

SALON STUDIO ILGEN 19 03 2023

Ladies and gentlemen,

Jacqueline and I welcome you at our Salon Studio Ilgen this afternoon.

On our card we mention Natvar to be the most successful painter we know.

His works are in more than 2000 corporate collections, likely in even more private collections around the world, and in prominent public collections, like the Guggenheim or the Metropolitan Museum. He received various prestigious awards, a.o. from the Barnett Newman Foundation. In 2015 Bhavsar was honored by US Congress with a gala dinner in DC attended by the US vice-president, hosted by the US-India trade organization. Bhavsar is acknowledged in both the US and India for his exceptional artistic legacy and has been a speaker at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

On that wall two modest pieces Jacqueline and I are happy to have. In our sitting room you may spot two more works.

I am not exaggerating Jacqueline and I are very proud to be able to host this small event today and honored to call him our good friend since many, many years, please, **welcome Natvar Bhavsar!** And of course, his wife and also our friend, Janet, who's last visit to Berlin was 1967, for Natvar it is the first time.

I hope you appreciate I cannot welcome each of you by name, but like to mention we are especially glad to welcome some guests who flew in for the occasion:

Mr. Choi Seungpil with our dear friend Lee Jungtae.

Alison Lee is a Berlin-based art historian, printmaker and curator who originally hails from Hong Kong. She received her Bachelor of Arts in History and Middle Eastern studies from Princeton University, and her Masters in Art History and Curatorial Studies from York University in Toronto. In her work, she explores historical influences on contemporary questions against the backdrop of a deeply-interconnected cultural landscape. She firmly believes that art (and food) have the power to bring all people together. Ladies and gentlemen, please, welcome Alison Lee?

WHY DO BHAVSAR'S PAINTINGS APPEAL TODAY?

We live in a time of far-reaching changes. Following the large shifts of economic interests in many parts of the world, history is re-studied and re-written, which explains the worldwide and timeless appeal of Bhavsar's paintings.

Each culture in the world is unique. The culture of India is unique. The culture of the USA is unique. The culture of Korea is unique. Yes, the culture of Europe is unique, and by itself German culture is unique.

Each culture, however, cannot be only unique but is also hybrid. No culture ever has come out of the blue and evolved in entire isolation. Especially trade interaction between local and international cultures always inspired and motivated to absorb features, bits and pieces of

each other's culture into one's own. After time elapsed such absorbed features became very much substantial part of one's own cultural identity. Important is to appreciate that in most cases a culture does not just copy features of another culture but transforms them into something of their own. Nevertheless, such new aspects only happen by absorbing elements of other cultures.

This is not the time or place to present a complete picture of the impact of India on the birth and development of Western culture, on the development of our Western cultural identity. Just a few interesting examples. The ancient Greeks had a lively cultural exchange with India, long before Europe existed. This exchange certainly was not one way. As Indian culture was far ahead, it is likely the Greeks took over more from India than the other way around.

The Romans extended such relationship by trade and diplomatic interactions with India. The traditional path from India to Europe happened over land. Syria played a crucial role as geographic intermediary, attracting all Mediterranean cultures to visit for trading. It is one of these minor but interesting aspects to learn from history that trading between countries was soon followed by establishing communities in such countries.

Sea trade played a major role. For a long time, it was believed that only since the Suez Canal there would be open sea trade possible between Europe and Asia. Think again. It has been re-discovered how already some Egyptian pharaohs build the Red Sea Canal, long before the Romans came along. Thus in 14th century the important harbor city and trade hotspot Pisa in Italy was known to host three major communities: Saracens (Arabs), Turks, and Indians. Through Syria many masons, including from India, were hired across Europe to build cathedrals and castles, making it obvious why many non-European ornaments can be spotted in our ancient architecture.

Christianity, which of course defined much of European culture, originally is a religion from the Middle East, transformed into a European variant. When in the Middle Ages priests discovered that preaching in Latin did not work well with the majority of illiterate public, they started telling Indian fables at the end of their formal sermon to make the message clear.

Chess became very popular across Europe. Most still do not know that this game comes from India. Just like our so-called Arab numbers are actually from India.

When the Portuguese discovered the sea-route to India, arriving on the Westcoast, they were not alone looking for trade. Since millennia India traded with all countries in Asia, to the east with China, likely also Korea and Japan. To the west with Arab and African nations, all the way to Egypt. Most by ship. The Portuguese, later the Spanish, Dutch, English, had to adopt to somehow fit into that busy trading scene. In school in Holland we never were taught this. At that time, India was much more advanced in philosophical, scientific, technical and social fields, and much more prosperous than any country in Europe.

The Portuguese saw the visually appealing and highly dynamic ornamental architecture of temples in the Indian kingdom of *Vijayanagara*. Reporting home in Portugal this inspired

their king to adopt a similar ornamental architecture for building cathedrals (known as the Manueline Baroque style) setting the tone for all Baroque architecture, adopted by the Jesuits. Ironically, many Western historians describe the Portuguese impact of such architecture on churches in India, plainly ignoring it came from India in the first place.

Sorry for this historical detour. But these examples demonstrate how many more features that we consider to be typically European, or Western, and as being an essential part of our identity, originate in India (or China, or rich Arab culture, but that is another discussion). Maybe even more important is to understand that in our modern times the standard Western views unfortunately continue to be prejudiced and such facts from history are being ignored. It is a matter of finding the right angle. After all, acknowledging such centuries old back and forth influences between cultures offer potential bridges to understand each other, also in our current times.

In a very comparable way, one indeed does not do justice to either compare Natvar's paintings to paintings by Rothko, or Graubner. Especially, because these Western born artists were genuinely inspired by their own understanding of Asian cultures, like so many of Western artists in 19th century and early abstract artists at the start of 20th century.

For our discussion it is helpful knowing all of this because it explains when we look at a Bhavsar painting, at least part of our liking to look at his works is caused by a sense of familiarity, based on certain features of our own cultural identity to originate from Natvar's own Indian background.

Thank you for your patience listening to this hopefully mind-teasing introduction, now we go to our discussion.

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