

Ancestor worship in modern art

C. RAMAN SCHLEMMER

Diary, May 1913: 'A work of art is a declaration of freedom. There has never been anything so difficult for mankind to bear as freedom.'

Diary, 7 November 1915: 'Once you reject classical painting and art, the sky is the limit. Everything opens up: the mystical, colour, intrepidity- the result must be glorious. [...] Liberation means embracing the unlimited possibilities.'

Diary, September 1916: '[...] The accomplishments of all significant men are rooted in a simple but comprehensive insight into the nature of things. To have found this means to have found oneself, and thereby the world. [...]'

Diary, 2 September 1915: 'I want to depict the most romantic idea in the most detached form.'

And then, years later, Diary, 13 July 1925: 'Theatre! Music! My passion! But equally the scope of this particular field. Theoretical possibilities that suit my disposition, because they come naturally to me. Free run for the imagination. Here I can be new, abstract, everything. Here I can be traditional, with success. Here there is no dilemma of painting, relapsing into an artistic genre in which I deep down inside no longer believe. Here my desires coincide with my temperament and with the contemporary mode. Here I am myself and new. The only one in the field, without competition. A late realization, but perhaps not too late. Sense of liberation!'



These quotes are from the diaries of my maternal grandfather, the artist Oskar Schlemmer (1888-1943). Who was Oskar Schlemmer, the painter, the dancer, the artist, who used his own body as an artistic expression? What is my connection to his work and what is my link with India? Oskar Schlemmer's creative period, which started around 1910, hardly lasted three decades. It was abruptly and brutally interrupted when the National Socialists in Germany seized power at the beginning of the 1930s and he was no longer allowed to work and live as a free artist. He died too young to complete what he had set out to do at the beginning of the 19th century.

During those thirty years, Oskar Schlemmer created an oeuvre of painting and sculpture which remains unique and cannot be clearly attributed to any of the trends and 'isms' of modern and avant-garde art of the early 20th century. His oeuvre, as a dancer, choreographer, stage experiments, stage sets and costumes continues to surprise us today. It may appear to us equally, if not even more utopian and visionary, than his work as a painter. These works for the stage have profoundly influenced subsequent generations of artists and served as a source of inspiration to theatre and dance artists ever since. Oskar Schlemmer can quite rightly be recognised as being the originator of Performance Art. The painterly oeuvre and the dance creations are inseparable, thus his experience as a painter, dancer, choreographer and stage designer are in a constant enriching and stimulating dialogue within his oeuvre.

Born in Stuttgart, Germany, Oskar Schlemmer studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Stuttgart and frequently visited Berlin, a major cultural centre of avant-garde exhibitions located between the two flourishing cultural capitals, Paris and Moscow. Like many young artists, he served as a soldier in World War I on the western front. In 1920 he married Helene Tutein (1890-1987) known by her friends as Tut, and was appointed as a Master of Form at the Bauhaus School in Weimar by architect Walter Gropius (1883-1969) in 1921. When the Bauhaus moved to Dessau, he also directed the Bauhaus Stage Workshop and created the 'Bauhaus Dances'. He left the Bauhaus in 1929 when he was appointed to the Academy in Breslau and started painting again. In 1931, he was appointed to the Berlin Fine Arts Academy.

As the political polarisation in Germany intensified, he was accused of being 'a destructive, Marxist-Jewish element' and was forced to leave his job. His exhibition was closed in Stuttgart and from 1934 Schlemmer retreated with his family to 'inner immigration' in South Germany. For his own and his family's survival, and in order to avoid more severe war related mandatory service, from 1940 Oskar Schlemmer was forced to take up work in paint factories in Stuttgart and Wuppertal where he worked on lacquer research with partly toxic substances. His health deteriorated. Resignation, despair and illness lead to Schlemmer's death in Baden-Baden on 13 April 1943.

The oeuvre of Oskar Schlemmer is as versatile and multifaceted as his talent, his vision, his vocations, and his various teaching courses, theatre and architecture collaborations. At the centre of his oeuvre is the image of man, the eternal subject of art. He creates and depicts man in its spiritual purity and beauty, a vision and talent few of his contemporaries shared. It is the consciousness of the magic, the commitment towards an ideal, which suffuses his work with strength and dignity, intensity and wisdom.

Oskar Schlemmer elaborates comprehensively in his diaries, letters and essays on his pictorial and sculptural works, his experiences as a dancer, choreographer and theatre experiments, his contemporaries, art, architecture, literature and music, life at the Bauhaus, as well as his most personal sentiments. Few of Schlemmer's writings on theatre, dance and his stage theory were published during his lifetime. In 1956 his wife, Tut, published a selection from his diaries and letters. In occupation post-war Germany, when book publishing was still difficult, it revealed to a German speaking readership the importance of Schlemmer, as well as life and ideals at the Bauhaus. His writings are a precious source for the understanding of his personality and art and remain a source of inspiration. Certain works by Schlemmer have become icons of 20th century art and are part of modern cultural heritage.



Oskar Schlemmer with Mask, 1930, photograph

After Schlemmer's death, enduring the loss of their son Tillman in the last of the hopeless battles on the eastern front, and struggling to reclaim some of the works which had been lost in the confusion of the war, my grandmother Tut found the courage to carry on his legacy. She catalogued his works and published his letters and diaries. She gave lectures, placed important works in museum collections, encouraged exhibitions and made his oeuvre known to a larger audience. She carried on well into her nineties.

When she passed on the legacy to my mother, U. Jaïna Schlemmer, and me, we discovered that it was no longer in order. As in other cases, people, among them state employed art historians and cultural administrators, passionate art lovers or simply opportunists, had taken advantage of Tut's old age. They had appropriated copyrights, kept back documents, photographs and works which she had generously lent them for study, made her sign disadvantageous agreements, or simply taken away original works, letters, manuscripts, photographs, documents and books. It became the next generation's task to once more secure what the family had saved under difficult circumstances and at great personal sacrifice during Fascism and World War II in Germany. To contain further damage, she bequeathed the artistic Estate to her only surviving daughter, Jaïna and to me. She bestowed works which were on loan to museums, and generously secured another grandchild financially.

Our principal activities today relate to the work, the oeuvre, the estate of Oskar Schlemmer. For artwork we use the French term 'œuvre'. For the body of work created by an artist, we use the English term 'estate'. The Bühnen Archiv Oskar Schlemmer (The Oskar Schlemmer Theatre Estate), Secretariat Schlemmer and Archives are research oriented, non-profit organisations. They do not have public research facilities though works by Oskar Schlemmer are part of numerous major international museum collections and are displayed in pivotal international exhibitions on 20th century art. Keeping to the artist's aspiration that people should have the opportunity to experience and enjoy his paintings and sculptures, I have placed important works in key museum collections in Europe and the US, continuing a tradition started by my grandmother Tut and my mother Jaina.

We are in constant contact with museums of modern and contemporary art, as well as archives and lenders, publishers, research scholars and students. Our work entails the administration of museum and exhibition loans. We also continue to research the work and life of Oskar Schlemmer, his contemporaries, the Bauhaus School and related art historical and socio-political phenomena. We maintain the archival database of documentation regarding works, writings and documents by Oskar Schlemmer.

An integral aspect of our research is the search for works that were dispersed, lost, stolen or destroyed during Fascism in Germany, World War II and the confusion of the post-war aftermath. We document these works and register them with different, specialised institutions, the police, art loss registrars etc. In case we recognise an unknown or unpublished work as an original, we document and authenticate the work, assigning it a new Catalogue Raisonné number. In the event that a work presented to us proves to be a fake, we document and register it as such.

By the end of the millennium the discussion about works of art confiscated by the National Socialist authorities in Germany had gained momentum. Following the 'Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets' in 1998, hosted by the US Department of State and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and the declaration by the 'Washington Conference Principles On Nazi-Confiscated Art', more than fifty years after these atrocious crimes against mankind's cultural heritage had been committed, provenance researchers, institutions and governments have intensified their research in public and private collections for stolen art works.



Oskar Schlemmer, 'Bauhaus Staircase', 1932, oil on canvas

As the value of some of the paintings in question had increased to millions of dollars, specialised US law firms and European provenance scouts engaged in litigations in US and European courts against individuals, institutions and even governments. Some paintings were successfully returned to the descendants of the rightful owners, and sold in the international art markets for vast sums. Other cases were less successful and some are still pending in US courts (e.g. Egon Schiele works, Museum of Modern Art/Leopold Collection, Vienna). Although I discovered documents in US archives which had been hitherto unknown to our family, so far we have been unable to negotiate the return of a number of works by Oskar Schlemmer that were stolen or appropriated without any compensation – money the family desperately needed during World War II to escape from Nazi Germany.

For my mother, Jaïna, who had seen her father suffer, it is painful to realize how the German successor state and some of its public institutions have held back and appropriated her father's work for a second time in less than five decades, the lack of moral values and standards in the discussion about these issues, and the double moral standards of certain collectors and lawyers. It is upsetting to see lawyers, who sit on the advisory board of restitution and provenance research panels, fight court claims by victims for the restitution of Nazi-confiscated and related art works. It is painful for her to see how works by her father, which were unrightfully held back, are today sold for vast sums without even a word of excuse, forget a minimal compensation or contribution to a social fund for artists.

In the same period that a new generation took charge of the Oskar Schlemmer legacy, other artists' families have restructured their estates and children and grandchildren have assumed responsibility: the Pablo Picasso estate acting as Administration Picasso in Paris; the Joan Miró family represented in various foundations in Spain; the Alexander Calder Foundation in New York; the Paul and Felix Klee Foundations in Bern, Switzerland; the Kurt Schwitters Foundation in Hanover, Germany; and other artist estate administrations. They are important players in the international art scene and often initiate projects which public museums might not, since they are well positioned among museum institutions, artist rights societies and commercial galleries. The revenue from copyrights at the Administration Picasso has long overtaken the entire income of the French State run artists' rights society, ADAGP, which administers the rights of most French artists other than Picasso. In many cases the income from such fees is so modest that it cannot even cover the administrative costs to grant the rights. As large publishing houses dominate art publishing internationally, it becomes increasingly difficult for artists and artist estates to claim their rights stipulated by international laws.

Each family situation is different; spouses, descendants and heirs of artists find different solutions. Yet what they all have in common is the strong desire to carry on the legacy of the artist, to keep alive the memory and to make the artist's work known to an ever growing public. The solutions vary depending on the type of art: they are different for the oeuvre of a visual artist, a writer, a filmmaker or a composer. Of course, several artists were so successful even during their lifetime that they could initiate and endow foundations with their artworks and even set up monographic museums during their lifetime.

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), born in Spain but living in France, donated a representative collection of his works to the city of Barcelona, where his career as an artist had its origin. The city has established a Museum Picasso in a row of aristocratic homes in the old city. Joan Miró (1893-1983) endowed his work to foundations in Barcelona (1973) and the Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró in his native Palma de Mallorca in Spain. Antoni Tàpies (1923), a living artist, too has created a foundation dedicated to his work in Barcelona.

Well-endowed foundations were also created for the work of three American friends of mine. The pop artists Andy Warhol (1928-1987) in Pittsburgh, the graffiti artist Keith Haring (1958-1990) in New York, and photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) within the Guggenheim Museum in New York. These three artists had no direct descendants. As their work is very popular, these foundations have ample financial resources generated from copyright fees and lucrative sales which enable them to fund museum exhibitions of emerging contemporary artists.

The only comparable examples in the context of modern art in India known to me is the donation of paintings by Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941) by her descendants, which became the foundation of the collection of the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, or the foundation of the 'Roerich Heritage Museum' with a gallery dedicated to the works of the Russian painters Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947) and Svetoslav Roerich (1904-1993), founded by the latter in 1962 in Kullu Valley in Himachal Pradesh. In contrast the Svetoslav Roerich and Devika Rani Roerich Estate is still under dispute in the courts of Karnataka.

It is fashionable to speak about globalization, even in the context of contemporary art. As any other artist, Indian artists too aspire to be integrated into the international art scene, established institutions and the globalized art market. But is the art scene really so much more international now than during previous generations? When today's multicultural influences, globalization and proliferation are discussed and praised, few speak of the restrictions on free movement in our times. Few remember that Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 and frequently visited Europe in the early 20th century. More of his writings were translated from Bengali and published in German than in English at the time. Nicholas Roerich's travels to India had a great impact. The first exhibition of the Bauhaus artists was held not in Germany but Calcutta in 1923 and several works by Oskar Schlemmer emerged from India in the 1970s.

My father, C. Paran, a painter, was born in Calicut to a German mother and an Indian father. My paternal grandfather, C. Unni had, like Schlemmer before him, studied at the Stuttgart Academy in the 1920s and went on to marry the daughter of one of the academy professors, Liesel Haustein. They lived in Calicut at the mansion of Unni's father, C. Krishnan Vakil, advocate, MLA in the Madras assembly and social reformer, where Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Annie Besant and young Krishnamurti were frequent guests.

After his mother's separation from her husband and their return to Germany, C. Paran miraculously survived Nazi Germany hidden outside of Berlin. He too studied at the Stuttgart Academy, where he met his future wife, U. Jaïna Schlemmer. They both studied under Willy Baumeister, a close friend of Oskar Schlemmer. Jaïna and Paran then moved to Berlin, where they joined the Berlin Academy, Jaïna studying stage and costume design and Paran painting with Karl Schmidt-Rotluff. I was born in Berlin and as a baby posed as a model in Schmidt-Rotluff's classes, earning my first money. Paran never returned to his ancestral lands in India and died in 1967.

Since then, the Indian art scene has changed dramatically. After the success of Chinese contemporary art over the last decade, Indian modern and contemporary art has taken the international art markets by storm. Works by established Indian artists fetch record prices at auctions both in India and internationally. The globally operating and dominating auction houses have created special departments, introducing specialised Indian sales much like the specialised German and Austrian or Italian modern art sales, and lure curatorial specialists from major museums into high-powered jobs. Even works which had been lying unsold in gallery deposits in Delhi and Mumbai for decades, fetch unprecedented record prices at specialised auctions in New York, London and Dubai – but also remain unsold if the expectations of the consigner and the reserves are too greedy. Some of these works look derivative and sadly dated, yet similar but better works of the École de Paris, German and Italian abstract expressionism do not fetch similar prices on the international art market.

In January 2007, the Daimler-Chrysler corporate museum in Berlin exhibited works from the Indian subcontinent from the collection of Lekha and Anupam Poddar. Works of contemporary Indian artists this year are included in the Venice Biennale and documenta 12, two of the most important international art exhibitions, as well as in the Istanbul Biennale. Contemporary Indian art is presented and sold fast at international art fairs such as Art Basel in June and SHContemporary in September in Shanghai.

A large, glitzy metal sculpture by Subodh Gupta salutes visitors to Venice on the Grand Canal outside Palazzo Grassi, the home of the cutting-edge collection of the French collector Pinault. The work of Amrita Sher-Gil, after successful museum exhibitions in Germany, has conquered mainstream Tate Modern in London. In the meantime her artistic descendants interpret this late recognition in different ways: Delhi based artist Vivan Sundaram by altering photographs of Sher-Gil visiting Europe (gallery exhibition this spring in New York), and Germany based Navina Sundaram in a film for German television.

Encouraged by their phenomenal success and sales, commercial Indian art galleries, some of them which have only been in business for a short time, have opened branches in other Indian metros, even in New York and Singapore and are participating in international art fairs. Gallery exhibitions of young artists in Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and Kochi are placed on the internet and sold out. Openings are accompanied by lavish catalogues, and celebrated with noisy late night parties where artists hand potential collectors and exhibition curators a DVD of their work, instead of a business card.

The new media, such as photography, film and video that I had hoped to find in 1986 rather than expressionistic, figurative painting, is very much a part of present contemporary Indian art. Websites featuring Indian contemporary art have sprung up and art magazines are trying to go with the trend as the success story continues, new artists emerge and more art galleries open. Several museum exhibitions on Indian and Asian art are being organized this year in Karlsruhe, Bern, Milan and Rome, and more are planned. After mega events last summer in Lille, France and the Belgian capital Brussels, in August 2007 Los Angeles celebrated Indian contemporary and spiritual culture on a smaller scale and London will celebrate India this autumn in a festival 'India Now'. However, much like the Bollywood film festivals, Indian contemporary art is turning into a trend and some of the curator stars are hastily hopping onto the bandwagon. Unfortunately, by restricting it to a national identity, there is a danger that Indian, much like recent Chinese, contemporary art is ethnicised, similar to concepts in Asia of western art. Do Indian artists really aspire to exhibitions and collections exclusively dedicated to 'Indianness'?

Unlike the Chinese situation, where international collectors and galleries are part of the success of modern and contemporary art, the contemporary Indian art market still very much remains a domestic affair, with the exception of a few Indian stars. Most works are bought by Indian collectors or NRIs. As works sell fast, and auction houses need to feed sales, it is increasingly difficult for non-Indian collectors and galleries outside of India to access important new works of Indian artists.



*Oskar Schlemmer as Turkish Dancer;
altered photograph, 1922*

Some Indian collectors specialize only in Indian art, some in subcontinental art, including Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh, some plan private museums for their collections, others support workshops for Indian artists abroad. Indian collectors and wealthy Indian would be collectors are vied for by international galleries, auction houses and art fair organisers such as Art Basel. As wealth is increasingly and ostentatiously paraded in India and lavish homes replace the austere homes of the socialist period, contemporary art rather than handicraft is becoming very much part of the new lifestyle.

Despite the current hype, India still lacks an infrastructure of public institutions to exhibit art in non-commercial exhibitions. Pages on art and culture in Indian newspapers are few and reports on culture would rather focus on fashion shows and film stars or the 'whose who' at an exhibition opening party. Serious criticism is nearly nonexistent. Hopefully some of these hip young Indian experts who are recruited by the international auction houses and who seem to know so much, will start sharing their knowledge in serious reviews and curate significant exhibitions.

For Indian art to sustain and be seen by a larger Indian audience, independent public exhibition spaces are pivotal. They must have the technical requirements to exhibit Indian art and to host international exhibitions respectfully. But does India need to follow the pattern of continental Europe, where in France, Germany, Holland, Austria and Switzerland, hundreds of state and municipal funded exhibition halls, so called '*Kunsthalle*' and art museums were and are being created and built? Can the private sector fulfil the patronage of contemporary art in India and create such visionary institutions as The Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, Holland, founded in 1938, Schaulager near Basel or 21:21 in Tokyo?

In the coming years we will witness the opening of private collections in spaces for the public, initially in Calcutta and Delhi, where dedicated collectors are preparing such projects. In other states such as Kerala from where many successful contemporary Indian artists hail, unfortunately the state government has failed to recognise the phenomenon and, therefore, has not provided respectful venues to exhibit art. Nor has the Kerala state government allocated land or encouraged wealthy Keralites in the Gulf region to develop and invest in cultural centres in their home state.

Both central and state governments and the tourist industry need to recognize that contemporary art has become a major financial force. Art lovers, collectors, dealers and museum directors are great spenders when they travel to art events. During art and antique fairs in Basel, Maastricht and Miami, tables in the most exclusive restaurants and hotel rooms are booked many months in advance, private jets crowd airfields and limousines shuttle guests from venues to receptions and parties.

Unfortunately modern and contemporary art does not seem to be of any priority to the Indian government. This year's director of the Venice Biennale, Robert Storr, a former curator of the influential Museum of Modern Art, New York and university lecturer, visited India last year. Next to the international exhibition curated by the director, many nations had their own pavilions for decades in the gardens of the Biennale area. As Storr told me over dinner in Venice in May, he wanted to introduce two new national pavilions at the Venice Biennale this year: Turkey and India. He called on the Ministry of Cultural and spoke with a high-ranking secretary of cultural affairs in Delhi as well as with critics, curators, art historians and artists, hoping to succeed until, as it seems, the files got stuck somewhere in the National Gallery in Delhi.

Neither the managing director of the Biennale, Renato Quaglia, who was charged with alerting the Indian government of this impending offer of space at the Biennale, as well as of actively negotiating with India about other practical issues, nor officials in India charged by their government to negotiate with the Biennale followed through on the opportunity and this time around, at least, it was missed.

Turkey did respond and mounted an exhibition in a pavilion in the core of the magical Arsenale building that is adjacent to what would have been the Indian pavilion. China has been present in the Arsenale for several years. Like all major nations, India needs to be present in Venice with an exhibition curated by a government appointed, independent curator. I agree with Robert Storr that India cannot be represented in such high profile international art exhibitions merely by art galleries with vested commercial interests in artists they represent.

What Oskar Schlemmer wrote in his Diary on 20 March 1912 is still valid today regarding the current Indian situation of an exuberant art scene, despite enthusiasm, success and much hype in contemporary art. 'A tremendous amount of patience is required. The ability to wait, temperance, restraint, in favour of something superior. There are so many examples particularly among modern artists, whose early work, through which they established their reputation, was meaningful, but consequently became part of rational art production, far apart from the early works created in an atmosphere of humility. There are numerous such cases of decline as a result of sudden fame, that these examples should be a warning, teach us to strive for capturing these early moments, and thus our youth and the quality of the artworks.'

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