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### Internationalism: The Determined Strength in Himmat Shah's Art

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#### ABSTRACT

During the 19th century, Indian art acquired a dilemma in developing its identity which ended with the rise of nationalism. During that time Indian artists started an expedition towards finding true Indigenous art. This development was not inspired from a superficial imitation of the past but from an understanding of the basic design principles and methodology underlying in all genuine visual creations.

Artist Himmat Shah is one of them who explores his artistic journey with the help of art and design to reflect the idea of Internationalism. Through it, he has opened an aesthetical uniqueness and distinct personal approach. He handles the sculptural vocabulary following the modernist European contemporaries and infuses his art in an international arena.

This paper exposes Himmat Shah's abilities to juxtaposed Indian and Non-Indian aesthetics and tradition to build an expressive body of art. In the way of searching appropriate methodology, Himmat Shah has utilized clay as a major medium to express his artistic prowess. He has picked clay as a material from the earth, as a source for sacred and healing powers. The researcher has used the Self-Observational Method to open-up the issue in Himmat Shah's Art.

**Keywords:** Modern Indian Art, Formulism, Internationalism, Abstraction, Indigenous Tradition, Himmat Shah.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Modern Indian art is a kind of resistance to the Western artistic intelligentsia. An intricate analysis of this art pattern reveals its prime characteristics - the amalgamation of Indian thought process with western techniques. The Modern Indian art differs from its ancient counterpart in more than one respect. Basically it treats art objects with the balanced ideal of real and surreal<sup>1</sup>.

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the emergence of Indian art in the domain of the Western capitalistic art which was in a large way a counter reaction, paving way for the Bengal School of Art. The aim and aspiration of the Bengal School of Art movement was to counter the prevalent western trends and ideologies as also to glorify the rich tradition and heritage of Indian art. The movement was initiated by E.B. Havel and Abanindranath Tagore and its other important profounder were Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivediata, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Percy Brown.

Art historian Mamta Chaturvedi (2010) sites, “This initial spurt was followed by the pioneering work of Rabindranath Tagore who incorporated experimentation in such a way as to elevate the Indian nationalist art movement to a world vision level altogether. Tagore, a born innovator and an iconoclast, believed that an artist should not only be aware of tradition and try to assimilate its nuances in his unconscious self but also practice his art freely to unearth new forms and meanings<sup>2</sup>. Tagore differed again from the mundane mass of art practitioners of his day in that he was very much against the nomenclature and labeling system which was prevalent at his time. Tagore’s inspiration led to newer horizons being touched and in 1940’s the Calcutta Group and the Progressive Artists of Bombay Group deconstructed the style of the Bengal School and created an original style by assimilating ideals of the contemporary art movements of West with that of the peripheral Indian folk art.

The ‘Group 1890’ tried to formulate these nuances juxtaposing Indian and Western modern art. Himmat became a core member of the Group 1890. In the first exhibition of group 1890 in 1963, he showed the series of burnt paper collages explore the idiom of minimalism. He went to Paris in 1966 on a scholarship and returned in October 1967 via London. In London he stayed with Raghav Kaneria , who had won high acclaim on the English sculptor scene. Himmat shows a huge amount of art during this European sojourn and, besides conforming his admiration for like Picasso, Miro, Brancusi, Giacometti, he focused on a pertinent set of artists – Fotana (Himmat wanted to work with him), Burri, Tapies, Saulages – artist he knew from reproductions in Baroda and who suited his own already distinct sensibility – then later, Carl Andre who he met in India in 1971 at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Indian Triennial.

## 2. ROOTS, INSPIRATION, METHODOLOGY AND METONYMIC DEVELOPMENT

Himmat Shah comes from a Jain family that had moved from Kathiawar to Ahmadabad district. His grandfather was a *nagar seth* in the village of Lothal, the site of the major archeological excavation. In fact the site virtually overlapped with their lands. The family traded in grain and cotton; they also had land, cattle, and horses. By the time Himmat grew up the family prosperity had declined, his father who practiced Ayurvedic medicine along with a much dwindled trade could not hold down Himmat’s adolescent rebellion against domestic feuds. Himmat was in and out of school – once he ran away from home and hang out in an ashram in Girnar – but he had a spell of enlighten education in Ahmadabad , where his drawing was noticed, and he returned to the city to do a diploma in art teaching

Himmat Shah joined the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda in 1955 where he spent six years (1955–61) and became something a young star. There, he was guided by Prof. N. S. Bendre, Prof. K. G. Subramaniyan and Prof. Sankho Choudhary. He was grounded by the living tradition of East and West in balanced way, where he becomes able to formulate a modernist aesthetics. He confirmed the indigenes/modernist aesthetic favored in India at the time, an aesthetic against time and history propagated by J. Swaminathan since the inception of the Group 1890. From the mid -1980s Himmat’s work took on the look it bears until today

– an array of heads and object-forms in plaster, ceramic and terracotta, sometimes enveloped with silver and gold-leaf that gives them the aspect of icons, shrines and votive object. Kapoor Geeta (2000) writes in this concern that “Uniquely, he is able to make things sacred by simply cherishing them in his hands long enough, making even brick-a-brace part of the signifying chain that reconfigures the world as a playground of everyday desires...<sup>3</sup>”.

Pandey, Alka (2008) said in an interesting twist of fate, Himmat Shah was born in 1933 in Lothal, one of the richest artifacts yielding sites of the Harappan civilization. Over the time, his work has grown to include diverse aspects of materiality<sup>4</sup>.

Shekh, Nilima (2013) says his sculpture foregrounds the question of rural visual culture coalescing, or being brought to coalesce, with the modern urban preoccupations of design and art<sup>5</sup>.

The all things sought Himmat's connection towards the indigenous wisdom and the fragrance of Indian soul. Finally he explores terracotta as a medium of expression also indicate his deep down connection to his route.

### **2.1. A Phase of Search and Curiosity**

On his return to India he took two years to work on a major relief-mural in brick and cement in a Modernist building of his architect friend, Hasmukh Patel: the Saint Xavier's school in Ahmadabad. For one of the three walls (18' x 20') he prepared 40 moulds from which he cast in cement relief. Devising in own methods of work, he also positioned himself in the contemporary sculpture field on the cusp of late modernist formalism. Himmat thus come to stand apart in Indian art not only vis-à-vis his sculptor colleagues, but also the older painter – turned – muralists like K.G. Subramaniam, Satish Gujral and M.F. Hussain who continued to rely in the pictorial in their mid-60s terracotta and mosaic tile murals. Himmat went right on ahead to handle the sculptural vocabulary of geometrical abstraction on a monumental scale and, then, when he returned to 'painting' he made densely tactile relief using plaster, tar, cloth, enamel paint, silver foil, what-not reliefs that were 'walls' (like village walls that he had joined hands to plaster and decorate as a child/and like materially replete modernist walls of contemporary European painters he had begun to admire in the 1960s).

Since the advent of abstraction in the visual art until the present day (1910s, '20, and 30s) geometry has been a constant source of inspiration for artists, representing a means of breaking free from illusory and imitative art. The inception of this formulistic device provides us a weapon to hit on traditional visual practices and create a corridor to manipulate multiple forms in a given space. Himmat Shah also used geometry to accelerate his composition, dividing space, narrating semiotics, indicating metonymic qualities and formulating a minimalistic way to bring out a modernist aesthetics.

### **2.2. The Search of Own Craft**

Modernist aesthetics has produced many 'avatars' of the early twentieth century idea of 'significant forms.' The ideas flourished on account of the ideological claim of universality by the moderns; on account of the more conducive claim for a universal language of forms to which artists happily subscribe. What is privileged in the modernist vision is a transformation of material into form via a process of metaphorical condensation therefore the insistence on the materiality of the transformational process itself rather than on the consequent (cultural) meaning?

The searching of his craft Himmat goes with modernist aesthetics tried to sync with the aspects of formalism and designing compositions utilizing formal development of a significant form. He admires the aesthetics and said that ‘main saundaraya ko abhivyakt karta hoon, roop ko nahi’. So using formalism he don’t bound with only form but emphasis form to narrate the ultimate beauty. In this concern Kazmi, Nuzhat (2004) explores the nature of Himmat Shah’s works. In her view Shah’s portrays his sincerity towards art and not to the raters of monastery achievement. Since 1990’s Shah has deliberately chosen clay and plaster as the medium of his creation. Here again, the notable point is that these two media have never been gripped by capitalist mercantile policy. According to Dr. Kajmi, the nucleus of Shahs artistry is not his exoteric, but his unique style to decipher the maiden beauty from a common day to day object. By choosing primitive art as his weapon to express thought, he does not confine his art to some specific genre or period; rather it imbibes the quality of post-modern pastiche<sup>6</sup>.

In an interview with Ved Prakash Bharadwaj, Himmat Shah expresses his own view regarding his inclination towards different unique and unused forms/mediums. He says that his use of clay as a medium sometimes astonishes himself and if the new form of clay enchants his artistic mind, within no time he adopts that form and makes it his signature style. He also records his distaste of abstract art and affirms that the aesthetics of art is his guiding force. Not only this, he even accepts that for him aesthetics is the ultimate purpose of art and not the form or content. While expressing his views regarding his unconventional medium, clay, he accepts that the quality of clay enables him to transform it in every possible shape he wants and also opens up the enormous opportunities for experimentation<sup>7</sup>.

Singh, Shanta Serbjeet (1982) has written that Himmat Shah believe that the artist is an enigma, a person whose work is only successful if it is the product of total “Samadhi”, complete concentration. The artist is a Brahmaa unto himself. And like Brahhama, his purpose is to search for new and yet newer forms of creation<sup>8</sup>.

### **2.3. Decipher the Maiden Beauty**

Himmat Shah has spent more than thirty years in LKA Garhi Studio where he evolved his personal individualist language. The dilemma of searching appropriate craft and aesthetics, he becomes more alone. Karode Robina (1998) has written that Shah continuous to live in the same state of uncertainty that has marked his life’s journey up until now. But there is a method of to his seeming ‘madness’ he deliberately goes into complete isolation confined within his studio for days without the acquaintance of a mind other than his own. Floating in timelessness, his little fragile world can easily be disrupted by an outsider’s intrusion. Living within this subjective mood, he did drive to mould his vision into his work. She again writes that Shah said “I like my solitude, sugarless tea and daydreams,” says Shah’s casually, finishing a smile but I realize that it is extermly important to understand the working of Himmat’s mind, which reveals his attitude to both his life and his art. He makes strong demands himself. There is a need of constant self – examination. He is often preoccupied, as if listening to his inner voice ‘A quietness that distances him from the world<sup>9</sup>’.

Chishti, Anees (1966) has written in the catalogue of Shah that this innovator has done his homework exceedingly well in various directions. He is an immaculate draughtsman and his drawing composition is perfect to the core. His lines speak and at times shake the onlooker out of the trivialities of worldly passions and emotions. Where, then, is room for “eroticism “or easy escape from creativity? One has to

be absolutely pure to go through Himmat's meanderings. He does not live a life of contrived situation: his inspiration comes naturally from his inner self<sup>10</sup>.

The art of Himmat Shah is complex and multi-dimensional. He drew his source and inspiration from a large number of people, periods, mediums and ideologies. These must have been assimilated and metamorphosed in the melting-pot of the genius of Shah to become individual pieces of art. By developing his craft, as a life force he actually enabling himself to celebrated life with creativity.

### 3. CONCLUSION

It is observed that by 1980's a situation of stagnancy blocked Indian art. That was because the Indian artists who were following the path of 19<sup>th</sup> and early half of 20<sup>th</sup> century art movements of Europe could not think and achieve beyond. That has changed later in 1990's with the emerging new generation, economic globalization where information and communication technology reduced the world as a global village.

Shah being one of the stalwarts of this transitional period whose career span between 1960 and 1980, a period of dilemma and uncertainty, filled up a lacuna in the sculptural language of Indian art. Study of his works not only signifies the development of visual forms in the history of modern Indian art it also emphasizes the time and mindset of the people in general and the artist in particular.

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