

***'Vistaar'* – A Return to Tradition**

Is Art making about invention and innovation or is it reflective of a state of being? Is this collaboration between artists and designers contrived or is it the result of a natural evolution of our sense of aesthetics?

It is in considering the implications of these questions that one uncovers clues, to unravelling the intention, behind artistic practices of nations in the history of humankind. In examining this legacy, we formulate and comprehend our own sense of aesthetics in current day practices, defining and re-defining its ideals of pursuit.

Working as a Textile designer in India, has posed many challenges. One has had to compete with a vast but threatened heritage and complement it. One has had to nurture a creative impulse driven by global experience and exposure, but temper it with the constraints of indigenous production capabilities. In working with saree printers, I discovered that the more sophisticated the design, the greater the difficulty in implementation, not in terms of the complexity of form, but in replication of colour. It was not about skill but sensibilities. When working with the Ikat weavers of Andhra Pradesh, the simplicity of form I envisaged required an intense application of their skills. However, they could not appreciate the value of this painstaking labour when they saw the subtlety of the resultant design. In Kashmir, the chain stitch and crewel embroidery artisans found it tedious to embroider the rich tapestries to exact specifications. Habituated to doing loosely worked stitches in catering for cheap produce for the price competitive export market, few cared for perfection. Straight lines were wavy and curves became geometric. In short, skill was either compromised or not compliant with their sensibilities and value thereof.

A designer does not work extraneous to cultural constraints and traditions. In the Indian context, these provide a certain inevitable direction, precisely because of the legacy we inherit. We cannot bypass it; therefore, this present collaboration between artists and designers presents a vision, which is on a path that does return to tradition.

Creativity aspires for excellence, for perfection. This drives the instinct in the artist and designer. When you are working in an under-developed environment, where there is such vast disparity culturally, socially and intellectually between the conceptualizer and artisan or producer, levels of comprehension will differ. This compromises excellence and the artist/designer remains dissatisfied through such processes of making. In the present context, the designer and the artist work in tandem because the hitherto mentioned disparities do not exist. The relative compatibility in these terms, now works to enhance the synergy that creates the product. The aspiration for excellence gets a new lease of life.

Historically, the artist works in isolation, alienated from the world, anguished by its lack of understanding of his or her vision. Van Gogh's story is a horrific reminder of the kind of tragedy that emanates from this. Freud may have attributed the creative instinct as wish fulfilling of fantasies of an unhappy human being, "a correction of unsatisfying reality.....either ambitious...or erotic ones"¹, but contemporary research and writing on

creativity contradicts this and attributes the legendary angst not to some demons that give impulse to the creative spirit but the ill-informed environment. “It was not their creativity that did it but an artistic scene that promised much, gave few rewards, and left nine out of ten artists neglected if not ignored.”²

Today, the artist is not as alienated from his environment as he once was. However, he still works in relative isolation and his sense of aesthetics is not as much a part of everyday life, as he would perhaps like it to be. An artist is an idealist and a visionary. He does not wish to speak through his canvas or sculpture, to just a select few. It is human nature to want to tell the whole world, your considered view of it. Reticence in this regard may have set in, owing to the evolving changes in the cultural and intellectual environment because of mechanization, digitalization and the booming capitalist economies around the world. The ruthlessness of the business world is too harsh for the subtle sensitivity of the idealist. He therefore prefers seclusion to confronting values that clearly preclude his sense of ideals. His conviction disallows abandoning them, more so when challenged by contrarians.

Designing is considered a glamorous profession, not because of the work designers do, (most will tell you how wretched it can be) but because of the scope of influence of their work and ideas. The utilitarian dimension of a designer’s product makes it integral to daily living, while art is not. Thus, art has a relatively esoteric value. This collaboration brings together the spirituality in art with the functionality of design. This ‘*Vistaar*’ (expansion) is therefore, defining a return to tradition. It gives greater utility to the artist’s work and provides enhanced creativity to the designer, whose self-expression and contemplative spirit lie buried under the dictates of trends and the daily rigours of production. In doing so, the collaboration ‘expands’ the scope and view of both the artist and designer.

In ancient Indian society, the potter and the weaver were the most respected members of a village community. The designer today, serves a similar purpose. However, the crafts person then was not divorced from the making of the product such as the designer/artist is today. A craftsperson embodied the dual role of conceptualizer and maker, with perhaps some guidance and suggestion from enlightened patrons. Handcrafting presents the concept of utility with a sense of aesthetics in making as well as in adornment. Devotion was inherent in the traditional practice of handcrafting, where the craftsperson was required to become one with the spirit of his being to perform the ritual of his craft with competence. Thus, a spiritual temperament became synonymous with the creation of the superb excellence in skill and diversity seen particularly in Indian textiles.

Such indulgence is unthinkable today when in every dimension of craft/design we are competing with price lines and deadlines. A stronger currency rate means a dip in profitability and not adhering to deadlines means cancellation of orders. The world is our competitor, not just the weaver next door. The uncertainty presented by the expanded dimension of the notion of the world as a global village, provides larger scope and opportunities for business. However, the pace of work deters one from the kind of contemplation the ancients upheld as integral to any artistic practice. Contrarily, it should necessitate this precisely because the plethora of information now available is non-computable in linear ways of contemporary thought processing. Each learned analyst has

a differing point of view, generating confusion. The solution for resolving such dilemmas accurately is to cultivate one's intuitive ability and tap into the larger dimension of spirit, going beyond the limitations of the cognitive ability of mind.

A Civilization, with its accrual of vast and deepening experiences, imbues the life of its people with a sense of aesthetics peculiar to them. This becomes their 'style'. The India of today is not the great civilization she once was. A young nation of little more than half a century old, she is still too young to have developed a style and therefore is in the process of evolving her own sense of aesthetics. Mesmerized by the sleekness of modern design that glorifies the power of consumerism, and of mechanization and digital technologies, we do not realize that this is robbing us of a vital aesthetic and spiritual quotient. In making us so accessible to each other, dependant upon 'things' and machines for most of our daily living, we are taken away from the essence of ourselves. This distorts the balance in mind, body and spirit, narrowing the scope for any sense of sustainable fulfilment.

We live in an age that defies the dictates of time. We live amongst a generation that demands production and ridicules contemplation, often defying limitations of being human. Technological advancements have made us, if not virtually incompetent to, then certainly reluctant to work with our hands, if we can help it. This reflects upon our attitude and frames its perception of the culture of handcrafting that has been an inextricable part of this nation's heritage, exemplified by the fact that craftspeople do not get much value for their contribution in the making of any product. This erosion of values has huge implications for the survival of the practice of handcrafting as a cohesive living movement. This in turn has greater socio-economic implications as well as cultural ones.

The history of ancient Indian art provides ample evidence of the merit of the philosophies that governed its artistic practices, but time has eroded the relevance of this wisdom. Art in ancient India was not a profession or an activity divorced from other spheres of living. It was a way of life that nourished the man "*corpus anima et spiritus*"³. The advent of machines has challenged this ideal. Working with the hands has deep links with the formulation of ideas. There is contemplation in a physical dimension, where "the culture of thinking requires a culture of hand as a subtle, sensitive organ. If the hand can open up, if it doesn't just work, but plays as well, if it perceives, then the mind will open up more freely as well. The hand's plasticity is the plasticity of thought; the concept is what is conceived." This affirms the sagacity of artistic practices in ancient times, clarifying the concept of human devotion towards and for the ultimate power of being, where the physical dimension augments and complements the process of mental contemplation.

In my own personal experience, of working with the hands, as an artist/craftswoman, I have noted, that beyond providing opportunity for excellence in creativity, it also allows time, space and dignity of pace, to come to terms with being human and all that it entails. This includes the capacity to retain some measure of emotional balance in an otherwise frenetically paced world, as well as finding purpose and enjoyment in the chaos of existence.

It is the concept which marries action with contemplation that takes one back to ancient times, for then, aesthetics was much more than just pertaining to the creating and/or

presenting an object with a visual sense of appeal. It was intrinsic to the very act of creativity and by extension, to living itself.

Today the crafts people, who represent the creators of our inherited artistic wealth, are almost completely alienated from the creative realm, relegated as mere skilled labour. They are largely uneducated and the global village concept, with its relatively alien life-style choices and vast, non-computable information thwarts their creativity more than it provides them with enhanced business opportunities. This affects their self-esteem, their livelihood and therefore the nation's aspiration for creative excellence.

Skill alone cannot manifest excellence and creative concepts cannot be physically manifest without the skill in production. We need excellence in both spheres, which requires having a vision as well as passion to bring it to fruition. In my attempts to involve artisans, I have been disappointed, for they cannot share either the vision or the passion and do not share the sensibility. The hard reality is that for them bread itself is tough to come by. There can be no room in a brutally sparse existence for the subtle nuances of creative sensibilities, the passion to envision ideals or live out another's. The present collaboration between artist and designer as conceptualizer and producer, directs us towards a re-defined return to traditional practices that imbued life with a sense of aesthetics which encompassed the spiritual with its physicality of being, creating artefacts used for living and contemplation.

I evolved from being a designer, to craftsperson and artist, through the passage of my experience in the professional domain. It is with pride that I acknowledge the amalgamation of artist-craftsperson-designer in my work, for it places me within the context of tradition, in a contemporary world. It incorporates a vision that seeks to preserve the practice of handcrafting, imbuing it with creative excellence and skill, redefining tradition. Re-turning towards it because the culture of 'crafting' brings into being a sense of aesthetics that promises wholeness to an otherwise fragmented state of being. However, it is only when enough creative people get motivated and confront the challenge of reconciling traditional practices with modern concepts of thinking that an evolution of culture will emerge. Towards this, the present exposition presents myriad possibilities that return us to consider traditional ways of being, seeing and living that have left an enviable legacy we all take great pride in being a part of, where "an artist was not a special kind of person, but everyman a special kind of artist otherwise less than a man."⁴

Gopika Nath

5th August 2007

[2129 words]

¹ Anthony Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation*, Penguin, 1972

² Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity*, Harper Perennial 1997

³ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy

⁴ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy