When was Modernism?

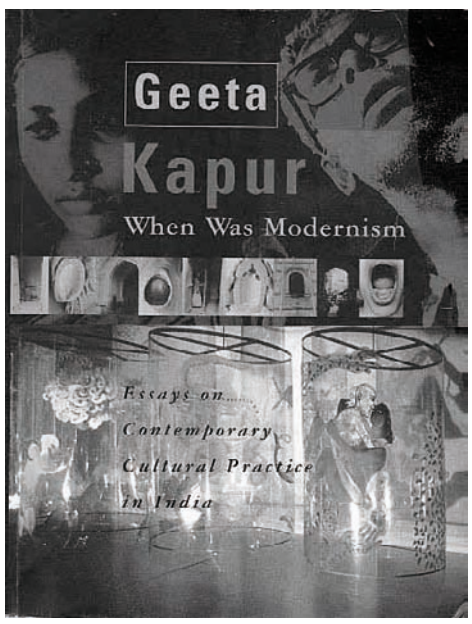
When was Modernism? is a compilation of thirteen essays, many of which have been reworked for this volume and which themselves are the result of over two decades of research. Never mind that many essays were published previously (between 1987 and 1997), as there is no denying that the compilation is more than a sum of it parts. _When was Modernism?_ constitutes a body of scholarship that reflects Geeta Kapur's deep and sustained examination of and thinking on twentieth-century, South Asian, cultural practices.

Asian Art > South Asia

By Deepali Dewan

The first set of essays on 'Artists and Artwork' concentrates on the lives and work of Amrita Sher-Gil, Nalini Malani, Arpita Singh, Nasreen Mohamadi, K. G. Subramanyan, and Raja Ravi Varma. In the second, 'Film/Narratives', the cinematic production of Ritwik Ghatak *(Jukti Takko ar Gappo)*, Satyajit Ray (*Apu* and *Devi*), and V. Damle and S. Fattelal *(Sant Tukaram)* are examined. Lastly a broad range of artists' works are scrutinized in order to arrive at a complex understanding of Indian cultural practice during the course of the twentieth century. More specifically, Kapur examines the engagement in Indian art with the 'traditional', the 'modern', nationalism, internationalism, and globalization. Kapur's intellectual range is impressive and is exactly what a proper examination of modern Indian art requires. She gracefully and skilfully manoeuvers between Indian artists and non-Indian ones such as Frida Kahlo, Matisse, and Anges Martin. Further, she draws from a broad theoretical background, such as the work of Frederick Jameson, Homi Bhabha, and Raymond Williams – from whose work the title *When was Modernism?* derives. The essays do not follow a chronological or geographical sequence, nor do they limit the discussion of a particular artist or concept in neatly bound chapters. Rather, the essays 'spill into one another', cross-referencing to data from each other, thus reflecting how Kapur's thinking in one essay is informed by her research in another. Together the essays add up to a profound articulation about twentieth-century cultural practice in India by one of the most exceptional thinkers in the field today.

Kapur's title is a provocative question that sets the stage for the book. It alludes to the multiple meanings that the term 'modernism' can signify. On the one hand, Kapur acknowledges, modernism is a term that claims universality yet comes out of the particular context of Western art history. As a specific period in the development of Western art, it nurtured an avant-garde that went against the academic establishment supported by the state. In these terms, Kapur points out, India has no avant-garde since the rebellious and progressive features of artistic development were channeled into the nationalist cause. So, Kapur asks, 'when, if the avant-garde has been thus blocked or deferred or deviated by what one may call the national cause, was modernism in India art?' (Kapur, p. 300). This question does two things. First, it inherently demands questioning the definition of the term 'modernism,' revealing its eurocentric terms of reference. Second, having thus cleared the space for other possible definitions, it allows one to look for other types of modernisms in the Indian context.



In the Indian context, Kapur argues, 'modernism' forms a double discourse with nationalism (see: p. 288) and the national and the modern are in constant dialogue. Nationalist art, for example, promoted the use of traditional or indigenous motifs. Modernism had constructed a paradoxical view of such motifs – sometimes rendering them as progressive signs, at other times subverting them as conservative and traditional (see: p. 293). Yet, this paradoxical position is a marker of India's particular form of modernism: 'Given India's sustained struggle for independence and the precise mode of its decolonization, its cultural life is alternately conservative and progressive' (p. 341). The relationship between the notion of tradition and nationalism and modernism is a particular feature of cultural development in post-colonial societies. Kapur demonstrates that the nature of this relationship changes with time and in each artist's work. The collection of essays carefully maps out the different articulations in a wide range of artists' works. In the last essays, Kapur begins to trace various disjunctures in contemporary artistic practice in order to name the possible avant-gardes-in-formation in the South Asian context.

The book is dense and partly deliberately so. In several essays, Kapur's rhetorical form follows her subject matter, communicating ideas about an artist's work not only through what she says, but also in the way the words are strung together. Yet this density is also a disadvantage: complex sentences that include references without explanation make it seem Kapur is talking to herself rather than to the larger audience for whom the book is intended. In several instances, extensive footnotes explaining the background of an artist in plain language would better have been included in the main body of text. Nonetheless, battling through the tough parts is a worthwhile enterprise – the product in the end is a rich and complex discussion of twentieth-century cultural practice in South Asia.

When was Modernism? is the most advanced and mature examination of contemporary culture practice in India that I have yet read. Geeta Kapur truly stands out in her field and finds herself virtually alone in terms of the breadth and depth of her scholarship. Outstanding enough that is, to compel Tapati Guha-Thakurta to write that '[Kapur] has been the singular dominant presence in the field - to a point that her writings alone seem to have constituted the whole field of modern Indian art theory and criticism...' (quoted on back cover, from *Biblio*, May-June 2001). *When was Modernism?* is required reading for art historians of South Asia wanting to expand the survey course to the modern period and for art historians who want to expand the modern art survey beyond the 'West'. Furthermore, it should be read by all the humanities and social science disciplines to consider how South Asian cultural practice in the twentieth century can contribute new insight into the complexities of modernity, nationalism, post-colonialism, and globalization.

- Kapur, Geeta, *When Was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, New Delhi: Tulika Press, (2000 & 2001), pp. 454, ISBN: 81-85229-48-1

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