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In search of expression

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Through art I've imbibed a certain familiarity in smoothly reading human character. My alma mater, Kolkata's Government College of Art, was established by the British in 1854 with "the purpose of teaching industrial art based on scientific method to youth of all classes." As a student here in 1970s, I was sent next door to the Indian Museum to study ancient Indian sculptures. Since 3900 BC, Indian art has been expressed with voluptuous feelings through celestial apsaras to Ajanta frescos, Mughal miniatures to folk and tribal art.

But when in class we had to draw the nude figure, my craftsmanship automatically shifted to European art. That required perfection in anatomical drawing, accuracy of human figures, nature or still life. Somehow my artistic hunger felt incomplete in this expression of realism. I was unsure of where I was headed until I suddenly discovered unrealistic disruption in Vincent van Gogh's paintings in the library. Simultaneously, unlike before the Renaissance era, the artist's personality was being given an identity. Such artistic disruption so appealed to me that without finishing my course I headed for France, with just \$8 that my mother could muster up, in search of disruptive expression of Western art.

Since prehistoric times, art has been intertwined with religion. Europe's oldest discovered cave art in northern Spain's El Castillo cave is over 40,800 years old. Paintings of large animals drawn 17,300 years ago were found in France's Lacaux caves. That's why behavioural modernity goes back 50,000 years when people began engaging in different civil activities. They started practicing art and music, growing and cooking food, playing games, burying the dead, long-distance bartering, making fine tools and becoming conscious of personal beauty and artistic decoration.

Every religion has used art to propagate its faith. Artistic embellishments portrayed belief in god's power over humans. South Asia's Indus Valley Civilization from 3300 to 1300 BC has inference of religious art in swastikas and Shiva-Pashupati seals found in the sophisticated, advanced urban culture remains of the Harappan period. Sacred art of Sunni Muslims prohibits representation so you will find highly evolved calligraphy and ornamentation. Buddhist art of 6th century BC has tantric symbols and Buddha images. Chinese art dates 10,000 BC, but was later influenced by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Ancient Egyptian Nile valley art from 5000 BC to 300 AD was highly stylized and symbolic, veering around pharaohs regarded as gods. Even the Central American Maya civilization from 1500 BC to 1500 AD had art intimately serving a religious purpose.

Christian art from 70 AD wanted to tangibly illustrate religious principles. Western art

evolution has 13 broad movements starting from 7th century BC Classical antiquity. Centered around the Mediterranean Sea, these art movements are Byzantine, Medieval, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, Neo-classicism, Early modern period, Modern art, Graphic art, Street graffiti, and Digital art today. The Renaissance period saw famous artworks in Italy such as Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel, Bernini's huge column of St. Peter's Basilica and Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. Then 16th century religious Reformation movement divided Christianity into Roman Catholics in southern Europe and Protestants in northern Europe. This fragmented the art world too. Artists who followed Protestantism that espoused humanity is perfection because god created man in his own image, started painting individual common people in moralistic day-to-day life and nature-scapes. These went on to greatly influence society in the coming centuries.

Western Europe's spectacular masterstroke has been to bring the art movement beyond the religious boundary. Society today places high value on artistic skill, making art the liberty of self expression, creating controversies with it, using visual art ideations to conquer nature and inspire inventions. Art's never-ending contribution in multiple domains of everyday living drives distinction in the contemporary world. It gives non-restrictive shape for people to imagine beyond what they see.

Design as expressed from Latin *designare* means to mark out. Through the window of art, we can find that all religions have a strong common design thread; their prayer structures have an elevated, high rise form. You'll see them in holy structures such as Hindu temples, Islamic mosques, Christian churches, American Indian prayer totems, Egyptian pyramids, Buddhists stupas, among others. It's possible that religion has emerged either from venerating the means of survival such as animal or nature worship, or from worshipping

what's feared, not understood, or outside the realm of human control. So god being somewhere beyond the sky gets expressed through monumental religious architecture.

Different religions display distinctive architecture as artistic design. Take the world's oldest known temple built 11,600 years ago. It's Göbekli Tepe, the archaeological site in Turkey, atop a mountain. If you see its 200 colossal limestone pillars with carvings of creatures like snakes, gazelles, foxes, scorpions and angry wild boars, you'll wonder how in those days when wheel carts did not exist, they had the fervor and commitment to build this temple. From very ancient times, religious monuments have had fantastic, artistic architectural design that expresses distinctive religious ideas.

Western Europeans later transformed the art in design to a usable form so that designs could serve functional benefit to society. Religious monument design had the emotive factor of aesthetics and the rational stability factor for sustainability. That's why these architectural structures survived several centuries, endorsing their distinctive design strength.

Significantly from the da Vinci era, Western design started to strongly pay heed to the functional aspect of having outstanding usage advantage. So when the Church freed human expression in the arts, science and literature from the 17th century, the functionality of design was explored in an incredible way. Initially, the usage advantage of design was manual. Subsequently, mechanical motorization came to provide functional benefits to avoid human effort, followed by electronic inventions and now modern day digital innovations. These inventions are reducing our exertion and increasing our comfort, so we enjoy a life of better ease today than people in past centuries did.

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