

POP ART WITH RELIGIOUS MOTIFS

A PECULIAR kind of popular art form in garish colours and a crudely illusionistic style, mostly sold as colour reproductions representing gods and goddesses is a characteristic phenomenon of 20th century semi-urbanised India.

These reproductions often serve as objects of worship, finding their way impudently into temples of family "puja" rooms or simply serve as wall decorations in homes and shops alike with the added utility of the calendar of the year printed below them.

This art form can be truly called "democratic" for it is meant for the masses and the artists belong to the same class and reflect their tastes and beliefs. It is an expression of the zeitgeist of that aspect of the modernisation of present-day India, which has resulted in a hybrid, vulgar and characterless culture due to the confusion of values. Chidananda Dasgupta's lucid analysis (The Times of India Sunday Magazine dated January 25 this year) of this cultural jumble with reference to the Hindi cinema is very pertinent. And, indeed, the Hindi film can be considered an analogous phenomenon.

No wonder then that the glamour girl of the screen and the luscious-looking goddess are inter-changeable types. Both the cinema and the oleograph were initially inspired by the common stock of mythological themes. Through the decades, national heroes, sages, actresses, playback singers and latter-day saints have been placed on an equal footing with older Pauranic deities with whom they are often juxtaposed in an everwidening repertoire of imagery which mingles myth with history and the spiritual with the sensual.

Thus the sexy actress turns by imperceptible degrees into a goddess and a lady who has a family resemblance to Lakshmi may be seen offering you a popular brand of cigarettes or a transistor radio wherein also lies the origin of the modern Indian poster. The Hindi film posters, especially those commissioned by cinema-theatre owners, are a further extension of this genre of painting. The public unconsciously then equates the prurient advertisement, the lascivious film poster and the sensual goddess who can be seen juxtaposed on the walls of the homes of the petit bourgeoisie and the nouveaux riches.

This art phenomenon shares with folk and tribal art its "social" quality, so that whatever is produced immediately finds its "consumers", and both the creator and his public

understand each other or rather the "object". But there are also fundamental differences. Tribal and folk art is vitally linked with life and religion and is a way of achieving harmony between the self and the world outside. Also due to the insular character of their society the tribes evolve symbols with their own meaning. The present-day urban (or small town) folk art - if we may call it so-is highly eclectic and hybrid and its relation to life is only superficial.

The begetter of all this was the once favourite artist of the Maharajas. Ravi Verma himself was ranked as a Raja, and was subsequently denounced for being unIndian and decadent. Yet his oleographs, which his press (established around 1890) kept on issuing even after his death, found wide appeal through the length and breadth of India. He used the same models- celestial beauties and Indian counterparts of western Venuses-to illustrate ancient classical and allegorical themes. Soon he had numerous followers who exploited this newly-awakened taste for the luscious by producing en masse albums of "Indian graces" having titles with a dual meanings-for example "Uncut Diamond" (for the unconsummated virgin), and "Wild Flower" (for the nude belle coming out of the village pond), prominent among these were H. Mazumdar and Thakur Singh.

The introduction and the adaptation of the western illusionistic modelling became widely used by Indian painters while preparing illustrations for their British patrons of characteristic Indian scenes and typical Indian characters, though these were done on a modest scale. They had before them as models of similar drawings and paintings made by European painters travelling in India and perhaps also the "advice" of the patrons. But this may be regarded also so the beginning of painting from "life" by the Indians of which Ravi Verma was a high point. Ravi Varma, in his work, almost seems to have put into practice the recommendation of Lord Napier (the British Governor of Madras during 1870s) to paint Indian life and Indian mythologies with the power of European technique as the panacea for the cultivation of the (non-existent!) 'Fine' Arts in India.

Ravi Verma had the example of the decaying European academic art before him and bad copies of third-rate European painters. The sensuality of his females and those of his follower may be linked with those of Cabanel or Prudhon (both French) and Etty (English), 19th century painters who in turn relate to the 18th-century French painter, Boucher.

The vast body of the reproductions today are not always done by skilled painters, who often put together stock images (pastiche and plagiarising is part of the game) ranging from two-dimensional and hieratic traditional symbols to illusionistically rendered figures.

This strange stylistic admixture of "flat", stark illusionism and schematic modelling together with the bizarre juxtaposition of "fraction" of reality can be visually exciting at times and explain the contemporary interest in this phenomenon. It has the qualities of the naive as well as those of photomontage which are among the aspects of pictorial representation being revived by the Pop and Pop-inspired modern trends.

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