

SPLENDOR AND MAGNIFICENCE

The Art of Natvar Bhavsar

“So what is form? Is form planet Earth, or is form the whole universe? It’s just mind-boggling! So I need room to have the idea that there is no such thing as a deliberate form, or need to coin words like “God”, or to coin words for particular things. It’s just flux, all the time. Although I think permanence is behind the scene all the time, in some way controlling me.”
Natvar Bhavsar¹

“By reflecting and becoming aware of myself as the eternal subject of knowing, I express with pride and confidence the undeniable truth that those worlds are my representation or mental picture and that therefore I, the eternal subject, am the bearer of this universe, whose entire existence is nothing but a relation to me. Where now is the shudder, where the alarm? I am, nothing else exists; supported on me the world rests in the peace that emanates from me. How could it terrify me, how could I be frightened by its size which is always only the measure of my own greatness that always surpasses it? This knowledge is the feeling of the sublime.”
Arthur Schopenhauer²

“I have felt from the very start of my art education that the excitement by color was by itself for me, uplifting. There was something very direct and biological about it, which engulfed me in a way.... What I was trying to express was that the color has given me charge to use it as completely, like in music, as the sound becomes a vehicle for creating a universe.”
Natvar Bhavsar³

Everyone feels privileged when enjoying a painting by Natvar Bhavsar. Any presentation of Bhavsar’s works is a special experience. Writing cannot equal the appeal of his artistic accomplishment. One should merely sigh: *please, just look....*

Very good texts exist on the works and life of Bhavsar.⁴ Therefore, the intention of this essay is to look from a bird’s eye perspective to identify the how and why of the unique splendor

¹ Natvar Bhavsar, *Poetics of Color*, interview by Marius Kwint, p. 19.

² Douglas L. Berger, *The Veil of Maya: Schopenhauer’s System and Early Indian Thought*, p. 48.

³ Natvar Bhavsar, *Color-Poetic Reverberations*, p. 4.

⁴ See www.natvarbhavsar.com. See Fré Ilgen, *ARTIST? The Hypothesis of Bodiness*, p. 147-154.

and magnificence of Bhavsar's paintings. Bhavsar is a great painter, but also a thinker and knows what he does. He has mentioned there is something biological about the enjoyment of color, how he understands his painting to be like dancing and that he noticed his works appeal to persons with a large variety of backgrounds. He intends his works to offer something substantially upbeat and positive for others to build on.

I discuss two main subjects that ground this extraordinary appeal and I offer reasons why across cultures and across peoples Bhavsar's work has a comfortable familiarity. For this we need to see that the foundation of all cultures is fluid and interwoven. First, I dig into history and include intriguing side-paths into philosophy and psychology, while also exploring the uncanny comparison of Bhavsar with Schopenhauer, and with Cézanne. Then I focus on particular biological components decisive for the appeal of Bhavsar's paintings.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Traditionally, in art history and art criticism, writing revolves around the artwork itself and around the culture of the author or critic. Since the 1960s Bhavsar has lived in New York, therefore essays about his painting focus mainly on the visual aspects related to his background as Indian-American artist. Although this perhaps conforms to current ideas of political correctness, it does not feel right, because it distinguishes between cultures, suggesting cultural branding. The current world and recent studies of history provide ample reasons such classification is outdated and must change.

A main reason for change is the decline of the hegemony of the Western world and the shift of the economic center from the West to the East.⁵ Economic prosperity, the emergence of production as well as technological and scientific accomplishments of Asian countries already have surpassed the superiority of the West. The Western art world lags behind. It would be seemly to redefine how we look at art by starting to acknowledge how Western culture over the past millennia has absorbed features from non-Western cultures. Many features have shaped Western culture over time.

The majority of Westerners are not aware of the origins of many cultural features they consider their own, but that in fact originate from elsewhere in the world. Since ages, for cultural and political reasons, historians have avoided to admit or discuss the ambit of such influences. Acknowledgement of

⁵ As documented, for instance, in the books and articles by geopolitics specialist Parag Khanna.

fundamental intercultural mixing could break down many conscious or hidden sentiments of cultural superiority. After all, parts of other cultures are deeply embedded in our own.⁶

One may see Bhavsar's art only in an American or Indian context, but this disregards the appeal his works have for people from Jewish, Islamic, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Sufi, Daoist, or any other cultures. What are the reasons for such a broad resonance? Isamu Noguchi has been described as an artist to be placed somewhere over the oceans between the USA and Japan. While poetically interesting, such descriptions continue the myth of national cultures being mostly different from each other. History offers a different picture, showing there is considerable cross-cultural impacting and overlapping of interests.

COMPARING BHAVSAR

If we compare Bhavsar to the American Abstract Expressionists or see his paintings as extension of *Color Field* painting we are limiting our perspective in a critical way. These American developments and their European counterparts, such as *l'Art Informel*, were all Western interpretations of artistic inspiration from Asian cultures.⁷

Bhavsar was inspired by the large format paintings of the American artists, but his own reasons for choosing to create large size painting also relates to his growing up in India. At a young age he worked on large size floor-paintings before coming to New York. The American artists were formally inspired by American-Indian sand paintings, but likely more by the format of Monet's late *Nymphéas* paintings, which were known by various American artists and critics who visited Paris in the 1940s and which were exhibited in New York and toured the USA in the late 1950s. The use of huge canvasses goes back to the Renaissance and Baroque, while large sized artworks, murals and reliefs, originate in Egypt, Persia and other ancient Asian cultures. Large format art was not a particular modern American invention.

Around the globe one can find artists who, like Bhavsar, followed their own idiosyncratic paths. Artists from Bhavsar's generation, with analogous interest in abstract artistic expression

⁶ Obviously, this is a remark relating to the current trend in each culture to seek or define a unique local cultural identity.

⁷ Informal painters in the 1950s in Germany, late in their lives, admitted to initially have been inspired by Asian calligraphy and the color dynamics of Tiepolo's baroque ceiling paintings in Würzburg. These Tiepolos include many features of Asian culture. During their careers it was considered not 'done' to refer to the Baroque. Comparable, at some point it was not 'done' for American artists in the 1950s to refer to Monet.

of self and the universe, such as Korean artists Park Seo-Bo and Ha Chong-Hyun, Egyptian artist Mohamed Taha Hussein, English artist Michael Kidner, and German artist Gotthard Graubner. But perhaps also earlier artists like Tintoretto, Tiepolo, Moreau, Monet, Kandinsky, Miró.

WESTERN CULTURE IS A HYBRID CULTURE

We do not want to ignore or downplay the enormous cultural, intellectual and technological accomplishments of the West, that still today is assumed to lead the art world, yet too few people are aware how Western culture since ancient times has been interspersed with elements of non-Western cultures. This is an important argument for the relevance of historical facts to explain Bhavsar's general appeal.

There is a general assumption in the West that ancient Greek culture would be the prime foundation of Western culture and Western art would still be superior to any other culture. The rest of the world today would be in a *catching up* mode.⁸

However, this assumption is at best a misrepresentation. Ancient Greece was without doubt a hotspot of exceptional developments in thought, science and culture, but shaped its culture and trade by looking south and east into Asia. Greek knowledge was early absorbed by Arab culture. Arab traders and conquerors then imported Greek knowledge into Europe when they invaded North Africa, Spain and Sicily. Arab culture furthermore inherited knowledge and cultural expressions from ancient Egypt, Persia and the Mughal empire, as well as directly from India and China. From the Arabian Peninsula such knowledge and cultural artifacts entered Europe.

Europe itself became interested in Greece mainly in the 15th century Renaissance. Since then, Greece has systematically been declared to be the birth ground of Europe and the West, in which the impact of other cultures was simply ignored.⁹ Europe evolved as a hybrid culture, not only inspired by Greece, but certainly also by Indian, Jewish, Arab and Chinese cultures. These influences rolled over Europe through the millennia, and also into the Americas.

Western thought or philosophy is based on European understanding of Asian thought and inspired by the confrontation with West-, East- and Southeast Asian cultures. The Western presumption of its own cultural supremacy brought

⁸ An expression used by Korean leading economist Professor Shin Jang-Sup University of Singapore.

⁹ Throughout the European Middle Ages interest existed in some of the Greek thinkers like Plato or Aristotle, especially in the formative years of Christianity, but not a broad interest.

forward a desire to resist the influence of such other cultures.¹⁰ The countries we call Europe or the West today were at the time of the Hellenistic heyday culturally and economically far too primitive and of no interest to the ancient Greeks, not even for trade.

Provocatively one may question if the rooting of the western world on Greece as fundamental European culture should not be revised? It would be rather important in our time to admit Western culture evolved as a hybrid of many non-Western cultures, and Greek culture at least to be for a large part Asian.

The Greeks from around 6th BCE, through the Persian courts, traded and interacted with both China and India. Communication was difficult but evolved around the time of the conquest of Alexander the Great into India.¹¹

Chinese, Indian and Greek philosophical and religious concepts are remarkably alike and can be thus summarized: when confronted with life's limited duration, the threats from the immediate environment, and humanity's powerlessness against nature's forces make people discover the extent to which they are grounded on earth and are a mere speck in the immense universe.

This vulnerability clashes with the need for equilibrium of the inner self with the cosmos, and in all three cultures this led to concepts of higher forces at play, to human subordination to such forces, to making sacrifices for establishing a discourse with the heavens above, using fire as proper tool of communication by allowing the rising smoke to visually connect to the higher forces. The forces of nature were pictured as fire, wind or streams of energy. A fascination for the sublime, as in Schopenhauer, or the creation of a universe, as Bhavsar says, are in line with such ancient ideas.

While recognizing many differences, the cohesion

¹⁰ The Western model of democracy and human rights goes back to the European Enlightenment in 17th and 18th centuries. New studies on the French and German thinkers demonstrate how their ideas were triggered by the confrontation with much older, more prosperous, and better organized cultures like China and India. A discourse often polarizing in terms of superiority and inferiority. See, for instance, books by John M. Hobson, R.A. Jairazbhoy, Simon Know, Donald F. Lach or Franklin Perkins.

¹¹ Bhavsar is born in Gujarat in north-western India, which historically is known to be a place where traders, settlers and conquerors from other cultures visited and often stayed. The Egyptians were the first to set up exchanging trade with India. The Persians and the first Greeks in 6th BCE, more intensively in the time of Alexander, the Arabs 9th ACE. Much later again, the Portuguese, Dutch and English. The multi-cultural foundation for Bhavsar's art seems thus a given.

between the basic features of the three leading ancient cultures caused all later cultures to have mutual interests in thought and concepts of reality. It is therefore logical to see quite similar interests in artistic expressions following these mutual understandings of reality. These similarities offer reasons to ponder the fact that at least since 6th BCE, in our genes all of us, in any culture, carry certain similar interests and preferences. Of course, on the surface each culture understandably emphasizes cultural differences, almost always on the assumption of cultural identity or cultural supremacy.

Bhavsar's works include the most prominent of features fundamentally present in all cultures. One merely may consider that his paintings often are associated with colored smoke, a breeze of color or cosmic swirls and carry a light from within.

INDIA'S IMPACT ON WESTERN CULTURE

The following historical resumé may seem odd at first, because I hardly refer directly to Bhavsar's work, but the intention will become clear soon enough. It is necessary to clarify why and how through history so many facets of Indian culture are ingrained in other cultures, certainly in Western culture.¹² This in turn will shed light on the phenomenon how Bhavsar's paintings do not seem other-cultural at all. The reader should keep Bhavsar and his work in mind while reading this presentation of historical information.

In about 6th BCE some individual Greeks already explored ways of travel and trade to India. We find early descriptions of India by Herodotus of Halicarnassus and Ctesias of Cnidus. When Alexander the Great campaigned in India in 326-324 BCE, he was accompanied by writers, philosophers and artists. The Greek expedition had a limited impact on Indian culture itself, although it did introduce the craft and dynamic style of Greek sculpture to Indian Gandhara sculpture and certain aspects of Greek architecture were taken up as well.¹³ For about two centuries Greeks ruled over parts of India. The Alexander legend

¹² Much literature exists on the astonishing similarities between ancient Indian and ancient Greek cultures, see Richard Seaford.

¹³ One can observe that after the fabulous dynamics in late Hellenistic sculpture, European sculpture declined during the following millennium. In late Medieval times in Bohemian sculpture, one observes a return to the swing in sculpture, which is known in Michelangelo, Bernini, Carpeaux, Rodin and as studied by me. This reassessment of dynamics in European sculpture may be caused by a renewed encounter with Indian sculpture. Syrian sculptors, specialized in Islamic but also in Indian styles, were popular across Europe for ornamenting churches and castles. Syria was the main intermediary between the West and the East.

reverberated throughout the European Middle Ages and spread tales about India and its exceptional tribes, animals, habits and vegetation, although these tales often distorted the facts. For many centuries India was popularized as a boundlessly wealthy, mystical, exotic and opulent country.

Megasthenes (ca 350-290 BCE), ambassador for King Seleucus to the court of Candragupta Maurya in Pataliputra, assembled an extensive description of India, which in Greece set the tone about Indian culture for centuries to come. Greek philosophers, such as Pythagoras, Democritus, Parmenides, Herakleitos, were enthralled by India, which they never visited. The mutual interest in Greek and Indian thought in the complexities of the mind and body within nature, inspired new Greek views on the position of earth in the universe, on life, death, freeing oneself from the constraints of the body, concepts of an afterlife, and reincarnation. These concepts centuries later became fundamental to Western Christian culture.

Such timeless topics show the universal desire to acquire a level of understanding reality. Said differently, the search for an idea of structure and cohesion of everything and oneself within the whole, psychologically causes a peace of mind. As the ancients knew, the moment we see structure in nature we can avoid potential danger.¹⁴

This is exactly what an artist like Bhavsar searches for through the process of creating a new work: he seeks to find a sense of structure, or universe within himself, that makes sense of the whole outside of himself. To the artist his own arm and hand are the physical intermediary, the elements connecting the inner self with outer nature, immersed in the established structure. To a general viewer, Bhavsar's paintings rarely have a structure that one normally associates with a clear-cut geometrical grid. However, in Bhavsar one senses a kind of cohesive and intentional whole, which, in other words, is a diffuse kind of structure. His paintings are not random. He frequently mentioned in interviews, that as a child he liked to stare at the clouds, while later in life he said that he sensed a permanence behind everything.¹⁵

The Greeks seem to have taken more from Indian culture than vice versa. Many Greeks settled and married in Bactria and

¹⁴ See Richard Stoneman, *The Greek Experience of India – From Alexander to the Indo-Greeks*, p.354: “Indeed, Buddhist philosophy is a kind of psychic medicine, while for most Hellenistic philosophers too philosophy has a therapeutic purpose.”

¹⁵ Until Benoit Mandelbrot initiated Chaos Theory by proposing fractal geometry explaining the mathematical structures of clouds, the skies were only filled with random shapes of humidity.

North-West India, an area where Bhavsar comes from. A well-known example of exchange of ideas between India and Greece, was the Indo-Greek King Menander (155 – 130 BCE), who was a Buddhist. Some ideas evolved simultaneously in both cultures, for example atomism, that states that everything is composed of basic elements; this seems to be the precursor to modern particle physics.¹⁶ Without doubt, there are aspects of ancient Indian and ancient Greek culture mirrored in Bhavsar's particular use of the tiniest pigment corns as particles of pure light.

The Greeks will have encountered the *Natya Sastra*, an ancient Indian manuscript attributed to Bharata Muni.¹⁷ It is a treatise about pictorial effects and has similarities with the *Citra Sûtra*, a treatise on painting that argues that painting is the artistic means closest to dance.¹⁸ It describes dance, mime, gesture and music and offers a direct link to Natvar Bhavsar who stated that when he paints, it is as though he is dancing. The text also points to a mutual interest in Greece and India in the simulation of dynamics in painting and sculpture, that I have already noted.

In contradiction to what most Westerners think, India did not keep its distance, although far away and not connected to Europe. An important detail in the history of international trade, often not considered, is that traders from India did not need to travel by land through West Asia before shipping from Syria or Cairo to Italy. The Suez Canal obviously did not exist yet, but the ancient Red Sea Canal connecting the Red Sea to today's Cairo did.¹⁹ Indian traders could sail the whole way to places around the Mediterranean.

The Persians occupied part of India, but Indian traders, crafts persons, slaves and mercenaries lived all over the Persian

¹⁶ See Richard Seaford, *The Origins of Philosophy in Ancient Greece and Ancient India – A Historical Comparison*, p. 325: "Systematic doctrines of atomism were held by the Jains, Ajivikans, Buddhists and Vaisesikas." And, same page: "A proto-atomist mode of thinking appears already in the passage of the Chandogya Upanishad..."

¹⁷ The *Natya Sastra* is known to have been available c 200 BCE, but theories exist it could be dated back to 500 BCE. If so, it is remarkable how around the same age in China Lao-Tse's *Dao De Jing* and in Greece the Heraclitan philosophy evolved of continuous change, everything flows.

¹⁸ Could the Italian humanist, artist and architect Leon Battista Alberti have known the *Natya Sastra*? Especially, as Alberti, in 1450, published his instruction for artists in Florence how to create an interesting and pleasing composition. Alberti's instructions are based on the dynamics of dance, mime and gestures, which proved useful to many artists throughout the Renaissance and Baroque, allowing compositions that are meaningful to any viewer, regardless of the depicted narrative.

¹⁹ Some say it was constructed by Egyptian pharaohs in about 1850 BCE, others say the canal was built by Persian King Darius about 500 BCE.

empire. Some joined the Persians on their conquests into Europe. The Romans developed direct trade with India, while Indian delegations also visited Rome. In those days slave trade was common, in both directions, obviously contributing to the mutual influence of cultures. Roman interior decorating was inspired by geometric and colorful Indian mural painting, while in Pompeii and other places Indian artifacts have been found. Precious stones and other valuable wares were imported from India. The Indian factor continued into the first two centuries ACE, as shown by some early Christian writers who were inspired by Indian Buddhism.²⁰

After having been translated, transformed and adapted in West Asia and changed in Italy again, fables from India became a trend for storytelling. Indian fable and grotesque animals became architectural decoration in Christian churches.²¹ Chess, extremely popular in the European Middle Ages, originated in India, as did Arabic numerals.²²

In late medieval Italy, three fiercely competitive harbor city-states set the tone for trade and European culture: Venice, Pisa and Genoa. As early as 1224, Genoa set up a trading institution for commerce with India. A bit later than Marco Polo, the Italian monk Odoric of Pordenone visited India in early 14th century and reported on the splendor, opulence and magnificence of the courts there. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, as illustrated by Botticelli, set the tone for ages of ideas on the hell, was based on concepts from Indian philosophical literature. Botticelli's illustrations are reminiscent of Indian miniatures and inspired by Chinese scrolls. The famous Renaissance tales of the *Decameron*, by Giovanni Boccaccio, followed the Indian style of storytelling. Dante and Boccaccio continued to inspire Western authors such as Shakespeare and many others over centuries.

In the early 15th and 16th century, reports about exotic

²⁰ See Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe, Volume I, The Century of Discovery, Book I*, p. 18: "Clement of Alexandria (d. AD 220) was the first to exhibit a real knowledge of Indian philosophy and to mention Buddha in his writings. Considerable force is added to the possibility of Indian influence upon Roman thought by examination of the *Philosophoumenos* (ca. AD 230) of Hippolytus, a writer of the early church."

²¹ F. Lach describes how the Indian *Barlaam and Josaphat* legend mirrored the life of Buddha. A story originally derived from the *Bhagavan Bodhisattvascha* and integrated in Christian culture as one of the stories priests liked to present at the end of their sermon, as a lesson in morality.

²² R.A. Jairazbhoy, *Oriental Influences in Western Art*, p. 37, discussing Roger II, Norman King of Sicily, about the replacing of Roman numerals "... by the numerals which the Arabs themselves had obtained from India by the ninth century."

plants, animals and people, and exceptional wealth, incited trade connections for spices, gemstones and many other products. Italian Renaissance nobles started to collect plants, wares and artifacts from India and China. Another wave of European interest in Indian sculpture and architecture led to the Portuguese *Manueline* style, an early Baroque building style. Flemish and Dutch artists, such as Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1460-1516), are known to have used Indian motifs in their work. Indian miniatures, especially from the Mughal period, became collectibles. Indian ornamental patterns became popular in European textile, fashion and carpet manufacture. The Italian city state of Pisa was known to host Turkish, Moors (Arabs) and Indian settlers.²³

The trade developments with the East fueled the Renaissance, and colonization led to a general fascination and at the same time fear of the strength and depth of Asian cultures. People became fascinated with the exotic and with unheard-of profits. Fear of the threat of being culturally overruled, roused Europe to think about its own culture and to obliterate the memory of millennia-long absorption of non-Western cultures.²⁴

Confrontation with philosophical concepts from China and India was one of the grounds for a general doubt about the Christian doctrine as the only possible truth. In the 18th century concepts of free will followed. This logically led to new ideas and artistic expressions of the individual's confrontation with the forces of nature. In Romantic art, the human presence became small and vulnerable, immersed in large sea- and landscapes, as we can see in the paintings of William Turner and Caspar David Friedrich. Late 18th century translations of original Sanskrit scriptures became available, especially in England, France and Germany. The philosopher Kant, inspired by such translations of Vedantic texts, set a whole new tone for approaching reality and self. More influential for art was Arthur Schopenhauer, who was the first to refer openly to Vedantic thought.

A broad interest in Indian culture accelerated throughout the 19th century.²⁵ Schopenhauer's complex philosophy fusing

²³ In R.A. Jairazbhoy, *ibid.*, p.65: "Just as Naples had been described in the ninth century as 'an outpost of Islam', so in the twelfth century an Italian was lamenting that Pisa was delivered over to the Moors, Indians and Turks." Referring to J. Ross and Erichson, *The Story of Pisa*, 1909, p.12.

²⁴ Remarkably similar to our current time and well described by Donald F Lach in his *Asia in the Making of Europe, Volume I, The Century of Discovery, Book 2*, p. 835.

²⁵ In France, Gustave Moreau developed an artistic taste for India, based on photos, artifacts and miniatures. An important pupil of Moreau was Henri

his Western way of reasoning, backed by his subjective understanding of Vedantic concepts, inspired French Symbolism. An interest in the Occult through the writings by Russian Helena Petrovna Blavatsky inspired the foundation of the Theosophical Society. In Switzerland Rudolf Steiner initiated the Anthroposophical Society. Both led to numerous gatherings and societies across the whole Western world, enabling participants to discuss modern versions of spirituality, that often involved new ways of dance, that focused mostly on India. Such discussions partially inspired scientific discussions on space, time and matter, and became very prominent in the 1960s and 1970s.

The various 19th century World Fairs in France, England and the USA included special presentations from non-Western cultures, such as the Chicago World Fair of 1893, that included public talks by philosophers from Asia, like Swami Vivekananda. He, and later Krishnamurti or Rabindranath Tagore held impressive lecture tours through the USA and Europe. Their writings became popular and influential throughout the 20th century.

Cézanne, in general seen as the founding father of important artistic developments of the 20th century, focused on Schopenhauer's understanding of Indian thought. Cézanne's Schopenhauerian approach caused him intuitively to transform trees and the landscape, seeking the essence of change (Schopenhauer's *will*) in everything. Cézanne found a new way towards a meditative, dynamic and non-central perspective, and a style of fragmented representations of reality, and this was inspiration for Cubism and Modernism.²⁶ One certainly can claim that Indian culture played a decisive role in the birth of abstract art, and for this reason Bhavsar's works clearly fit into this whole creative development in 20th century art.

In Russia's exceptional creative rush in the first two decades of the 20th century, the Indian factor was omnipresent. Kazimir Malevitch, the pioneer of spiritual geometric art, had an interest in Indian tantric iconography. Painter and composer Michail Matjuschin was fascinated by non-Western kinds of perception, colors and spirituality. Iwan Kljun painted his *Spherical Compositions*, of which some have a kinship to Bhavsar's paintings.

Much of the abstract art in Western countries was influenced by these Russian artists. Mark Rothko, born in Lithuania, follows that line and was enthralled by Schopenhauer,

Matisse. See Fré Ilgen, *ARTIST? The Hypothesis of Bodiness*, p. 99-102.

²⁶ See Richard Schiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism - A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art*.

likely also by India itself.²⁷ To break away from their initial infatuation with European Surrealism, the American artists in the 1950s shifted their attention to Asia, albeit not openly. In his letters Jackson Pollock referred to his interest in Indian thought and it is known he twice met Krishnamurti in California. Many other artists in New York in the 1950s and 1960s had an interest in Asian calligraphy, Asian art or Asian thought. Many such artists misinterpreted Asian philosophy and ideas, but a genuine interest did exist.

When discussing Bhavsar's artistic accomplishment, it is important to be aware of the fundamental impact of Indian culture on everything in art and philosophy in the West up to modern times, certainly including the New York School. Now, why does the local art world, in this case in New York, and also in Europe, cherish local artists for being inspired by another culture, but need more time to acknowledge artists who actually come from that other culture?

This chapter has now proven the way how Western and Indian cultures have been intertwined for so many ages.²⁸ Bhavsar's painting is the artistic conclusion of all the above.

BHAVSAR - SCHOPENHAUER

Schopenhauer recognized in Vedantic thought something that inspired him to find his own philosophy. Comparably, by seeing the large paintings of meaningful abstractions of American artists in the 1950s, Bhavsar was inspired to migrate to New York and find his own artistic path. Schopenhauer surpassed previous European philosophers by daring to fuse Vedantic thoughts on self, mind, body and the universe with his European roots. Comparably, Bhavsar surpassed the artists of the New York School by daring to fuse American painting with his Vedantic roots.

Throughout history and across cultures one repeatedly finds two opposing preferences for understanding world and human existence. One emphasizes perception, therefore the senses and the body. The other emphasizes thinking, often seen as only of the mind, the intellect or spirituality. As a rule of thumb, artists and poets focus on the first, while philosophers and writers center their work around the second.

Schopenhauer and Bhavsar metaphorically bridge both approaches; they appreciate that we are not mind over body but

²⁷ Compare his compositions with the Indian inspired murals of Pompeii displayed at the Metropolitan Museum New York.

²⁸ Similar intertwinements exist with Arab and East Asian cultures (first Chinese, later Japanese), but in this essay about Bhavsar the focus is on India and the West.

a whole of mind/body. The mind/body is the inevitable starting point of how we look at and relate to the world, and this builds on a deep understanding of continuous change.²⁹ Schopenhauer and Bhavsar both intentionally offer a limited clarity in their implicit picturing of reality, which allows a person openness for finding and filling in his or her own truth and meaning.

Schopenhauer encountered Vedantic concepts as a student, and was the first Western philosopher to understand that, however we attempt logical reasoning, we cannot escape nor avoid the vagueness of perception and of understanding reality. Western tradition explicitly describes a philosophical concept by covering everything in an all-encompassing and consistent argument. In Asian thinking, one may intentionally incorporate inconsistencies, leaving out explicit explanations. Some non-Asians understand this to be imprecise, not rational, nebulous, incomprehensible, poetic or metaphoric.

To exaggerate in order to make a point, in Western culture one convinces one's audience by the logic of words, which is a *linear* argumentative style. In Asia one wishes the audience to understand by indicating the right direction or context.

A person, who is able to quote or literally repeat an argument, does not necessarily also understand it. For understanding we need a *circuitous* argumentative style. Both traditions motivate progress in thought but differ in approach.

What we know today of perception and thinking as biological processes is that these processes certainly are circuitous and non-linear. Schopenhauer embraced the circuitous argumentative style including all verbal inconsistencies and lack of explicitness, which caused his ideas to be ignored and criticized during his lifetime and this continues today. For an artist like Bhavsar who is profoundly interested in the self in reality, it comes naturally to focus on the circuitous feature of visual argumentation. His paintings are not illustrations of the circuitousness of such processes, but offer a sense of circuitous motion. His paintings share this feature with ancient Gandhara sculpture, and Baroque painting and sculpture (Tintoretto, Rubens, Bernini).

Neuroscience confirms the unavoidable vagueness of perception and thought in its research on how our mind/body actually functions. Schopenhauer understood that perceptual illusion in fact is our only individual idea of reality; here he appealed to the Vedantic concept of *maya*, something that is not

²⁹ Schopenhauer, in Christopher Janaway, *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, p.145: "My body is the only object of which I know not merely the one side, that of representation, but also the other, that is called will."

entirely real nor unreal. Schopenhauer understood *maya* as veiled reality. Whatever we observe or think, the basis is our mind/body and therefore all we see cannot be objective but is a subjective representation.

We can all see signs of cohesion between what is, and that everything is bound for change. We understand there to be some basic forces at play with all there is and within everything, which makes clouds to fly past, a blade of grass to grow, a stone to erode, a river to flow. This is what Schopenhauer meant with *will*. Schopenhauer was fascinated by what in Asian thought is the essential drive of nature. This drive is not causal, it does not proceed logically from A to B, but just is.

And this is exactly visualized in Bhavsar's painting. There is a direct sense of Schopenhauerian will in the way the pigments, the colors, the motions come together on the canvas. Comparison of Bhavsar's work to the American Colorfield painters does not help explain it. One has to acknowledge both Schopenhauer and Bhavsar as unique and timeless bridge-builders between East and West, without searching for traditional art historical labels. Bhavsar fuses his inner self with his physical output, and approaches a fundamental essence. As was the case in Schopenhauer's philosophy, Bhavsar's work points to a synthesis of mind/body and larger nature. This perspective of necessity speaks to all people.

Schopenhauer's interpretation of Vedantic thought led Paul Cézanne to sit in front of nature, and by staring at trees, mountains, landscapes and skies he sought the Schopenhauerian will. Cézanne thus followed a path that led him to reach beyond Impressionism, seeking a representation of the essence of light in nature. Impressionism merely, though astonishingly, depicted the interaction of light and the landscape. Cézanne did not so much look for the way patches of light create the intricate sense of depth in a landscape, as Monet so wonderfully did, but he tried to find what light as streams or bursts of energy did in everything, from landscape to apples. Thus, he accomplished his elementary painterly transformation.

Bhavsar's own past, including his experience of throwing colored pigments at the Holi festival and creating large floor paintings, pushed him to reach beyond Cézanne. Bhavsar in principle accomplished this by focusing on pure color as medium of pure energy. Artists such as Titian or Rembrandt had already sought to depict light. Painting light was pushed further by painters like Turner or Monet. Thanks to Schopenhauer, Cézanne took the concept of light in nature to another level by focusing on color in the landscape not as local emphasis, but as directed energy. Kandinsky presumably was the first artist to

focus on streams of energy as play of forces, as did Russian painters like Larionov, Goncharova or the Italian Futurists. But one may argue Turner sensed this essential force of nature a century earlier, and Daoist painters and Indian sculptors long before him.

They, however, did not so much understand streams of energies as color. Expressionist painters in various countries in Europe, the USA and Asia came close to this understanding, but we had to wait until Bhavsar's applying of dry pigments to come closest to experiencing pure energy. Although theoretically the use of bright lamps or looking into the sun would match the concept of pure energy, a person hardly can enjoy such experiences.

Artistic transformation as in the paintings of Bhavsar reaches further than experiencing pure energy. It is the universe within and outside of us we encounter, and can endlessly enjoy.

VEDIC – VEDANTIC CONTEXT³⁰

“Attendance on (or, the worship of) that consecrated fire (agnyadheya) means (speaking) the truth. Whosoever speaks the truth, acts as if he sprinkled that lightened fire with ghee; for even so does he enkindle it: and ever the more increases his own vital energy, and day by day he becomes better.”
Satapatha Brahmana³¹

Considering an artist's roots in the culture where he was born obviously plays a role when describing his work. In the case of Bhavsar, selecting features from Indian culture makes sense in understanding his work and allows us to come full circle describing all facets of his painting. The following may also enlighten why Schopenhauer recognized wisdom in ancient Indian thought, which he sensed to be present in his European bones as well.

In ancient Indian thought, expressed in the *Rigveda*, the *atman* develops from vital breath to self.³² Breath, as wind, soul and spirit, even as self and body are key factors.³³ In principle,

³⁰ *Vedic* thought relates to the Vedas, the ancient Indian scriptures dealing with religious rituals and philosophical concepts. *Vedantic* thought, the Vedanta, relates to the Upanishads, translated the ‘end of Veda’, philosophical scriptures focusing on spiritual enlightenment.

³¹ Quoted in Richard Seaford, *The Origins of Philosophy in Ancient Greece and Ancient India – A Historical Comparison*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, ISBN 978 1 108 49955 2, p. 247.

³² The Indian *atman* is assumed to be comparable to the Greek *psyche*.

³³ See Richard Seaford, *The Origins of Philosophy in Ancient Greece and Ancient India – A Historical Comparison*, op cit., p. 59.

breath is not only taken literally but also metaphorically as streams of energies that flow through all beings; when breath is present it shapes the self of these beings, when it leaves the body, it causes death. The cosmos, according to Herakleitos, in ancient Greece was seen as ever-living fire. Vedic tradition sees fire within a person as an equivalent to elementary energies in physics and biology.

This is a fundamental concept one then and now can observe in various forms in all cultures. It is comparable to the concept of Qi in Chinese Daoist philosophy, which has its equivalent in West Asian Sufism, and inspired the concept of a soul in Christianity. In ancient India, Greece and China, philosophies tended to focus on the body, mind and cosmos. A way of thinking that contradicts the Christian conviction, adopted in Western culture, that mind would rule over body. In later philosophy and for roughly the last 150 years, it has become clear that mind and body are a unity as mind/body, immersed in or unavoidably part of cosmos.

This is a concept remarkably recognizable in Bhavsar's unique approach to painting, which can be described as the result of his personal absorption of energies, letting them flow and transform through his own mind/body before allowing these energies to pour out through his arms and hands onto the canvas. Like a colored breath, or fire, the pigment grains are distributed, falling like colored smoke or light particles (photons) onto this carrier. Bhavsar paints on a canvas that lies flat, above which he moves horizontally, using a variety of sieves to gently dust down the pigments onto the canvas, where they fall into the painter's binding medium, and settle.

Like with focused breathing, his method builds on rhythm and requires exquisite physical control that results from many years of experience. The process itself proceeds from a deep understanding of the mind/body as temporary medium for channeling the streams of nature's energies. The consistency of visual quality and clearness of Bhavsar's works, including the changes, large and subtle, through time reflect the truthfulness of his creativity.

Earlier I described how the biological will towards an equilibrium of the inner self with the cosmos, led to ancient concepts of higher forces at play and to the concept of sacrifice as establishing discourse with the heavens or powers above. In ancient times fire and smoke were used as tool of communication, allowing the rising smoke to connect visually to the higher forces; this would seem to mirror the natural desire to look upwards into the light.

Bhavsar's colors are like the fire or smoke in such sacrifice. The associations with cosmic winds, cosmic forces or cosmic light reflect the human need to look at the life-giving source of natural light. Bhavsar's use of pure pigments "... *as if he sprinkled that lightened fire with ghee...*"³⁴ create an image in which the tactile surface with its sometimes hardly visible paths of sieved pigments relates to something beyond and above.

Artists experience the creative process as physically and mentally exhausting, but with a self-therapeutic and addictive side. It involves frustrating as well as profoundly tiring and also exhilarating outcomes and leads to an unequaled form of well-being. This is less an experience of feeling pleased with oneself, but more of having accomplished a direct link between oneself and the universal structure of nature. One can imagine Bhavsar's true motivation is to offer such a connection to others.

It is therefore not too farfetched to see the metaphorical parallel of Bhavsar's work to ancient sacrificial goals, in that it appeals and speaks to other persons through the efforts that are visible in the artwork, though not necessarily consciously.³⁵ We might characterize the artwork as a metaphorical sacrifice contributing to another person's well-being.³⁶

It is well known that ancient thinkers in India, China and Greece, were intuitively aware of the enormous forces at play in nature at macro and at micro level. Great thinkers have offered intricate theoretical and mystical concepts and implications to explain these. It is fascinating how basics of these ancient ideas have continued through time to relate to modern scientific theories.

Natural phenomena such as immense nebulae and star clouds seemed to be randomly shaped, until science explained how the immense drive of gravitational push and pull forces slings the forces of light outwards. Science provides a logic way to read the virtual and shapeless structure of the universe, how nebulae come about, follow some kind of systematic process of enormous quantities of local interactions.

Bhavsar certainly does not illustrate the universe, but he

³⁴ See quote from the *Satapatha Brahmana*, at the start of this chapter.

³⁵ See, *The Biological Component of Visual Appeal in Bhavsar* in this essay.

³⁶ See Richard Seaford, op cit., p. 80. Sacrifice re-establishes the self in relation to nature, the universe, and has to be repeated throughout time. In similar ways artists cannot just make one work but steadily need the ritual of work to re-confirm and relive the experience offered by the process, a cyclical or circuitous process within changed circumstances. This means that the works are not mere repetition. On p. 81, Seaford quotes Heesterman concluding: "... *the daksina is the material manifestation of the cyclical course of the universe as it is represented in the ritual.*"

presents a similar creative process from within, leading to his idiosyncratic pouring out, or sprinkling, of colored nebulae into hardly fathomable shapes of light. As in the universe, where star nebulae do not just happen at random but take time to shape up, following all internal and external interactions, Bhavsar's works are not spontaneous nor random bursts of color, but carefully and painstakingly built-up compositions, seeking and finding their own logic.

THE BIOLOGICAL COMPONENT OF VISUAL APPEAL IN BHAVSAR

For too long art professionals dictated that art describes an artist's statement, and art would not be about visual appeal. We live in an interesting world in which many things change impressively while many other things hardly change or do not change at all. Since millennia the biological human mind/body has not changed much. The ongoing emphasis on continued innovation works for technology and science, but not for food, music or fine art. When and how does an artwork work? Some basic features are helpful to understand the appeal of Bhavsar's paintings.³⁷

An artwork by itself should visually attract, catch and hold the gaze of a viewer. This happens when the artwork offers sufficient large and subtle contrasts in format, color, shapes. One speaks of attraction-points from which the viewer's eyes are lured to gradually fan out and roam the whole canvas. This concerns saccadic eye motions we are aware of, and microsaccadic eye motions too fast for us to notice, but necessary in their repetition for the focus of our gaze. Repetitions strengthen the processing in the brain of the observed, at some point diverting brainpower away from brain paths involved in processing everyday concerns, and therewith may evoke a sense of well-being.

Good artworks incorporate large, subtle and directional contrasts, in material, manual marks and format. Viewers automatically walk up to such an artwork, to enjoy a close encounter. One sees how this functions in large Tintoretto or Rubens paintings, in late Michelangelo or Rodin sculptures, in Monet's late *Nymphéas* paintings, in Jackson Pollock and certainly in Bhavsar's large and tactile paintings. This does not occur in Barnett Newman's overly perfect paintings, nor in industrially or digitally produced artworks.

What we see in the artwork should not be entirely clear

³⁷ For more elaborate explanations and facts, see Fré Ilgen, *THE VIEWER? The Actual Purpose of Art*, 2022.

at one glance, because the brain will immediately conclude the work to be boring and the eyes go elsewhere. Imperfection works best. Imperfection automatically lures the eyes to scan along the imperfections, while manually made marks in material are picked up as marks made by another human. In Bhavsar there are no brush-marks, but the viewer is aware of visible, subtle and irregular indications that the pigments have been applied by the hands of the artist. Bhavsar's sieving of pigments is a style nobody else can copy and clearly relates to *his* unique bodily motions.

To be effective, an artwork needs to find a balance between bewilderment and familiarity. Our brain also does not like to focus on something entirely *unfamiliar*. A viewer relates to Bhavsar's paintings already fundamentally at a biological level. The brain cannot hinder the eyes to like looking at those paintings. As so often, the brain follows what the eyes are attracted to. This corresponds to the process of alignment researched in neuroscience and popularized as mirror neurons. When we see some other person physically acting, this perception in our own brain fires the same neurons, providing us with the experience as if we are the acting person ourselves. The unconscious recognition of the action of a fellow human making the artwork creates a sense of familiarity and explains its appeal.

If we want art to work well in our everyday life, where we not necessarily look at it constantly, but where at intervals a person chooses to look or to look longer, the artwork needs not be loud, but toned down in an elegant way; the choice of colors and choice of tactility of the surface change their impact under the changes of light. Bhavsar's paintings excel in any environment, while their exceptional elegance and capacity to interact with light in ways hardly any other method of painting brings about, automatically attract the gaze in a powerful but soothing way.

SILENT DYNAMICS IN A PROCESS TO EQUILIBRIUM

Bhavsar's paintings do not move, they do not change, except optically when the light changes, but they simulate continuous change. Some of his works evoke associations with more dramatic change and swirling strings of colored smoke, or light, while in others the association with change is so subtle, that the change is hardly noticeable though always present.

The world provides each of us every day with incentives that demand response. Neuroscience teaches us that the endless process of equilibrium and disturbance of equilibrium within us has natural causes. Understanding the biological part of this process helps explain why we occasionally like and, in principle,

need to look at certain kinds of art. For artists the creative process is a repetitive search for equilibrium, and the unfolding artwork is the medium between the mind/body, or the self, and the world.

The viewer's self-reflection caused by enjoying a work of art provides a sense of comfort, a way to feel at ease or in consonance with oneself and the world. This is a process that is more important than any statement by the artist about the particular artwork. Therefore, whatever is written in this text, the initial command to '*just look*' remains a priority and precondition.

The whole of our organism, the brain as well as the rest of the body, is in constant turmoil caused by our bodies' natural processes. We need this turmoil because real equilibrium in biological terms is equivalent to death.

Hence, to stay healthy, our bodies demand that we avoid pure equilibrium. To do this we need contrasting changes of impulses. Such impulses can be caused by fluctuating processes within our bodies, for instance by hormones, as well as by connective processes with our environment, emotions and sensory input. The right kind of artworks, like Bhavsar's, work accordingly, offering the viewer personal experiences that he or she may well associate with eternal but silent dynamics. Already the mere occasional viewing of Bhavsar's painting has a profound impact on the mind/body and, put straightforwardly, causes a decline or reduction of stress hormones in a viewer.

SPLENDOR AND MAGNIFICENCE

Knowing Bhavsar's oeuvre one cannot escape experiences of splendor and magnificence. Notions that have always played an important role at all levels of society.

Magnificence, as Aristotle wrote, refers to the public presentation of greatness of a person, symbolized in artistic or architectural monuments. Splendor references the Iranian concept of *khvarenah*, translated as brilliance, luminosity, or as sun, halo-like glory and charisma.³⁸

The distinction between magnificence and splendor evolved in early Renaissance and was inspired by the late medieval travel-

³⁸ Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, 340 BCE: "A magnificent man will also furnish his house suitable to his wealth (for even a house is a sort of public ornament), and will spend by preference on those works that are lasting (for these are the most beautiful) and in every class of things he will spend what is becoming." See Evelyn Welch, *Public Magnificence and Private Display – Giovanni Pontano's De Splendore (1498) and the Domestic Arts*, in *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 15 No.4, 2002. Available on the internet.

reports of European merchants, such as Marco Polo, and monks, such as Odoric of Pordenone, through their visits to the East. They gave account of magnificence, opulence and splendor at the Persian, Mughal, Indian and Chinese courts and palaces. As mentioned, increasing trade in 15th century brought many non-European artifacts into European households, and for many people this was their first experiences of how luxurious interiors with many artifacts, paintings and sculptures immediately reflects favorably on the owner, while also impacting his and his visitor's well-being.

In principle, magnificence can be accomplished by the exceptional quality of an artist's oeuvre as a service to the public. Bhavsar's artistic accomplishment certainly belongs in this category, but certainly also the category of splendor for any private home.

Giovanni Pontano, a 15th century Italian humanitarian thinker, proposed a distinction between the public and the private space. According to Aristotle, a person can achieve magnificence by public presentations of greatness. Splendor, however, relates more to the person's attitude, thus is more personal and private.³⁹ Pontano's emphasis on splendor as a kind of social attribute and as personal embellishment that immediately reflects on a person, may not sound new in our time, but is still refreshingly novel since for too long hardly anybody has the courage to offer the notion of splendor, or elegance, or its positive impact on human life when we discuss art.

Splendor and magnificence have historically played specific roles. But, in today's world, where our media bombard us every single day with things that go wrong someplace in the world, there is a growing need for the positive, and for personalized and direct human contact and quietness. The private home as location of reflection and mental safety has returned as a basic life necessity. The personal well-being evoked by the quality and elegance of one's own environment has become a contemporary topic again. Splendor, as Pontano described, in ways one can decide according to what one can afford, seems in sync with our times.

Only a few artists are Old Masters in the sense of the high quality in the Renaissance or Baroque. This has been the case in

³⁹ Described by Evelyn Welch according to Pontano: "... *the splendid man has to be prepared to pay an appropriate sum in order to ensure that his goods were copious, rare and elegant. This did not always require great wealth and even a figure of modest means could, with care, afford to be splendid.*" Ibid.

most cultures across time. Most artists, when they are lucky, peak at a certain moment, the works before and after may have a historical interest but are not as strong.

Bhavsar can with justification be labelled a Master, and his oeuvre contains both splendor and magnificence. The high quality of his work has always been exceptionally consistent. To have the presence of Bhavsar's paintings in one's personal life is a privilege. His art substantially contributes to a viewer's comfort and provides an anchor for coping with personal life and with the larger world.

Fré Ilgen, Berlin, 2022

LIST OF LITERATURE

Berger, Douglas L.; *The Veil of Maya: Schopenhauer's System and Early Indian Thought*, Binghamton, New York, Global Academic Publishing, 2004, ISBN 1 58684 243 9.

Hobson, John M.; *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, ISBN 978 0 521 54724 6.

Ilgen, Fré; *ARTIST? The Hypothesis of Bodiness*, Tübingen, Wasmuth GmbH, 2014, ISBN 978 3 8030 3364.

Ilgen, Fré; *THE VIEWER? The Actual Purpose of Art*, Berlin, Salon Studio Ilgen, 2022.

Jairazbhoy, R.A.; *Oriental Influences in Western Art*, Bombay, etc, Asia Publishing House, 1965.

Janaway, Christopher; *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, ISBN 0 521 62106 2.

Kow, Simon; *China in Early Enlightenment Political Thought*, Routledge New York, 2017, ISBN 978-1-138-80927-7.

Lach, Donald F.; *Asia in the Making of Europe, Volume I, The Century of Discovery, Book 1*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, ISBN 0 226 46731 7, 1965.

Lach, Donald F.; *Asia in the Making of Europe, Volume I, The Century of Discovery, Book 2*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, ISBN 0 226 46732 5, 1965.

Lach, Donald F.; *Asia in the Making of Europe, Volume II, The Century of Discovery, Book 1*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, ISBN 0 226 46730 9, 1970.

Lach, Donald F.; *Asia in the Making of Europe, Volume II, The Century of Discovery, Book 2*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press,

ISBN 0 226 46733 3, (first 1977) paperback 1994.

Perkins, Franklin; *Leibniz and China, A Commerce of Light*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, ISBN 978 0 521 04822 4.

Sandler, Irving; *Natvar Bhavsar, Color-Poetic Reverberations*, New York, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, 2004

Sandler, Irving; Kwint, Marius; *Natvar Bhavsar, Poetics of Color*, interview by Marius Kwint, Milan, Skira Editore S.p.a., Italy, 2008.

Seaford, Richard; *The Origins of Philosophy in Ancient Greece and Ancient India – A Historical Comparison*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, ISBN 978 1 108 49955 2.

Shiff, Richard; *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism - A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1984, ISBN 0 226 75305 0.

Stoneman, Richard; *The Greek Experience of India – From Alexander to the Indo-Greeks*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2019, ISBN 978 0 691 21747 5.

Welch, Evelyn; *Public Magnificence and Private Display – Giovanni Pontano's De Splendore (1498) and the Domestic Arts*, in *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 15 No.4, 2002. Available on the internet.