

REIMAGINING NARRATIVES AND CULTURAL BOUNDARIES: THE ARTISTIC JOURNEY OF SANAT KUMAR CHATTERJEE

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Abstract: The borders of the cultural identity of an artist are often informed by his geographical sensibilities and an artist's multiple displacements to different geographies make their way into his work. I would like to posit that multiple migrations by an artist create friction between the familiar and the unfamiliar resulting in a unique perspective of art. To explore the vast ocean of ideas and possibilities, one often tends to reduce the underlying gap between the existing cultures. Sanat Kumar Chatterjee, one of the important artists of Bengal School had a huge transactional artistic and cultural effect on Indian art and society. His transition in artistic styles while travelling around India formulates this research paper's basis.

Keywords: *Art, Artistic styles, Bengal School, Cultural Identity, Cultural affect, Sanat Kumar Chatterjee.*

INTRODUCTION

Cultural change and cultural identity is often informed by the geographical sensibilities of an artist. Cultural change often affects how people think and perceive society and things around them. The shift from one place to another often leads to the quasi-inevitable exploration of new things and ideas. A person's shift from one place to another often leads to new experiences and one cannot deny that art and exploration go hand-in-hand. The more you explore, the inner self or the outer world, the more information you gather. Art changes society by changing opinions shifting values and translating experiences across space and time. The more the artist explores the world around him the more he contributes to society and acts as a valuable asset to society. Also, shifting geographies of artistic encounters are a historical continuum in art, as exemplified by the cyclical relocation of art centres underpinned by migration as well as the waxing and waning of cities' economic attraction and critical mass.¹

For many artists, their migration and those of their ancestors shape their identities and the art they produce; as people move they absorb the culture of their new home and influence it with their traditions. Artists move around the world shifting their identities cultural traditions and artistic techniques. India has always been acknowledged as the land of diversities and varied cultural heritage and its artists have been challenged continuously throughout history with varied art styles and cultural and political shifts, while there is no doubt that these artists have given a compelling aspect and direction to the various art and craft of India. The tales of inherent artists, the spontaneity of village craftsmen, the beautiful folklore. India is rich in such old traditions and one can witness the promiscuity of Indian culture in the artworks and the

¹ Miyamoto & Ruizin in the book *Art and Migration* explain vividly how some American painters continued their education after the First World War in France, which became a popular destination for artists in the nineteenth century due to its internationalising art schools and galleries. Also, some French artists fled to New York during World War II, where the city's burgeoning art scene attracted a variety of rich artistic currents and gave rise to movements like surrealism, expressionism, and abstractionism, among others. In turn, these American artists introduced French artists to new artistic forms. In a similar vein, many activist painters and Impressionists who were escaping the Franco-Prussian War, the Paris Siege, and the aftermath of the Paris Commune were welcomed and supported by London artists in the 1870s.

artists that we get to see in India. Out of all the contrasting artists in the contemporary world, the works of Sanath Kumar Chatterjee stand out from the crowd and make a niche of their own. Born in 1935 Sanath Kumar is an example of innovative ideas with the true sense of Indian art in his works and encapsulates almost all the desired qualities that make him an artist worth exploring. Being one of the artists of Bengal School. Chatterjee's mentor Asit Kumar Haldar in his early years of life helped in grasping the essential knowledge of traditional fine art painting (i.e. Bengal School of Art) which helped him throughout his life as an artist and art professor. Painter, sculptor, writer, singer, and poet with over 12,000 paintings, 1500 sculptures, and hundreds of exhibitions all over India to his credit. He is a true artist in all forms. Sanat worked most of his life doing paintings all around India and vast subject matter in his works of art, he renders the Hindu cosmology with his religious-philosophical, and scientific implications.

EARLY LIFE OF SANAT KUMAR CHATTERJEE

Sanath Kumar's father Nirmal Chatterjee was an accounts officer with Northern Railways and lived in Lucknow when he was born. Due to the transferable jobs around India, from a very early age, Sanat had to shift his identities and cultural traditions which provided him with ample information about different cultures and places. A few years after he was born, his father was transferred to Calcutta from Lucknow. It was then he discovered his love for art and paintings. He got the opportunity to watch various artists who use to draw cinema posters using the graph of Bengali actors and actresses along with the artistic life that Calcutta encapsulated in its society at that period. Sanat made sculptures which were very much appraised by everyone in the society, which in turn made a major part of his future artistic endeavours. Sanat became quite popular among his friends

and teachers. After a few years, his father was again transferred to Lucknow. Sanath had to change various schools over the period to cope with his studies which exposed him to different environments and allow him to meet different people which resulted in a unique perspective of art that he encapsulated. It is, therefore, the multiple migrations that create friction between the familiar and the unfamiliar resulting in a unique perspective in art. While in school Sanat had already become very prominent and popular. It was in Lucknow he met his guru Asit Kumar Haldar, who was one of the most important artists of the Bengal Renaissance. His maternal grandmother was the sister of Rabindranath Tagore, making him Tagore's grandnephew. Sanat started learning drawing and painting under Asit Kumar Haldar and it was through his guru, young Sanat became the third generation of the artist of the Bengal School of Art. The influence of Asit Kumar's teaching can be seen in the works that he did all his life. Sanat was under his guidance for 14 years, yet he had a lifelong influence on young Sanat's mind.

TRANSFORMATION AND NEW LEARNINGS

The huge transformation came when Sanat was asked to travel to the Punjab hills to propagate the teachings that he received from his guru. As a result, he was exposed to yet another territory, and to explore the vast ocean of ideas and possibilities, one often tends to reduce the underlying gap between the existing cultures. To understand the work of art we need to understand what made an artist make the work of art and how the artist conceived the work of art. History mythology and theology all have stirred the imagination of Professor Chatterjee. The principal character of Chatterjee is its depth and vitality deriving roots from the spiritual and cultural heritage of the country. To propagate the teachings of his guru, and to reduce the cultural gap. Sanat Kumar never sold his paintings and spent his life teaching art in the hills as a part of Guru Dakshina to his mentor. The beautiful Hill paintings; Pahari miniature had a huge impact on his art. Exposure to the art of this region can be seen in the works that he did in the later years of his life. The influence of Buddhist art and the folk art of the hills are very much evident in his paintings.

The "Portrait of the Lady with Lotus" is a famous painting by the Bengal School Artist Sanat Kumar Chatterjee, created around the 1960s. This masterpiece showcases several stylistic elements that contribute to its enduring allure. This painting is one of the artist's early paintings, and the style of the Bengal school is evident in the intricate rendering of the painting.

Sanat Kumar Chatterjee's use of lines is a defining characteristic of his work. In this painting, a soft, diffused line work on the subject's face along with warm colours creates a gentle play of light and shadow. The colour palette is predominantly warm and muted, with shades of off-white, greys, and earth tones. The contrast between the subject's earthly complexion and the light grey background draws attention to her face and the beautiful lotus she is holding. The composition is tightly framed, with the subject's face and upper body occupying the majority of the canvas. This close-up composition enhances the intimacy and intensity of the portrait. The subject is depicted in a three-quarter pose, with her head turned and slightly tilted. This creates a sense of naturalness and elegance, allowing the viewer to engage with her enigmatic gaze.

Fig.1 "Portrait of the Lady with Lotus" photographed from Sanat Art Foundation Gallery archives.



Sanat Kumar Chatterjee's smooth and refined watercolour brushwork contributes to the overall sense of delicacy and precision in the painting. The details, particularly in the subject's face and the intricate patterns of her clothing, are meticulously rendered. Chatterjee's attention to detail is evident in the intricate rendering of various elements, including the subject's delicate features, the line work, and the intricate folds of her clothing. This meticulousness contributes to the overall realism of the painting. This

work of art from the artist expresses the style and the space in which he was working and living, hence providing us with the masterpiece which is part of the creation of the early years of his life.

Fig.2,3 fragments of the painting “Lakshmi” photographed from Sanat Art Foundation Gallery archives

Coming to the later stage of his life and a unique perspective of art that he incorporated into his art can be



seen in yet another masterpiece, a painting titled “Lakshmi”. In the painting Lakshmi is positioned centrally, surrounded by other elements. The composition is symmetrical, balanced, and harmonious, creating a sense of order and stability. Lakshmi is depicted with a serene and peaceful facial expression, reflecting her compassionate nature. The facial features are delicately rendered, with a calm and gentle expression that evokes a sense of tranquillity. Lakshmi is depicted in “Abhaya varada mudra,” where her right hand is extended downward holding a kumbha in her hand, representing her bestowing blessings and boons upon her devotees. Her left hand often holds the stem of a lotus flower, symbolising purity and enlightenment. Lakshmi is seated in a meditative posture, in the full lotus position, representing her focus and concentration. The painting at first looks similar to a “Thangka” and the various elements, the line work, the moulding of garments and the wavy patterns that we see in the painting all suggest the incorporation of Buddhist art and the infusion of Thangka style of painting in his later years of work.

CONCLUSION

The geographical boundaries that are typically imposed on art history are challenged by art and migration. Multiple migrations and displacements create a link between cultures and art, challenging physical, political and ethnic frontiers as well as the frontiers of the art community. Sanat Kumar Chatterjee, one of the important artists of Bengal School had a huge transactional, artistic, and cultural effect on Indian art and society due to his extensive travelling all around the world. Sanat Chatterjee's paintings show a mixture of Pahadi, Tibetan, and a Bengal School style and it won't be wrong to say that multiple migrations helped him create a unique style with a blend of all the cultural transitions and information that he gathered in his life. It is therefore the touch of an artist to different cultures which creates friction between the familiar and the unfamiliar resulting in a unique perspective in art, a new style in art.

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