

## Innovation Through Tradition Workshop Remarks

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Innovation Through Tradition provided an opportunity to discuss and develop a greater understanding of the issues around Chinese ink painting. By offering a comparison with calligraphic abstraction from North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, along with 'new miniature' painting, connections between 'tradition' and more recent art were explored. Many early practices from Asia and the Middle East have adapted and influenced the ways in which art is currently produced. In fact, these disciplines have themselves 'traveled' extensively—ink painting was practiced across East Asia, miniature painting was created in South Asia and the wider Persianate society, and Arabic calligraphy developed throughout the Muslim world. These are therefore not 'authentic' modes of practice in the sense that they are tied to a specific place or group of people, but their capacity to transgress allows them to continue to be influential in the present.

Before looking at the commonalities between these three practices, it is important to identify their many differences. Chinese ink painting is traditionally associated with the literati—its circulation, reception, and continuity, even today, is considerable in East Asian society, and it is still taught as a separate discipline in art schools.<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, miniature painting in South Asia has largely been an art patronised by the courts—created by painters who emerged from *gharana* or kinship-based professional circuits. In essence, it was practised and circulated among much smaller groups. The teaching of miniature painting in art schools during the twentieth century was also neglected, and it was not until the 1980s that it eventually re-emerged as a separate major at the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore, and where it today remains a primary place of learning.

Finally, the practice of calligraphy based on Arabic script has been widespread before and after the print revolution, but the teaching of calligraphy as an *artistic discipline* in South Asian art schools remains marginal. Even today, with the exception of Iran and Turkey, most calligraphers are not primarily viewed as artists.<sup>2</sup> In South Asia, due to the late arrival of printing, Urdu texts and newspapers were reproduced via a lithography based on handwritten calligraphy; the memory of this writing practice has therefore been present throughout the twentieth century. Its transformation into modernist and abstract paintings during the mid to late century was an important dimension in the development of modern and contemporary art in these regions, but only as initiatives by individuals or small groups.

It is important to theoretically situate the reuse of 'tradition' into the present. In so doing, one can identify at least three approaches. Fred Jameson argues that in postmodernism, the past becomes a storehouse of dead images and practices—these can be mined and plundered arbitrarily without any claim on the present in a historically meaningful way. Walter Benjamin's interest in the 'dialectical image' brings aspects of the past and present together in a temporary and productive configuration, rather than Jameson's identification of the frozen, deathly aspects of postmodern appropriation. In contemporary art, an influential mode of practice is

the reworking and re-presentation of the archive—they may be factual or fictional, authentic or invented—but nevertheless point towards paths not taken, and usually to forms of social life and aesthetics impossible to imagine within modern identities or late capitalism.

My approach to 'tradition'—in its present use and for the future—is somewhat different and does not directly address any of the above modes. Rather, it presumes that postcolonial societies have traversed the modern era in ways that art must still come to terms. For these societies, having been marginalised in the wake of industrial capitalism and modern colonialism, any movement towards modernity was and continues to be a very uneven process—one attended by violence and rupture, but also by incompleteness and translation of the past into the present.

In numerous Asian societies during colonialism and modernisation, the past was attacked relentlessly as decadent, feudal, patriarchal, and essentially anti-modern. Yet this very need to vehemently condemn the past also suggests that it persisted in many ways. Moreover, one must be mindful that each era comes with its own blinders and closures. Today, Asia's numerous nation-states work hard to hegemonise the imagination of their subjects, but what about other imaginaries that might be activated by a closer examination of historical linkages? For example, focusing on the history of the Indian Ocean suggests vectors of mobility and trade that do not map well with modern nation-state borders. These networks still persist in less visible ways, and it takes effort to see them not simply as illicit activities, but as conduits that have historical meaning that may carry added significance in the future.

Without an adequate reckoning of the turbulent processes that shaped the modern subject and society, one might fall into two dangerous fantasies: a nativist attempt to re-inhabit an idealised past that is seen to be more authentic, or a full leap into the future as if the entire burden of the past could be overthrown. We have seen examples of both these approaches in Asia with disastrous results. Tradition cannot be embraced wholesale in an era that stresses equality and the potential for individual human development—values not fully foregrounded in most pre-modern societies—but it also cannot be entirely overthrown. This leads to psychic and social damage, exacting tremendous costs in numerous direct and indirect ways.

Understanding 'tradition' as a capacious term of identifying, to an extent, the traces of one's formation, is in this sense not limited to the pre-modern era—indeed, I believe it is impossible now to distinctly identify aspects of tradition not reworked by modern processes. In South Asia, for example, this complex legacy includes experience of lived practice, such as calligraphy and exposure to key literary formations from lyric poetry to progressive writing. It includes the processes of colonial governmentality that produced modern identity through ethnography, textual scholarship, and the rise of modern institutions. It also encompasses knowledge disciplines and aesthetics that colonialism and orientalism formulated.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, for many Muslim societies, the importance of texts and intertextuality in their intellectual history is central. In Talal Asad's conception of Islam as a 'discursive tradition', many disciplines such as law—and perhaps poetry—possess a lineage of textual production, commentary, and critique that continue to characterise their unfolding over time, but there was no textual equivalent for the discipline of Islamic art. There were no pre-modern original texts of visual

aesthetics, no 'great artists', and no canon of exemplary objects. Many modernist artists in Pakistan and India therefore turned to more established literary forms as a ground for aesthetic value.

Above all, tradition can only be apprehended creatively, partially in fragments, and with an eye on its value today. Tradition is a complex and contradictory ensemble of motivations, objects, and practices, possessing progressive resources as well as deeply regressive dimensions. In artistic practice, the three case studies we looked at—ink, calligraphy, and miniature—are actually quite different in how they are currently practiced, yet all share a cosmopolitan ethos drawn from the pre-modern era. Today, they offer other genealogies a more expansive subjectivity, provided they are approached with an open-ended manner in which formal transformations are understood as complex allegories with the potential to notate processes of social change.

Therefore, in my estimation, it is important to teach these practices seriously and carefully in secondary schools and art colleges, yet with openness to their multifarious iterations across time and space. It is equally salient to situate them within larger historical and social registers so that contemporary practitioners can create an ongoing critical assessment of their aesthetic potential and value in relation to social transformations—rather than seeing them as transcendent artifacts apprehended only via connoisseurship, or through notions of authenticity.

There is also an ethical element to these practices: they all demand training, rigour, and patience, but if practiced in this open-ended way, they also present moral analogues for our era. In uncertain times, all we can do as right-minded subjects is to engage as fully as possible in the focused pursuit of the greater good—to the best of our abilities—while remaining as vigilant and critical to the partiality and privilege of our own positions.

#### **ENDNOTES**

1. The other track being Western painting.
2. This includes languages such as Persian and Urdu, but also many others historically that now use other scripts, such as Ottoman Turkish, Malay, and many Central Asian languages.
3. Governmentality is a term coined by Michel Foucault, and refers to how the state exercises control over, or governs, the body of its populace.