International Journal of Social Science Research and Review

http://ijssrr.com
editor@ijssrr.com
Volume 8, Issue 9
September, 2025
Pages: 377-386

Art and Power in Colonial India: Resistance and Control

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http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v8i9.2962

Abstract

Art has historically functioned not only as a medium of aesthetic pleasure but also as a powerful instrument of political expression and ideological dissemination[1]. In colonial contexts, visual culture becomes especially charged, reflecting the tensions between dominance and resistance. In British-ruled India, painting emerged as a contested site where imperial ideologies and nationalist aspirations collided.[2] British imperialism did not only seek territorial and economic control but also aimed to reshape the cultural imagination of the colonized. Art, particularly visual art, was central to this civilizing mission.

Prior to colonial rule, Indian painting thrived under indigenous patronage in diverse regional traditions. However, with the expansion of the British Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries, Indian artists were gradually subjected to European artistic values through formal institutions like the Madras (1854), Calcutta (1854), Bombay (1857) and Lahore (1875) art schools. These schools, modelled on the Royal Academy in London, prioritized Western academic realism as the standard of artistic merit.

British intervention in Indian art was underpinned by a racialized ideology. The British thought that European artistic traditions, especially naturalism and academic realism, were "better" because they were linked to reason, realism, and civilisation. In contrast, Indian art was labelled as "inferior, decorative, and primitive," mirroring colonial stereotypes that portrayed Indians as culturally and intellectually regressive. This classification was not impartial; it was integral to a broader colonial power framework, wherein art criticism served as a mechanism to validate subjugation and bolster Western cultural hegemony over the "native." British critics thus positioned themselves as arbiters of value, employing aesthetics to legitimise colonial authority on cultural grounds. British critics classified Indian art as decorative, inferior, and primitive, thus justifying colonial authority on cultural grounds. This paper asks: How did visual art during British colonial rule in India serve both as a tool of political control through Western academic realism and as a form of resistance through the nationalist ideology of the Bengal School?

During British rule, visual art was not merely aesthetic, it was deeply political. Through academic realism, the British institutionalized European aesthetic values to assert cultural dominance and reshape

[1] **Zavala, M.** (2022, June 15). *Cultural imperialism and hegemony* (Working Paper No. 59). Portland State University, Economics Working Papers.
[2] **Guha-Thakurta, T.** (1992). *The making of a new "Indian" art: Artists, aesthetics and nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920*. Cambridge University Press.

Indian subjectivity. In response, Indian artists led by Abanindranath Tagore and supported by E.B. Havell, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Sister Nivedita initiated a countermovement: the Bengal School. Other prominent figures such as Nandalal Bose, Asit Kumar Haldar, and Kshitindranath Majumdar further advanced the movement, while later artists like Jamini Roy drew inspiration from folk traditions to reinforce cultural pride. By reviving indigenous artistic forms, the Bengal School redefined Indian art as a vehicle of anti-colonial resistance and cultural self-assertion.

Art as a Tool of Colonial Power in India

According to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Kenyan author and academic, the "most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others." This insight is particularly relevant to the context of colonial India, where British imperial power operated not only through military and administrative mechanisms, but also through aesthetic and cultural ones.

Among the most insidious aspects of this domination was the British reconfiguration of Indian visual culture to assert racial and civilizational superiority. Through the systematic dismissal of Indian art as primitive and decorative, colonial authorities sought to undermine indigenous cultural confidence and redefine the very notion of artistic legitimacy in their own image. Art became a tool of epistemic violence, as colonial institutions actively imposed Western standards of beauty, technique, and authorship. By reshaping Indian visual expression to mirror European academic realism, the British effectively rewrote the cultural narrative of India, casting its traditional forms as obsolete and unworthy. The following section explores how this ideological project unfolded through the deliberate presentation of Indian art as inferior, laying the groundwork for deeper economic and pedagogical exploitation.

Indian Art Being Presented as Inferior.

The British colonial administration dismissed Indian art, and by extension, Indian culture, as backward, primitive, and inferior. Under the guise of "improvement" and "civilization," they imposed Western artistic norms, reconfiguring visual culture to align with colonial ideologies. This cultural domination served to undermine indigenous identity while justifying British rule as benevolent and progressive. As Susanta Pal highlights, Indian painters were not even granted the status of "artists" until the mid-19th century. They were relegated to the role of "artisans," a term that stripped them of creative authorship and positioned them as mechanically skilled but intellectually subordinate.[3] Only Europeans, or those trained in European methods, were acknowledged as true artists. This institutionalized hierarchy functioned as a cultural boundary that reinforced colonial rule, with artistic legitimacy monopolized by the West. The civilizing mission extended into pedagogy and taste.

Partha Mitter has argued that the British viewed themselves as moral and aesthetic guides, believing they were refining and correcting the "native taste."[4] This intervention was not a benign act of cultural enrichment; it was a paternalistic effort to overwrite Indian sensibilities with European artistic values. The introduction of Western art education in India aimed to displace indigenous traditions rather than coexist with them. Tapati Guha-Thakurta further elaborates on this point, demonstrating that British-run art schools sought to implant a "correct" artistic vision that mirrored Greco-Roman ideals. This initiative actively disqualified Indian spiritual and symbolic art as regressive. Through institutional channels, a colonial "aesthetic hierarchy" was established, marginalizing traditional Indian forms and privileging academic

[3]**Pal, S.** (2024). The objectives of establishing art schools in colonial India by the British. *Brainwave Journal, 5*(2).
[4]**Mitter, P.** (1994). *Art and nationalism in colonial India (1850–1922): Occidental orientations*. Cambridge University Press.

realism.[5] Mahrukh Tarapor documents the selective appreciation of Indian aesthetics by colonial authorities.

While British designers admired elements of Indian craftsmanship for industrial replication, they ignored the cultural and spiritual contexts that gave these designs their original meaning. This instrumentalization of Indian art for imperial gain represents yet another facet of cultural dispossession. Together, these strategies constituted a calculated imperial project of cultural erasure. By defining what counted as "real" art and who could claim the title of "artist," the British colonial regime delegitimized centuries of Indian artistic achievement. These interventions were not merely about art; they were expressions of racial and cultural dominance, embedded within the broader ideological framework of the empire.

The Fulfilment of British Economic Goals

Even the rare recognition of Indian aesthetic principles was ultimately aligned with British economic goals. Tarapor shows how British officials like Richard Redgrave analysed Indian decorative design not to elevate its cultural value, but to extract lessons for improving British manufacturing. Indian art thus became a resource to be mined for imperial industry, not respected on its own terms. This instrumentalization extended beyond theory. The Company's collection, admired in the Exhibition, was acquired by Henry Cole for a British museum, not to preserve Indian heritage, but to serve domestic pedagogical and industrial needs. Indian design was admired selectively, only to the extent that it could be co-opted to enhance Britain's industrial competitiveness. Simultaneously, while Indian aesthetics were being celebrated in elite circles, the colonial market was being flooded with cheap British-made imitations designed to appeal to anglicized Indian consumers. These imitations, often in textiles and furniture, were deliberately priced to undercut native artisans. This economic strategy effectively displaced lower-class Indian producers while enriching colonial commercial interests, demonstrating how appreciation of Indian art served imperial profit at the expense of indigenous livelihoods.[6]

Education

Paule Freire, a revolutionary Brazilian educational theorist, discusses the idea of education as a form of oppression in "*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*". He explains how the "banking concept of knowledge" where "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to nothing" involves "projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic ideology of oppression" that "negates education and knowledge as a process of inquiry".[7] According to this line of argument the establishment of government art schools in colonial India was not a neutral educational effort, but a calculated extension of colonial control. These institutions served dual roles, propagating European aesthetics and generating skilled labour for the colonial economy. As Altbach and Kelly argue, colonial education was designed "to assist in the consolidation of foreign rule" and reflected "the power and the educational needs of the colonizers."[8] British art schools were set up in Madras, Calcutta, Bombay, and Lahore, not to nurture indigenous art, but to support British trade. Kantawala notes that these schools were economically positioned and far apart, designed to produce goods that matched British tastes using Indian techniques. Indian students were trained to replicate British design standards under colonial supervision.[9] Crucially, the curriculum did not prioritize artistic expression or the cultivation of Indian aesthetic traditions. Instead, as Kantawala underscores, the real goal was to develop technical proficiency in trades

[5]**Guha-Thakurta, T.** (1992). *The making of a new "Indian" art: Artists, aesthetics and nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920*. Cambridge University Press.
[6] **Tarapor, M.** (1980). John Lockwood Kipling and British art education in India. *Victorian Studies, 24*(1), 53–81. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3826879
[7]**Freire, P.** (2017). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.; P. Mayo, Introduction). Penguin Books. (Original work published 1970)
[8]**Altbach, P. G., & Kelly, G.** (1978). *Education and colonialism*. Longman.
[9]**Kantawala, A.** (2012). Art education in colonial India: Implementation and imposition. *Studies in Art Education, 53*(3), 208–222. National Art Education Association. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24467910

such as carpentry, masonry, printing, and leather work. Art education became synonymous with industrial training, a system designed to supply the colonial bureaucracy and market with skilled, compliant labour. This utilitarian vision of education denied the intellectual and creative capacities of Indian artists, relegating them to the role of producers rather than visionaries.[10] The ideological basis for this system is clearly articulated in colonial educational documents. Trevelyan's endorsement of a program that would "set the natives on a process of European improvement" demonstrates the assimilationist nature of British education policy. The underlying assumption was that Indian culture needed to be replaced, not developed, its value measured only in terms of its adaptability to European norms. Art schools were thus vehicles for a broader cultural reengineering project.[11] While these institutions did inadvertently contribute to the formation of a modern Indian art identity and the revival of certain traditional crafts, their foundational logic remained deeply exploitative. They propagated Western norms and institutionalized colonial definitions of taste, value, and talent. Indian artists were expected to serve colonial interests, economically, by producing marketable goods, and ideologically, by internalizing and reproducing European standards of beauty.

Thus, one can say,, as Kantawala writes, colonial art pedagogy "imposed a one-size-fits-all aesthetic", leaving little room for the meditative, narrative, and abstract modes of traditional Indian expression.[12] In effect, colonial art schools became laboratories for cultural control. They shaped how Indian art was produced, who was authorized to produce it, and what counted as worthy of admiration. Behind the façade of instruction and preservation lay a calculated strategy of domination, one that sought not to uplift Indian art but to reshape it in the image of the colonizer.

The Bengal School: Art as a Nationalist Response

By the turn of the 20th century, colonial Indian art was undergoing a decisive shift from Westernization to cultural nationalism. In Bengal, a new generation of artists led by Abanindranath Tagore spearheaded a self-consciously "Indian" school of painting as a direct reaction against European academic naturalism. This avant-garde movement, later dubbed the Bengal School of Art, was closely tied to the Swadeshi phase of India's freedom struggle, as artists sought to liberate indigenous visual culture from colonial dominance and imbue it with nationalist pride. In contrast to earlier colonial-era painters like Raja Ravi Varma—along with artists such as M. V. Dhurandhar, Hemendranath Mazumdar, and Pestonji Bomanji, who had embraced European oil techniques and academic realism - the Bengal School artists rejected Western artistic norms and instead turned to India's own past for inspiration. In doing so, the realm of art became a potent arena of resistance: a cultural battlefield where the colonizers' claims of superiority were challenged by a revival of native aesthetics.

Art as a Form of Resistance in Imperial Colonies

Art has long served as a tool of resistance in colonized societies, reclaiming identity and subverting imperial narratives. In Durban, South Africa, public artworks transform segregated spaces into affirmations of Black identity, "Africanizing" the city and challenging apartheid legacies.[13] These visual interventions act as spatial resistance, reclaiming visibility for marginalized communities. In Palestine, artists like those discussed by Gal turn oppressive materials, concrete from Israeli checkpoints into sculptures of remembrance, flipping instruments of confinement into symbols of survival.[14] This act reclaims both

[10]**Kantawala, A.** (2012). Art education in colonial India: Implementation and imposition. *Studies in Art Education, 53*(3), 208–222. National Art Education Association. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24467910
[11]Trevelyan, as cited in Edwardes, 1861, p. 256
[12]**Kantawala, A.** (2012). Art education in colonial India: Implementation and imposition. *Studies in Art Education, 53*(3), 208–222. National Art Education Association. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24467910
[13]**Udo, F., et al.** (2025). Mapping public art to explore the decolonization and Africanization of space in the inner city of Durban, South Africa. *South African Geographical Journal*, 1–22.
[14]**Gal, N.** (2024). "Politics in matter": Concrete expressions in contemporary Palestinian art of resistance. *Art Journal, 83*(2), 38–59.

narrative and material agency. In Latin America, Cohen-Aponte shows that colonial authorities systematically destroyed anti-colonial art, fearing its power to mobilize revolts like the Haitian and Aponte uprisings.[15] The suppression itself proves how threatening visual resistance was to imperial control. Finally, Nkosinkulu draws from Fanon to argue that resisting colonialism includes decolonizing how we speak about art. By challenging Eurocentric art histories that deem African art primitive, scholars and artists reclaim interpretive power.[16] Together, these examples demonstrate that visual art in colonized nations is a powerful tool of resistance - just as in India, where the Bengal School transformed painting into a site of cultural self-assertion and anti-colonial.

The Revival of Indigenous Aesthetics

During the Swadeshi movement (beginning around 1905), Indian art became a vehicle for nationalist expression, as practitioners rejected European academic art in favor of "uniquely Indian" forms drawn from local traditions.[17] Coomaraswamy's seminal essay, presented in 1910, is a contemporary critique and manifesto on art in the Swadeshi movement. In it, Coomaraswamy argues that political self-rule alone is not enough, India's regeneration must come "through art, and not by politics and economics alone." He insists that "Swadeshi must be something more than a political weapon. It must be a religious-[and]-artistic ideal." Coomaraswamy deplores the "profound decay" of India's traditional artisanal arts under colonialism and urges a return to indigenous craftsmanship. He distinguishes "True Swadeshi" (which he defines as a sincere way of life devoted to indigenous creativity) from a "False Swadeshi" that merely imitates Western industrial products. Notably, he calls for preserving the status of skilled artisans and village craftsmen as a core national asset. This early treatise thus links the Swadeshi movement with an aesthetic/spiritual revival, advocating indigenous art, handicrafts, and even traditional textile production as vital to India's identity. [18]

Moreover, Guha-Thakurta's acclaimed study examines the nationalist art revival in Bengal, dissecting how indigenous aesthetics were consciously reinvented during the colonial period. She explores the "campaign for a new Indian art" in late-19th and early-20th century Bengal, in which British art educators (like E. B. Havell) and Indian artists (like the Tagore family) collaborated to purge Western academic "taste" and resurrect Indian artistic ideals.[19] Guha-Thakurta documents how figures such as Havell and Sister Nivedita valorised India's precolonial artistic heritage, from Ajanta cave paintings and Rajput/Mughal miniatures to temple sculpture and folk crafts, as the foundation for a modern national art. She details how Abanindranath Tagore and his circle synthesized these indigenous and pan-Asian influences (including Japanese wash techniques) to create a new painting style that was spiritual, revivalist, yet modern.[20] Guha-Thakurta also analyses the intellectual discourse of the time, for example, how Bengali art journals and institutions (the Indian Society of Oriental Art, founded 1907) promoted Swadeshi ideals in art. The Bharat Mata painting (1905) by Abanindranath is highlighted as an emblem of the period, personifying India through indigenous iconography. Overall, this research illustrates how nationalist thinkers redefined art education and aesthetics to reflect Swadeshi values, viewing Indian art's "higher qualities of imagination and spirituality" as "inscrutable" to the West.

Additionally, art historian R. Siva Kumar provides a concise overview of modern Indian art, emphasizing the role of cultural nationalism in its development. Kumar notes that the rise of Indian modern art cannot be seen simply as an imitation of Western modernism; rather, it involved a "nationalist cultural

[15] **Cohen-Aponte, A.** (2021). Reimagining lost visual archives of Black and Indigenous resistance. *Selva: A Journal of the History of Art*, (3).

[16] **Nkosinkulu, Z.** (2023). Fanonian art practices: Toward a decolonial grammar of being. *Journal of Black Studies, 54*(5), 394–409.

[17] **Ali, A.** (2004, October). The rise of modernity in South Asia. *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rmsa/hd_rmsa.htm

[18] **Coomaraswamy, A. K.** (2017, January 20). *Art and Swadeshi* [E-book]. Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.201377/mode/2up

[19] **Guha-Thakurta, T.** (1992). The ideology of the "aesthetic": The purging of visual tastes and the campaign for a new Indian art in late nineteenth/early twentieth century Bengal. *Studies in History, 8*(2), 237–281. https://doi.org/10.1177/025764309200800205

[20] **MAP Academy.** (2025, July 6). Revivalism. *MAP Academy*. https://mapacademy.io/article/revivalism

counter-stance around the turn of the century". As India's freedom movement gained momentum, artists turned against colonial academic realism "as an anticolonial gesture," leading to "a revival of indigenous values and forms." This revivalist impulse, rooted in the Swadeshi period, meant that painters of the Bengal School rejected oil-painted European naturalism and instead embraced traditional Indian techniques and subjects (mythological themes, classical styles) to define a modern Indian identity. Siva Kumar also situates the craft revival in this context: as Western art education spread, many Indian intellectuals began to "reconsider their own traditional antecedents," leading to renewed respect for indigenous decorative arts and design. The article underscores that Indian modernism was shaped by the push-pull of East-West encounters under colonialism, with nationalist artists selectively adapting folk and classical motifs into contemporary art as a form of resistance.[21] Furthermore, an essay by curator Atteqa Ali (for the Met's Timeline of Art History) offers an institutional perspective on the Bengal School and Swadeshi-era art. It contextualizes the Swadeshi movement as a broad push for social, economic, and cultural self-reliance that 'revived and invented Indian traditions'.

In the realm of visual art, Ali explains how a Calcutta-based group of artists led by Abanindranath Tagore believed they could forge a modern art that was distinctly Indian rather than European to do so, they drew on Hindu themes and resurrected older art forms, for example, studying the ancient frescoes of Ajanta and the folk pat painting tradition, as well as craft techniques like traditional scroll painting. The essay notes the influence of the British Arts and Crafts Movement on these revivalists: the Bengal School's orientalist mentors (like Havell and Coomaraswamy) were inspired by Arts-and-Crafts ideals calling for a return to handcraft, spirituality, and pre-industrial design as an antidote to Western materialism. The new "Indian" style that emerged around 1905 was thus intentionally anti-Realist (in contrast to Raja Ravi Varma's academic oil paintings) and often pan-Asian in flavour, incorporating Mughal, Rajput, and even Japanese elements. Ali also contrasts how nationalist critics praised the Bengal School's spiritual authenticity while condemning artists like Ravi Varma as "un-Indian" in style. This institutional summary underscores how intimately the Swadeshi ethos and the indigenous art revival were entwined: artists used visual culture to cultivate national pride and "develop a truly Indian modern art".[22] Ultimately, modern scholarship agrees that the Swadeshi-era revival of indigenous aesthetics was a foundational chapter in Indian modern art. By reviving traditional painting styles, sculptural motifs, and crafts, Indian artists of the early 1900s helped redefine national identity in visual terms. This legacy endured well beyond the 1920s: the emphasis on folk and classical forms influenced later artists and even post-independence cultural policies on art and handicrafts. Recent art historians continue to explore this period as a complex interplay of anti-colonial politics and aesthetic innovation. The consensus is that India's nationalist movement not only achieved political freedom but also instigated an enduring aesthetic reordering of art, one that celebrated indigenous creativity as a source of pride and resistance. In sum, the Swadeshi-linked art revival reinvigorated Indian painting, sculpture, and crafts, leaving a rich intellectual legacy documented by both contemporary observers like Coomaraswamy and later scholars like Guha-Thakurta.

Beyond individual artists, the infrastructure of nationalist art in early 20th-century India was significantly shaped by organized institutions that advanced an indigenous cultural agenda. Among the most influential was the Indian Society of Oriental Art, founded in Calcutta in 1907. This society played a critical role in legitimizing and disseminating the ideals of Indian modernism rooted in native traditions.[23] Unlike colonial institutions such as the Government College of Art, which emphasized European techniques and values, the Society curated exhibitions that highlighted Indian historical art forms, published journals like *Rupam* to cultivate public aesthetic literacy, and promoted artists who rejected

[21] **Kumar, R. S.** (2019, September). R. Siva Kumar - Modern Indian art: A brief overview. *Visva-Bharati*. https://www.academia.edu/40244293/R_Siva_Kumar_Modern_Indian_Art_A_brief_overview

[22] **Ali, A.** (2004, October). The rise of modernity in South Asia. *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rmsa/hd_rmsa.htm

[23] **Guha-Thakurta, T.** (1992). *The making of a new "Indian" art: Artists, aesthetics and nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920*. Cambridge University Press.

Western academic styles.[24] As Partha Mitter notes, it provided an autonomous platform for cultural expression at a time when colonial art schools were producing imitative realism.[25] By offering an alternative vision of modernity, grounded in regional idioms, spiritual themes, and pan-Asian solidarity, the Society institutionalized the Swadeshi aesthetic. Its influence extended beyond exhibitions to shaping curricula, encouraging critical discourse, and fostering pride in indigenous visual heritage. In doing so, it was not merely a cultural body but a nationalist enterprise that challenged the ideological authority of colonial aesthetics from within the framework of art institutions.

Critiques of The Bengal School

Critiques of the Bengal School argue that its spiritualism and revivalist nationalism were fundamentally disconnected from the political and social urgency of post-independence India. A key voice in this critique was the Progressive Artists' Group (PAG), formed in 1947. The group's founders, F. N. Souza, S. H. Raza, and M. F. Husain deliberately rejected the Bengal School's idealized vision of Indian identity. They moved away from its revivalist nationalism and spiritual aesthetics, viewing them as relics of colonial-era thinking. Instead, they embraced a more cosmopolitan, modernist art form rooted in indigenous folk traditions and international modernism, which they believed better reflected India's pluralistic, secular, postcolonial ethos.[26] Vandana Kalra's article in The Indian Express further reinforces this critique by referencing PAG's 1949 exhibition catalogue. In it, Souza boldly declared, "We have no pretensions of making vapid revivals of any school or movement in art," explicitly rejecting the Bengal School's nostalgic revivalism. Kalra also cites art historian R. Siva Kumar, who emphasized how 1940s artists began doubting the notion of an indigenous modernism that cut itself off from global art movements. These artists viewed the Bengal School's aesthetic as backward-looking and incapable of addressing contemporary Indian realities.[27]

The Princeps article provides one of the most cutting critiques from within the PAG. It quotes Souza deriding Bengal School artworks as "sentimental pictures" and "nostalgic gouaches of pining damsels." This harsh dismissal illustrates the Progressives' belief that the Bengal School's romanticism and idealism were entirely disconnected from the raw, material conditions of modern Indian life. According to the PAG, Indian art had to abandon both British academic norms and Indian revivalism to become truly modern, rooted in real experiences, not mythic pasts.[28]Art critic Geeta Kapur echoes these concerns in her book When Was Modernism. She describes the Bengal School's art as embodying a "medievalist aesthetic" that diffused the human body into symbols of spiritual transcendence, ultimately becoming static and ornamental. Kapur critiques this symbolism as empty in the face of the modern world's demands, calling much of it "pastiche" or even "farce." She argues that even Nandalal Bose, despite his stature, could not overcome the limitations imposed by this idealist tradition.[29] Finally, Dilip Menon's review of Sanjukta Sunderason's Partisan Aesthetics positions the Bengal School as fundamentally out of step with the political urgency of 1940s India. The trauma of the Bengal Famine and the Second World War forced Indian artists to confront real suffering and historical change. Menon explains that artists like those in the

[24]**Ali, A.** (2004, October). The rise of modernity in South Asia. *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rmsa/hd_rmsa.htm

[25]**Mitter, P.** (1994). *Art and nationalism in colonial India (1850–1922): Occidental orientations*. Cambridge University Press.

[26] **MAP Academy.** (2025, July 7). *Bombay Progressive Artists Group | Modern art*. MAP Academy. https://mapacademy.io/article/bombay-progressive-artists-group/

[27]**Kalra, V.** (2022, December 4). On the 75th anniversary of the Progressive Artists' Group, remembering their seminal role in shaping Indian art. *The Indian Express*. https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/75th-anniversary-progressive-artists-group-india-most-well-known-artists-art-8302901/

[28] **Prinseps.** (2024, November 11). Progressive Artists' Group and M.F. Husain's impact on modern Indian art. https://prinseps.com/research/progressive-artists-group-m-f-husain-1-8-20/?srsltid=AfmBOooMhyANDibie6kHXmj4oKSxHj5D6LsVOok1pJy61gwYqRHQ7v9N

[29]**Vidal, R. A.** (n.d.). *Geeta Kapur - When was modernism: Essays on contemporary cultural practice in India*. Retrieved from https://www.scribd.com/doc/125390198/Geeta-Kapur-When-Was-Modernism-Essays-on-Contemporary-Cultural-Practice-in-India

PAG and the Calcutta Group demanded a "partisan aesthetics" – art with direct social and political commitment. They rejected the Bengal School's romantic idealism, accusing it of retreating into "vapid humanism" and the safe confines of the studio, far removed from the realities of a modern nation.[30]

While subsequent critiques would call for altering this legacy to address the pressing social realities of a postcolonial India, the Bengal School's critical engagement with and revival of indigenous artistic traditions not only challenged colonial aesthetic dominance but also laid the foundation for a distinctively Indian modernism that entwined cultural pride with the larger nationalist struggle.

Conclusion

This research has explored the dual function of visual art in colonial India—as a mechanism of British control and as a medium of nationalist resistance. Under British rule, art was weaponized to establish and reinforce imperial ideologies. By promoting Western academic realism and institutionalizing it through art schools, colonial authorities not only displaced indigenous artistic traditions but also imposed a racialized hierarchy that aligned aesthetic merit with European standards. The relegation of Indian artists to mere artisans, the selective commodification of Indian design for British industry, and the use of education to produce compliant colonial labour reveal the depth of this cultural engineering. Art, therefore, was not an isolated aesthetic domain; it was integral to the colonial project of mental and material domination.

In response, the Bengal School emerged as a profound nationalist counterforce. Spearheaded by Abanindranath Tagore and supported by thinkers like Coomaraswamy and Havell, this movement revived indigenous aesthetics, mythological themes, traditional techniques, and pan-Asian sensibilities, as tools of cultural self-assertion. Art became a site of resistance: not just symbolic, but institutional, ideological, and pedagogical. Through exhibitions, publications, and new art societies, nationalist artists and intellectuals redefined modern Indian art as inherently spiritual, rooted in precolonial heritage, and in defiance of colonial realism. This was not a passive nostalgia but an active reconstruction of visual identity in service of national pride and anti-colonial solidarity.

However, as critics like Souza, Kapur, and Menon later argue, the Bengal School's revivalist ethos, while foundational for cultural nationalism, became increasingly disconnected from the social and political urgencies of post-independence India. Its spiritual idealism, once radical in its defiance of empire, came to be seen as ornamental and apolitical in the face of famine, war, and the complexities of a modern nation-state. These critiques remind us that resistance in art must evolve with context; what begins as revolutionary can ossify into nostalgia if not critically re-engaged.

Ultimately, the story of colonial and nationalist art in India is not one of binary opposition but of dynamic negotiation. Visual art under colonial rule was deeply entangled with questions of identity, authority, and resistance. The British used it as a strategic tool to civilize, control, and reshape cultural narratives in their favour; Indian nationalists, in turn, reclaimed art to reimagine their heritage and resist imperial domination. In doing so, both colonial powers and nationalist actors acknowledged that art, far from being politically neutral, is a contested terrain where power is continuously exercised, challenged, and redefined through cultural expression. This ongoing struggle reveals how art functions as a vital site for negotiating colonial legacies and forging new, postcolonial identities.

[30]**Menon, D.** (2021). Review of *Partisan aesthetics: Modern art and India's long decolonization* by S. Sunderason. *Asian Ethnology*, *80*(2), 441–442.

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