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Theme I
Orient and Occident

DISTORTION OF PERSPECTIVE IN ORIENTAL AND MODERN ART

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Distortion of perspective is, more or less, a common feature of Oriental art. It cannot be explained away as a mere lack of skill, for there are sufficient examples, to refute such an assumption, of the command of several Oriental artists over perspective.

When it is not due to a lack of skill, distortion of perspective is attributable either to tradition or to various motives which the artist may consciously own.

In the case of Oriental art, tradition may appear as the main cause of the distortion of perspective, for, after all, widely established and rigid traditions, rather than personal innovations, have been the dominant factor in shaping the course which Oriental art has followed through the centuries.

However, traditions also generate from certain primary motives,—although these motives may no longer be remembered once they have been developed into traditions.

What these primary motives have been in the case of the distortion of perspective in Oriental art, is a matter for art historians to find out. Yet an attempt at guessing what these motives might have been should not be regarded as futile, for such an attempt should at least point to certain possible ways of explanation.

Considering first the uses of perspective and then the circumstances in which these uses might become a hinderance rather than an advantage to the artist, seems to be a practical method of making such an attempt.

Perspective is, primarily, a means for introducing third dimension into a picture by bringing out the distance, and, consequently, a means for the representation of objects as situated in a given space and as they appear from a given angle.

These two uses of perspective are, of course, of great value to an artist who aims at objectivity and who regards the process of creation as an impersonal function as far as the result is concerned.

But to an artist who aims at subjectivity and for whom the process of creation is a personal, or even an intimate act of self-expression, perspective may become a burden,—unless, as in the case of Paolo Ucello, he regards perspective not as a means but as an end in itself, thereby incorporating it with his own system of thought. But then, as can also be observed in Ucello's case, one would never know when such an artist might intentionally take liberties with the rules of perspective.

In the art of painting, subjectivity would generally tend to clash with the sense of distance. Because it is distance, after all, that takes objects away from us, places them out of our reach and forces us to give in to the reality of an external world. When an introvert unwillingly gives in to this reality and retains the sense of distance inspite of himself, he feels himself unbearably detached and lonely in the

world,—hence, I think, is the deep sadness that pervades the canvasses of so many surrealists who seem to take an almost masochistic pleasure in meticulously applying the rules of perspective.

Subjectivity is also bound to clash, sooner or later, with one's own visual perception. Because introverts, who generally incline to subjectivity in art, have an awareness that surpasses their physical faculties of perception. This, I think, should explain their tendency to represent objects from as many angles as they possibly can on a canvass, regardless of the limitations of their visual perception. This tendency to represent objects from several angles at once, naturally results in the distortion, or even, at times, the negation of perspective.

Such conscious distortion of perspective can, therefore, be regarded as some sort of a Berkeleian tour de force to evade the obstacles before subjectivity in art.

An inverted perspective is finally developed if and when the distortion of perspective is carried to the extreme.

Perhaps the best psychological explanation of the inverted perspective was given by Rabindranath Tagore, when he said, in one of his aphorisms, that "in the heart's perspective distant looms large."

In other words, when the inverted perspective is applied, the true point of focus in a painting is the painter himself (or, as the Poet would ^{have} prefer^{ed} to say, the artist's heart). Therefore, the parallel lines converge in the painter's eyes, whereas, if a normal perspective were used they would have converged at a distant point in the picture itself.

Where introspection leads to mysticism, as it so often does in the Orient, the inverted perspective could serve a double purpose,—that of enabling the artist to represent objects without giving in to the limitations of his visual perception, and, that of enabling him to represent the external world as a mere efflux of his own self.

Although this may have been the motive for the adoption of distorted or inverted perspective in the Orient, it has no doubt deviated from its original purpose by stagnating into a rigid tradition, and has been reduced into a merely decorative element.

Its adoption by several contemporary painters in the West, however, in this age when a tendency for introspection and subjectivity is stronger than ever in the world of art, has given new impetus to distorted perspective and has restored its original purpose.