

Articulating the Modern Neo-Tantrism and the Art of P.T. Reddy

Asian Art >
South Asia

The recent narrative of twentieth-century art in India, resting upon a new interpretation of the mid-century, post-Independence growth of Indian modern art, traces a large arc from the nationalists at Santiniketan in Bengal to the diasporic concerns of the 1990s. This article presents a case study of a particular artist, P. T. Reddy (1915-1996), whose role within that story of modernism is explored so as to understand Indian art of the mid- and late twentieth century as India grappled with Independence, Partition, and the defining of a new 'India'.

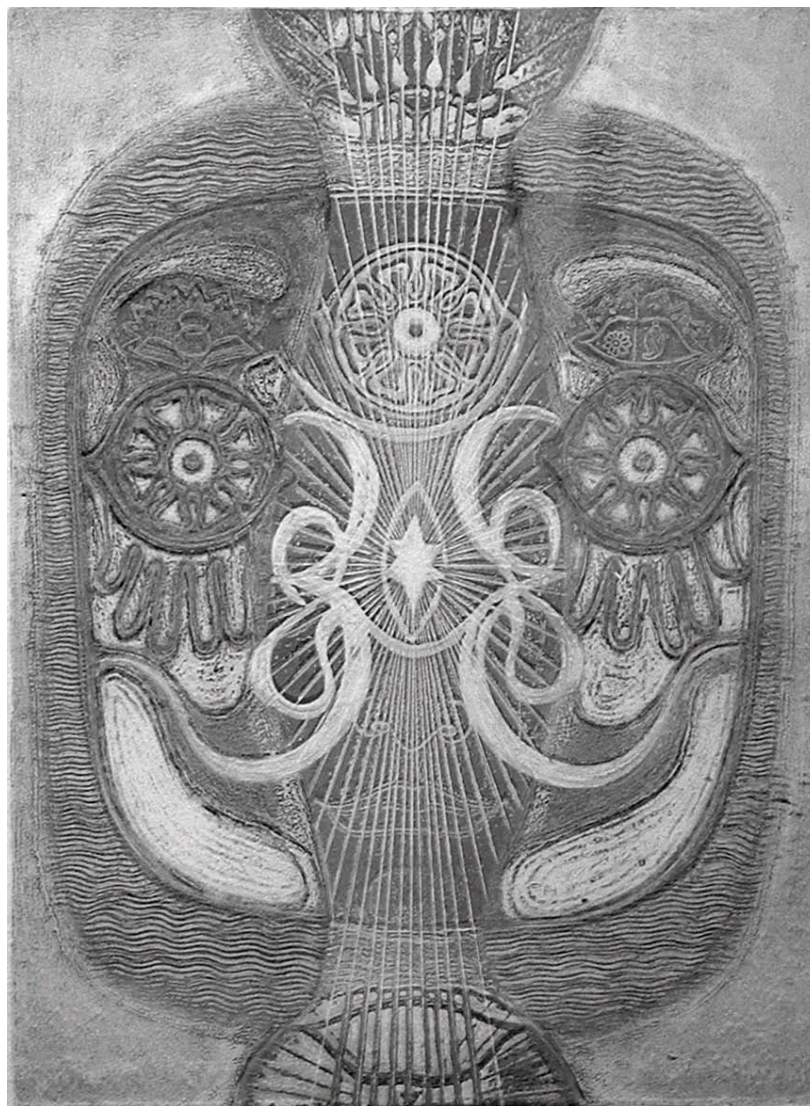
By Rebecca M. Brown

Struggling with the questions of the 'Indian essence' in art versus an international modernism, as did many of his contemporaries, in his Tantric-inspired work Reddy presents his location for modernism. Art historian and critic Jaya Appasamy aptly termed him, a 'transitional modern', working across the 1947 politico-temporal marker (Appasamy 1972:6-9). If modernism in India is a struggle with and against the norms of a hegemonic Western pattern of modernity, then it is not surprising that artists of this period 'have seemed to be stuck at the crossing-over', for 'they are living out the actual material transition' (Kapur 2000:302). Reddy's work allows us to see that transition clearly and to put some detail to the broad narrative of Indian modernist struggles.

After training at the Sir J.J. School of Art in Bombay during the late 1930s and early 1940s, Reddy stopped painting to join the Quit India movement, only to return to art in the mid-1950s. This hiatus separates him from his famous contemporaries of the Bombay Progressive group such as M.F. Husain and F.N. Souza. Soon after Reddy returned to art, artists such as Biren De (b. 1926) and G. R. Santosh (1929-1997), began working in tantric modes. The so-called 'neo-tantric' art movement looked to Buddhist and Hindu tantrism for its esoteric, abstract symbols and re-made this tantric language into a contemporary Indian modernism. Neo-tantrism appealed not only to Indian contemporaries but also to Western audiences, as it represented an 'authentic' art form that escaped purely formalistic aspects of 1960s Western art.

In tantric art artists conceived a space for something deemed impossible: a truly Indian modernism. The question that arises is: how do a group of cultures that have 'not yet' arrived at a modern stage achieve modernity? (Chakrabarty 2000:49-50) In the case of art history, the gap between the modern and the 'not yet' is reinforced by the romanticization and valorization of the native, primitive, indigenous Other as a source for artistic inspiration. Indian modern artists saw in tantra the possibility of an Other that was seen as authentic, spiritual, and universal, just as Picasso saw that authenticity in Malian culture. While an Indian modern was not achievable if pursued along the same lines as Western modernism, Reddy found that the hidden nature of tantric imagery fit perfectly with the elusive modernism he sought.

Two of Reddy's yantra-inspired images may serve as an introduction to his works. Rather than drawing on full-blown Tibetan mandala imagery, it is simpler yantra forms that provide Reddy with the framework for his symbolic language.



P. T. Reddy,
Beginning Sound,
n.d.

In *Srec Chekre* (1971, fig. 1), Reddy sets out from the traditional Sri Yantra form: an architectonic square frame housing a series of circular lotus forms, culminating in the centre with the overlapping triangles of the yantra itself. He adds to this foundation a Devanagari 'sri' in the centre, re-emphasizing both his title and the form of the yantra. Finally, two figures overlay the Sri Yantra, their heads opposite one another at top and bottom, their bodies joined in sexual union in the centre. Reddy arranged their arms in a circular fashion reinforcing the lotus form, but their legs are not symmetrical: the legs of the bottom figure form a 'V' with the feet flanking the head of the top figure while the legs of the upper figure bend at the knees and splay outward, echoing the two directions of the triangle of the Sri Yantra.

In tantric symbolism, a female triangle points downward and a male one points up. Their overlap indicates the sexual and spiritual union articulated more directly in Reddy's piece. Likewise, the 'sri' spelled out in the centre of the image would be unnecessary in a tantric context, where the iconography of the Sri Yantra is known. Reddy articulates the geometric forms and architectonic elements of the Sri Yantra more fully for a wider audience, clarifying the abstract symbolism of union for the uninitiated viewer. At the same time, he undermines the neat geometry of the Sri Yantra, for the human form cannot conform precisely to the circle of the lotus or the symmetry of the triangle. Reddy's work acknowledges messiness in the translation of tantric form to contemporary contexts.

While these types of images within Reddy's oeuvre are directly related to existing yantra forms, Reddy also moves away from given iconographies to create his own. Interestingly, it is when Reddy experiments with some of the conceptual aspects of tantric philosophy that his work moves toward a freer combination of symbols.

In *Beginning Sound* (n.d., fig. 2), Reddy works with the relationship between sound, particularly the mantra, and form. (This concept is discussed in: Mookerjee 1966:15-20). The overarching form eludes the shape of the yantra, instead filling an organic yet symmetrical shape reminiscent of micro-

scopic cell imagery. A central, reflected devanagari 'om' anchors the composition, and supports an eye or lotus form. Penetrating this eye is a vertical, blue phallic swath, re-making that central 'eye' into a vaginal yoni form. The phallic lingam with the yoni echoes Reddy's focus on ultimate union of Purusha (male) and Prakriti (female) energies. Two eyes flank this symbolic representation of the lingam-yoni, so that the phallic form bisects a face, illustrating both union and the deep connection to the human body. Reddy demonstrates the centrality of the body for tantrism, both in its gross form and in its subtle form.

This image thus attempts to capture the way sound works in the context of tantra through both its symbolic language and its shape. Eschewing both the yantra and lotus framing, Reddy offers a fluid mapping of the edges, giving an impression of an acoustic wave. The symmetry of the image echoes sound vibrations, and the curvatures generate both an organic quality and an all-encompassing element of growth. Reddy takes tantric thought as his guide, thus using symbols in a new way and remaking the yantra form.

For both neo-tantric artists and Western modernists, the tension between the spiritual and the material found expression through symbols that defied particular iconographic or culturally-grounded systems and instead evoked broader universal expressions of spirituality, patterns in the universe, and sense perception. Reddy's use of symbols, connection to a spiritual system in tantra, and interpretation of sound all play into similar ideas. Articulating the relationship between spiritualism and materialism forms one major part of the modernist struggle; this relationship is in many ways resolved by tantric thought, one reason that it held such appeal for both Western and Indian culture of the 1960s and 1970s.

Reddy still treads the problematic knife-edge of the modern, teetering between the pattern of looking to a native tradition (tantra) while creating an abstracted, personal symbolic vision. He does not escape the problematic position of mimicking the moves of Western modernity – he looks to the 'primitive' or in this case a 'hidden' culture in order to build the modern. Reddy was not afraid to delve into the problematic modern despite his difficult position as an Indian artist on the margins, or his position as an artist of transition, following Appasamy. Reddy bases his modernism on a thoughtful appropriation of tantrism in order to bridge existing dualities: the abstract and the figurative, the microcosm and the macrocosm, the secular and the sacred, the otherworldly and the mundane, and not least, the Indian and the modern. Thus, it is a modernity situated within rather than outside the mainstream. Producing art within this paradox of circularity, Reddy's tantric works succeed in developing one Indian modernist aesthetic, revealing an Indian modernism out of something formerly 'hidden'. ◀

References

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Both images courtesy of the Teaching Collection at St. Mary's College of Maryland, St. Mary's City, Maryland.

P. T. Reddy,
Srec Chekre, 1971.