



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

THE CONTEMPORARY ART AND ARTISTS IN MANIPUR

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Abstract: The research focus on how the contemporary art movement flourished in Manipur and describes about what initiative took by the artists in the progress of art practices in the region. The study discusses about the artist's life, contributions and their art works. Further, the study categorized and arranged the artists in "groups", according to the period, birth and their activities. Scope: since, a systematic research work on the particular area is not being done properly yet. Only scanty written text has published in the form of a catalogue, monograph, souvenir, and articles on daily newspapers, etc. The present article will give a fresh idea and views, which is different from the earlier concepts. The research found, and shows, new vivacious interpretations that required for the life and works of the artists. The approach and presentation are different from the earlier perception, in terms of chronology, categorical terms, period wise arrangement etc.

Index Terms - Contemporary, Modern, Pioneer, Movement, Art & Artist, 20th Century, Manipur.

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary art movement in Manipur has flourished in the middle years of the 20th century, but started its nourishing from about two decades earlier of the time. Three pioneer artists of the state carried out for the initiative of the art movement, namely 1, M.K. Priyabrata Singh, 2. Hanjabam Shyamo Sharma, and 3. Haobam Shyamsunder Singh. The study cited the three artists as "First Generation Group", in the progress of the Contemporary Art movement of Manipur. The artists received their knowledge of art from irrespective sources. The first artists brought the idea and methods of western modern art from England during his short study period and the second artist established an art college in the state in the year 1949 and made Manipur a cradle of the younger generation of artists. The third one is not only an artist, but also a scholar; he made the people conscious about what the art is like to be. In the present article, will study another three more important artists, they are Rajkumar Chandrajitsana Singh, Thoidingjam Tombi Singh, and Laishram Shamu Singh, they are categorized here, as "Second Generation Group".

The present area of study has not been taken up yet in a proper manner, so that the study will help in the further study of the subject area.

II. METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

The research methods applied in this study are a range of approaches as since the research area is a practical based work. Survey and data collection technique are in different technique, such as interview, taking photographs from the original and reproduction materials. Data collection from museum, art gallery, archives and different private collections, etc. are part of the methodology. Action research paradigms are another method used in the study. Frequent discussion took place with guide, art scholars and concerned artists. The comparative study method is also applied in the study. Inquiry based is another approach applied in the study. Paradigm and perspective is an approach to the study.

III.RESULT & DISCUSSION:

3.1 The Pioneer Artists of Manipur

The history of a better “Contemporary Art in Manipur” is not encompassing for a long period of its course, however, enthusiastic younger artists of Manipur hurriedly acquired the knowledge and idioms of the prevailing implication of the technical skill and concepts of the new art forms. At this time, the question of unparalleled in the establishment of the art movements in the various area of the country; may not be a matter of issue, but to have a look into the progress of Art movement of a particular region is more desirable. Moreover, it is also necessary to inspect the condition of the artists, and how the art and culture of a region being nurtured. In this condition without the responsible of the government, any kinds of development would be rather sluggish. We also required remembering the Contemporary art movement of New York. As we know that, the epicenter of art activities at Paris, had shifted quickly over to the city of New York. The main reason was nothing but the states’ initiative as well as the Diasporas artists from the Europe countries.

When we think of contemporary art of Manipur, We are compelled to look into the development of Indian contemporary art movement, as well as the whole of the northeastern states, which has been more promising and active in the field of visual art. In the Eastern part of India, we may observe the states, Tripura, Manipur and Assam, as it has a good prospective in the field of art and their culture.

To begin with, the evolution of contemporary art in Manipur, we may establish with the important year 1959, for the upgrade of the Imphal Art School to a Grant-in- Aid College. The year may consider as a turning point in the History of Art in Manipur. From the year onwards, a good number of students started joining the college, and subsequently, most of them went for further studies to the *West Bengal, Baroda* and other states of the country. The majority of the Artists of Manipur attended in their native Art College, and received strong inspiration for their further artistic embark. At this stage, we cannot leave out an important vanguard artist, Haobam Shyamo Sharma, (1917-1979), who was taking a great responsibility in the making of innovative modern traits of art in Manipur. He learnt his basic knowledge of art from a Manipuri traditional artist called Kalachand Singh and preceded his venture forward for making of Manipur, an artist’s paradise. Owing to his noble dream, visual art has brought into a precise disciplined tract as happening in other places of India. In his early ages, enthused by his elder artists and occasionally by the British artists, who came across during his outdoor study around the city, Imphal. “Shyamo Sharma had confronted a hard time in Manipur, and later on, he wish to go to Silchar, there he met a veteran artist, Susila Sen, and started further learning of fine art, for about two years” (Tombi, 1992, p.3). It was during this period, he started establishing a Fine Art School in Manipur. The founding and progress of the college, according to the Imphal Art College, states that “The Imphal Art College was established in 1949..... as an Art School and upgraded to the status of the Art College”(Imphal art College, 2017, p. 1). His major works manifest social reformative paintings, religious and horror of Second World War in Imphal etc. In his later ages generated variety of creative type of paintings including symbolic elements, human figures with strong contours and reduced tonal surface, which are able to convey the idea of modernity in the art scenario of Manipuri art movement. Shyamo Sharma was born for the sake of art only, and dedicated the whole of his life for the development of art. In short, if there was no Shyamo Sharma, art movement must have been belated in Manipur. In addition, two other pioneer artists *also* appearing in the art scene of Manipur and joint the college to liven up the only institution in the eastern states of India. The artists are M.K. Priyabrata Singh (1911-2005), and H. Syamsunder Singh (1917-2006).

The artist M.K. Priyabrata Singh, better known as P.B.Singh),(1911-2005), was born in the Maharaja’s family of Manipur, and received his education and comprehensive art training from the Rajkumar College at Raipur, and very much inspired by the British Impressionists during his short stayed in England. In an autobiography of the artist, M. K. Priyabrata Singh, stated that “My brother had already gone to the Rajkumar College at Raipur and I had to join soon” (Priyabrata, 2017, p. 10). As the artist is from the isolated region, where the concept of modernity in the field of visual art has not known widely. In the meantime, his creative energy has also expressed through a familiar realistic vocabulary with lustrous colours and vigorous application of pigment. Priyabrata served as a strong pioneering model painter for the younger art students and followed the notion of academic approach along with Impressionistic methods of process. He favored rural life and their activities unlike the European Impressionists’ subjects of luxurious and life of elite classes. However, during the 1980s, onward P.B.Singh started taking up the new prevailing system of modern art, particularly his paintings show more interest in Surrealistic and symbolism type. His loves of Impressionist method of paintings also make obvious in his early phase of works. It was during the 1970s onward, Priyabrata, painted many of his valuable works. Although P.B. Singh was, a high profile political figure in Manipur, but his valuable times spent with the artist’s community and worked together. P.B. Singh had indeed taken a major role in the administrative works of the existing Imphal Art College.

One another veteran artist, Haobam Shyamsunder Singh 1917-2006, was another equally interesting person, earlier, he held a respectable government job and later became principal of the Imphal Art College. According to the Art Society, Manipur, “Studied painting from Dr. B.C.Laha of Bhabanipur, Calcutta, 1937-1939” (Art Society Manipur, 1998, p.12). It was a part time learning, during the period of his studies in literature, under the Calcutta University (1936-1939). Later, Shyamsunder once happened to get a chance for learning ceramics design course in Japan, for a short period of about half year. He was a man of multifaceted person, and had the knowledge of various art forms including philosophy of art. He started working the academic type of paintings, his vibrant watercolour and oil paintings in impasto technique are his favorite medium with technique. He left behind, hundreds of small watercolour painting in his old house at Yaiskul, Imphal. Apart from his painting, he had done a good number of sculptural works, including bronze and other medium of sculpture. His sculpture of Mahatma Gandhi at G.M.Hall, Imphal, is one of the rarest early modern bronze works in Manipur. He was one of the most influential Principals of the art college since ever, and by his personality, the financial condition of the college was improving and academic systems of the institution brought into a certain more acceptable level. The artist has dedicated half of his lifetime in the field of visual art.

Another important artist who has inspired significantly the younger generation of artists is Rajkumar Chandrajitsana Singh,(1928-2004) popularly known as “RKCS”. Chandrajitsana received his professional skill and knowledge of painting from his father R.K. Yumjaosana Singh (1870-19540), a Manipuri traditional artist who was once a renowned painter. His major artistic journey starts from religious and cultural paintings and later established his career as a cinema poster painter. The RKCS’ first cinema poster was the Hindi film ‘Dekhoji’, screened at

the Victory cinema hall, Imphal, in 1947. RKCS became a popular painter in Manipur who was able to steal the heart of the common people and art lovers. Along with his popular style of te poster (guach) paintings, he had also executed varieties of easel paintings in oil and poster medium. Such works are comprised of portrait painting, historical events of Manipur, mythological subjects, cultural items of different communities, monuments, and other genre paintings. His romanticism type of paintings and film posters were profoundly admired by the common people as well the art lovers. His powerful sweeping broad-brush strokes of the poster works enthused greatly the then beginner students of visual art in Manipur. RKCS's major works are displayed in his permanent art gallery. Today, the gallery has become an important place, for displaying, for the largest number of paintings in the entire eastern region of the country. Although RKCS did not receive a systematic art education from any recognized art institutions, his contribution in the field of visual art in Manipur is very much strong and influential. R.K. Bhudhimanta Karta (2008), mentioned, "He has more than 10,000 paintings to his credit over a span of 60 years" (Karta, 2008, p. 66). For his largest number of exhibits by a single artist Chandrajitsana has recorded in the *Limca Books*.

The veteran group of artists discussed above contributed a unique exertion and moving towards a progressive manner for the development of art in Manipur. It may be said that what the position of visual art today in the state, is the result of their dedication for the augmentation of art in Manipur, as well as in the neighboring states. The veteran artists discussed above filled the gaps that remain between the tradition and modernity, in the process of art production in Manipur. Towards the middle period of the second half of the 20th century, some younger generation artists followed the path built by the veteran artists and brought the contemporary art trends into a more efficient and even logical tract.

3.1.1 Artists in the midst of trouble situation

As Manipur resumed its former independent from the British rule on the August 14th, 1947, and, constituted a preamble in the form of a republic nation, and started enforcing the constitution. Later, Manipur is being part of the Union of India, in 1949, and consequently both political and social conflicts happened for various reasons. The situation then was greatly affecting the lives and economic condition of the region. It was the time of chaos and turmoil, the life of the people was apprehensive and tormented. The socioeconomic and political situations were in its piteous state. Overflowing of cultural alienation also already started, and followed by a lot of external social behaviors, interring from the mainland India and neighboring countries also augmented. Thus, new alienated social, culture and political situation affected deeply to the artists' community of the region. In the meantime, promotion of education system was encouraged by some sections in the valley, C.H. Mani Singh (1996), asserted that "suddenly roused the somnolent Manipuris to a new realization of the value of higher education" (Mani Singh, 1996, p. 242). Establishing the Imphal Art School (College, in future), was part of the new education system, at the time, the state was in an insolvent situation. Thus, the private college was facing an acute financial crisis for about half a century. However, the college's founder, Shyamo Sharma maintained the usual academic classes by using his ultimate means, even by selling his scanty properties. Many young, versatile art lovers attracted the classes of fine art course, and opted as their leisure pursuit or a full time vocation. In the middle of the century, to glorify the Art College, Sharma recruited some brighter students, and started teaching in systematic methods. Most of the senior artists of Manipur got lessons in art from him. The earliest disciples of Shyamo Sharma are –1. Th. Tombi Singh, 2. L. Shamu Singh, 3. G. Brajamani Sharma, 4. E. Kanta Sharma, 5. L. Phunindro Singh, 6.L.Modhuchandra Singh, 7. S. Sundaram Singh, and others. Most of the artists of this group were studying visual art under the strict supervision of H. Shyamo Sharma, and later on, the students went to other states for a more extensive and short-term courses in the field of fine arts, but the last two artists stayed back and remained serving the college. Among the second group of young artists, we may be highlighted the artists who were more contributing in the laying foundation of a new visual art movement in Manipur. The artists are 1.Th.Tombi Singh, 2. L. Shamu 3. L.Modhuchandra, and 4.L. Phunindro Singh. Here, only the first two artists will discussed.

3.2 Thoidingjam Tombi Singh (1936--)

He is one of the well-known artist and scholar in Manipur, as he started preaching the thought and value of the contemporary art as early as from about 1970s onwards. Due to his learned quality and passion for art, Tombi Singh has the advantage of making himself an eminence in the field of art. He has received the prestigious National Award (LKA) in 1988, and became executive board members of various art organizations and department, including Lalit Kala Akademi, Modern Art Gallery and Ezcc, etc. Tombi Singh, have delivered a number of lectures, on art, in various places of India. He had written on the various topics of different art movements, particularly of Manipur that brought the art forms conscious.

His early training of art received under a strict guidance of H. Shyamo Sharma (1917-1979) the founder, principal of Imphal Art College. Tombi was influenced greatly in his early days by his master. Although, he became an assistant professor of political science, his interest in art was not even be stopped. At this time, Tombi Singh was able to hold a good reputation in the society, but he was not keeping away from his fellow artist's community and continued working in the growing of contemporary art in Manipur. His artistic zeal was so great that he has to get relief from his new family and his job for a comprehensive study in fine art, at MSU, Baroda in about 1975. In Baroda, Th. Tombi, availed a good opportunity to convene a circle of great Indian contemporary artists K.G. Subramanyan, a legendary teacher, celebrity artist and critic, who became a role model throughout his artistic career. Apart from Subramanyan, he also happened to get in touch with many other Indian imminent souls, such as K.K. Hebbar, Jeram Patel. Jyoti Bhatt, Mahendra pardya, Gulam Md. Sheikh, N.S Bendre, and Gautam Vaghela, were among the galaxy of Indian contemporary artists.

Soon after Baroda, he joint to the art college, Art society, Manipur, found that Tombi Singh took the charge of acting principal of the Imphal art college, in the year 1977 to 1982 (Tombi, 1998, p. 59). As being an educated person, he accelerated the pace of modernity or contemporary movement of art in the state.

The implausible experience in his days in Baroda, make Tombi Singh a tremendous change in the style and technique of his art works as well as having the fervor of new theoretical knowledge of visual art. His paintings depict the psychological conditions of the people and passion for

the nature around his life. He expresses by reconstructing the mental images, using with strong contours and lines, decreasing tonal surface to make precision his sensation. Tombi Singh is not only a good artist, he wrote numbers of articles, monographs, catalogues etc. At present, although, the artist is at his 84, his zeal and love for art is still strong in his heart and blood.

3.3 Laishram Shamu Singh (1940-2020)

In addition, another artist, L. Shamu Singh is one of the outstanding contemporary artists of this soil, born in “1940”,⁸ in Imphal. His diploma in fine art is from the Imphal Art College, attended a short-term course at the National Museum, Delhi in 1973, and from here, he acquired more knowledge of art and cultural ideas of India. He has a good time with the art scholars and artists during his short period in Delhi. From 1970 onward, he started working abstract and figurative types of paintings, through experimental process. He also promulgated the contemporary style of art through practicing paintings. Shamu also wrote articles on the various contexts of visual art, Samu Singh selects his subject from a wide variety, ranging from the epic of Manipur “Khamba Thoibi”, Vishnavite cults, Manipuri traditional subjects, festivals, and genre activities of different people. The subjects depict in a more advancing manner of modernity in the form of academic and experimented abstract presentation.

Shri Shamu Singh, Actively contributed and sharing his time and idea for the development of visual art in the state and he may be considered as the first pure contemporary artists in Manipur. He had practiced and dedicated only the contemporary art of Manipur. His contributions in the field of visual art in Manipur are a peculiar reputation. His biography in the Art Society, Manipur mentioned, “He has been in the art movement for about 25 years” (Tombi, 1998, p.27). The artist is passed away on 8th April, 2020.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Six artists discussed above have taken important initiatives in the making of contemporary art movement in the state of Manipur. There are a number of artists followed their path in the following years and brought up the art movement of Manipur in the level of acceptable standard. Here, the present article is not covering all the artists; it discusses comprehensively only the pioneering artists. Important data written in the present article are from the interview with personal and their family members, and publications. Thus, all the information given in the present article is vividly asserted, written documents and published materials helped a lot in completion of the work.

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