

**J. SWAMINATHAN: ONE OF THE ENIGMATIC INDIVIDUALS & PIONEERING  
POST-AVANT-GARDE DISCOVERING NATIVE ETERNAL ABSTRACTION**

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**Abstract**

*A preternaturally rare combination of ascetic liberalist by heart and a staunch rationalist by mind, J. Swaminathan had manifested in him both an artist and art critic with a difference. This was to eventually reincarnate in himself an Enigmatic Individual who had the uncanny guts to challenge not less than the hegemonic territory of Progressive Artist Group through his gallant audacity and undaunted bearing through valiant manifesto positing disillusionment from what he commented as, 'hybrid mannerism' as imposition of European modernism."*

*This paper investigates the reasons, J. Swaminathan, as an enigmatic individualist and post-avant-garde, pioneered in discovering abstraction based on native spiritual-dialectical materialism*

**Keynotes:** *Hybrid Mannerism, European modernism, numinous image, numinous experience,*

*Bohemianism, Abstraction, Eternal, Perennial Awareness, Spiritual-Dialectical Materialism*

**Abstraction born out of Numinous Experience**

The romantic conditions of having been born in Shimla and having nurtured in his childhood memories of the experience of mountains, valleys and vegetation of the bountiful Himanchal Pradesh J. Swaminathan couldn't curb the discursive reasoning of his meandering mind. Again, the journalist with a Communist ideological orientation had opened his pineal eye to be materialized through his creative forte which was baffled by the occult and sublime element of the Super Nature. This combo was finally to endow as the original quality in his abstraction, he would quote as "*numinous experience*" or "*numinous image.*" This was the year when Jagdish Swaminathan founded the 'Group 1890' in August 1962 in Bhavanagar, Gujrat along with the other artists members, viz. Raghav Kaneria, M. Reddeppa Naidu, Ambadas Khobragade, Rajesh Mehra, Gulam

Mohammed Sheikh, Himmat Shah, Jeram Patel, S. G. Nikam, Eric Bowen, Jyoti Bhatt, and Balkrishna

In the late 1950s, Swaminathan became a full-time artist after leaving his job as a journalist and art critic for left-wing magazines *Mazdoor Awaz*. He founded the 'Group 1890' in 1962, which aimed to attack the 'vulgar naturalism' of Raja Ravi Verma, 'pastoral idealism' of the Bengal School, and the imposition of 'hybrid mannerism' European modernism. Swaminathan's paintings explored the 'virginal state' of phenomena, creating alternative pictorial spaces in bright color fields. He was awarded the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship in 1968 for his research on the significance of traditional Numen to Contemporary Art. Swaminathan was a charming conversationalist and purposive visionary, and his bold and outspoken manner earned him positions as a member of the International Jury at the Sao Paulo Biennale and the Board of Indian Council for Cultural Relations. He was also an honorary trustee of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.

Swaminathan, a painter and promoter of indigenous art, began his career with a pre-individualistic awareness of tribal culture, particularly Gond and Bhil in Madhya Pradesh. His early paintings focused on the minimal essentials, removing modernism. Swaminathan later developed a spontaneous style using rugged materials, aiming to preserve tribal symbols without modernist jargon. He retired in 1994.

### **Cultural Experience and Creative Activity in India**

The 'perennial awareness' in the individual eternally pulls him or her towards cultural experience towards creative activity in any given culture. Swaminathan's oeuvre consisting of an evolution from figuration towards abstraction is not simply a stylistic transliteration but a deep spiritual reverie towards the cultural consciousness which his sympoietic sensibility had acquired from the collective unconscious of the Indian society. He so deftly melt-transformed that sympoietic collection of cultural molasses in his ascetically personified Indian cultural trait as a magnanimous reservoir of cultural alchemy, the result was his totemic paintings of the late 60s, Later in the 70s his painting changed and became more refined. A mysterious primordial silence of Swaminathan's colour, line and textures in his paintings are the *primaeva* 'naad' or the 'unstruck sound' of

the 'becoming' within the perennially rising inner 'being' constantly incarnating in the commonplace. They are as if celebrating the vivacious souls nonchalant of the predicaments singing a celestial sonnet through the archetypal birds, celestial trees, paratural mountains and the likes. Swaminathan quoting Picasso in the short-lived magazine 'Contra-66: Number,' "*art and liberty, like the fire of Prometheus, are things one must steal, to be used against the established order,*" heralds his cultural generosity that was to manifest in his various cultural associations. Swaminathan's cultural angle draws him towards further liberation from his well-ordered colour geometry usual tools and starts using his fingers to render totemic symbols. Swaminathan as a pre-individual was opened to mysterious events and incidents of tribal cultural which left deeper impact in his mind. One of those incidents was Swaminathan witnessed, "*A young boy had been bitten by a snake and the witch doctor was reviving the boy by continuous chant and throwing full pots of water on him. We watched in rapt fascination and soon enough the boy recovered, and the snake, which had been imprisoned in an earthen pot, was let free and disappeared into a thick bamboo grove.*" (Pandole's, 2020) Swaminathan's early exposure to tribal art and artists led him to focus on Indian Perennial Wisdom, resulting in a lifetime of work and a perennial awareness of Indian Perennial Wisdom.

*"Those who worship ignorance live in gloom; and they who believe in knowledge live in greater gloom."* So true is the one liner from the trans-empirically proven truth in the Perennial Wisdom of Upanishad that due to 'perennial awareness' to which Swaminathan as an Enigmatic Individual could secede from '*sugary sentimentalism*' of the Bengal School, '*vulgar naturalism*' of Raja Ravi Verma, '*pastoral idealism of the Bengal School*' and against the imposition of '*hybrid mannerism*' European modernism, practiced by Indian Modernism pioneers like M. F. Hussain and F. N. Souza, and second-generation Indian Modernism pioneers Tayeb Mehta and Akbar Padamshee, indirectly influenced Indian Modernism.

According to Swaminathan this uncritical subjugation to the European influence was already in decline in the west and that a blind-folded followership of Indian Modernism will further lead to its downfall, this was the 'perennial awareness' in Swaminathan that, after monitoring a prolonged meeting in Bhavnagar in Baroda along with Jyoti Bhatt, Himmat Shah, Jeram Patel, Raghav Kaneria, Rajesh Mehra, S. G. Nekram, Gulam Mohd. Sheikh, Ambadas, Balkrishna Patel, Eric Brown and Reddappa

Naidu he wrote a belligerent manifesto with a fiery fervor, *“from its early beginnings in the vulgar naturalism of Raja Ravi Verma and the pastoral idealism of Bengal School, down through the hybrid mannerisms resulting from the imposition of concepts evolved by successive moments in modern European art on classical, miniature and folk styles to the flight into ‘abstraction’ in the name of cosmopolitanism, tortured alternately by the memories of a glorious past born out of a sense of futility in the face of a dynamic present and the urge to catch up with the times so as to merit recognition, modern Indian art by the large has been inhibited by the self-defeating purposiveness of its attempts at establishing an identity.”* (Swaminathan, 2020) The Group 1890 manifesto, reprinted in Lalit Kala Contemporary 40 in 1995, reflects Swaminathan's 'perennial awareness' and his ability to reservoir cultural awareness, leading to the invention of a new vocabulary. He warns against the hurried showcasing of culture, as it may glorify imported modernism, as he writes' in Contra 66, No.2, *“There is a general tendency among art historians and critics of Indian art to associate the beginning of the modern moment in India with the introduction of academic realism (as exemplified by the vulgar naturalism of Raja Ravi Verma) by the English colonial masters and the subsequent reaction against it in the form of the Bengal School. This development, however, did not arise as a revolt against tradition, infused with the contemporary awareness. Burdened by the dead weight of a culture that ceased to grow centuries ago and thrown out of gear by the impact of technologically advanced west, it has been from its very initiation plagued by the longing to perpetrate the ‘glory’ of the ancient heritage on the one hand and the desire to be in tune with the ‘advanced’ west on the other.”* Swaminathan's acidulous criticism on the opportunistic appropriation of the Indian misfortune by the pioneering post-independent (post-colonial) art critics and their compliers, needless to say the artists, would be an aftermath of culture itself for the action resulting from such an action would neither be able to catch-up with and assimilate the western native history of dialectical materialism nor it could do justice to their hypocritic glorification of the ancient heritage. For Swaminathan the solution lay in what Kapila Vatsyayan connotes, quoted in Chapter I of this research, as in Indian heritage *“Art was a discipline (‘sadhana’) a ‘yoga’, and a sacrifice (‘yajna’).*” Swaminathan was articulate of the sanctity of ‘sadhana’ meant as deep absorption into the cultural experience through the artistic forte without the beguiled distraction to the imported incentive of international ‘identity’ often pre-granted through *‘hybrid*

*mannerism,* while *'sacrifice,'* he knew, is the key philosophy of Indian Perennial Wisdom, the Veda, as mentioned in Chapter II as *"freedom from darkness and falsehood"* and also as *"an upward journey, which man undertakes in quest of his supreme goal. And he does that he grows from one state into a still higher one till he finds himself the full Ray of Light, and in possession of all the treasure of heaven."* Swaminathan's clarity in pursuing the *'possession of all the treasure of heaven'* bestowed in him that he undertook as his *'supreme goal'* without caring for any western incentive of international identity; and this was his *'perennial awareness'* which outrightly rejected commercial longings out of his art, a sheer awareness in him that earned him recognition through his handling of the *'abstraction'* strikingly different from that of the west. It was the color geometry It was Swaminathan's herculean orientation of his discipline (*sadhana*) and sacrifice (*Yajna*) that carved a niche for him as different from all his group members and this could be argued to be the main reason for the breaking of the Group 1890. However, Swaminathan's *'perennial awareness'* through cultural experience has reflected in his off-beat *'abstraction'* of spiritual materialism and its recondite aesthetics materialized in his paintings, justify this view. These creations by him are what he called *'poetic rendering of ideal truth'* in which the *'idea'* was not the unreal but *'para-natural'* belonging to the transcendental realms of beatific experiences immanent in the collective unconscious of Indian consciousness, this was had been his dream come true as he expected the same from the artists of his contemporary time and the posterity to come.

### ***'Hybrid mannerism' as imposition of Eurocentric Modernism***

Swaminathan, a multifaceted artist, writer, critic, institutionalist, cultural activist, and visionary, is mysteriously incomprehensible when approached without simplicity. His critical discourse on modernism is enigmatic, with his approach resembling that of philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy, who *"in popularizing oriental art they (the Bengal school) have only contributed to the complacency at home. That many in the west baffled by the problems of life posed by the great technological revolution have sought a way out in India's spiritualistic stance, is no proof of its authenticity. It has seldom been felt that only searching and militant criticism of the values held sacrosanct, can make the Indian artist come out of his shell and expose him to the winds of uncertainty and change."* (J. Swaminathan, 1966) Swaminathan's essay in Contra 66 No. 2 highlights his militant criticism of the values held sacrosanct', while Philip Rawson's comment in Contra

66 No. 2 echoes this concern. According to Rawson, in modern India, art doesn't play a significant role in people's lives, but it is still produced in significant quantities at various levels of sophistication. Indian art has a significant contribution to the modern world, potentially fertilizing artistic styles, particularly in its evolving approach to the visible image. (Rawson, 1966) Swaminathan's concern for the culture was not nationalistic like that of the proponents of Bengal school but he offered himself to its sacrosanctity so self-critically that he neither fantasized himself to be saving any memory in himself nor he wished to be a memory in the unilinear arrow time of the history; as he didn't believe in resuscitation of expired history, be it is himself. To quote his assiduous detachment free

from inhibition, from Contra 66, No. 2:

*"So I paint while I can though I do not know why paint but I know that I do not paint to make you happy or for the glory of man or the motherland or even as propitiation of the dead though I would like to be happy if my work gives you joy or introspection or relief from the prison house of knowledge which is surely better than the womb.*

*I paint because I can not keep away from it and it takes me away from myself. Not knowing what to paint I start my daily journey in innocence and all the teachings of the masters are of no use to me for they are as mere crutches to one unaware of his own feet.*

*But there is a great pantheon. Along the highway of history, they stand with their spells but I am impervious to their charms for I have no guilty knowledge of the past and in my search for encounter, I see Paul Klee, the contemporary. Klee, because he could move as I move (.....)." (Swaminathan, 1966)* It will be a great blunder mistaking Swaminathan as Eurocentric in his radical ideas and knightly mannerism whereas he was anti-Eurocentrism having challenged not less than the hegemonic territory of Progressive Artist Group through his gallant audacity and undaunted bearing through valiant manifesto positing disillusionment from what he commented as, *'hybrid mannerism' as imposition of European modernism.* Swaminathan was so irked by the artists ambitiously in action at the behest of the history or any state-sponsored programme of 'saving the culture' or 'reviving the culture' which surely was linked with

his sarcasm “*pastoral idealism of Bengal school.*” Swaminathan’s nihilism and anarchism remained reality-check to the flawed populist definition of ‘culture’ as he further writes, “*you may have seen I am averse to culture and they call me arrogant and egotistical and self-opinionated. But I do not begrudge them their wisdom and refuse to be siphoned out of my obduracy.*” (Swaminathan, 1966)

Having grown as a communist Swaminathan was yet a non-conformist to its limitation which prompted him to liberate from all ideological obligations as however, he admired Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Dialogism* and *Heteroglossia*. Swaminathan is considered to be the most important forerunner of abstraction in Indian Contemporary Art not as an expounder of the western idiom but enormous awareness to the Perennial Philosophy, namely, Vedic and Vedantic. The fact that abstraction in art is not spatiotemporal to European Abstract Art and American Abstract Expressionism but universal phenomenon, therefore eternal.

### **Swaminathan’s bohemianism as self-criticism and hiving off from *hybrid mannerism* to trace the Virginal State of creative expression**

Understanding the prerequisites for experience, self-consciousness, and the perception of "primitive" events is central to Kant's transcendental argument. J. Swaminathan was a unique artist who supported creation in its "virginal state" and originality. His rejection of foreign influence and hybrid mannerism led to the creation of art free from the constraints of history. Swaminathan used materials like sand, soil, and straw because he was passionate about primitive, unvarnished, and austere art.

Kant's transcendental argument emphasizes the importance of inferring the necessary conditions for experience, leading to self-consciousness. J. Swaminathan, a highly imaginative artist, sought to establish a continuum between folk, tribal, and contemporary art. He repudiated hybrid mannerism and self-refutation, resulting in newer imagery and iconoclasm. Swaminathan's art, deeply connected to poetry and literature, was free from historical pressure due to his rejection of foreign influence.

He founded ‘Group 1980’, the manifesto of the group written by Swaminathan declared, “*art for us is not born out of a preoccupation with the human condition, we do not sing of man nor are we his messiahs. Art is neither conformity of reality nor a flight*

*for it, it is reality itself, a whole new world of experience, the threshold for the passage into the state of freedom". (Swaminathan, 2020)*

**Swaminathan's aesthetic has evolved through various schools, leading to an enigmatic transformation into his individualism.**

J. Swaminathan's aesthetic journey reflects his transformation as a true individual, witnessing himself as being into becoming. His responsibility to live the moment uninhibited by history's bandwagon is credited.

*"Swami – as people lovingly called him remained an enigma not only for many but for himself too. He was a gypsy to the core as he was answerable to none but himself. His life traverse proved this spirit as he kept on changing his cloak from 'comrade' to 'editor,' 'short story writer' to 'political activist,' from 'medicine' to his aesthetic aspirations enveloped in oil and brush techniques wherein he moved from 'pahari miniature' to 'space' and then to the tribal culture. He was thus an epitome of versatility and depth on moving from outer to inner – a search for rediscovery. As honourable Trustee of IGNCA he also kept on guiding the Centre. We pay tribute to this noble soul. As all great men indicate their spontaneity from childhood days so was the case with Swami. He himself pronounced: 'I was born at the juncture of Gemini and Cancer, with the summer solstice imminent on June 21, 1928 – in a hurry.' He once recounted: 'My mother is no more, but she tells me that I was an impossible child, voraciously hungry for everything, selfish and contrary.' This was the beginning of his enigmatic life which continued to scale low and high and often subjugated him to his own higher order. He remained unperturbed – thanks to his "spiritual" sojourn which guided him through upheavals. (IGNCA, 2020)*

Swaminathan, an Indian artist, embraced Surrealism in an indigenous way, urging Indian artists to avoid Western influences and maintain their identity. He inspired self-discovery and wrote a book on Somari Korwas' drawings, and promoted Bhil artist Jangarrh Singh Syam.



### **Swaminathan draws inspiration from tribal art and culture in his understanding and interpretation of these aspects.**

Swaminathan posited extraordinary anthropological views towards the role of dialogic interaction between cultural ethnicity and urban culture for inevitable social transformation but unfortunately both the sectors due to unscrupulous political struggle or so had always widening the bay between the two. His insights in this regards is evident in his comment on the issue, *“cultural experiences and activity in India is a multi-level phenomenon – and these levels are often mutually independent and non-interacting – it is the urban and the so-called modern sense of contemporarily that appears to dominate the scene and thus to distort the real perspective.”* (Swaminathan, 2020)

J. Swaminathan, a significant pedagogical change in Baroda, deviated from prescriptive standards, embracing inspiration from outside the institution, and empathizing with the learning of the unprivileged class.

*“Swaminathan pondered over the tribal culture and throughout his life he kept on addressing the people and tried to give the tribal expression a proper place in the global art and cultural fora. As an artist and a man of institutions he kept on guiding people from all walks of life who value culture and human endeavor in wider perspective.”* (Parabook, 2020) Swaminathan's pre-individualistic autodidactic association with tribal culture, known as dialogic didacticism, led to the establishment of an institution promoting the ontological dimension of dialogical concepts. In 1981, the Madhya Pradesh government invited him to establish 'Roopankar' art museum.

### **Occult diagrams, signs and symbols in the abstract paintings of Swaminathan and their seminal resources**

Swaminathan's abstract paintings explore the occult and totemic signs in eastern cultural practices and customs. He argues that abstraction is a natural humanitarian phenomenon, even preexisting civilization. In the West, abstraction was born during wartime when emotions revolted against reason to protect human consciousness. However, in Eastern culture, abstraction is not a concern, as emotions and reason are not forced into such situations. This awareness led Swaminathan to study hieroglyphic primitive drawings from Bhimbetka Caves and traditional rituals of tribal art, folk art, and rural art in Madhya Pradesh and Himanchal Pradesh. These artistic cultures reflect the gnostic wisdom of

human intuitive dimensions, which directly impacts Swaminathan's understanding of native eternal abstraction.

## **Conclusion**

Swaminathan, a cultural awareness pioneer, discovered India's indigenous Tribal art and founded Bharat Bhavan. He influenced modernism and the abstract movement in India, inspiring a virginal state philosophy in his paintings. His philosophy inspired posterity globally.

*“There is something in the vast complex of our racial psyche, from the austere, crystalline poetry of our Vedic forbears to the awesome pantheon of gods and demons, from the abstract metaphysics of Hindu thought to the threatening totems of the folk ritual, that bears its head against the wall of the Pseudoscience that our so-called intelligentsia has inherited from Modern Western culture.”* (Swaminathan, 1995)

Swaminathan's paintings, rooted in his love for nature, evolved into signs and hieroglyphs after his 'Bird and mountain period'. His journey into self led to resolved symbolism and the exploration of the 'numinous' and mysterious.

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