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Mantrakala

They Call It "Bija Mantra Art." Part Painting and Part Calligraphy, It's One of India's Unique Contributions to Sacred Expression, and it Has Precious Few Masters.

Greys, greens and blues melt and merge in the background without being continuous tones, yet they're so subtle and refined. In the foreground great detail unfolds in brilliant color, but there is no line work. How was this done? Even a single form--one of many within the complete composition--is filled and thrilled with a world of its own, simple on the surface yet deeply faceted like highly-polished, intricately-grained wood. From a distance it looks like it has been created through some sort of finely-textured painting media uncommon even amongst professional artists. Yet up close it's seen to be seas, rivers and streams of mantras, melted together in form and texture, sometimes so small they're almost indistinguishable to the naked eye.

This is not a usual media of visual art as conceived by most, nor is it standard calligraphy. Actually, it's both these and more--something like "painting with words." Yet, even this feeble assessment falls short, for it is more worship than personal expression. Like all acts of bhakti it is a sacrificial giving-up of the personal that something better and higher might take its place. Like a song sung from heart to heart, it implores to please and as such transcends the limits of our

mortality even before pen touches paper. By its very intent it beseeches a force greater than our own. Hence, it's power is not that of the artist. May we say that it belongs to God?

Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh calls the practice of painting with mantras likhita japa. He says, "the benefits of likhitajapa cannot be adequately described. Besides bringing about purity of heart and concentration of mind, it gives control of sight and tongue, and fills you with the power of endurance." Another Sanskrit term for this sadhana is mantrakala, which means "mantra art." Usually, the greatness of art is determined by the quality of the artist's intent and design, coupled with the degree of success with which he is able to manifest these in physical form or imagery. Mantrakalais a unique artistic technique because, in addition to the above, it utilizes mystically empowered words with esoteric meaning fortified by bhava(devotion) from the artist and shakti(divine power) from God and Gods as the primary media of expression, infinitely enhancing artistic potential.

"Calligraphy" is a simple term. It means beautiful handwriting. "Art" is a general term--too general to be simple. According to its most extensive definition, art means anything man-made. In this sense it is described by Webster as "the creativity of man as distinguished from the world of nature." Such a broad definition would include any change human activity has wrought upon the face of the earth, be it good or bad, beautiful or ugly, beneficial or destructive. However, the ordinary use of the term is clearly different. Art usually means that which evokes aesthetic response. Yet, if we understand "aesthetic" to imply a sensitivity to beauty with some degree of good taste, then much of today's "modern art" would not fall

into this category. Hence, a contemporary view of visual art might be defined as that form or image which is intentionally created to convey a message.

In art--as in all things--intent is of the utmost importance. The intent of mantrakalais, or is strongly influenced by, devotion. As in any devotional practice, there is an inherent admission of personal shortcomings followed by a submission of humanness, opening a vacuum to receive the inflow of divine blessings from the Deity worshiped. These blessings make the art divine. Because the art is divine, it may even be used as an object of worship, almost like a stone temple murthi permeated with the power of puja.

Modern Art

Compare this with the intent of some modern art which unabashedly seeks to express the flawed depths of mortal frailty. If we accept both of these examples as "art," we must also define them as art's extreme boundaries--the latter being the lowest and the former being the highest.

Hindu art in general creates a beautiful chest of jewels for mantrakala, as does most traditional Eastern art. As the Encyclopedia Britannicasays: "The structure of Indian temples, the outward form of images, and indeed the very character of Indian art are largely determined by religion and a traditional view of the world, which penetrated the other provinces of culture and welded them into a homogeneous whole. " Because of its devotional nature, mantrakalaexpresses the quintessence of Hindu and Eastern artistic aspiration.

Modern art is a product of the western notion that individual creativity and personal expression are of primary importance in the artist's work and thereby constitute artistic "genius" or its lack. Born and bred in the richness of a timeless mystical tradition and culture, the eastern artist sees it differently. To him, the Godly source of life is the genius, and individual creativity is but its instrumental expression. For him, any form of creativity inspires a retrospective search of awe and openness back into the very origin of his art for that which is his Creator and therefore greater than himself.

This self-effacing approach can seem somewhat disconcerting and ungratifying to the Western artist who might view such an approach more like uncreation (merging back into) than creation (manifesting out from). Yet, even he cannot deny the intangible potency of, for instance, the daring simplicity of Japan's Zen pen-ink-wash art and calligraphy or the powerful, monolithic symmetry of South India's agamically structured Siva Nataraja.

Traditional Hindu artists, especially those who create mantrakalaas a sadhana, find their greatest inspiration in personal mystical experience manifesting in a number of ways: through the discipline of their art, through their sadhana expressed in art, through art as an expression of their spiritual aspiration. However it may manifest from each individual artist, it fortifies the basic Hindu values they learned in youth through genuine experience that is transferable to the viewer in positive life-changing imagery.

Nandalal Bose, artist, writer, art critic, and life student of the

late great Abanindranath Tagore, says in his book, On Art, "Art is an expression of joy. Although humanly composed of all the different shades of happiness and sorrow, it transcends them all in its own indefinable, true nature. Out of joy, the Upanishadsdeclare, the world came into existence, from joy to joy it moves, and in the end enters into joy. An artist creates for the joy of creating. The test of the genuineness of any work of art is its capacity to gladden the hearts of men. In this respect art as sadhanais akin to yoga or spiritual sadhana. You aim at realizing the One hidden behind all that is apparent, the One by knowing whom one comes to know everything. The artist should be absolutely detached. He may have his share of personal instincts, impulses and sentiments, but as an artist and at the moment of creation, he should wholly transcend them. His personal likes and dislikes in relation to the subject would simply obscure his vision and obstruct his passage from personal feeling to impersonal expression. His aim should be to allow his personal emotion to become impersonal rasa or the bliss of being. It is only when rasais not the aim that his work is affected by the dual sentiments of attraction and repulsion, pleasure and pain."

Symbols

All forms of art create icons, high or low. Icons are symbols that carry meanings which we cannot ignore. Mantrakalais power-packed with double meanings since the basic imagery carries one message while the words carry another. Perceived by us either consciously or unconsciously, this collection of meanings is given a certain amount of energy by the artist when created, but is further magnetized by those who view it, think about it, meditate upon and worship it. This collective mind force carves powerful impressions in the inner akasha of the collective mind.

If this principle can work so positively for great art like mantrakala, it can work just as effectively in a negative way for lesser art of darker intent. Thus, the impressions of art left behind in our minds can be either positive or negative and effect our lives accordingly. Truly great art brightens the light of the soul, while its opposite clouds it with confusion and ugliness. Both carve destiny.

"Indian art is highly symbolic," says the Encyclopedia Britannica:, "The much-developed ritual-religious symbolism presupposes the existence of a spiritual reality that, being in constant touch with phenomenal reality, may make its presence and influence felt and can also be approached through the symbols that belong to both spheres. The production of objects of symbolic value is therefore more than a technique. The artisan must model an image after the ideal prototype that appears in his mind only when he has brought himself to a state of supernormal consciousness. After undergoing a process of spiritual transformation himself, he also transforms the material of which the image is to be made into a receptacle of divine power. Like the artisan, the sadhaka must grasp the esoteric meaning of a picture and identify with the power residing in it. The usual offering, a handful of flowers, is the vehicle used to convey the worshipper's 'life-breath' into the external image." With special regard for the importance of accomplished execution in the creation of Eastern art the Encyclopedia Britannicasays: "The beauty of cult objects contributes to their force as sacred instruments: their ornamentation facilitates the process of inviting the divine power into them. Statues of Gods are not meant to immediate ideal human forms but to express the supernatural."

Evolution

As we look at the history of the world we see art, in both its style and form, as an colorful chronicle of human development. In a country like India permeated with a timeless history of culture and mysticism, art is the inevitable, unstoppable expression of wisdom's joy, imbibed with its special power. Doubtless it is true that great art is essentially the proof of religious inspiration, the outward sign of inward and spiritual grace.

Thus, in great art--especially mantrakala--the unseen and unsaid are as important as the apparent, for as in the evolution of all things, the growth of art is cyclical and not linear, meaning all creative endeavor eventually finds its final resolution at the source from which it began. However this process may culminate for each artist, the final stretches of the journey find rest in an increasing appreciation for simplicity. The magic is seen more in the space between the brush strokes than in the brushstrokes themselves. And as an artist paints the same figure perhaps a thousand times the same way--yet, not quite--the invisible power of his sadhana makes the magic that changes lives--his and others.

As Lal observes: "Things appear and pass on the crest of the unseen rhythm of life and symbolize the One Reality during their brief stay. I was born a Hindu and brought up in the Hindu tradition. So it is no wonder that I have painted so many Gods and Goddesses. Formerly I used to see Godliness in the Gods alone, now I try to find it in the sky, water, mountains, plants, animals--and human beings. "

Painting With Words

India's Calligraphers Paint Their Artistic Works with Words,

Endowing Images with Sacred Sound and Significance

It's art married to discipline, and in its highest form transcends both. A single work can take several years of 10-hour days, and so not surprisingly there are few practitioners of this almost extinct craft. For years the HInduism Today staff has known two, and we are honored this month to feature their accomplishments on the following three pages. Their styles are very different, but both use mantras and slokas as others would apply strokes of a brush. Their intent is less to invent than to evoke. We begin with Shrikant Damodar Pandit who tells his own story.

Namaskaram to my friends at Hinduism Today:
I, Shrikant Damodar Pandit, was born on March 12, 1938, at Deorukh in Ratnagiri District of Maharashtra State, India. Our family Goddess is Kulswamini Sri Ambal. Our family is blessed by Sri Satguru Kaka Puranik. My spiritual Satguru is Sri Brahmachaitanya Maharaj of Gondavale. He was a great devotee of Lord Rama. He died some 80 years ago. Throughout his life he talked and taught only naam sadhana (repetition of holy names).

How I started drawing calligraphic pictures is a story in itself. For many years I had a hobby of collecting greeting and marriage cards. I have gathered 1,000 to 1,500 cards now. I used to gives cards from my collection as gifts at our family marriages. In March, 1990, one of my relatives asked for something unique. There were only eight days before the marriage ceremony, and I could not find a suitable card. Then the idea came to me to paint Lord Ganesh in one color and write "ardhanarisvara" in different designs on one side of the

picture. I did it and everyone loved it. So I drew a few more in the same way. Then I thought to draw the pictures of Lord Ganesha in different shapes with the outline of Aum. Even physical details like eyelashes, nails, hair, crown, flowers, and even the mouse are made in different shapes of Aum. In blank areas different stotras are written in a readable size. While drawing the pictures, I found that I became totally engrossed in the work and lost track of day and night. Soon I found definite changes in my thoughts. The more I drew the pictures, the more I found peace of mind.

It takes me between 20 and 50 hours to complete one picture, depending upon the size. Everybody who sees the pictures gets satisfaction and joy. I think the greatest achievement is that people from other religions admire the art.

I always feel the backing of my Satguru, whose presence is there, standing behind me like a rock. I feel that whatever happens in my life is done by my Satguru. At the end of each picture, you will find one Sanskrit sentence stating that the drawing is dedicated to my Satguru. Until today, I have drawn about 700 pictures. This is only because of the Satguru's blessings. Everything is spontaneous and brings success because of Satguru kriya only. Until now the script I use has been Sanskrit, Marathi, Hindi and English only. I don't have any book on calligraphy or any script. Beside Lord Ganesha, I have now drawn the pictures of Lord Rama, Lord Shiva, Lord Hanuman, Sri Krishna and Swami Vivekananda.

Since I started drawing calligraphic pictures, I had it in my mind to do something for children. I feel that we should teach

the children that one should always pray to the creator of the universe for at least five minutes in a day. Out of 1,440 minutes one can easily spare five minutes and pray to God or the guru. From this we get peace of mind. Everyone is searching for happiness in this computerized and modernized world, and we are not getting it. The sole reason from my point of view is we have forgotten God, the Creator of Universe.

Sincerely, Shrikant Damodar Pandit
Route 8, Box 233
Charlottesville, Virginia 22901, USA.

Sidebar: Tamil Nadu's Living Saint of the Limning

Saroja Nagarathnam is an unassuming Madrasi woman whom you would wrongly judge an ordinary citizen if you met her on Mount Road. Only those who know of her artistic masterpieces comprehend her exceptional skill and devotion. She paints with words in an ancient Indian style. Known as likhita japa, this art form has found its apotheosis in Saroja's meticulous approach, a painstaking style that lifts and defines this ancient craft. She spent four years on one of her images, working 10 to 12 hours a day. Every line and shade, every nuance of her art is created by patiently scribing, with an old-fashioned quill pen and colored inks, hundreds of thousands of sacred syllables, so minuscule they are barely visible to the unaided eye, yet fully legible with a magnifying glass! The mantra basis of her work makes it suitable for worship, just like a stone or bronze image.

Born in Erode, the daughter of a photographer, Saroja married at 18 and has six children. A long-time devotee of the late Sri Chandrasekharendra Sarasvati Paramacharya of Kanchi

Peetham, Saroja insists that it is by his grace that she does this work. She and her husband pilgrimage to the mutt for blessings before beginning and upon completing each piece. Five of Saroja's bija masterpieces are featured on the following two pages.