Indian Art and Culture

Curated by: Beloo Mehra
His living cosmic spirit shall enring,
Annulling the decree of death and pain,
Erasing the formulas of the Ignorance,
With the deep meaning of beauty and life's hid sense,
The being ready for immortality,
His regard crossing infinity's mystic waves
Bring back to Nature her early joy to live,
The metred heart-beats of a lost delight,
The cry of a forgotten ecstasy,
The dance of the first world-creating Bliss.

Sri Aurobindo
(CWSA, 33-34: 706)
CONTENTS

Editorial

On Beauty and Art

Essentials of Indian Art

The Mother as an Artist

Selections from the book 'Paintings and Drawings by the Mother'

When Young India Awakes — 31

The Mother on Cinema

Singing for the Divine: Story of Swami Haridas

Spirituality in Art

The Mother on Art and Yoga

Why Arts Education for All?

Art as Yoga

Beloo Mehra

Beloo Mehra

Beloo Mehra

Selections from the book 'Paintings and Drawings by the Mother'

Beloo Mehra

The Mother

The Internet

NoliniKanta Gupta

The Mother

Beloo Mehra

Ananda Coomaraswamy

4

7

12

16

20

21

22

25

28

29
On Beauty and Art

“Man’s seeking after beauty reaches its most intense and satisfying expression in the great creative arts, poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, but in its full extension there is no activity of his nature or his life from which it need or ought to be excluded,—provided we understand beauty both in its widest and its truest sense. A complete and universal appreciation of beauty and the making entirely beautiful our whole life and being must surely be a necessary character of the perfect individual and the perfect society.”

The modern tendency is to depreciate the value of the beautiful and over-stress the value of the useful. Generations of Indians have been cut off from the ancient roots of their aesthetic cultural traditions, thanks to a utilitarian and soulless education. According to Sri Aurobindo, this situation can only be corrected if education can figure out ways to emphasise and facilitate the faculties of creative imagination as well as higher emotional delicacy and spiritual sensitivity. There is a great necessity to revive the temperament which values the deeper beauty in all aspects of life.

But what is Beauty? The great sufi musician Hazrat Inayat Khan once said:

“As the ocean cannot be emptied into a vessel made by human hands, so beauty cannot be captured within the limits of human definitions. There is the beauty of the pine tree, a beauty of straightness and uprightness; and again there is the beauty of the sweeping branches of the willow. Or again a curve added to the beauty of steadiness of form sometimes doubles that loveliness. What can explain this diversity? Beauty of movement, of gesture, of feature, of expression, of voice, all escape explanation, which is indeed but a limited thing.”

Beauty indeed escapes all human definitions. It is in and of the form, but also and primarily beyond the form, it is in movement and also in stillness. Beauty is something to be experienced, though that experience may be limited by the limitations of the experiencing heart and mind.

Beauty, Delight, and Harmony

“Beauty is his footprint showing us where he has passed…”

This one line from Sri Aurobindo’s epic poem, Savitri expresses perfectly the deepest Indian view of Beauty. In the Indian spiritual tradition Sachchidananda is the highest Supreme trinity of Existence (Sat), Consciousness (Cit), and Delight or Bliss (Ananda). Beauty, according to Sri Aurobindo, is Ananda taking form, though the form need not be a physical shape.

“One speaks of a beautiful thought, a beautiful act, a beautiful soul. What we speak of as beauty is Ananda in manifestation; beyond manifestation beauty loses itself in Ananda or, you may say, beauty and Ananda become indistinguishably one.”

This oneness of Beauty and Delight is a quintessential aspect of the Indian view of Art, Beauty and Art Appreciation. All Art is a medium to express this Ananda, this Eternal Delight through form, in this view. But as the above quotation shows, beauty need not have a physical form. A thought, or a most ordinary act, becomes beautiful when it becomes a means to Delight. This is a matter of experience and requires gradual inner development—both for the artist as well as for the one appreciating art.

How does one experience the delight of beauty? In the words of Ananda Coomarswamy:

“The vision of beauty is spontaneous, in just the same sense as the inward light of the lover (bhakta). It is a state of grace that cannot be achieved by deliberate effort; though perhaps we can remove hindrances to its manifestation, for there are many witnesses that the secret of all art is to be found in self-forgetfulness. And we know that this state of grace is not achieved in the pursuit of pleasure; the hedonists have their reward, but they are in bondage to loveliness, while the artist is free in beauty.”

When we stand in front of a work of art, does it make us experience a moment of self-forgetfulness? Is that the same

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1 CWSA, 25: 136-137
2 Hazrat Inayat Khan, The Art of Personality, Chapter 12, Beauty
3 CWSA, 27: 700
4 Ananda Coomaraswamy, The Dance of Shiva: Fourteen Essays, pp. 39-40
as being in a state of divine grace? But it is important to remember that the self-forgetfulness Coomaraswamy speaks of is not a casual mind-less-ness, but rather a practice of going higher than the realm of mind where the mental-vital ego-self is forgotten along with its incessant demands, desires, expectations, and preferences.

It is a state of grace when we are completely identified with the objet d’art, even if the moment is just a tiny one. This is how one may experience Delight, whether in the process of creating art or appreciating art. Furthermore, the pursuit of true beauty is not at all a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure.

To experience beauty in a work of art it is not necessary to understand the artist’s meaning. A true connoisseur who has developed the inner sight and feeling to experience beauty knows without reasoning whether or not the work is beautiful, before the mind begins to question what it is “about”.

Sri Aurobindo emphasises that beauty for beauty’s sake can never be the spirit of art in India. An artist and an art connoisseur who are steeped in the highest values of Indian culture always seek beauty, but they never lose sight of the end which Indian culture holds more important, the realisation of the Self in things, of the Invisible in the visible, of the Infinite in the finite.

“Beauty does not get its full power except when it is surrendered to the Divine.”

Such an ideal is based on a higher spiritual truth that Beauty is an expression of the Infinite on the physical plane, and therefore for something to be truly and beautifully effective it must be offered at the service of the Divine. In other words, there is no place for an egoistic pursuit in the truest experience of Beauty.

“In the physical world, of all things it is beauty that expresses best the Divine. The physical world is the world of form and the perfection of form is beauty. Beauty interprets, expresses, manifests the Eternal. Its role is to put all manifested nature in contact with the Eternal through the perfection of form, through harmony and a sense of the ideal which uplifts and leads towards something higher.

* Let beauty be your constant ideal.

The beauty of the soul
The beauty of sentiments
The beauty of thoughts
The beauty of the action
The beauty in the work
so that nothing comes out of your hands which is not an expression of pure and harmonious beauty.

And the Divine Help shall always be with you.”

Harmony is another important aspect of the Indian view of Beauty and Art. This is true for all kinds of artistic and creative process. This aspect of harmony is emphasised in all Indian art forms—be it painting, dance or music. Ultimately, this inner harmony is to be experienced both by the creator as well as the receiver of the art. Harmony like Delight is an inner quality of the soul and must be developed progressively. Art—both the artistic process and art appreciation can be important means to develop a greater sense of inner harmony.

“Skill is not art, talent is not art. Art is a living harmony and beauty that must be expressed in all the movements of existence. This manifestation of beauty and harmony is part of the Divine realisation upon earth, perhaps even its greatest part.

For, from the supramental point of view beauty and harmony are as important as any other expression of the Divine. But they should not be isolated, set up apart from all other relations, taken out from the ensemble; they should be one with the expression of life as a whole. People have the habit of saying, “Oh, it is an artist!” as if an artist should not be a man among other men but must be an extraordinary being belonging to a class by itself, and his art too something extraordinary and apart, not to be confused with the other ordinary things of the world. The maxim, “Art for art’s sake”, tries to impress and emphasise as a truth the same error. It is the same mistake as when men place in the middle of their drawing-rooms a framed picture that has nothing to do either with the furniture or the walls, but is put there only because it is an “object of art”.

True art is a whole and an ensemble; it is one and of one piece with life.”

The Mother strongly emphasised cultivation of a sense of beauty as part of one’s integral development. She once said:

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5 CWM, 15: 232
6 CWM, 12: 232
7 CWM, 3: 109
"It is one of the greatest weapons of the Asura at work when you are taught to shun beauty. It has been the ruin of India. The Divine manifests in the psychic as love, in the mind as knowledge, in the vital as power and in the physical as beauty. If you discard beauty it means that you are depriving the Divine of this manifestation in the material and you hand over that part to the Asura."8

Taking inspiration from these words, the present issue is dedicated to exploring some key aspects of Indian Art and Aesthetic traditions in the light of the integral vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. It has been a tough task selecting a few gems from the vast ocean of pearls that we find in their written works and conversations, and also in the works of several other senior sādhaka-s and devoted children of the Mother. We have highlighted a few salient aspects to give the reader a general orientation to appreciate the significance, richness and diversity of Indian arts including the most popular contemporary art form, namely, cinema. A special focus of this issue is on highlighting the Indian vision of highest art which is essentially one with the deeper spirit of India.

8 CWM, 13: 372–373

Beloo Mehra
Essentials of Indian Art

“Indian architecture, painting, sculpture are not only intimately one in inspiration with the central things in Indian philosophy, religion, Yoga, culture, but a specially intense expression of their significance.”

Sacred Roots of Indian Art

E. B. Havell in his work The Ideals of Indian Art (1912) makes some excellent points about the inner truth behind the origin of art in India. India, he says, had conceived the whole philosophy of her art, early on in the Vedic period itself. Indian Art was conceived when that wonderful intuition flashed upon the Indian mind that the soul of man is eternal, and one with the Supreme Soul, the Lord and Cause of all things. The rishis who expressed their spiritual realisations and experiences through the Vedic hymns and spoke of the Spirit behind Nature in beautiful imagery were great artists who gave to India monuments more durable than bronze.

Havell reminds us that in the Vedic period in India, though we may not find any explicit development in what we are accustomed to call as the fine arts, it was nevertheless an age of wonderful artistic richness. He explains that the transcendentalism of the essential Vedic thought which could satisfy the intense reverence for the beauty and delight in Nature that the Rishis expressed through vivid images were the opposite pole to the barbaric materialism of the present day which is the negation of all art and beauty.

It is also important to note that the Vedic period was not entirely barren of art in material form. The elaborate sacrifices and rituals called forth the highest skill of the decorative craftsman who worked on the yajñaśālā and the vedikā, the consecrated space and altar for performing the sacrifice ritual. We find references in several texts from Vedic and post-Vedic times, e.g., in the description given in the Ramayana of the great sacrifice prepared by Vasishtha we find equal honour being accorded to the skilled craftsmen. There is, in fact, a direct continuity between the ornamentation of carved posts made for yajñaśālā and the ornamented pillars of later Hindu and Jain temples.

The priests who performed the yajña and recited the hymns were experts in poetic meter and precise articulation, pronunciation and accent. This precise musicality of the ritual and its inner spiritual significance of facilitating an invocation and a transcendence—both for the singer as well as the listener—may be considered the highest form of art in itself. The entire performance of a ritual in itself is an Art as it emphasises the deep interconnectedness of Art, Religion, and Life.

Significance of Adornment, Decoration

Indian tradition considers alamkāra (or alankāra), adornment and decoration auspicious and leading to prosperity. We find evidence in both śilpashāstra and the purānas where decoration is considered important for the houses, both of gods as well as ordinary people. The Vishnudharmottara prescribes auspicious depictions on houses of men. There are specific depictions to be avoided. The Samarangana Sutradhara speaks of ashtamangalas (eight auspicious objects) on the door and says that the auspicious Sri is to be carved on the entrance. The Pramanamanjari, a śilpashāstra text from western India, speaks about the kind of decorations for the pillars in houses (e.g., figures in dance-poses). The threshold should be decorated with flowers and leaves.

This tradition of decorating the houses continues to this day in the forms of kolam, rangoli and mandala. Much study has gone into the deeper meaning behind this sacred practice. The third chapter of Bharata muni’s Nātyashastra, which is based upon the Gandharva Veda (appendix to Sāma Veda) gives detail of the rang-pooja to be performed for the gods of the stage before dramas can be enacted in a newly constructed theatre. It says that a mandala should be drawn on the stage and the gods should be worshipped and invoked to occupy their proper seats. In another ritual, mentioned in the Nātyashastra, a brilliant mandala of ashtadala padma is drawn in which Brahma and other guardian deities of the eight quarters etc., are worshipped.

An Integral Vision of Art

In the Indian aesthetic tradition, all art expressions were viewed as vehicles of beauty providing both pleasure and education, through refinement of senses and sense perceptions. While speaking of theatre (nātya), the Nātyashastra encompasses all
The text itself claims that there is no knowledge, no craft, no lore, no art, no technique and no activity that is not found in the *Nātyashastra*. The reason that theatre arts were given greater significance is that drama was considered the most comprehensive form of art expressions.

The interdependence of the arts was also underlined in another important ancient text dealing with arts, *Vishnudharmottara* (circa 5th century), an appendix to Vishnu Purāṇa. This idea was expressed in a famous passage in which sage Markandeya instructs king Vajra in the art of sculpture, emphasising that to learn it one must first learn painting, dance, and music. The story goes as follows:

**Vajra**: O sage, teach me how to make the forms of gods so that the image may always manifest the deity.

**Markandeya**: He who does not know the canon of painting (citrasutram) can never know the canon of image-making (pratima lakshanam).

**Vajra**: Explain then to me the canon of painting because one who knows the canon of painting knows the canon of image-making.

**Markandeya**: It is very difficult to know the canon of painting without the canon of dance (nritta shastra), for in both these arts the world is to be represented.

**Vajra**: Explain to me then the canon of dance and then speak about the canon of painting, for one who knows the practice of the canon of dance knows painting.

**Markandeya**: Dance is difficult to understand by one who is not acquainted with instrumental music (atodya).

**Vajra**: O sage, speak to me about instrumental music and then speak about the canon of dance, because when the instrumental music is properly understood, one understands dance.

**Markandeya**: Without vocal music (gita) it is not possible to know instrumental music.

**Vajra**: Explain to me the canon of vocal music, because he who knows the canon of vocal music knows everything.

**Markandeya**: Vocal music is to be understood as subject to recitation that may be done in two ways, prose (gadya) and verse (padya). Verse is in many meters.

Indian Art: An Expression of the Divine

“The whole basis of Indian artistic creation, perfectly conscious and recognised in the canons, is directly spiritual and intuitive.”

The greatness of Indian art is the greatness of all Indian thought and achievement, particularly the following ideals, as pointed out by Sri Aurobindo:

- recognition of the persistent within the transient,
- recognition of the domination of matter by spirit,
- the subordination of the insistent appearances of Nature (prakriti) to the inner reality, which the Mighty Mother of All Creation veils in a thousand ways even while she suggests.

It was the highest vision of the Vedic seers, the vision of the Infinite that is revealed and yet hidden in all the finite forms of the existence, which materialised in the later periods in the wonderful forms of all Indian art, including painting, sculpture and music. Sri Aurobindo speaks of the theory behind all great Indian art in these words:

“Its highest business is to disclose something of the Self, the Infinite, the Divine to the regard of the soul, the Self through its expressions, the Infinite through its living finite symbols, the Divine through his powers. Or the Godheads are to be revealed, luminously interpreted, or in some way suggested to the soul’s understanding or to its devotion, or at the very least to a spiritually or religiously aesthetic emotion.”

The highest Indian art is identical in its spiritual aim and principle with the rest of Indian culture, says Sri Aurobindo. This spiritual aim of art is not forgotten even on the level of material world, the outer life of man and the things of external Nature. In most good works of Indian art, there is always something more in which the material presentation of life floats as in an immaterial atmosphere. Life is seen in some suggestion of the infinite or of something beyond, or there is at least a touch and influence of these which helps to shape the presentation.

“What Nature is, what God is, what man is can be triumphantly revealed in stone or on canvas.”
Difference between Indian and Western Art

Sri Aurobindo writes:

“All great artistic work proceeds from an act of intuition, not really an intellectual idea or a splendid imagination,—these are only mental translations,—but a direct intuition of some truth of life or being, some significant form of that truth, some development of it in the mind of man.”

However, as he further explains, there still remains immense divergence between different cultural forms of art because of various significant differences:

- in the object and field of the intuitive vision,
- in the method of working out the sight or suggestion,
- in the rendering by the external form and technique,
- in the whole way of the rendering to the human mind, and
- in the centre of our being to which the work appeals.

The first point of difference is most significant.

In most western art, particularly of the realist and naturalist schools, the object and field of creative intuition is limited to Life, action, passion, emotion, idea, or Nature. But all these are seen for their own sake and for an aesthetic delight in them.

Such art appeals more directly to the outward soul by a strong awakening of the sensuous, the vital, the emotional, the intellectual and imaginative being. It is not directed to the eye of the deepest self and spirit within. The spiritual component in such work is limited to as much or as little that is suitable to and expresses itself through the outward form.

The modern, rational, westernised mind is arrested and attracted by the form, lingers on it and cannot get away from its charm, loves it for its own beauty, rests on the emotional, intellectual, aesthetic suggestions that arise directly from its most visible language, confines the soul in the body. For such a mind form creates the spirit, the spirit depends for its existence and for everything it has to say on the form.

The theory of ancient Indian art at its greatest is of another kind. And as Sri Aurobindo reminds, it is the greatest art which gives its character to the rest and throws on it something of its stamp and influence.

Indian art is identical in its spiritual aim and principle with the rest of Indian culture. Reality for its own sake is not the ideal of Indian art. As per the Indian view, the highest ideal of an artist is one who sees with an inner vision the true reality which is hidden.

It is not that all Indian work realises this ideal; there is plenty no doubt that falls short, is lowered, ineffective or even debased, but it is the best and the most characteristic influence and execution which gives its tone to an art and by which we must judge and appreciate it. The noted Indian painter S. H. Raza once explained the inner purpose of Indian art as follows:

“A stone can represent divine power, and it can also be just the visual representation of a stone! So the question of finding the immense power of symbolism in Indian culture is one thing. To be dedicated to it in a romantic way, is entirely a different thing. Now it depends who the artists are that are working in this direction, and what they are trying to show.”

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13 CWSA, 20: 266
Form as a Creation of the Spirit

“For the Indian mind form does not exist except as a creation of the spirit and draws all its meaning and value from the spirit. Every line, arrangement of mass, colour, shape, posture, every physical suggestion, however many, crowded, opulent they may be, is first and last a suggestion, a hint, very often a symbol which is in its main function a support for a spiritual emotion, idea, image that again goes beyond itself to the less definable, but more powerfully sensible reality of the spirit which has excited these movements in the aesthetic mind and passed through them into significant shapes.”

According to Sri Aurobindo, when we see a great work of Indian art — a painting or a sculpture — the truth, the exact likeness or resemblance is there, the correspondence, sādṛśya, but it is the truth of the essence of the form, it is the likeness of the soul to itself, the reproduction of the subtle embodiment which is the basis of the physical embodiment, the purer and finer subtle body of an object which is the very expression of its own essential nature, svabhāva.

The means by which this effect is produced is characteristic of the inward vision of the Indian mind. It is done by a bold and firm insistence on the pure and strong outline and a total suppression of everything that would interfere with its boldness, strength and purity or would blur over and dilute the intense significance of the line.

For example, as Sri Aurobindo explains, in the treatment of the human figure, an Indian artist pays attention to the following:

• all corporeal filling in of the outline by insistence on the flesh, the muscle, the anatomical detail is minimised or disregarded;
• the strong subtle lines and pure shapes which make the humanity of the human form are alone brought into relief;
• the whole essential human being is there, the divinity that has taken this garb of the spirit to the eye, but not the superfluous physicality which he carries with him as his burden.
• It is the ideal psychical figure and body of man and woman that is before us in its charm and beauty.

It must also be noted that Indian art was not always solely hieratic or catering to religious impulse of the race. It may seem this way because it is only in the temples and cave cathedrals that ancient and medieval India’s greatest work has survived. But looking through our old literature, we see that art was devoted as much to the court and the city and to cultural ideas and the life of the people as to the temple and

14 CWSA, 20: 270

Sculpture and Painting, Ajanta

15 CWSA, 20: 308
monastery and their motives." This is more clearly seen in the Rajput and Mughal era paintings.

Sri Aurobindo reminds us that "Indian painting, sculpture and architecture did not refuse service to the aesthetic satisfaction and interpretation of the social, civic and individual life of the human being." There is plenty of evidence to suggest that these things played a great part in the Indian artists’ motives of creation, elaborately carved stepwells are a quick example for such art which served highly practical, social and aesthetic functions all at the same time.

Appreciating Indian Art

“To appreciate our own artistic past at its right value we have to free ourselves from all subjection to a foreign outlook and see our sculpture and painting, ....in the light of its own profound intention and greatness of spirit. When we so look at it, we shall be able to see that the sculpture of ancient and mediaeval India claims its place on the very highest levels of artistic achievement.”

16 CWSA, 20: 126
17 CWSA, 20: 227
18 CWSA, 20: 286
The Mother did not give her personal career as an artist a primary importance. Hence it is not commonly known that she was an accomplished artist. ...in spite of her limited artistic activity in later years, she never lost the power of her observing eye nor the sureness of her hand, nor did she allow her consciousness of beauty and her aesthetic vision to become diminished in the midst of her intensive spiritual endeavours and manifold responsibilities as the head of Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

The Mother loved to draw and paint from her childhood. Though art was only one of her many interests, it occupied a prominent place in her early life. She began to take drawing lessons at the age of eight. Two years later she started to learn oil painting and other painting techniques. By the time she was twelve she was doing portraits. In 1892, when she was fourteen, one of her charcoal drawings was exhibited at the International “Blanc et Noir” Exhibition in Paris.

Having completed her regular schooling at the age of fifteen, she joined an art studio in Paris to study painting. In all likelihood it belonged to the Academic Julian, an organisation with several studios founded by Rodolphe Julian in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In those days women were not
admitted to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Most of the paintings reproduced here are evidently of models supplied by the studio. They are good examples of the style of painting taught in the best French art schools of the time. The first one of these studies is signed and dated 1895, when the Mother was seventeen.

The Mother continued to work in this studio until 1897, when she married artist Henri Morisset. During the next few years, she participated in the stimulating artistic life of turn-of-the-century Paris and associated with some of the leading artists of the period. She did a fair amount of painting, both in Paris, where she and Morisset had their flat with a studio in the garden, and on trips to the countryside. Six of her works were exhibited in the prestigious Salon de la Societe Nationale des Beaux-Arts in 1903, 1904 and 1905. These works are listed by name in the catalogues of the Salon; one of them was reproduced in the illustrated catalogue of the 1905 exhibition.

Only about forty of the Mother’s paintings are available to us today. More than half of these belong to her early years in France (before 1914, when she made her first trip to India), including her visits to Algeria (1906 and 1907). Other early works, which she considered to be among her best, were either sold or presented to friends and are now lost to us. The Mother also did a number of paintings and drawings while she was in Japan, between 1916 and 1920. There she acquired the Japanese technique of water-colour painting, working directly with brush and black India ink. When she returned to India in 1920, she brought with her seven paintings and some drawings which she had done in Japan.

In Pondicherry, the Mother rarely had time to undertake oil paintings. Her spiritual work and practical responsibilities became all absorbing and she preferred to bring out latent artistic faculties in others rather than display her own abilities. But she did quite a few drawings of the highest quality and artistic value. These are mainly portraits. Those who saw her doing these portraits describe how within minutes, with a few rapid strokes, a living face would be completed.

The Mother herself did not attach much importance to what she had produced as an artist. No doubt, she could have done much more if she had chosen to apply her talent, training and spiritual vision to serious painting in her mature years. Her early works, for all the skill and beauty we may admire in them, are in a style which may be said to belong to the past. The Mother was well aware of this. She spoke of the future of art in her talks, yet she did not herself attempt to realise its highest possibilities as she saw them. She left this for others to attempt. When she was urged to take up painting again, she replied that she had no time for it. Her later drawings were generally a spontaneous expression on the spur of the moment, not a premeditated artistic creation.

It must be remembered that even from childhood the Mother was conscious of a larger mission to which art and all other interests were subordinate. Art was for her a valuable part of life, but not the most important thing. It was a language which
came naturally to her, and she used it as a means of expression and communication in the course of her work with people. For her, images could often reveal more than words. She regarded her art study in her early years as a discipline for developing the consciousness, not as a preparation for a brilliant career or a life dedicated to art for art’s sake. Once she had mastered painting to a sufficient degree for her purposes, she moved on to other things. Some remarks on specialisation the Mother made to a group of students are typical of her attitude:

“This is something I have heard from my very childhood, and I believe our great grandparents heard the same thing, and from all time it has been preached that if you want to succeed in something you must do only that. And as for me, I was scolded all the time because I did many different things! And I was always told I would never be good at anything. I studied, I did painting, I did music, and besides was busy with other things still. And I was told my music wouldn’t be up to much, my painting wouldn’t be worthwhile, and my studies would be quite incomplete. Probably it is quite true, but still I have found that this had its advantages—those very advantages I am speaking about, of widening, making supple one’s mind and understanding. It is true that if I had wanted to be a first-class painter and to play in concerts, it would have been necessary to do what they said. And as for painting, if I had wanted to be among the great artists of the period, it would have been necessary to do that. That’s quite understandable. But still, that is just one point of view. I don’t see any necessity of being the greatest artist, the greatest musician. That has always seemed to me a vanity.”\(^{21}\)

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The story behind one of the portrait-sketches is of interest for the light it sheds on the Mother’s method of drawing. The portrait of Champaklal done on 2nd February 1935 is unique in that it was done with closed eyes. When the Mother took the picture to Sri Aurobindo she said, “The pencil just went on moving.” Though this kind of feat was not the Mother’s normal practice, it is a striking illustration of a principle on which she more than once insisted, namely, that the hand must acquire its own consciousness:

“I have told you that no matter what you want to do, the first thing is to put consciousness in the cells of your hand. If you want to play, if you want to work, if you want to do anything at all with your hand, unless you push consciousness into the cells of your hand you will never do anything good—how many times have I told you that? And this is felt. You feel it. You can acquire it. All sorts of exercises may be done to make the hand conscious and there comes a moment when it becomes so conscious that you can leave it to do things; it does them by itself without your little mind having to intervene.”\(^{22}\)

The Mother gave her help and encouragement to a number of people in the Ashram who wished to draw and paint, both beginners and trained artists. The results were varied, often original and sometimes remarkable. For two or three aspiring artists she herself made sketches and suggested compositions. The paintings of Chinmayi (Mehdi Begum) display an impressionistic style and carry a great deal of the Mother’s training and influence. The Mother demonstrated the technique of oil painting to Barin, Sri Aurobindo’s brother, in the 1920s, to Sanjiban in the 1930s and to Huta in the 1950s.

Sanjiban has recounted how the Mother introduced him to oil painting after he had made sufficient progress in painting with pastel colours:

“I wanted to do oil painting. The colours and brushes were ordered from Calcutta and paid for by Mother. She asked me to meet her at 10.30 in the morning on Pavitra’s verandah.

\(^{21}\) CWM, 6: 19
\(^{22}\) CWM, 4: 403
She had an old piece of canvas ready and called Chinmayi to pose for her. Then she showed me how to take out the colours and arrange them on the palette. She gave me a palette knife which she had used and asked me to keep it with me.

Then she painted Chinmayi—only her face, forehead, hair and the background. While she painted she talked. “Do not put direct dark colours on the head,” she said, “first put the facial colours and then the dark colours—this will give a better impression. If you put black directly, it will give the impression of a hole.” Then she asked, “Do you know how to do the background?” She took another brush and did the background. “See, the head is not touching the background. There is space in between.” Then she blended the edges of the hair with the background.

This portrait of Chinmayi has not been found.

The Mother encouraged Huta to illustrate Sri Aurobindo’s epic poem, Savitri, and herself made sketches for the paintings. … Naturally, the actual execution of the paintings represents Huta’s style and ability and cannot be considered identical to what the Mother would have done with her own hand. Yet these “meditations on Savitri” give a hint of the kind of mystical imagery and symbolic expression she might have employed if she had taken up painting again in her later years. Their purpose is, in the Mother’s own words, to make us “see some of the realities which are still invisible for the physical eyes.” The work with Huta in the 1960s on the illustration of Savitri was the Mother’s last substantial involvement with art.

~ Selections from the book ‘Paintings and Drawings by the Mother’
Yuvaan was feeling totally relaxed after spending a restful weekend, practically doing nothing except preparing some simple meals for himself. He needed this rest after the last few hectic days—first visiting Bengaluru to take care of some urgent work for his father, and then going on a road trip with a friend visiting from Delhi. His friend was interested in the arts, especially from the Vijayanagara period, and had been on a tour visiting Hampi and several other places.

They decided to meet at Bengaluru and drive together to Lepakshi, a small village in Anantpur district of Andhra Pradesh, famous for its grand temple dedicated to Veerabhadra, Lord Shiva in his fiery form. This temple, as his friend informed him, was built in the 16th century by two chieftains, brothers named Virupanna and Veeranna, during the reign of King Achyuta Devarāya (1529-1542) and is a glowing example of the Vijayanagara style of art and architecture. As per the inscriptions, the main artistic activity at the temple happened between 1531-1541 CE.

Yuvaan’s heart and mind were soaked in the grandeur and beauty of the Veerabhadra temple, its magnificent sculptural riches especially the intricately carved pillars in its kalyāna mandapa, its marvellous murals—most of which have now become highly faded due to time. He was looking forward to his friend’s articles about this and other temples he had been to during his recent travels.

But that Sunday afternoon, Yuvaan felt like watching a Hollywood film—some change in cultural exposure would be good for him, he thought. It had been a long time since he indulged in this hobby; in college for three years, he used to host a film-screening-and-discussion evening once a month, for which he used to pick out films from all over India and also from world cinema.

While searching on the internet, he came across a title that caught his attention—“The Monuments Men,” an American-German production directed by George Clooney who was also
acting in the film along with a big superb cast. The film claimed to be based on true events. Yuvaan was intrigued by a little that he read about the film. It revolved around the idea that while the whole world was burning under the massive flames of the inferno called World War II, a small but important concern had taken hold of some minds that the War was destroying not only millions of human lives and thousands of cities and towns, but was also posing a great danger to the innumerable pieces of art, architecture and sculpture, one of the greatest accomplishments of any civilisation.

Saving art and sculpture in the middle of a gruesome, most horrible war; can any piece of art be worth more than a human life? Can a group of dedicated art-enthusiasts really save some precious art without concern for their safety? Should they have taken that risk?

Making himself a big glass of lemonade and a sandwich, Yuvaan sat down to watch the film on his laptop. He didn't realise when the two hours went by. As he lay in his bed afterwards thinking about the film, he was intrigued by some of the questions that were addressed in the film.

Is it possible that at times a conflict can emerge between an impulse to save the life of human beings and saving the life of humanity? He thought that the film really expressed well the idea that a culture, a civilisation is a living, breathing thing, which must be protected and aggressively defended, even in the middle of a war. The film strongly made the point about the need for an aggressive defense of a culture and its highest accomplishments against all barbarism, whether it is an invasion from the outside or a parasite from within.
While ruminating, Yuvaan recalled an important word of caution he had once read in an essay by Sri Aurobindo:

“The culture which gives up its living separateness, the civilisation which neglects an active self-defence will be swallowed up and the nation which lived by it will lose its soul and perish.”

That is what the art-enthusiasts in the film were trying to do. They were trying to protect and defend that which made their culture living and unique; they were ready to sacrifice their lives to protect and defend the finest accomplishments of their civilisation which were under grave danger.

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It was now evening. Yuvaan walked to the sea-front thinking he might do some jogging. But his mind was still busy thinking about the film; he bought some roasted peanuts from a street vendor and decided to just relax on a boulder near the sea-front enjoying the view, and indulging in a thought-exercise to identify what other thoughts or questions can such a film possibly trigger for a curious and thoughtful audience.

When watching the film, Yuvaan was aware of a particular thought arising in one part of his mind which at times made him feel a little disconnected from the film. While he appreciated the narrative of how some of the best art and sculpture produced over many centuries of Western civilisation were being so courageously protected by those who understood the significance and value of art and heritage, he also couldn’t help but recall that part of the world history which had seen the same Western civilisation as the perpetrator of massive destruction of many wonderful human accomplishments—in art, sculpture, systems of education, ways of life, languages, religions.

Now, sitting at the beach, Yuvaan’s mind was trying to come up with examples from World History where indigenous cultures and civilisations had to face the destructive might of the West, in the name of imperialism, colonialism, settlement, civilising mission, (and he quickly added economic globalisation to the list). The present state of native cultures throughout the American continents speaks for itself, he thought. Those on the civilising mission might not have always needed to decimate physical structures, but the kind of loss of culture and civilisation that occurs when indigenous ways of life, religious traditions, and systems of living and social organisation are destroyed, displaced and uprooted under the name of colonialism and settlement is irreplaceable. He felt a certain mental unease at the thought that these same destroyed cultures have now become part of the museum exhibits.

Yuvaan understood that the film was not about this issue of West versus rest of the world; the story was set in a very particular historical moment. And he also realised that in the post-colonial era there have been many instances when the modern West has provided strong leadership in preserving and protecting the art, monuments and other heritage of several indigenous cultures in various parts of the world. The heightened awareness and greater sensitivity that all this is our shared world heritage is in many ways gradually erasing the division of cultural attackers and cultural defenders. And yet cultures, especially those that are firmly rooted in great traditions from the past, cannot afford to be passive in this fast-globalising world, Yuvaan was now thinking. Often the older cultures, like Indian, are more vulnerable to the loss of their heritage because of the fast-paced and often mindlessly executed attempts to modernise and globalise.

His mind now wandered to something else, something he had also witnessed in his recent travel to Lepakshi temple, namely, the most brutal destruction that had been unleashed by various invaders on India’s finest sculptural and architectural wealth. His friend had told him how the destruction of temples has been quite well documented by several historians, often based on the first-hand accounts kept by official recorders of the invading armies, but unfortunately this part of Indian history has become controversial due to politics and other reasons. But an undeniable truth is that the ruins of India’s glorious heritage and civilisation are scattered all over her landscape for anyone to see. Thousands of broken stones and beheaded statues in thousands of Indian temples and cave-monasteries built thousands of years ago speak the story of the massive destruction they had once gone through at the hands of invaders and looters.

Yuvaan wondered if most Indians today are fully awakened to the need of protecting and defending their great heritage, the great accomplishments of their culture and civilisation. The threat this time is not from the outside invaders, but from the in-house ignorance, indifference, neglect, and total disregard. The situation has also worsened because of the aggressive marketers of the glories of commercial-consumerist-mechanical-materialistic view of life(style).
Yuvaan recalled how during his travels through various places in India he had so often seen silly things like people scribbling their names on stone and rock monuments. And of course, littering in many culturally significant places was still not so uncommon despite efforts by the local administrative bodies to ensure general maintenance. Part of the reason for such indifference could be that mainstream education generally fails to inculcate in Indian youth a sense of healthy pride and respect for their cultural heritage and civilisational ethos. While many public and private organisations are working hard to create awareness among Indian public, and especially children and youth, through educational programmes and campaigns, more effort is still required.

While much work has been done by institutions like Archaeological Survey of India and others which are given the responsibility of protecting and preserving the various monuments and architectural wonders of Indian heritage, much more remains to be done. On a weekend visit to Tharangambadi (Tranquebar) in Tamil Nadu last month, Yuvaan had seen the dilapidated condition of the 700-year-old Masilamani Nathar temple (near which a new one had been built a few years back), while the nearby Danish Fort and several other homes from Danish settlements had been carefully preserved by private heritage-preservation organisations. In Kumbakonam and other smaller towns of Tamil Nadu, he had been to many temples which seem to be loudly calling for proper care and detailed attention. Of course, he had also seen tremendous work done to preserve and bring back the glory of bigger temples such as the ones at Thanjavur, Gangaikondacholapuram and Kanchipuram.

He remembered how sad he felt seeing so much decay and lack of upkeep even at something so grand and glorious as Kailashanatha cave temple at Ellora caves in Maharashtra. On the other hand, the results of the efforts gone into preserving and bringing back the glory of the nearby Ajanta caves with the help of UNESCO and several other international organisations were clearly visible.

Yuvaan felt that like the West, we Indians need to become more mindful and aware of the need to aggressively defend and protect our culture and its finest accomplishments—be it in art, architecture, literature, traditions or ways of life. It starts with Indians becoming aware of and proud of its heritage and culture, something that doesn’t necessarily come in conflict with having a broader and global outlook. Yuvaan felt happy at the thought that in some cities in India there was now a growing trend of heritage walks, generally led by local youth keen on showcasing their cities’ unique cultural sites while at the same time building a momentum for protecting the civilisational heritage and artistic accomplishments.

The biggest challenge is to get rid of indifference, sheer neglect, and lack of interest still prevalent in many sections of Indian society and also Indian bureaucracy, Yuvaan felt. What else can explain the theft of numerous priceless pieces of sculptures that find their way in various museums across the world without proper documentation? Yuvaan’s friend had told him about something called ‘India Pride Project’ and the work of some activists in facilitating the restitution of several high-profile cultural objects back to India. He made a mental note to find out more about this effort.

When a country forgets to take care of its cultural riches, it begins to lose its cultural foundation. It is high time we Indians recognise this truth. Yuvaan felt happy that his restful Sunday had somehow ended up giving him sufficient food for thought!

Beloo Mehra
The Mother on Cinema

When one has the true attitude, everything can be an occasion to learn. …

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We would like to be able to show the children pictures of life as it should be, but we have not reached that point, far from it. These films have yet to be made. And at present, most of the time, the cinema shows life as it should not be, so strikingly that it makes you disgusted with life.

This too is useful as a preparation.

Films are permitted in the Ashram not as an amusement but as part of education. So we are faced with the problem of education.

If we consider that the child should learn and know only what can keep him pure of every low, crude, violent and degrading movement, we would have to eliminate at a stroke all contact with the rest of humanity, beginning with all these stories of war and murder, of conflict and deception which go under the name of history; we would have to eliminate all present contact with family, relatives and friends; we would have to exercise control over all the vital impulses of their being.

This was the idea behind the enclosed monastic life of convents, or the ascetic life in caves and forests.

This remedy proved to be quite ineffectual and failed to pull mankind out of the mire.

According to Sri Aurobindo, the remedy is quite different.

We must face life as a whole, with all the ugliness, falsehood and cruelty it still contains, but we must take care to discover in ourselves the source of all goodness, all beauty, all light and all truth, in order to bring this source consciously into contact with the world so as to transform it.

This is infinitely more difficult than running away or shutting our eyes so as not to see, but it is the only truly effective way—the way of those who are truly strong and pure and capable of manifesting the Truth.

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Mother,

How should one see a film? If one identifies oneself with the characters and if it is a tragic or detective film, one is so much involved that one weeps or is frightened. And if one keeps aloof one cannot appreciate it very well. What is to be done then?

It is the vital that is affected and moved.

If you look mentally, the interest is no more the same; instead of being moved or troubled, you can judge quietly the value of the film, whether it is well constructed and well acted and whether the pictures have any artistic value.

In the first case you are "good public", in the second you are more peaceful.

The Mother
CWM, 12: 242-243
Singing for the Divine: Story of Swami Haridas

A true musician seeks to find the eternal, the True Being in himself and to express through his music the Truth which underlies all creation. Many stories and legends of the Indian musical tradition speak to this point. But none does it better than the story of Swami Haridas, the guru of the legendary musician, Miyan Tansen.

Tansen was the royal musician in the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar. One day, after listening to Tansen, Akbar was so thrilled that he asked him, “Tansen, tell me who was your teacher?” “Swami Haridas, my lord,” replied Tansen. Akbar asked again, “Is he as great a musician as you are?” Tansen said very humbly, “Please, never compare me to my master. He is not a musician but music itself.” Akbar was intrigued, “Then I would like to hear him sing.” Tansen answered, “But he will never agree to come to the court to sing.” “Then we will go to him,” said Akbar. Tansen was still diffident and said, “My teacher sings of his own will and he won’t be happy if he is compelled to sing before the emperor.” But the determined Akbar said, “Then I will come with you, disguised as your servant.”

So, Tansen and Akbar travelled far to the place where the sage lived in a hut, his temple of music. The sage received Tansen, his former pupil, and his servant Akbar, with love and affection. He listened to their request but remained silent. Three days passed. Then one day, just before sunrise, Swami Haridas began to sing. Akbar and Tansen were spellbound. It seemed as if the sound had no beginning and no end, as if the trees, the stones, and all living creatures had turned into music and forgotten themselves.

After some time, when the spell was broken Akbar and Tansen found that they were alone in the hut. Swami Haridas was nowhere to be seen. “Where is he?” asked Akbar. “He has left this place for ever, fearing that we may come again and trouble him,” replied Tansen sadly.

They returned to the palace, silent and indrawn. Several days passed but Akbar could never forget the effect the song had had on him. One day he asked Tansen whether he knew the rāga and the song that Swami Haridas had sung. “Yes, I learnt it from him”, replied Tansen. At Akbar’s request, Tansen sat down and sang the rāga as only he could. But Akbar’s heart was not satisfied, “Tansen, you sang beautifully. But still, why is it not the same as when Swami Haridas sang?” Tansen answered softly and humbly, “My lord, I sing for you, the emperor among men. But my master sings only for the Lord and Creator of the entire universe. Herein lies the difference.”

“'To suggest the strength and virile unconquerable force of the divine Nature in man and in the outside world, its energy, its calm, its powerful inspiration, its august enthusiasm, its wideness, greatness, attractiveness, to breathe that into man’s soul and gradually mould the finite into the image of the Infinite is [the] spiritual utility of Art. This is its loftiest function, its fullest consummation, its most perfect privilege.’”
(Sri Aurobindo, CWSA, 1: 452)
Is there any natural opposition between art and the spiritual life? The Puritans had cast aside poetry and music like poison. In the Talmud (the scripture of the Jews) there is total prohibition to draw the picture of anybody, be he a man or a God. Plato in his Republic refused to award a locus to the poet. Even in the world of today, behind the externals we are after Idealism that awakens the higher emotions, the spiritual perception, and inspires the spiritual life in poetry, music, painting and sculpture. We want to do away with mundane art and have the art that helps to acquaint us with God. We want to turn our eyes from the art that depicts the lower propensities of our nature and like to gaze at the one that gives us a higher, nobler and purer inspiration.

The spiritual knowledge is the supreme knowledge, and the rest is the ordinary knowledge. The spiritual life is alone the best and the only thing worth aspiring for. If this is the only truth then men will aspire for nothing except that which is helpful to the spiritual life. Men will keep aloof from whatever is an obstacle to it. Every branch of the ordinary knowledge should be made into a step towards the supreme knowledge. If there is any glory or beauty in the world then it belongs to God. So the usefulness of the ordinary knowledge lies in being subservient to the supreme Knowledge. Today we want to found this thesis. But how far is it correct, what is its precise meaning?

At the very outset we would like to say that the object of art is to create joy. There is one joy in God-realisation, and another in the company of a woman: an artist can make a joyful creation out of either of the two. The depiction of the company of a woman may be harmful to the spiritual life, but, from the standpoint of the creation of pure and simple joy, is there any hard and fast rule that its value should be low? The critic may say: “God alone is the repository of the complete joy. In the ordinary worldly life there is no lack of joy or beauty, but that joy or beauty is a portion or a shadow of God himself, a major part of it being a deformation. The story of the enjoyment of a woman may be very fascinating, but if we do not find it anything that may lead our vision to and draw out the sweetness of God then from the side of the creation of taste too it falls short of the perfect perfection. If art were to exist in the creation of taste anyhow then the artist might deal with any subject to fulfil his object by any means. But if he wants to create the highest taste, the fulness of taste, let him manifest God in speech, painting and sculpture.”

But the problem is: What is God, and what again is the blissful form of God? The word God does not mean any fixed, invariable form. God has many a form. There is no end to the ways in which He has been seen by men. So at the very outset we may be in doubt: the God of a sadhu or saint and that of an artist – are they identical or is there any difference between the two? A sadhu’s vision of God may not tally with that of an artist. The blissful aspect of God which has been realised by a sadhu may also be realised in quite a different way by an artist.

In fact, in the eyes of a sadhu, that God alone is holy who is pure, unsullied and who cannot be stained by any earthly impulse. The God of a sadhu shines there alone where there is the complete absence of human impurity, sense-turmoil and grossness. In the eyes of a sadhu he alone is the real artist whose aim is to manifest God who is behind the play of daily transient activities of life and who is All-Good and free from all worldly sin. That artist alone is dear to him who has depicted men as above wants and afflictions and the restlessness of the senses and endowed them with the glow of nobility. To a sadhu God may possibly be a disciplined, liberated Being, but to an artist He is also the slave of the mind, vital and body. A sadhu takes delight in renunciation, sanctity. It is the artist who can reveal that the delight of the physical enjoyment or even of the enjoyment which we call impure is no other than and in no way inferior to the delight of God. A sadhu may remain absorbed in tranquil pure bliss, but if he fails to appreciate the ambrosial bliss which the artist finds in his artistic work in the midst of the surging current of earthly life, then has he not found God piecemeal? God dwells in the generosity, the nobility of man as well as in the regions beyond the senses. But the same God also dwells in the meanness, narrowness and sensuality of man. The sadhu wants the former. But the artist can portray both the aspects equally in the full manifestation of their truth and beauty.

The aim and object of a sadhu and those of an artist are not the same. A sadhu and a reformer want to mould men and the world after an ideal. Chastity, truthfulness are such ideals. The demand of a sadhu is that all women for all time should remain chaste and all men remain truthful for ever. That is why he is averse to seeing and showing the picture of an unchaste woman or a man addicted to falsehood. For he fears that such an act may awake unchastity and falsehood in the society. The things that are morally undesirable must be undesirable...
also in art and in all fields of life. But the artist argues: “The things that we do not want to have or to become also harbour God. They too are images of the One who is infinite. They too contain truth. They too have their special nature and the secret reason of their existence and I would comprehend them and manifest them before the world’s eyes. I may not like sin, but why should I remain blind to it? In actual life I may very well be a pious man, if it be the Will of God to establish virtue in the world through me, but in spite of being a virtuous man why should I refrain from appreciating the play, the object and the ultimate essence of sin? Nobody likes to grow old. Eternal youth should be the aim of all. The gods have eternal youth. But, for that reason, are we to say that there is no truth or beauty in old age? Or are we to depict the picture of an old man in such a way that men may have disrespect and hatred for years and feel more attracted to the youthful than to the aged?”

The art of an artist is not meant to set up an ideal however great in the world. The ideal is ever mutable. A certain ideal may prevail in a certain epoch to attract the heart of the world. The artist’s genius does not follow that ideal. Art is beyond time and space. The artist sees only the eternal truth. He meditates upon the endless mysteries of the divine Nature at play in virtue and vice, in the small and the great, in the present and in the future. He tries to give expression to or manifest that Nature before the eyes of mankind. The art of an artist may be helpful for the accomplishment of some very useful purpose of the world, because he is able to bring out the real beauty of that purpose. But if he confines himself to this task alone, then human knowledge will remain circumscribed. The world-mystery will remain veiled to a great extent. We shall fail to relish the manifold joy that flows from the diverse beauty of the Divine.

When we sit in judgment to evaluate art we often remain oblivious to these infinite ways of appreciation of joy. At times we want to determine the value of art by the standard of ethical benefit to the pious or by the special form of the Divine imagined by the sadhu. At times we employ art for political or social welfare. A special form for the worship of the Divine may be necessary for practical purposes in different times and climes. The social, the political and the moral progress and welfare are also necessary. But these are not intrinsic to the pure art.

We have already said that the fundamental principle of art is the expression of the infinite truth. This truth is vast, all-pervading. There is a hidden truth in everything which may appear beautiful or ugly to the eyes, which may appear attractive or repulsive to our disposition or which may appear good or bad to our intelligence. The truth of a thing consists in its quality, in its uniqueness and speciality and in the part it has to play on the stage of the world. This truth itself is eternal and full of delight. The artist tries to manifest the essence of this truth. Whatever there is in the world may not appear conducive to welfare or convenient to a sadhu or a religious reformer. But there is nothing that is absolutely untrue. Everything manifests itself through some truth in the core of its being. This truth is the solid delight itself, and therein lies its beauty and this itself is the image of God in it. The manifestation of this God is the aim of the artist. The ability of the artist that can awaken the spirit of an absolute renunciation is the same as that which can awaken the thirst for action in the man of action. The artist’s prestige does not suffer even when he depicts the madness of lust in a lustful man.

There is no conflict between art and true spirituality. Rather, spirituality is the life-breath of art and its alpha and omega. Spirituality means things related to the Self. The quintessence of the yogi lies in his yoga and that of a carnal man in his carnality. The artist will reach the acme of his art if he can bring out the quintessence of yoga in the picture of a yogi and the quintessence of carnality in the portrait of the carnal, and godliness in the picture of the gods and beasthood in the likeness of the beast. In this sense the artist alone is the true spiritual man. An artist may depict Lord Buddha, the Incarnation of compassion, but that is no reason why the atrocious Nadir Shah’s picture should be banished from the domain of art. In the pen of Kalidasa is found the spiritual description of sex-appeal. If this picture proves tendentious to some readers, then, is the fault to be ascribed to Kalidasa the poet? His very purpose was to give expression to this idea. Under certain circumstances this idea may prove an obstacle to spiritual practice, but for that reason who can say that it is fundamentally untrue and ugly?

The picture of a naked woman is offensive to our eyes and not only to our sense of morality but also to our aesthetic sense. For the picture we often see is not verily a work of art but only a photograph, an exact imitation of nature. What is ugliness? Ugliness is that which shows only the outer form of a thing, phenomenon, and which fails to show the raison d’être of the thing, noumenon. A photograph of anything is often ugly, be it of a naked woman or a saintly man. For we see therein only a naked woman and not the nakedness of a woman. We see therein a sadhu’s lock of hair and the bark for his loins and not his saintliness. If we judge from an artistic point of view then the pictures of the gods and the goddesses drawn by Ravi Varma are as ugly as the worthless novels of the street. Where
there is only body and where we do not get the meaning of
the body in some deeper truth behind it, the other-worldliness
of the saint is an object of contempt equally to the moralist’s
sense of decency and the artist’s aesthetic sense.

The artist who has drawn the picture of a naked woman
to express the soul of a naked woman has not seen the naked
woman with the naked eyes of a lustful man, nor with those
of a sadhu. He has seen her with the eyes of a seer. He has
unveiled a divine truth. Other people being duped by the mind
say that this is pure, that is impure, this is the virtue, that is
vice. But the artist with an insight like that of a seer sees what
is the truth, the hidden principle, behind a thing, the perennial
source of true delight.

The poet or the seer creates something from the inspiration
derived from the truth realised by him. Such an action is
above the duality of good and evil, purity and impurity,
good will and ill will. For an immature sadhaka, from the
standpoint of his sadhana, the absolute realisation of truth
by the adept may not always be desirable; still his realisation
is an unquestionable truth. The truth meant for the aspirant
is momentary, temporary; its value is neither universal nor
eternal. The poet stands on the same footing with the adept.
Neither of them should be judged by the standard of discipline
applicable to the aspirant. The picture of a naked woman may
perturb us. But for that reason why should we refrain from
the appreciation of the true beauty revealed therein? Why
should we banish the legitimate enjoyment of the senses with
a view to controlling them? To deny the presiding deities of
the senses for fear of the agitation caused by the senses is
itself an obstacle to the realisation of truth.

It is not that art has no value from the standpoint of the
spiritual discipline also. But the artist and the sadhu do not
tread the same path. The way of the sadhu is “Not this, not
this” and that of the artist “Here it is, here it is.” The sadhu
wants to control and get rid of the senses in order to reach the
Transcendent or to confine himself within the boundary of a
particular way of the use of the senses. The artist wants to
feel the Transcendent in the plenitude of wealth of the senses.
The sadhu wants to form a religious life through canon and
conduct. The artist does not subscribe to any hard and fast
rule. He considers himself free from the very beginning. If he
can hold on to this principle for all time then he can attain to
liberation and fulfilment in the entirety of his life.

The sadhu and the pious measure the value of their
achievements by the attraction and repulsion they have for the
objects of the senses and sit down to analyse their real nature.
But the artist pays no attention to discriminating the object
he deals with. He knows that essentially there is no flaw in
the object. His concern is with his inner attitude. He reveals
the true and the beautiful form from whatever he undertakes
in his spontaneous urge of the truth within him. The sadhu
wants to have access to spirituality through conduct, example,
discipline and interpretations of the scriptures. But the artist
wants to attain his goal through the feeling of his art. You
may depict the picture of a Madonna or that of a harlot; there
is nothing inherent in the subject of your delineation to make
you choose the one or the other. The question is whether you
have been able to get at the truth of the thing.

Subtle is the penetrating influence of art. We, who live in
the physical nature, are unable to feel it readily. We require a
massive influence. If it is not clearly pointed out to us we fail
to grasp it; we need a baton-charge to be aroused from our
slumber. That is why religious scriptures and moral codes have
come into existence. We want to introduce moral doctrines in
the realm of art as well. Moral doctrines may serve a useful
purpose in changing the physical part of our nature. But the
subtle inner nature and the spiritual being of man will never
be awakened by the canons of morality.

Art is but revelation. This revelation enables us to hold a
direct communion with the innermost truth of our heart. Many
a time we become identified with the spirit of things through
art. This union is nothing but a union of delight. In religious
terminology we may call it divine Grace. One who is endowed
with this Grace has no need to observe the rules of conduct or
spiritual practice. By the help of this divine Grace the artist
can continue his enjoyment of sense-appreciation, yet become
flooded with spirituality and get purified without undergoing
any hardship or austerity.

In fact, there is no gulf between art and spirituality, provided
that by the word spirituality we mean genuine spirituality and
not merely moral conduct or religious ceremonies. If the aim
of spirituality is to know the Self, then the aim of art too is
the same. If the seer of the spiritual truth can see the Spirit
everywhere without excluding the body or any part of it, then
why should the artist not be able to manifest the glory of the
Spirit through colour, sound, word and stone and thus play the
role of a truly spiritual man?

NOLINI KANTA GUPTA
Collected Works,7: 68-75
The Mother on Art and Yoga

There is nothing to prevent a Yogi from being an artist or an artist from being a Yogi. But when you are in Yoga, there is a profound change in the values of things, of Art as of everything else; you begin to look at Art from a very different standpoint. It is no longer the one supreme all-engrossing thing for you, no longer an end in itself. Art is a means, not an end; it is a means of expression. And the artist then ceases too to believe that the whole world turns round what he is doing or that his work is the most important thing that has ever been done. His personality counts no longer; he is an agent, a channel, his art a means of expressing his relations with the Divine. He uses it for that purpose as he might have used any other means that were part of the powers of his nature.

… If you want art to be the true and highest art, it must be the expression of a divine world brought down into this material world. All true artists have some feeling of this kind, some sense that they are intermediaries between a higher world and this physical existence. If you consider it in this light, Art is not very different from Yoga. But most often the artist has only an indefinite feeling, he has not the knowledge. Still, I knew some who had it; they worked consciously at their art with the knowledge. In their creation they did not put forward their personality as the most important factor; they considered their work as an offering to the Divine, they tried to express by it their relation with the Divine.

This was the avowed function of Art in the Middle Ages. The “primitive” painters, the builders of cathedrals in Mediaeval Europe had no other conception of art. In India all her architecture, her sculpture, her painting have proceeded from this source and were inspired by it. The songs of Mirabai and the music of Thyagaraja, the poetic literature built up by her devotees, saints and Rishis rank among the world’s greatest artistic possessions.

The discipline of Art has at its centre the same principle as the discipline of Yoga. In both the aim is to become more and more conscious; in both you have to learn to see and feel something that is beyond the ordinary vision and feeling, to go within and bring out from there deeper things. Painters have to follow a discipline for the growth of the consciousness of their eyes, which in itself is almost a Yoga. If they are true artists and try to see beyond and use their art for the expression of the inner world, they grow in consciousness by this concentration, which is not other than the consciousness given by Yoga. Why then should not Yogic consciousness be a help to artistic creation? I have known some who had very little training and skill and yet through Yoga acquired a fine capacity in writing and painting. …

Why are artists generally irregular in their conduct and loose in character?

When they are so, it is because they live usually in the vital plane, and the vital part in them is extremely sensitive to the forces of that world and receives from it all kinds of impressions and impulses over which they have no controlling power. And often too they are very free in their minds and do not believe in the petty social conventions and moralities that govern the life of ordinary people. They do not feel bound by the customary rules of conduct and have not yet found an inner law that would replace them. As there is nothing to check the movements of their desire-being, they lead easily a life of liberty or license. But this does not happen with all. I lived ten years among artists and found many of them to be bourgeois to the core; they were married and settled, good fathers, good husbands, and lived up to the most strict moral ideas of what should and what should not be done.

There is one way in which Yoga may stop the artist’s productive impulse. If the origin of his art is in the vital world, once he becomes a Yogi he will lose his inspiration or, rather, the source from which his inspiration used to come will inspire him no more, for then the vital world appears in its true light; it puts on its true value, and that value is very relative. Most of those who call themselves artists draw their inspiration from the vital world only; and it carries in it no high or great significance. But when a true artist, one who looks for his creative source to a higher world, turns to Yoga, he will find that his inspiration becomes more direct and powerful and his expression clearer and deeper. Of those who possess a true value the power of Yoga will increase the value, but from one who has only some false appearance of art even that appearance will vanish or else lose its appeal. To one earnest in Yoga, the first simple truth that strikes his opening vision is that what he does is a very relative thing in comparison with the universal manifestation, the universal movement. But an artist is usually vain and looks on himself as a highly important personage, a kind of demigod in the human world.
Many artists say that if they did not believe what they do to be of a supreme importance, they would not be able to do it. But I have known some whose inspiration was from a higher world and yet they did not believe that what they did was of so immense an importance. That is nearer the spirit of true art. If a man is truly led to express himself in art, it is the way the Divine has chosen to manifest in him, and then by Yoga his art will gain and not lose. But there is all the question: is the artist appointed by the Divine or self-appointed?

But if one does Yoga can he rise to such heights as Shakespeare or Shelley? There has been no such instance.

Why not? The Mahabharata and Ramayana are certainly not inferior to anything created by Shakespeare or any other poet, and they are said to have been the work of men who were Rishis and had done Yogic tapasyā. The Gita which, like the Upanishads, ranks at once among the greatest literary and the greatest spiritual works, was not written by one who had no experience of Yoga. And where is the inferiority to your Milton and Shelley in the famous poems written whether in India or Persia or elsewhere by men known to be saints, Sufis, devotees? And, then, do you know all the Yogis and their work? Among the poets and creators can you say who were or who were not in conscious touch with the Divine? There are some who are not officially Yogis, they are not gurus and have no disciples; the world does not know what they do; they are not anxious for fame and do not attract to themselves the attention of men; but they have the higher consciousness, are in touch with a Divine Power, and when they create they create from there. The best paintings in India and much of the best statuary and architecture were done by Buddhist monks who passed their lives in spiritual contemplation and practice; they did supreme artistic work, but did not care to
leave their names to posterity. The chief reason why Yogis are not usually known by their art is that they do not consider their art-expression as the most important part of their life and do not put so much time and energy into it as a mere artist. And what they do does not always reach the public. How many there are who have done great things and not published them to the world!

… The mistake of the artist is to believe that artistic production is something that stands by itself and for itself, independent of the rest of the world. Art as understood by these artists is like a mushroom on the wide soil of life, something casual and external, not something intimate to life; it does not reach and touch the deep and abiding realities, it does not become an intrinsic and inseparable part of existence. True art is intended to express the beautiful, but in close intimacy with the universal movement. The greatest nations and the most cultured races have always considered art as a part of life and made it subservient to life. Art was like that in Japan in its best moments; it was like that in all the best moments in the history of art. But most artists are like parasites growing on the margin of life; they do not seem to know that art should be the expression of the Divine in life and through life. In everything, everywhere, in all relations truth must be brought out in its all-embracing rhythm and every movement of life should be an expression of beauty and harmony.

[...]

Art is nothing less in its fundamental truth than the aspect of beauty of the Divine manifestation. Perhaps, looking from this standpoint, there will be found very few true artists; but still there are some and these can very well be considered as Yogis. For like a Yogi an artist goes into deep contemplation to await and receive his inspiration. To create something truly beautiful, he has first to see it within, to realise it as a whole in his inner consciousness; only when so found, seen, held within, can he execute it outwardly; he creates according to this greater inner vision. This too is a kind of yogic discipline, for by it he enters into intimate communion with the inner worlds. A man like Leonardo da Vinci was a Yogi and nothing else. And he was, if not the greatest, at least one of the greatest painters,—although his art did not stop at painting alone.

Music too is an essentially spiritual art and has always been associated with religious feeling and an inner life. But, here too, we have turned it into something independent and self-sufficient, a mushroom art, such as is operatic music. Most of the artistic productions we come across are of this kind and at best interesting from the point of view of technique. I do not say that even operatic music cannot be used as a medium of a higher art expression; for whatever the form, it can be made to serve a deeper purpose. All depends on the thing itself, on how it is used, on what is behind it. There is nothing that cannot be used for the Divine purpose—just as anything can pretend to be the Divine and yet be of the mushroom species.

[...]

Look again at what the moderns have made of the dance; compare it with what the dance once was. The dance was once one of the highest expressions of the inner life; it was associated with religion and it was an important limb in sacred ceremony, in the celebration of festivals, in the adoration of the Divine. In some countries it reached a very high degree of beauty and an extraordinary perfection. In Japan they kept up the tradition of the dance as a part of the religious life and, because the strict sense of beauty and art is a natural possession of the Japanese, they did not allow it to degenerate into something of lesser significance and smaller purpose. It was the same in India. It is true that in our days there have been attempts to resuscitate the ancient Greek and other dances; but the religious sense is missing in all such resurrections and they look more like rhythmic gymnastics than dance.

Today Russian dances are famous, but they are expressions of the vital world and there is even something terribly vital in them. Like all that comes to us from that world, they may be very attractive or very repulsive, but always they stand for themselves and not for the expression of the higher life. The very mysticism of the Russians is of a vital order. As technicians of the dance they are marvellous; but technique is only an instrument. If your instrument is good, so much the better, but so long as it is not surrendered to the Divine, however fine it may be, it is empty of the highest and cannot serve a divine purpose. The difficulty is that most of those who become artists believe that they stand on their own legs and have no need to turn to the Divine. It is a great pity; for in the divine manifestation skill is as useful an element as anything else. Skill is one part of the divine fabric, only it must know how to subordinate itself to greater things.

There is a domain far above the mind which we could call the world of Harmony and, if you can reach there, you will find the root of all harmony that has been manifested in whatever form upon earth. …
If by Yoga you are capable of reaching this source of all art, then you are master, if you will, of all the arts. Those that may have gone there before, found it perhaps happier, more pleasant or full of a rapturous ease to remain and enjoy the Beauty and the Delight that are there, not manifesting it, not embodying it upon earth. But this abstention is not all the truth nor the true truth of Yoga; it is rather a deformation, a diminution of the dynamic freedom of Yoga by the more negative spirit of Sannyasa. The will of the Divine is to manifest, not to remain altogether withdrawn in inactivity and an absolute silence; if the Divine Consciousness were really an inaction of unmanifesting bliss, there would never have been any creation.

The Mother
CWM, 3: 104-113

Why Arts Education for All?

One of the ways to develop an aesthetic sensibility in learners is through a well-conceived arts education programme. India has had a great tradition of all forms of visual and performing arts, and Indian thinkers and philosophers have written great volumes on aesthetics and aesthetic education. But somehow, over the centuries, all that was forgotten. Arts education was slowly pushed out of schools and colleges, and where it still exists it is in the form of one or at the most two 40-minute period(s) in a week.

New Education Policy 2020 gives some hope in its declaration of correcting this situation. Drawing inspiration from the rich educational history of India which valued holistic and multidisciplinary learning, the policy document stresses on better integration of arts in the educational experience of all students.

Sri Aurobindo’s profound essay-series titled National Value of Art provides valuable perspective on why arts education is absolutely essential for the overall well-integrated development of a learner.

“Between them music, art and poetry are a perfect education for the soul; they make and keep its movements purified, self-controlled, deep and harmonious. These, therefore, are agents which cannot profitably be neglected by humanity on its onward march or degraded to the mere satisfaction of sensuous pleasure which will disintegrate rather than build the character. They are, when properly used, great educating, edifying and civilising forces.”

In addition to facilitating the development of an aesthetic appreciation, arts education also encourages learners to develop a keener sense of observation of all that is around them and also within them. Arts education helps improve learners’ perceptions by a through training and refinement of the sense-organs including mind, which in time could lead to greater refinement and self-control of emotions and feelings, eventually helping them grow more reflective and introspective.

Arts education also helps train the intellectual faculty in several important ways. It makes the mind quick to grasp at a glance, trains it to distinguish subtleties, opens it to intuition and inspiration. By raising images in the mind which an artist or art student has to understand not by analysis, but by self-identification with other minds, arts education also helps build sympathetic insight.

24 CWSA, 1: 447-448
Education must help learners develop a deeper sensitivity and appreciation of beauty—in form and in spirit, in thought and in action, in feelings and in sentiment. Masses of men, interested in enjoyment of the world and satisfaction of their vital instincts, have always been drawn to a certain sense of beauty—beauty in fellow human beings, in food, in things, in articles of use and articles of pleasure. There is universal impulse to enjoy the beauty and attractiveness of sound, to look at and live among pictures, colours, forms. This impulse when denied proper training and self-purification spends itself on the trivial, gaudy, sensuous, cheap or vulgar. In the majority of mankind, the artistic impulses are condemned to the low and debased level of enjoyment.

A meaningful arts education is essential for a general diffusion of a broad-based human culture, not to make every individual into an artist. It is necessary to give every individual an opportunity to develop his or her artistic faculty, train his or her sense of beauty, and develop sensitive insight into form and colour and that which is expressed in form and colour.

“It is necessary that those who create, whether in great things or small, whether in the unusual masterpieces of art and genius or in the small common things of use that surround a man’s daily life, should be habituated to produce and the nation habituated to expect the beautiful in preference to the ugly, the noble in preference to the vulgar, the fine in preference to the crude, the harmonious in preference to the gaudy. A nation surrounded daily by the beautiful, noble, fine and harmonious becomes that which it is habituated to contemplate and realises the fullness of the expanding Spirit in itself.”

Arts education is essential if we want our youth to grow up to become sensitive and kind human beings—conscious of the mystery and wonder that surrounds them in nature and in human-made world, and compassionate toward all life and nature.

Beloo Mehta

The purpose of Yoga is mental contemplation, carried so far as the overlooking of all distinction between the subject and the object of contemplation; a means of achieving harmony or unity of consciousness.

It was soon recognised that the concentration of the artist was of this very nature; and we find such texts as Sukracharya’s:

“Let the imager establish images in temples by meditation on the deities who are the objects of his devotion. For the successful achievement of this yoga the lineaments of the image are described in books to be dwelt upon in detail. In no other way, not even by direct and immediate vision of an actual object, is it possible to be so absorbed in contemplation, as thus in the making of images.”

The manner in which even the lesser crafts constitute a practice (āchārya) analogous to that of (samprajñātā) yoga is indicated incidentally by Sankaracharya in the commentary on the Brahma Sutra, 3.2.10. The subject of discussion is the distinction of swoon from waking; in swoon the senses no longer perceive their objects. Sankaracharya remarks, “True, the arrow-maker perceives nothing beyond his work when he is buried in it; but he has nevertheless consciousness and control over his body, both of which are absent in the fainting person.” The arrow-maker seems to have afforded, indeed, a proverbial instance of single-minded attention, as we read in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa.

“I have learned concentration from the maker of arrows.”

A connection between dream and art is recognized in a passage of the Agni Purāṇa, where the imager is instructed, on the night before beginning his work, and after ceremonial purification, to pray, “O thou Lord of all the gods, teach me in dreams how to carry out all the work I have in my mind.” Here again we see an anticipation of modern views, which associate myth and dream and art as essentially similar and representing the dramatisation of man’s innermost hopes and fears.
The practise of visualisation, referred to by Sukracharya, is identical in worship and in art. The worshipper recites the dhyāna mantram describing the deity, and forms a corresponding mental picture, and it is then to this imagined form that his prayers are addressed and the offerings are made. The artist follows identical prescriptions, but proceeds to represent the mental picture in a visible and objective form, by drawing or modelling. Thus, to take an example from Buddhist sources:

“The artist (sādhaka, mantrin, or yogin, as he is variously — and significantly — called), after ceremonial purification, is to proceed to a solitary place. There he is to perform the ‘Sevenfold Office,’ beginning with the invocation of the hosts of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and the offering to them of real or imaginary flowers. Then he must realize in thought the four infinite moods of friendliness, compassion, sympathy, and impartiality. Then he must meditate upon the emptiness (sunyatā) or non-existence of all things, for “by the fire of the idea of the abyss, it is said, there are destroyed beyond recovery the five factors” of ego-consciousness. Then only should he invoke the desired divinity by the utterance of the appropriate seed-word (bīja) and should identify himself completely with the divinity to be represented. Then finally on pronouncing the dhyāna mantram, in which the attributes are defined, the divinity appears visibly, “like a reflection,” or “as in a dream” and this brilliant image is the artist’s model.”

This ritual is perhaps unduly elaborated, but in essentials it shows a clear understanding of the psychology of the imagination. These essentials are the setting aside the transformations of the thinking principle; self-identification with the object of the work; and vividness of the final image.

There are abundant literary parallels for this conception of art as yoga. Thus Valmiki, although he was already familiar with the story of Rama, before composing his own Rāmāyana sought to realize it more profoundly, and “seating himself with his face towards the East and sipping water according to rule (i.e., ceremonial purification), he set himself to yoga —contemplation of his theme. By virtue of his yoga-power he clearly saw before him Rama, Lakshmana and Sīta, and Dasaratha, together with his wives, in his kingdom laughing, talking, acting and moving as if in real life ... by yoga-power that righteous one beheld all that had come to pass, and all that was to come to pass in the future, like a nelli fruit on the palm of his hand. And having truly seen all by virtue of his concentration, the generous sage began the setting forth of the history of Rama.”

Notice here particularly that the work of art is completed before the work of transcription or representation is begun. “The mind of the sage,” says Chuang Tzu, “being in repose, becomes the mirror of the universe, the speculum of all creation.” Croce is entirely correct when he speaks of “the artist, who never makes a stroke with his brush without having previously seen it with his imagination” and remarks that the externalisation of a work of art “implies a vigilant will, which persists in not allowing certain visions, intuitions, or representations to be lost.”

Ananda Coomaraswamy

The Dance of Śiva: Fourteen Indian Essays (1918), pp. 21-23
In a profound existence beyond earth’s
Parent or kin to our ideas and dreams
Where Space is a vast experiment of the soul,
In an immaterial substance linked to ours
In a deep oneness of all things that are,
The universe of the Unknown arose.
A self-creation without end or pause
Revealed the grandeurs of the Infinite:
It flung into the hazards of its play
A million moods, a myriad energies,
The world-shapes that are fancies of its Truth
And the formulas of the freedom of its Force.

Sri Aurobindo
(CWSA, 33-34: 95)
Rangoli is an ancient Hindu art form of decorating the threshold of the house, whose mention is found even in Natyashastra and several other texts on Indian aesthetics. Generally drawn by women, rangoli is supposed to bring auspiciousness and prosperity. Known by different names throughout the land (such as kolam and alpana) it can be made with diverse materials such as rice powder, brick powder, chalk powder, flower petals and coloured sand.