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'Understanding the Past is Pivotal'

History is as important as form, composition and colour to arrive at a perspective. But art students seem to be ignoring this aspect, says art historian Ashrafi Bhagat

by Aparna Desikan

Why is the logo of University of Madras the way it is? We need to ask such relevant questions to get a perspective of the pieces of art that form a part of history," says Ashrafi Bhagat, art historian. During a lecture series titled 'Pictorial Traditions: Visual Narratives in Pictorial Art from beyond the Vindhyas in the South: Second Century BC to 19th Century AD', Bhagat reiterated the relevance of learning art history.

"Form, colour and composition are important factors, but we also need a sense of perspective to enhance our creativity. Also, these works of art are documentations of a essential part of history. It is essential we know about it," she adds.

However, she also rues that students of art are not interested in learning art history. "In my 35 years of teaching art history, rarely have students shown interest in learning about art history. It is looked down upon. There's a general lack of awareness about art history...perhaps this is due to the low number of schools teaching that subject. Painting is more important and students fail to understand the relevance and importance of art history," she explains.

She points out that if the job market requires knowledge on art history, more students would take the effort to learn about it.

"Any job that involves designing

must require knowledge about style and iconography, which in turn draws inspiration from art history. It's time people get to learn about it," she says.

Bhagat also spoke of the transition of paintings of South India since its inception to its present form. Colonial past, especially in the south, led to English patrons supporting native artists, which in turn resulted in a hybrid form called the 'Company Art'. This led to a modern art form that was specialised by Raja Ravi Varma. The influence of miniature paintings from those times can be found even today in several works.

"Mural paintings of Kerala, in particular, bear the influences of miniature art from those times. Artists like Sadananda and Satish, who have their contemporary sensibility intact, have been painting with the style and iconography of the colonial past," she says, emphasising the importance of art history, which helped to make the connection with the past.

And perhaps, there are some unexplored pieces of art, which would provide another dimension to history, if deciphered. "There may even be a different perspective to the paintings on the Ajanta and Ellora caves and perhaps they'd convey a different story, too," she adds.



PIC: MARTIN LOUIS

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