



Body and its aesthetical context

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Abstract

Our propensity to ascribe value to certain facets of life over the other and consequent creation of value laden concepts is very apparent. Our notions of beauty, morality etc. are some significant illustration of this propensity. Associating aesthetic value to an art form or particular features of an art form seems to be an extension of this propensity of ours. However, a psychological analysis of this tendency of ours suggest that the perceptions that control our mental states significantly control how we ascribe value to particular facet of art form over the other. Further, tenets of social psychology show how socio-cultural contexts form our perceptions that eventually control our mental states. This paper seeks to explore the relationship between socio-cultural contexts, consequent social perceptions and the aesthetic values we ascribe to the art forms.

Keywords: beauty, morality etc.

Introduction

Man's creative prowesses have taken many forms throughout his creative history and if there is one creative endeavour that has captured people's imagination, it would be art.

Art, undeniably, has many facets that a man might want himself too loose in. however, we are going to concern ourselves here with one particular nature of art, viz. art is essentially a depiction of some kind which has a particular meaning and value for the one who depicts it and which has a value for the one who admires it too.

As it happens, the element of meaning and value seems to be of great significance when we talk about art forms. Nothing could possibly go wrong if we are to say that meaning partly comes from the entity that is depicted and partly from the context of which it is a part, which also implies that the entity and the overall context from which the entity comes should colour the imagination of the person to be depicted in any form to be described as art.

Further, for any entity to be valuable, one needs to find some facets in it that are of one's personal liking. Now we can put a claim that for an art form to be valuable it needs to have some facets that are regarded by an individual of his personal liking. If psychological analysis are to be believed, likes and dislikes are a matter of perception, and more often than not, it comes from the socio-cultural environment of which an individual is a part.

Now, what do we understand by the aforementioned argument? As it appears, to give some art form a meaning one needs a context, and by now it is very clear that it comes from ones socio-cultural environment, and following the argument presented in the previous paragraph, we now can say that it is the socio-cultural context that provides value to an art form.

Finally, when we bring the notion of meaning and value together, a realization should dawn on to us that it is the meaning formed as a result of socio-cultural environment that

enables us to fathom the value underlying any work of art, and in this paper that value is aesthetics.

Social perceptions and aesthetic values

As things stand now, utilizing the socio-cultural context, this work seeks to understand the aesthetical value of art forms that depict human body. However, it doesn't seem to be a pragmatic task, for there are too many kinds of art work, viz. music and sonic art, visual art, performing arts, literary arts, architectural art and modern art. Likewise, there is no dearth of art forms representing body either. If we take a chronological approach the time line would be too long. Thus, to do justice to the work, it appears the best approach would be to pick some of the key master pieces of the history that depict body and analyze the facets mentioned above.

Although we seem to have talked about most of the essential elements that are going to be used in our analysis, socio-cultural context still needs a bit of elaboration it appears. There is no denying the fact that like all other living beings, human is in constant interaction with the nature. If for nothing else, to cope against the challenges thrown at him by the nature and to survive, human started developing and evolving skills, leading to the accretion of vast amount of information by way of primitive induction and deduction. This information, unless proved otherwise, became the bedrock of the earliest belief system that humans might have had. With the ticking of the clock, this belief system flourished into social perceptions, economic and political systems, religious systems and associated mythologies, language as medium to express it, technology, science as mode of acquiring knowledge, and art. As it turns out, the plethora of expressions that came out of this earliest belief system that man developed during the course of his interaction with nature is called as culture. It is this culture because of its uniqueness worldwide shapes the uniqueness of art forms too.

When we are looking for a start, why not start with something that has captured the Indian imagination since time immemorial. Dancing, with its antiquity in Indian scheme of things, seems to have been ever present, and rightly so, it has made us feel its pulse since vedic periods. As has happened in most parts of the world, a particular element of the culture called spiritualism and the mythology emanating from it has shaped the art more than any other element of the culture. Same goes true for the Indian art too. Religious and spiritual sentiments and the resultant mythologies with various gods and goddesses depicted in them have been the source of Inspiration for all the dance forms.

From what could be discerned, one can choose to believe that it were the literary works that elaborated the mythology and its aesthetical value to great imaginable proportions. It brought home the conception of beauty, emotions and feelings that existed in the society. Historical accounts show us that there was ample presence of such literary work especially after the later vedic period. Epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata, and mythologies such as puranas demonstrated various facets of life that already had considerable influence over people's beliefs. Thus, literary art seems to have given a considerable fillip to other forms of arts and more so in case of music and sonic arts and other forms of performance based arts such as dancing.

Thinking of dance, one can immediately associate synchronization of certain kinds of bodily movements that can be elevated to mind numbing performances. But still there are certain elements missing as the previously mentioned performance can also be called as acrobatics. Dance, as has been found in the Indian context, is a depiction of some story with every bodily movement corresponding to some events of that story. However, the real beauty comes when an artist is able to express the emotions depicted in the story. This is how, it seems, the concept of 'Navras', the codification of nine emotions that human body is able to express came into the picture. As time went by, music became more synchronized with dance forms and by the dawn of sangam age in South-India, especially in the region called Tamilagham, all the elements of music, viz. sura, tala, bhava, and raga where synchronized with dance movements. This was the bed rock that laid the foundation of all the classical Indian dances, viz. Bharat-natym, kuchipudi, kathakali, and kathak. Some of the names of the dance forms themselves suggest that story is an inseparable part of them; for example, kathakali means dance based on story and kathak means story teller. Thus, there wouldn't be any exaggeration if we say that dance forms in India became medium where human body was used to show the aesthetical element of something that was larger than life.

As it happens with most facets of the life, they are dynamic. This dynamism in the end creates diversification. Let's see how this happens. Early mythological texts belonging to most religions have amply demonstrated how the genesis of universe and the opposite, i.e. apocalypse happens. As it turns out, this is exactly what shiva maha purana did, with shiva being the destroyer of the world and indirectly the force behind the creation of the world. Now this is a literary work. As it happens, the whole story got depicted in the natyashastra, a treatise on dancing. Dance depicted shiva as a dancer, performing lasya and tandav, the former being the

dance of creation and the latter being the dance of death and destruction was the main theme. This famous work came to be called as Natraj. As a natural progression, the bronze image of shiva, the natraj, the lord of dance, got sculpted and became the main deity of the Chidambaram temple. Things didn't stop here. The whole temple of Chidambaram shows 110 body positions used in the dance.

This is a remarkable story of how culture provided the meaning and value to the earliest literary works and how they became a source for the art forms such as music and dancing to take a start. Things didn't stop here. Sculptors and painters took the cue and gave vent to their imagination. Even the temple architecture of both Nagara and Dravida style couldn't remain untouched by it. Thus, a remarkable transformation of art was on display for people to admire.

There is no dearth of Indian art, and one cannot stop discussing that. However, paucity of scope is something to be considered. Moreover, a better analysis would require a wider reach, and this work in this regard shouldn't be limited to Indian work.

When we were already touching old times, why not start with something that has similar antiquity. As has been the case, Greek and roman art, also called classical art, present us with something that is as remarkable as the one we have witnessed in the foregoing passages.

Significance of geographical barriers is something that one never forgets to appreciate. In the hoary past, we didn't have the technical means to overcome the physical barriers set by nature. There were seemingly insurmountable mountains such as Alps, Elburz, Zagros, Hind kush and Himalayas. Likewise, there was no shortage of huge rivers, straits and deserts. Inability of the humans to cross these barriers easily disallowed any degree of diffusion of beliefs from any foreign culture and allowed some degree of stability to one's own culture. This is exactly what gives individuality to one culture. However, it is here that astonishment creeps in. There is no denying the fact the there are differences in the way art is depicted, yet when we analyze the context it is the culture that is giving the meaning and value to the art, but it is the part astonishing part. Astonishment comes from the element of culture that shaped the art in the classical era. Here too, it is mythology and various facets that got depicted by the art though it doesn't mean that other facets of the life were not depicted.

From whatever understanding we have of geology, we know that Greece has Karst topography, meaning limestone and its metamorphosed product marble were in abundance. They used what nature gave them; i.e. marble, and sculpted them to depict what they thought were gods. As it appears, they visualized their gods in human forms, a more beautiful one though. Now, it would be interesting to know what their concept of beautiful body was. Although it seems to be a matter of general knowledge that Greece was the birth place of Olympics. As the story goes, these renowned sculptors, who were hell bent on creating a perfect body, got the notion of perfect, graceful, and beautiful body from the athletes practicing for the games. As luck would have it, these athletes practiced there events completely uncovered. Their sculpted and toned body became the lynch pin of the sculptures that artists like the great Phidias, who built the famous statues of

goddess Athena with ivory and gold and the other famous statue of god Zeus in the temple of Olympia. Taking the cue from the same sporting, they built some of the marvels of the history, such as, the bronze statue of 'disco bolus', the discus thrower built by Myron. And if this was something to be admired, then there is a cause to think again because the next one, as believed by the experts, is closest to the true proportion of human body, the Doryphoros, or the spear bearer.

There are many such gems that could be discussed here, but our purpose is solved here. Without any hiccups, one can see for his own satisfaction how important a role culture plays when it comes to the assignment of value and meaning to any depiction.

Hitherto we have been searching in the antiquities. Its time one moves ahead in the time line and picks up some change in the meaning and value of the art particularly as a result of cultural changes. If ones historical memories are refreshed, one would find that there was a sea change in the thinking after the end of dark ages in the Christian world. As a matter of fact this change is called renaissance and Italy became the centre point this Cultural Revolution if that is what one might want to call it.

Once again there is no dearth of names that have done wonders and thrilled many, but three names pick themselves up for their unparalleled contribution in the arena of art. First being the prince of sculptors himself Michelangelo. Picking up from where Etruscans left, Michelangelo took the art of depicting body to a whole new level. His attention to detail was few notches above anything witnessed by the previously mentioned artists. If anybody has any doubts, the statues of Moses and David may dispel them and any remaining trace would be swept away by watching the ceiling of Sistine chapel, for all the paintings showing various biblical events are his handiwork. As art history would tell us, his disciple too was not left behind, and as expected, created a spectacle of his own. With a poetic elegance, he created many pictures of Madonna, and churches in Italy, even now vouch for the sheer brilliance of his frescoes. One such fresco, the school of Athens forces one to relive the moment those philosophers and early scientists lived. Finally, the great man himself, some call him the torch bearer of renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci came to the center stage. He was both jack and master of all trades. To improve his mastery over the art of painting, he went to great lengths. He took the permission to dissect the corpse itself to fine tune his skills and to improve his understanding of the body. Finally he made many sketches of the body that were used for scientific study of the body. Using the same skills, he painted some of the most cherished paintings of all time, viz. Mona Lisa, the last supper, virgin of the rocks, the Vitruvian man etc. his works, to some extent, were masterpieces for both science and art.

An era of sheer brilliance was in front us in the preceding passages, and once again looking at the work in front of us, we can only conform the view that religious and mythological elements of the culture in this era too played a great part in giving that all important meaning to the art. However, Leonardo's work seems to be a tad different in the sense that many of his works were the result of pure curiosity to understand human body rather than any depiction of biblical

or classical account as witnessed in other works of the time. It seems that we were witnessing some kind of a transition in the elements of culture that dominate the shaping act of culture.

Conclusion

By now it is very clear that events in social sphere dictated by the change in the belief can capture the imagination of people like no other force can. Such a change happened in the 18th century France, where feudal system had wreaked havoc. Disgruntled by the system, people revolted for the sake of some cherished ideals that any society would be proud of to have, viz. liberty, equality and justice. French revolution became a symbol of new values that most of the world now admires. As it appears, this wave of change in culture didn't leave art untouched either. One such master piece of neoclassical art is the statue of liberty built by Frederic Bartholdi. Although it depicts the roman goddess of liberty libertas, the meaning and value that it gets is from the values that came out of French revolution and the American war of independence.

It won't be farfetched, if, banking on the foregoing, we agree to the notion that social changes are relentlessly persistent, there shouldn't be any doubt in one's mind that new elements of culture are around the corner waiting to give new values and meaning to the art.

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