

Modern Indian Painting



Fig. 5: FRANCIS NEWTON SOUZA, *Citadel*, Oil on board, 24 x 48 in., Signed and dated, 1961

Making Magic Through The Real

SOME EARLY EPISODES OF MODERN INDIAN ART

Giles Tillotson

"Portraits have been painted of all His Majesty's servants, and a huge book has been made, [which stands comparison with the work of the Persian master Behzad, and with] the magic-making of the Europeans."

ABU'L FAZL¹

"What distinguishes oil painting from any other form of painting is its special ability to render the tangibility, the texture, the lustre, the solidity of what it depicts. ... Its potential of illusionism is far greater than that of sculpture, for it can suggest objects possessing colour, texture and temperature, filling a space and, by implication, filling the entire world."

JOHN BERGER²

ABU'L FAZL, THE COMPANION AND BIOGRAPHER of the Mughal emperor Akbar, writing towards the end of the sixteenth century, and John Berger, a leading exponent of the Marxist-inspired 'New Art History' of the 1970s, are two commentators on art not normally considered to have had very much in common. But both writers, while observing the high degree of illusionism in post-Renaissance European art, point out how this quality can lead, amid the realism, to a sense of magic and of wonder.

Experimenting with new media, including oil paint, and grappling with the illusionistic styles of Western art were among the dominant and persistent concerns of artists working in colonial India. Such concerns may not be the only sources of interest in their work to engage the modern viewer, as we look today from changed historical and cultural perspectives. But we know from their own writings that these concerns were prominent matters for artists themselves. Engaged in a conscious and ongoing attempt to fashion a new art that could be at once both modern and Indian, they pondered whether to embrace or to reject Western materials, methods and styles; and, if these were to be accepted, how they were to be applied to Indian subjects. The repeated questions never led to a single agreed answer. The decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw many different answers, and correspondingly many differently nuanced solutions.

This essay examines some schools of Indian painting that supplied their own answers. Each in its time was strong aesthetically and numerically but is often overlooked today. Though known to specialists, they have received little discussion in art-historical writing. They might be said to constitute missing chapters in the story of modern Indian



Fig. 42: EARLY BENGAL SCHOOL, *Annapurna Feeding Lord Shiva*, Oil on canvas, 29 x 23 in.



Fig. 81: FRANCIS NEWTON SOUZA, *Pope and Pilot*, Oil on board, 36 x 50, Signed and dated, 1956



Fig. 132: SOMNATH HORE, *Mother and child*, Bronze, Height 15 in.



Fig. 133: SOMNATH HORE, *Seated man*, Bronze, Height 9 in.