CHAPTER 1

The Dialectic of Abstract Art
Before approaching the dialectic of Abstract Art, the meaning and interpretation of the word Abstract is prerequisite. The term abstract, according to the Webster’s New World Dictionary is - designating or of art abstracted from reality, in which designs or forms may be definite and geometric or fluid and amorphous: a generic term that encompasses various non-realistic contemporary schools. Abstraction, it says, is the - formation of an idea, as of the qualities or properties of a thing, by mental separation from particular instances or material objects.

Abstraction, according to the Dictionary of Philosophy is - “that aspect or form of cognition which mentally isolates properties of an object or connections between its properties from others. Both the process and its result are called Abstraction. In the process of Abstraction it is sometimes necessary to disregard certain of man’s subjective possibilities... The various concepts and categories -
matter, motion, value are the results of Abstraction".\(^1\) The process of knowing in the broadest sense, including perception, conception, memory, and judgement is resulted through the processes of Abstraction. To penetrate the depth of an object it is necessary to breakdown that, separate out the essential aspects in their pure form. The process of this analysis could only be resulted with an intellectual work of abstraction.

It seems essential to quote Lenin here to justify the relevence of abstraction in the process of knowing "thought processing from the concrete to the abstract - provided it is 'correct'... does not get away from the truth but comes closer to it. The abstraction of matter, of a law of nature, the abstraction of value, etc., in short all scientific (correct, serious, not absurd) abstractions reflect nature more deeply, truly and completely".\(^2\)

**ABSTRACT AND CONCRETE**

According to the Dictionary of Philosophy abstract denotes a simple, elementary and undeveloped part of a whole, while concrete, it explains, as many sided, complex, developed, whole. Hegal, it informs, first catagorised the abstract and concrete for a philosophical meaning which was later developed by marxist philosophers as - "the concrete is a synonym of dialectic interrelations of dismembered wholeness, the abstract is not metaphysically opposed to concrete but is a stage in the development of the concrete itself; it is the unrevealed, undeveloped concrete"\(^3\)
the relation between abstract and concrete for him is like bud and the fruit.

According to Hegal, the concrete is the description of an absolute idea which is the spirit of the thought process. The social relations and the nature are considered as other being, and abstract revelation of individual aspects or moments in the life of the absolute spirit. The abstract in real life unfolds only a limited nature of any of the fragments of the whole, as it is absolutely impossible, to reveal the absolute idea of the spirit. Abstract knowledge according to Hegal, therefore is one-sided, which expresses only one aspect of an object and isolates it from other aspects of the concrete nature of the whole.

The term abstract or abstraction has been variedly defined from a modest approach where it starts from near naturalism through semi abstraction to pure abstraction, to a very straight and direct one where it strictly prohibits even an accidental representation of any reality of natural forms.

Abstraction in A·t Fundamentals - Theory and Practice is defined as "a term given to the visual effects that derive their appearance from natural objects but which have been simplified and or rearranged to satisfy artist's needs for organization or expression. Abstraction is a process of varying degrees of change - from near naturalism through semiabstraction to pure abstraction. Sometimes any resemblance of the final product to the original objects is
difficult to detect (as in pure abstraction, with its non representational art).

Abstract Art, it says, is a type of art which is entirely imaginative and not described from anything visually perceived by the artist. The elements, their organization, and their treatment by the artist are entirely personalized and, consequently, not associated by the observer with any previously experienced natural objects."

Abstraction in A companion to Aesthetics is described as "absence of representation. In painting and sculpture, pure abstraction consists in the absence of representative elements, elements which recognizably resemble items in the external world and which the work is intended to portray. Abstraction, however, admits of degrees. Extremely realistic works display a minimum of abstract elements. As the artists introduces distortions or generalizations or purely decorative elements, the work grows more abstract."*

While in the Dictionary of Abstract painting (Seuphor) the definition of Abstract Art is given as "... all art that does not recall or evoke reality regardless of whether that reality be the point from which the artist started or not." True abstract painting, it explains, should avoid representation, even of an accidental kind, or the depicting of any subject whatsoever. Its color, form, and textures exist for themselves alone depending on no reference to any external reality".*
The concept which did not arise from representational reality of objects or nature but out of spiritual - intellectual sources and the amorphous and geometric representation are accepted as pure forms. It has nothing to do with ideas taken from natural world, a different way of seeing came into existence, which generates and enjoys the inner sound of pure forms and characteristic quality of colors. "for nothing is more concrete, more real than a line, a colour, a surface (Van Doesburg)." and "remember that a picture, before being a bottle, horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote, is essentially a plane surface covered with colours (Maurice Denis)."

Abstraction can often be achieved with its own peculiar value of being the reality or an end in itself. The painter doesn't need to represent or initiate anything. He looks upon abstract painting as independent painting, emancipated painting. He can paint the symbols, forms, shapes geometric patterns, and even musical analogy, where he can use elements like line, texture, colours, rhythmic repetition, intensity, harmony etc. which could be composed without giving any hint of the natural forms, shapes and sounds.

A very strong support is provided in favour of abstract art long time back by Socrates' famous passage from the Philebus of Pleto. Section 51C:

"Socrates: What I am saying is not indeed directly obvious. I
must therefore try to make it clear. I will try to speak of the beauty of shapes, and I do not mean, as most people would think, the shapes of living figure, or their imitations in paintings but I mean straight lines and curves and the shapes made from them, flat or solid, by the lathe, ruler and square. If you see what I mean. These are not beautiful for any particular reason or purpose, as other things are, but are always by their very nature beautiful, and give pleasure of their own quite free from the itch of desire; and colours of this kind are beautiful, too, and give a similar pleasure".

The dialectic of abstract art is based upon the assumption that the work of art, a painting for example, is worth looking at primarily because it presents a composition or organization of colour, line, light and shade. Resemblance to natural objects, while it does not necessarily destroy these aesthetic values, may easily adultrate their purity. Therefore, since resemblance to nature is at best superfluous and at worst distracting, it might as well be eliminated.

Hans Arp, although he long ago abandoned pure-abstraction, has expressed this point of view with engaging humour:

"Art is a fruit growing out of a man like the fruit out of a plant, like the child out of the mother. While the fruit of the plant assumes independent forms and never strikes to resemble a helicopter or a president in a cut a way, the artistic fruit of man shows, for the
most part, ridiculous ambition to imitate the appearance of other thing. I like nature but not its substitutes".¹⁰

Abstraction not only generates the pure form of non-representational objectivity as an end in itself, it also explores the innermost abstraction feelings like emotions, experiences like pain, pleasure, mental stress, intellectual curiosity and mental voyage "Thus the key to abstract art lies in the discovery of the self (also) and the exploitation by a suitable technique, of the hidden store of virgin material which we all carry within us and to which we all must find a path - and this is perhaps the hardest aspect of the artist's work - before it can be brought to light (Michel Seupher)."¹¹ For the abstract expressionists, "the human gesture and its emotional content are absolutely key for interpreting the work; the work is a trace or record of the gestures that produced it, and can not be understood except as part of human emotional life."¹²

Many of the early abstract artist represented their work as a spiritual exploration and have done justice to their approach which is undoubtedly incomprehensible without a sense of this purpose. They made their position clear by producing a proof away from the realistic approach for actual objects towards the spiritual. Kandinsky wrote:

"The artist must have something to say, for his task is not the mastery of form, but the suitability of that form to its content... (the artist's) actions and thoughts and feelings, like those of every
human being, constitute the spiritual atmosphere, in such a way that they purify or infect the spiritual air." ^13

ABSTRACT, NON-REPRESENTATIONAL, REAL, ABSOLUTE AND CONCRETE

Concept such as absolute, abstract, pure, non-representational and later non-depicting, non-figurative, concrete, etc. are the so called major terms concerned with the whole concept of Abstract Art. There are other less popular trends also like Rayonnism, Unism, Structuralism, Taskism, etc. which are distinguished by their different concepts, elements and functions. The main termini mentioned here mirror the great, indeed antagonistic, contradictions of two worlds: the representational and the abstract.

Abstract painting is a label like Romantic painting is for works of different origins and importance. The classical practitioners have defined this art as, "every kind of art which does not relate to visible reality, that is, it does not contain any abstract reality where it provides the initial impetus for the artist or not". ^14 That means a slight hint of natural reality spoils the abstract reality. In this case the term art without objects or non-representational art - that is, art separated from all concrete objects, are not appropriate as art without object's- the painting itself is an object so it can not exist without it. And formation of any abstraction when painted is again a representation
of artists abstract thoughts. Therefore non-representational is also a defective term".15

The relationship of reality with only representational art is also looked more deeply which are determined by the existence of the object and the creation of its image.

The Dictionary defines reality as - that which exists, independently of ideas concerning it. Most of us have ideas about the things we look at or paint, unless we happen to be an undirected camera. Reality is such a relative thing from the artist's view point certainly, that we must consider carefully before we condemn him for not painting what is real.

As painting itself is an object it also contains the property of being a reality weather it is abstract or realistic as Picasso said to emphasize the meaning of reality "nature is a reality and my canvas is also a reality"16 here the existence is motivated with the term reality it does not encompasses the content of the canvas but the canvas itself.

The term absolute art also needs to be defined, Adolf Hoelzel, the teacher of many abstractionists wrote: absolute art happens when the energy inherent in the artistic means is deployed without any outside interference. By interference he means the imitation of objects.

Mondrian understood absolute art as totally free expression of art. He saw it not only liberated from imitation
but free of all individual means of expression, feeling and form. The aim is a concept of supra-individuality, objective art.

The concept pure art (Peinture pure) was coined by the poet Apollinaire around 1913. He demanded paintings without literary or practical content, integrated and pure like plants.

Near naturalism, semi-abstractions, pure-abstraction, non-objective, non-figurative, non-representational - all these terminology have different connotation in different countries. There are countries who adopted abstract art relatively late followed by Modern art and there are countries where the interpretation was wrongly understood. Indian contemporary artist from late 40's very liberally practicing all these termini, consciously or unconsciously, to reach their final approach towards pure abstraction.

All the synonyms of abstract art need to be discussed and analized in support of the wider frame work of abstract art.

NEAR NATURALISM, SEMI-ABSTRACTION AND PURE-ABSTRACTION

As per the definition of Art fundamentals - Theory & Practice "Abstraction is a process of varying degrees of change - from near naturalism through semi-abstractions to pure-abstraction". Abstract Art encompasses all the development of world art including Impressionism followed by trends in the history of Modern Art.
To resume: near naturalism is a breakage from pure realistic imitation in which pointillism, expressionism, fauvism etc. preceded by Impressionism could be taken. But only naturalistic tendencies in art, partly a reaction against the impressionist, including Art Nouveau and work of the symbolists; Paul gauguin, Maurice Denis, and Paul Serusier takes us gradually away towards semi-abstraction.

Near or semi abstractions are compositions in which the artist starting with natural forms, transforms them into abstraction or nearly abstract forms. He approaches an abstract goal but does not quite reach it. The best example for this category could be Cubism wherein the designs are derived from subject matter and natural forms that have been abstract- that is to say transposed from the subject and containing many hints of what the original natural form was. Even the most extreme Cubist distortion has some elements of the face, figure or guitar and wine glass still evident. As Picasso doesn’t believe in pure abstraction, he says "There is no abstract art. We must always begin with something. Afterwards we can remove all appearances of reality; there is no danger because the idea of the object has left its indelible imprint. It was the object which provoked the artist, excited his ideas, stirred his emotions".18

Picasso had his niche in Paul Cezanne’s concept of solidity of natural forms. His patient exploration of natural forms and
their depiction as solid images on the flat surface of the canvas provided the foundation for the experiments of the Cubists.

Cubism in Indian contemporary art has been a stronghold for a very long time. The modern artist who had a strong attraction towards Internationalism, crossed the forewalls of Indianness and adopted Cubism in search of a new meaning.

After so many new avenues semi-abstraction reaches the stage of pure-abstraction in which the artist makes a composition of abstract elements such as geometrical, spiritual, intellectual scientific and amorphous shapes. In India, abstraction is rather rediscovered as it has always been an integral part of Indian religion, mythology, traditional art, tantric meditation, symbolism and fantasy etc. New experimentation and curiosity towards colors and texture made Indian artists to divert towards more original forms with new philosophical and intellectual approach.

NON-OBJECTIVE AND NON-FIGURATIVE

The term non-figurative seems to please many artists who are in search of a word to describe a painting without figuration or representation of visual objects and forms. This term is used to describe most painting that depends on abstract and plastic qualities alone for expression and meaning. Non-objective, a term which describes a Pure Abstraction of the kind created by Kandinsky in which the image is regarded as being rejected.
Alfred H. Barr Jr. an American writer in his book Cubism and Abstract Art does not keep non-objective and non-figurative in the category of abstract. He argues "Substitutes for abstract such as non-objective and non-figurative have been advocated as superior. But the image of a square is as much an object or a 'figure' as the image of a face or a landscape, in fact 'figure' is the very prefix used by geometers in naming A or B the abstractions with which they deal."

He explains "this is not to deny that the adjective abstract is confusing and even paradoxical. For an abstract painting is really a most positively concrete painting since it confines the attention to its immediate, sensuous, physicals surface for more than does the canvas of a sunset or a portrait."

THE REASON FOR ABSTRACTION

When the old imitative Renaissance realism were being severed, many new motivation set in to redefine the capabilities of human creative instinct. It became increasingly necessary to put certain distance between the artist and the world in reaction to the unpleasant criticism. The autonomy of creative impulse protested against any kind of dependence and limitations and proclaimed its right for freedom. 'As long as art is in bondage to objects, it condemns itself to slavery', Delaunay called out. Paul Gauguin had advised a friend:

'Art is abstraction; Take from nature only what you dream of it';
Abstract artist started a new dimension to his vision through a new perspective of the spiritual intellectual and experimental value system. It made him reinterprete the fundamentals of colour, line, design, texture etc. So modernists believed all the more in their own powers of imagination and intuition, in an autonomous art.

After 1908 these wishful concepts where voiced in a psychosis of image-making. "The human mind wants to force its order on to life and nature, indeed it wants to put itself above nature. It does this by changing nature, or leaving it out completely or by denying the validity of sensory perception altogether (Brion). Human order was therefore created in images. And it was believed that it was in correspondence with the universal order of things".20

The idea behind making - Abstract Painting is the visualization of an idea and the creative impulse of an abstract artist make him a different kind of creator of a different kind of a reality. Like the astronauts who launch themselves into the darkness of space and chart the existence of invisible stars. The invisible world which abstract painters try to show us, has a purely spiritual and intellectual origin. The forms they create often do not represent anything but themselves, having no origin in the outside world,

There are paintings which sometime exude a strong sense of cosmic experience and sometimes represent an excellent
resemblance of microbiological photography. There is tantric sublimity which unites the atma with parmatama through meditative representation. The symbolic achievement makes the mind exercise for recognition. Geometric and colour patterns and variation widely give the source to his creative mind. There are so many technical achievements which have their niche in non-representational way of painting. Sometimes it represents external resemblance, sometimes the inner reality of human mind and sometimes a curiosity of knowing the unknown.

The autonomy of abstract painting place this form of art at same level as the creative arts like music and architecture, as both of it does not resemble or represent anything but itself. An architect and a musician is an abstract artist, he does not imitate any natural object or voice in nature. The musician creates the magic with sounds and chords and the motif of music itself. Abstract painters also construct different kinds of ideas of invisible harmony, of the unending vibrations, the eternal contrasts, out of liberated means or elements. All these elements dance on a new tune which generates a new exciting energy.

In the same connotation color also received a new dimension by Kandinsky as he wrote in 1910; "Sharp colours express their natural qualities more vividly in a pointed form (for example yellow
Colours which tend towards depth are enhanced in their impact by the use of round forms (blue in a circle). These ideas on the psychological significance of colour were later developed by him for teaching purposes.

Kandinsky also believed that pure elements, especially colours, are capable of affecting our inner experiences, even apart from the traditional tripartite reaction to art; colour is a means of direct impact on the soul. The colour is the key. The eye is the hammer. The artist is the hand which sets the soul in vibration by means of this or that key".

ABSTRACTION HAS ALWAYS EXISTED

The presence of abstraction in art could be traced back in the pre-historic age when man was threatened by the mysterious forces of nature. It seems he wanted to please nature, protect himself from the atrocities and the confusion through his geometrical expression or witch craft practice, which do not possess any reality of the outside world.

Later, perhaps in the first era of civilisation, man reached the conclusion that his capacity to reason and act made him superior to nature. Therefore he demonstrated his wish for order through abstract geometrical forms. At the same time he had to realise that his striving for order on the one hand, and the signs of flexibility on the other, did not only have the same geometrical forms but also the identical source which keeps the
universe in check: the higher eternal energies, the divine. The presence of abstraction, therefore, also meant being connected with the higher, divine principle and sometimes also a guarantee of immortality. Ornamental abstractions and geometry therefore became forms expressive of the divine. We can see how these dominate in Islamic, Byzantine, Medieval and to a certain extent in Ancient Indian art.

The epochs of predominantly Abstract Art were superseded gradually by representational ones when geometricism and the archaism of the ancient Greeks came with the high praise of the beauty of nature of the Phidian and Hellenistic age; after the geometrical Romanesque and the abstract Gothic came the Florentines and their Renaissance realism.

If we perceive it more closely we could realise that even Renaissance realism is constructed on the abstract fundamentals, for Botticelli, Leonardo and especially Piero della Francesca built up their whole paintings from abstract basic structures. They constructed a compositional skeleton and dressed this architecture with realistic observations from nature. This became the standard procedure.

Abstraction had always been there, and has remained under the skin of every realistic work of art. By carefully observing a representational, figurative painting we discover not only the abstract structure of composition which gives order to the
whole, but also the ornamental arrangements of the figurative silhouettes, the musical rhythm of repeated motifs and the counterpoint of colour surfaces. We can even discover a great abstract sign which is generated by the contrast of darker and lighter shades of colour. Each representational painting is informed by this tension between the realistic imitation of life and abstract visual values. This interpretation is valuable in the study of Indian contemporary art where we find more possibility of near naturalism an semi-abstraction.
REFERENCES - 1


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.


14. Arsenphohribny; *Abstract Painting*, (Phaidon Press Ltd., Little gate house, St. Ebbe's Street, Oxford), P. 12


