

Educator Resource

Modernist Art from India: The Body Unbound

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How to Use This Educator Resource

Throughout India, the use of figuration in art has been a long and continuous tradition. After independence this notion of the body and human figure became connected with the creation of a new cultural identity as well as social and political concerns facing the new nation. The exhibition, *The Body Unbound* features works of Indian art from the early 1940s to the mid-1980s, ranging from traditionalist representations of Indian villagers and townspeople to representations of the metaphysical "man" to the socially and politically charged narrative representations that predominated in the 1980s.

The contents of this Educator Resource are designed to be used by educators and students and can be adapted to suit the needs of a wide range of classrooms. **Included are three key images from the exhibition.** The guiding questions provided with each image are intended to draw attention to details in each painting and to the broad themes of the exhibition. It is always helpful to begin looking at each work of art with some basic, open-ended questions that will elicit observations and questions.

- What's going on in this painting?
- What about this painting made you say that?
- Where else have you seen something like this?

We encourage you to use this guide in any way that works best for you:

- Learn about the exhibition as you prepare to bring your students to the Rubin Museum.
- Introduce modernist art from India and the main theme of the exhibition to your students.
- Use the guiding questions as a starting point for students to conduct independent research.
- Explore the additional resources to learn more about modernist art from India.

Glossary

Deity- the state of being divine; god or goddess

Figure- form or shape of an object, as determined by exterior surfaces.

Iconography- symbolic representation and conventional meanings attached to an image.

Modernism- a philosophical divergence from the past in the arts and literature occurring especially in the course of the 20th century.

Secular-worldly attributes or characteristics that are not regarded as religious, spiritual, or sacred.

Setting- the locale or period in which the action of a novel, play, film, or art work takes place.

Odalisque pose-a common pose in art representing sensuous feminine beauty first used Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres in 1814.

Caste- any social class or system based on cultural distinctions like heredity, rank, wealth, or profession.

Trishula- a type of Indian trident, or a three prong spear, commonly used as a Hindu-Buddhist religious symbol.

Shiva- one of the three chief divinities of Hinduism, the two others being Brahma and Vishnu. Siva is also the god presiding over personal destinies.





P B. Prabha (1933–2001)
***Fisherwoman*, 1960**
Oil on canvas
Collection of Shelley and Donald Rubin

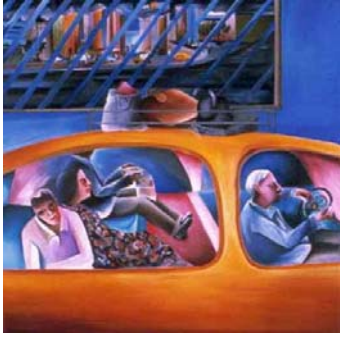
This frontal, reclining portrait of a fisherwoman recalls a pose often seen in representations of **odalisque** figures in historical European paintings. However, within the context of Indian modernist painting, *Fisherwoman* presents several striking, experimental contradictions: she is sexualized, feminine, and mostly delicate, though her traditionally lower-**caste** work is shown through her large, muscular hand next to her basket. The unusual perspective of this representation can be attributed to the female gender of both the subject and the artist, as there were relatively few professional female artists in this period.

Professional female artists like B. Prabha were quite unusual in the Modern Indian art world of the 1960's. With the introduction of various social and professional spaces for women, female artists found a sanctuary of expression and began to transcend issues of gender, all while developing the modern feminist identity in India.

Guiding Questions

1. Look closely at the pose, colors, and proportions of this figure. What do they tell you about her?
2. This painting is called *Fisherwoman*. What details in the painting point to her role as a worker?
3. The artist, B. Prabha, was one of a few female artists painting in India in the mid-twentieth century, and she painted many images of women. What might this painting tell us about her views on women in Indian society?





Bhupen Khakhar (1934–2003)
First Day in New York, 1983
Oil on canvas
Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts

In the mid 1970's many Indian artists began to change the way that they worked with the human form. While previous work represented individual figures, artists began to use narrative forms placing the **figure** of the human body within a surrounding environment. One artist who began this innovation was Bhupen Khakhar.

Khakhar was born into a middle-class Bombay family in 1934, and later obtained a degree in economics, becoming a chartered accountant by the 1950's. Khakhar's interest in art grew and he attended the M.S. University of Baroda to study art criticism. He maintained his job as an accountant while painting during his free time. Through his art Khakhar sought to introduce India's true middle class into his painting welcoming narrative scenes of everyday life into his practice. His work often depicted his own middle-class profession, including accountants at work, as well as the profession of barbers which was traditionally a low caste in India.

If you look carefully at the four figures in this painting, you'll notice one figure reading what appears to be a tourist guide of New York and another wearing an exaggerated floral pattern garment that completely covers her body. The figure in the front seat looks quite similar to the artist, and he's driving a car with the steering wheel on the wrong side of the road for driving in the United States. Khakhar extends his humor into the painting by placing the mismatched luggage of the passengers on top of the taxi, a common place to store one's luggage in Indian taxis but not often seen in New York. The luggage itself is not common for a transcontinental journey, and the bags seem to be normal shopping bags which can often be seen on a daily commuter train in India. Attempting irony, Khakhar's piece is meant to represent a person's first day in a strange new place, unprepared for the new experience.

Guiding Questions

1. How would you describe the relationship between the figures in the taxi cab?
2. The artist had never been to New York City when he painted this work. How might this have affected how he painted the **setting**?
3. This painting is called *First Day in New York*, and some scholars have noted that the figure in the driver's seat looks similar to the artist, Bhupen Khakar. Why might the artist have represented himself as the driver?





Krishna Shamrao Kulkarni (1916–1994)
Deity, 1970s
Acrylic on paper
Collection of Shelley and Donald Rubin

K. S. Kulkarni was a founder-member of the leading Delhi Shilpi Chakra artist group established in 1948. With a single figure against an abstracted background, *Deity* reflects one of the predominant trends in modernist Indian art after Independence. Though the figure is geometric, flattened, and semi-abstract, it is rendered as if it were an icon, especially through its large size relative to the ground of the paper. The vertical **trishula**, or trident, along the figure's left side would identify it with the Hindu god Shiva, though it lacks other definitive attributes and maintains a resolutely secular modernist aesthetic function.

Guiding Questions

1. How does the artist arrange shapes to create the **figure** in this painting?
2. This image is made with acrylic paint on paper. How would you describe Kulkarni's use of color?
3. This painting is called *Deity*, and incorporates elements of traditional Hindu religious **iconography**, such as **Shiva's** trident. Does knowing this affect how you look at this painting?

Resources for Further Learning

Web Resources

www.rmanyc.org/thebodyunbound

The Body Unbound // Explore exhibition resources to further explore modernist art from India.

www.rmanyc.org/education

Rubin Museum of Art // Explore multimedia resources and videos. Find out about current and upcoming exhibition and programs at the Rubin Museum of Art.

www.rmanyc.org/schoolprograms

School Programs: Rubin Museum of Art // Browse and learn about the different programs the museum has to offer for students K–12.

<http://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/6308/The-Modernist-Art-Movement-from-India/>

The Modernist Art Movement from India- Event Timeline // Explore a virtual timeline that documents various historical events in India that paralleled and influenced the modern art movement.

Readings

Kumar, R. Silva. "Modern Indian Art: A Brief Overview." *Art Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (Autumn, 1999), pp. 14-21

Vadehra, Kapoor, Adajania and Dalmia. *Tyeb Mehta: Ideas Images Exchanges*

Hyman, Timothy. *Bhupen Khakhar*

Quintani, Sonya Rhie. *Rhythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose*

Ramaswamy, Sumathi. *Barefoot Across the Nation: M F Husain and the Idea of India*

Drathen, Huyssen, Fibicher, and Malani. *Nalini Malani: Splitting the Other*