindhya Hills' slopes, standing about 150 feet above the Bagh River. Among the nine caves, Caves 2, 4, and 5 hold the greatest significance. Although much of the original artwork has deteriorated over time, the best-preserved fragments remain on the outer wall of the continuous verandah of Caves 4 and 5. The depicted scenes clearly belong to a Jataka or Avadana tale. One scene features a grieving princess being comforted by her companion, while another shows two divine beings and two royal figures engaged in conversation. Comprising cavalry and foot soldiers armed with bows and arrows, and featuring at least two stately figures shaded by ceremonial umbrellas, the scene unfolds near the royal gateway—likely close to the palace. Princes mounted on elephants and high-ranking women riding cow-elephants accompany the procession, signaling the occurrence of a significant event within the royal household. This depiction stands out as one of the most splendid portrayals of a royal procession in its full grandeur.

Elsewhere in the same cave, the walls and ceiling are adorned with exquisite floral motifs—elegantly winding lotus stalks laden with buds and blossoms, and graceful pairs of birds in flight, particularly geese—offering a visual experience that is both ornate and deeply pleasing to the eye.

Others

The tradition of cave-temple painting endured for a long time, with its legacy primarily preserved in Southern India. Typically, select portions of temple architecture were adorned with such paintings, intended to captivate the attention of art connoisseurs with a keen aesthetic sense.

Traces of this artistic tradition can be found in the upper cells of the Dharmaraja Ratha at Mahabalipuram. Similar examples appear in other Pallava cave temples, including the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram. This decorative approach is also evident in sites like Badami and Hampi.

Among the most significant examples are the paintings in the Brihadisvara temple, which offer invaluable insight into the state of the painter's art during the Chola period.

At Lepakshi in Andhra Pradesh, one of the most extraordinary murals of the Vijayanagara era can be found—a monumental image of Virabhadra painted on the ceiling of the mandapa. The narrative scenes depicted here draw from the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the Puranas. Highlights include the coronation of Rama, Arjuna's battle with Kirata, and the image of Krishna as Vatapatrasayi—all rendered with remarkable charm and vitality.

Medieval Miniatures

A distinctive aspect of this period is that artists began signing their works, enabling us to recognize several painters from Akbar's court. One remarkable characteristic of this era is the tradition of artists signing their paintings, which helps us identify numerous painters from Akbar's court. During this time, it became common for artists to sign their works, allowing the identification of several painters from Akbar's court. The practice of artists signing their works emerged as a notable feature of this period, providing insight into the identities of many painters at Akbar's court.

An important development during this era was the signing of artworks by artists, which has helped attribute many pieces to painters from Akbar's court. Significant artistic achievements of the era are reflected in the exquisitely illustrated manuscripts such as the Babur-Nama, Akbar-Nama, Hamza-Nama, and Razm-Nama. Despite the Indian evolution of the style, Persian influences remain evident—particularly in the treatment of backgrounds and landscapes.

Mughal paintings are marked by their aristocratic elegance, individual expression, and a strong emphasis on portraiture. Developed by and for the nobility, this art form offers glimpses into the opulence of court life: from the inner festivities of the harem and the grandeur of royal assemblies to the spirited spectacles of elephant and

camel fights, hunting scenes, and intimate moments of courtly women engaged in adornment and toilette. These works vividly capture the refinement and vibrant life of the Mughal elite.

The Rajasthani School of Art evolved organically from India's long and rich painting tradition. Interestingly, while it is most famous today for its exquisite miniatures—widely displayed in art galleries throughout India and beyond—its roots are actually found in large-scale murals. This is clearly demonstrated by the impressive wall paintings that remain preserved in the palaces of Jaipur and Udaipur, highlighting the skill and creativity of the artists from this school. A recurring and beloved theme in Rajasthani art is the Raslila—the divine love play of Radha and Krishna—which artists have depicted with great joy and spiritual sensitivity. Rajput paintings, grounded in the life and spirit of the people, express a strong bond with the vibrant rhythms of rural life. Their simplicity and emotional directness give them a powerful appeal, especially to peasants and common folk. Profoundly religious and mystical in essence, these paintings are universal in their resonance. They serve as poetic interpreters of nature's many moods and evoke themes that speak straight to the heart.

MODERN PAINTINGS

European Artists in India

Eighteenth-century India was a political crucible, where various powers clashed and conspired for dominance. In such an atmosphere of instability, the flourishing of art became increasingly difficult. As turmoil deepened, Indian painting began a steady decline, eventually degenerating into mere technical imitation devoid of soul or creativity. The once-unique crafts and techniques of fresco and miniature painting—so distinguished in the annals of art—were gradually lost. What persisted were only lifeless replicas of earlier artistic brilliance. Yet, even amidst this decline, folk art traditions retained a degree of vitality, continuing into the early period of British rule. However, the surviving elements of traditional Indian art were gradually overshadowed by foreign styles and influences. European oil painting began to supplant miniatures, and with the consolidation of British power in India, Western art and architectural styles of the 19th century began to take root. The affluent classes, in particular, grew increasingly drawn to Victorian ideals and aesthetics. During their rule, the British set up art schools in various provincial capitals. These institutions primarily aimed to train painters and draughtsmen for technical roles in the Railway and Survey departments, rather than to nurture creative artistry. Patronage for the popular genre paintings of the time came mostly from the landed aristocracy, wealthy merchants, and, to a limited extent, British bureaucrats stationed in India. Nonetheless, a small yet notable group of enlightened Englishmen developed a genuine appreciation for Indian art and worked to preserve it from complete decline. Among the most prominent of these were Cunningham, Fergusson, Cousins, Havell, and Percy Brown—individuals whose efforts played a key role in recognizing and safeguarding the aesthetic legacy of Indian art.

Modern Indian Painting

By the late 19th century, a strong reaction began to emerge against the stagnation and decline of Indian painting. This period marked a turning point, as conditions became favorable for the revival of a truly Indian artistic expression. While many gifted Indian artists became proficient in European styles and mastered the techniques of oil and watercolour painting, a deeper search for national identity in art had begun.

Among the prominent figures of the time was Raja Ravi Varma of Kerala, who gained widespread acclaim for his mythological scenes and portraits rendered in the European academic style. However, a growing number of pioneers began to look inward, drawing inspiration from India's rich artistic heritage.

Chief among them was Abanindranath Tagore, who made a dedicated effort to revive and develop a distinctly Indian style of painting. Along with his devoted students, he experimented with traditional techniques drawn from Indian miniatures, frescoes, scrolls, and *pata* paintings, laying the foundation for a new national school of art rooted in indigenous traditions.

This new artistic movement soon spread across the country and came to be known as the Bengal School of Painting. Naturally, its proponents—imbued with a renewed sense of nationalism—sought to revive traditional Indian art by closely imitating classical watercolour works from the past.

However, this romantic phase of cultural renaissance was short-lived. As it faded, the Bengal School gradually gave way to stronger, more modern influences. As early as the 1920s, Rabindranath Tagore distanced himself from the revivalist ideology altogether, signalling a shift toward a broader, more progressive vision for Indian art.

For the first time, the term "painterly paintings" began to enter the discourse. While difficult to define precisely, "painterly" generally refers to an emphasis on the handling of pigment and the expressive use of colour—where colour becomes a central element in the artwork, often independent of any specific subject matter. This marked a clear departure from stale traditionalism, as artists embraced progressivism and innovation. Modern Indian painting represented a complete break from the past—a radical reversal of earlier artistic approaches.

But what is modern painting? It is not easily captured in words, as it belongs to the realm of shape, colour, and form. In visual art, seeing is understanding. To truly appreciate a work of art, one must engage with it using the eyes, the heart, and the mind.

Modern Indian painting mirrors the complexity and contradictions of contemporary life. Most modern Indian artists are urban dwellers, deeply entangled in the realities of the modern world. Intellectually, they align with the principles of modern art, while also drawing from the shared experiences of modern humanity.

Rabindranath Tagore's artistic vision lent Indian modernism a unique identity, especially through his contributions to expressionistic art in multiple mediums. Gaganendranath Tagore, his nephew, explored the emotive potential of light—especially in indoor scenes—and experimented with Cubism and the merging of forms. While his art rarely depicted explicit Indian themes, it subtly conveyed social critiques, often laced with mild satire. Amrita Sher-Gil, through both her lineage and artistic perspective, represented a synthesis of Indian and European influences—a defining characteristic of much of modern Indian art. Her works reveal a tendency to simplify forms to their essential planes, using colour modulation to suggest volume and capturing light effects not through traditional chiaroscuro, but through the brilliance and purity of pigment—even in outdoor scenes. In contrast, Jamini Roy drew inspiration from the vibrant energy of Indian folk-art traditions. Drawing inspiration from pata paintings, scrolls, clay dolls, and decorative pottery, his work reconnected with indigenous visual culture in a powerful way. The true achievement of this formative period was not the establishment of fixed aesthetic goals or stylistic norms, but rather the creation of a vibrant artistic ferment—one that opened new possibilities and directions for Indian modern art.

Thank you