

Shaping Art Criticism in India: Seminal Role of European Art Critics on the Development of Art Criticism in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract

Art criticism shapes how art is understood, appreciated, and discussed. It provides a framework for analyzing and interpreting artworks, contributing to the cultural and intellectual discourse surrounding art. The development of art criticism in India has a long and layered history, reflecting the country's rich and diverse artistic traditions. However, Art Criticism as a genre in India is generally believed to have begun with the writings on art undertaken during the colonial period. Europeans started to study Indian art and architecture, according to their understanding, in a more systematic manner than had been attempted in previously written accounts. They also wrote about Indian art, architecture, and crafts in European languages, making information available to their readers in the Western world. This paper attempts to study European writers' contribution to the development of art criticism in India, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A brief analysis of writings of art critics and writers like Birdwood, Kipling, Brown, Havell, Coomaraswamy, Sister Nivedita, Hollebeque, and Fabri, among many others, will also be incorporated as they played a seminal role in shaping art criticism in India during the period. The aim is to recognize various elements that these writers induced through their works that shaped art criticism in India.

Keywords: art criticism, Indian art, colonial India, critical writings

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Introduction

The modern art criticism in India began during the colonial period. However, writings on art in India have a tradition that spans over millennia, with treatises like *Natyashastra* of Bharata Muni discussing *rasa* (aesthetic experience) and *bhava* (emotions/mood), *Citrasutra* of Vishnudharmottara Purana guiding artists in canons of art, Dandin elucidating on *Guna* (merits/ excellence) and *Dosha* (blemish/flaws) in *Kavyadarsha*, and Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* encourages cultured people of practice sixty four types of art while explaining the *Sadanga* (six limbs of art) theory. There were other accounts as well, including journals of Greek travellers like Philostratos (Priault, 2011), Chinese pilgrim Hsuan-Tsang (Tsiang, 1884), and European travellers Nicolo de Conti (Major, 1857), mentioning architecture and artworks. During the rule of the Mughal dynasty, architecture and painting were at the centre of artistic activities, whereas sculpture was mostly ignored. We find mentions of painters and their works, along with those of architects/patrons, in biographies of Mughal Kings (Allami, 2006). However, by modern terms, none of these accounts can be truly categorized under modern art criticism. As the focus in these writings is not on art, and its mentions are just a byproduct of a bigger picture.

Art criticism in its modern form can loosely be described as writing that evaluates art, involving a process that leads to qualitative assessments of artworks and the judgments that arise from them (Elkins, 1998). It is art criticism that helps in recognising and or understanding artworks, which otherwise might have been overlooked. Critical writings on art in India have evolved parallel to its art movements, colonial experiences, and various socio-political developments. British colonial rule plays a crucial role in the development of Indian art and its criticism, as with it, formal art training was introduced to the sub-continent. Art schools in different parts of India were opened in which the Western academic style of art was taught, like in Madras, where two art schools by Dr. Alexander Hunter were founded in the middle of the nineteenth century, one for the fine arts and the other for industry (Rohatgi & Parlett, 2008). This brought Western academic styles of art, along with formal art criticism, to India. This led to academic discourse on Indian art, both ancient and contemporary, to materialise in India, laying the foundation for modern art criticism in the country. European writers like Birdwood, Kipling, Brown, Havell, Coomaraswamy, Sister Nivedita, Hollebeque, and Fabri, among many others, started to write systematically on Indian art, architecture, and crafts as per their understanding. They wrote these critical analyses primarily in English, sometimes in other European languages like French, which made information on Indian art and its contemporary trends accessible to their European readers.

To trace the influence of European writers on the development of art criticism in colonial India, roughly around the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, this paper attempts to analyse the writings of the critics who played a significant role in shaping the genre of art criticism in the country. Extracts from their writings give an insight into their understanding of Indian art, which collectively paved the path for future critics to tread on. A better analysis of their writings can be made by dividing the periods of the writings according to the general sentiments of the time and the content of their words. Hence, the periods are categorised under three headings: Through the lens of Orientalism: Mid-nineteenth Century to Early Twentieth Century, Finding "Indian" in Art: First Quarter of the Twentieth Century, and New Approach: Second Quarter of the Twentieth Century.

Through the Lens of Orientalism: Mid-nineteenth Century to Early Twentieth Century

British scholars, artists, administrators, and travellers began documenting and critiquing Indian art, often through the lens of Orientalism, which viewed Indian art as exotic and traditional. They noticed the difference in art practices between India and the West, which intrigued them to write about it. An English traveller, William Moorcroft, documented the themes of Pahari paintings patronised by the Katoch ruler Raja Sansar Chand in his travel journal (Moorcroft, 1841). In his book, he documented the diminishing style of traditional Indian painting, struggling to stay afloat in some of the Indian courts. While an East India Company employee and a botanist F. Buchanan, noticed an emerging trend among local Indian artists of the time who had started catering to their new European patrons by assimilating Western elements and themes in their paintings (Buchanan, 1936). He recorded the changing style of Indian art due to socio-political reasons. Indian connoisseurs were increasingly losing their financial capabilities to support traditional paintings and artists. Europe, in its justification of slavery, had conjured up a pseudoscience theory in the seventeenth century stating the superiority of white people over other races, both physically and intellectually (Mills, 2017).

The British, who came to India in the nineteenth century, had already established an arrogance that was reflected in their opinion on Indian art and artists. If we go by the writings of James Mill and Emily Eden, both English writers, we find that they refused to acknowledge Indian artists as artists of the fine arts and insisted on them being more of craftsmen who struggled with skilfully depicting perspective and the effect of light and shadow (Eden, 1978; Mill, 1840). Similarly, Sir George Christopher Molesworth Birdwood, who had compiled an iconic book on Indian arts, painted Indian craftsmen as among the best in the world; however, to him, Indian painters and sculptors, on the other hand, were regressive in their art as their style did not match the Western academic aesthetics (Birdwood, 1880).

An English scholar like J. L. Kipling too, was focusing on Indian crafts as well, but he also appreciated the skill of Indian painters in painting accurate portraits from photographs on ivory (Kipling, 1913). However, Indian art was viewed as craft and celebrated for its design and beauty, but when it came to high arts, the critics of the time judged harshly based on their limited Western vocabulary. The critics limited the talent of Indian artists to Indigenous crafts and often commented on their inability to excel in high art, in these cases Western academic style of art. In their approach to evaluating Indian art, they somehow assembled diverse art and design forms of the sub-continent under one style, "Indian Art". This led the people of India to realize the extent of variety and the excellence of craftsmanship displayed in Indian art, inducing a sense of pride that became the stepping stone for the next phase of art criticism in India. They also recorded the plight of the perishing traditional painting style, which later inspired the revivalist art movement in India.

Finding "Indian" in Art: First Quarter of the Twentieth Century

The introduction of Western art schools brought European academic styles and art criticism to the fore in India. In the late nineteenth century, John Griffiths, Michael Higgins, and Lockwood Kipling taught at the Sir J.J. School of Art, Bombay. In the school curriculum, the arts and crafts of India were considered an integral part of Indian culture, so students were trained in them. The students, under the guidance of Griffiths, also produced copies of ancient Indian murals from the Ajanta caves. However, the growing influence of academic style

attracted students like Pestonji Bomanji, Pithawala and M.V. Dhurandhar to practice more in the oil medium. In the year 1919, during the tenure of W.E. Gladstone Solomon as the principal of the art school, students started to study Indian mural painting under him, and by 1924, students were encouraged to move beyond mere copying of the murals and encouraged to paint contemporary murals instead (Solomon, 1924). This was the beginning of “Bombay Revival”, under which artists took inspiration from Indian themes but executed the works in the academic style. Solomon encouraged his students to embrace their cultural heritage and infuse it with Western techniques to create art (Solomon, 1978). This, to some extent, brought Indian artists to the same standing as their Western counterparts. Hence, we can presume that it was no longer believed that Indian artists were unable to master European fine arts, which was a general perception till then.

A somewhat similar trend was transcending in Calcutta (Kolkata) as well, where figures like E.B. Havell and Ananda Coomaraswamy advocated for Indian artistic traditions, resisting the Eurocentric bias of early colonial critiques. As Indian art became more associated with the independence movement, critics and artists sought to revive and reinterpret traditional Indian art forms. The Bengal School played a major role in this cultural renaissance. Kolkata, in the early twentieth century, was budding with various intellectuals who discussed different ideologies both in person and in the print media. The city was also a hub of artistic activities. Here, the ideology of the Bengal School was born. Havell, who was principal of the School of Industrial Arts in Kolkata, believed in the conservation and revival of traditional arts (Havell, 1909). In his books *Indian Sculpture and Painting* (Havell, 1908) and *Ideals of Indian Art* (Havell, 1920), he emphasised that Western parameters should be avoided for judging Indian art. He was highly appreciative of Indian art and instilled pride in Indian artists towards their heritage. He found Asian art superior to its Western counterpart (Havell, 1920). Ananda Coomaraswamy, along with Havell, advocated for the revival of traditional Indian art forms. Coomaraswamy, like Havell, disagreed with Indian artists adopting Western techniques and criticised the works of Ravi Varma, an acclaimed Indian painter of the time, for painting in the academic style (Coomaraswamy, 1907). He found deep philosophical and spiritual aspects in traditional Indian art, which, according to him, elevated its position far above Western art. Unlike the Bombay Revival, the Bengal School ideology seen in the writings of both Havell and Coomaraswamy indicates a reverse snobbery, opening up ideological debate in art among critics of the time.

Another writer from the city, Sister Nivedita (Margaret Elizabeth Noble), empathized with the ideology of the Bengal school and often wrote articles reviewing their works. She was born in Ireland, later became a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, and moved to India. Her articles were the outcome of a deep understanding of Indian culture, and they also had a feminist inclination. Her understanding of Indian goddesses resonated in her critical review of Abanindranath Tagore’s painting “Bharat-Mata” published in *Prabasi* in the early years of the twentieth century (Nivedita, 1967). Through her writings, she contributed to the spread of Bengal School ideology.

Reflecting similar sentiments M. Hollebeque, a French writer, appreciated the paintings of the Bengal School artists. He found the essence of India reflected in the paintings of Abanindranath Tagore (Hollebeque, 1918). His article was in French, which was translated into English by Pramila Chaudhury and published in *The Modern Review*. By writing in a European language besides English, he became instrumental in informing his European readers of the new trend of Indian art.

During this phase, we find that the critics were constantly looking for “Indian” elements in art, whether it was in the theme or the technique. Another development is that the women art critics, with their feminist viewpoint, were also paving the way for their gender in a male-dominated field.

New Approach: Second Quarter of the Twentieth Century

Art criticism can challenge established norms and encourage social and political reflection. By critiquing the subject matter, approach, or ideology behind a work, critics can highlight art's role in questioning power structures, addressing inequality, or providing commentary on current events. Havell and Coomaraswamy paved the way for the likes of Stella Kramrisch, Charles Louis Fabri, and J. H. Cousins, who not only advocated the Indian tradition of art but also added new viewpoints to look at Indian art. Stella Kramrisch, born in Mikulov, Austria (now the Czech Republic), was predominantly an art historian, but her critical contribution to the modern art of India is seminal. She came to India in 1919 on the invitation of Rabindranath Tagore to teach at Santiniketan (Manjapra, 2014). In India, she became part of the intimate circle of the Tagore family and participated in various discourses on art. She agreed with the Bengal School's ideology and with Havell and Coomaraswamy that Indian art should not be judged on Western parameters (Kramrisch, 2013). She further expressed that artworks belonging to different periods or places cannot be compared or judged using similar vocabulary (Kramrisch, 1922). In her view, understanding of the aesthetics of art is essential to justly appreciate any art, as it is the aesthetics that drive the artist to create art.

Another European from Hungary, Charles Louis Fabri, on the other hand, was a writer who was multilingual and explored various media like radio and print to voice his opinions. He, unlike Kramrisch, was not based in Kolkata but in Lahore in the first half of the twentieth century. His reviews of art exhibitions were prompt and varied. Fabri is credited with recognizing the talent of Amrita Sher-Gil. In his newspaper review of her works exhibited in Lahore in 1937, Fabri declared her to be the greatest artist India possessed (Parimoo, 1997). In his critical writings, he systematically analysed the works of artists, providing insights into not only the artworks but also the evolution of the artist. His style of writing was like a bridge between the art and the viewer/reader. The promptness of his review brought a nervous edginess to the art criticism practiced in India.

In the south of the country, James H. Cousins, an Irish poet and a teacher, contributed by writing on art. He believed in the individualism of the artist and reminded them not to lose their vision and method (Cousins & Cousins, 1950). When he visited an exhibition of Bengal School artists, he saw it as the reawakening of India through its art (Cousins & Cousins, 1950). He was instrumental in organizing the first modern art (Bengal School) exhibition in South India in 1916. Cousins incorporated terminologies like “suggestiveness of impressionism”, which gave his writing a modern appeal (Cousins, 1918). While writing on the Bengal School, he often mentioned the emotive quality of these works. His writings, along with enhancing linguistic expression, helped in spreading information regarding the modern art trends practiced in Bengal to the southern part of the country. The critics during this phase showed tendencies toward growth, eagerness to explore, and responsibility toward their readers. Through their writings, they were shaping the future of art criticism that was to follow in independent India.

Conclusion

Art criticism plays an essential role in the development of art movements, while it also helps the viewer to understand the perspective of artworks. It is instrumental in enriching the experience of viewing art. While art was not altogether ignored in the writings from pre-colonial India, they were generally part of travel journals, biographies or treaties. These writings seldom commented on contemporary art practices. On the other hand, Europe developed a tradition of documenting contemporary art since its antiquity. European art critics charted the course of the development of art criticism in India with their writings on the art of India during the colonial period. They not only systematically recorded and compiled information on the arts of India like Birdwood and Kipling but, with time, induced pride in Indian artists towards their artistic and cultural heritage like Solomon, Havell, and Coomaraswamy, inspiring different artistic movements in the country. However, Critics from Kolkata stressed the importance of reflecting traditional tendencies in art. They also broke away from the racist shackles that were binding the arts of the country and opened up options for Indian artists to explore. Art criticism fosters a dialogue between artists, viewers, and other critics. It creates a space for intellectual exchange and debate about what art means, how it should be valued, and how it reflects or challenges societal norms. This dialogue stimulates creativity and pushes the boundaries of artistic expression. Critics like Fabri understood this very well, and his writings stimulated dialogue and stirred the curiosity of his readers.

Critical writings on art become instrumental in guiding future generations to gain insights into how art was perceived in the past. Through art criticism, the history of the time is recorded, which states evolving tastes, concerns, and values of the time. This helps preserve the cultural heritage of art and its reception. European art critics have strongly impacted the course of art criticism in India by recording, inspiring, and analysing art during colonial India. Their writings not only shaped the art criticism of the times but also ignited the path for the critics of the future.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

In writing this paper, Grammarly and ChatGPT, AI-assisted writing software, were used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. I further declare that, apart from these, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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