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An expert guide to 10 radical 20th-century modern art movements you may not know about, but definitely should

Author of *Global Art* Jessica Lack introduces 10 pioneering modern art movements born out of political engagement, decolonisation, marginalisation and conflict

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5 SEPTEMBER 2022



Emiliano di Cavalcanti (1897-1976), *Sonhos do carnaval*, 1955. Oil on canvas. Sold for \$782,500 on 27 May 2011 at Christie's in New York. Artwork: © DACS 2020

## Bengal School, India and Bangladesh, 1900s

In 1909, the Sri Lankan cultural theorist Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) wrote: ‘It is the weakness of our national movement that we do not love India; we love suburban England, we love the comfortable bourgeois prosperity that is to be some day established when we have learned enough science and forgotten enough art to successfully compete with Europe.’

His message — that India had become enslaved to the imperial power — was inspired by political events that began in the northeast Indian province of Bengal in the late 1800s, where the struggle for Indian independence was at its most critical.

Central to the anti-imperialist debate were artists based at the Government School of Art in Kolkata. Led by Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951), nephew of the Renaissance poet and thinker Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), the group promoted a mystical modern art that drew on techniques from the East and rejected Western influence.



Abdur Rahman Chughtai (1894–1975), *Endless Journey; Chinese Girl*. Etchings on paper. Sold for \$7,500 on 30 June 2020 at Christie's Online

Tagore's pan-Asian outlook drew inspiration from art across the wider continent, in particular Japanese ink-wash painting, which contributed to the dream-like quality of the Bengal School

images. Abdur Rahman Chughtai's *Endless Journey; Chinese Girl* exemplifies this fusion of Eastern influences.

According to Nishad Avari, Head of Sale, *South Asian Modern + Contemporary Art*, 'The movement had a profound influence on artistic production in South Asia, particularly on *Nandalal Bose* (1882-1966), whose drawings of Gandhi were fundamental in mythologising the anti-colonialist as a humble, but resolute servant of the people.'

Later artists who were inspired by the Bengal School's powerful symbolism included the Indian modernist *Ganesh Pyne*.

## **Stridentism, Mexico, 1920s**

One night in December 1921, a manifesto appeared on the walls of Mexico City. Its rhetoric was so provocative that it seemed to seethe with the pugnacious energy of a prize fighter. Written by a young, subversive poet called Manuel Maples Arce (1900-1981), the manifesto exhorted Mexican intellectuals to seize the day, and stop living in the past.

'Death to Father Hidalgo, Down with San Rafael and San Lázaro!' wrote the poet, referring to the great hero of Mexican independence and two revered saints. The text also quoted Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's (1876-1944) Futurist manifesto — 'An automobile in motion is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace'.

This was the birth of Stridentism, a literary and artistic movement that incorporated European modernist trends, like Futurism, with Mexican Art Nouveau and Art Deco.



Jean Charlot (1898-1979), *Landscape, 1930*. Oil on canvas. Sold for \$56,250 on 21 November 2015 at Christie's in New York. Artwork: © DACS 2020

The group were left-leaning and participated in workers' demonstrations, but unlike Diego Rivera and the artists of the Muralist movement, the Stridentists refused to romanticise the Mexican Revolution. Instead, they were committed social reformers who took their artistic inspiration from folklore and Pre-Columbian art.

The Stridentists were based in a commune in Veracruz, from where they published the magazine *Horizonte*. The building was attacked in 1927, after which the movement dissolved.

## **Anthropophagia, Brazil, 1920s-1930s**

In 1928, the poet Oswald de Andrade (1890-1954) sought to scandalise Brazilian society out of its cultural lethargy with a provocative ideology called anthropophagy (literally meaning 'cannibalism'). Arguing that Brazil's greatest strength in the past had been in the devouring of its colonial oppressors to achieve autonomy, he declared it was Brazil's duty to do the same with European culture in order to create a uniquely Brazilian modernism.

Andrade's wife, Tarsila do Amaral (1886-1973), was one of the leading artists of the group. She had studied in Paris with the French modernist Fernand Léger (1881-1955), where she had discovered the anarchic sensibilities of the Parisian avant-garde.



Emiliano di Cavalcanti (1897-1976), *Sonhos do carnaval*, 1955. Oil on canvas. 51 x 63 in (130 x 160 cm). Sold for \$782,500 on 26-27 May 2011 at Christie's in New York. Artwork: © DACS 2020

These ideas were incorporated into the Anthropophagia aesthetic, which was typified by an industrial primitivism — flat cityscapes and buildings — with bold colour and imaginative, dream-like imagery.

The Anthropophagia movement had a huge impact on later artists, most notably those associated with Tropicália, who emerged in Brazil in the late 1950s.

## Négritude, France, 1930s

The influential Négritude movement began in Paris in the inter-war years with three poets from the African diaspora. Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), Léon Damas (1912–78) and Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001) started a student journal called *L'Étudiant Noir* (The Black Student). The first issue was published in March 1935, and featured a robust and caustic essay by Césaire in response to Western readings of black culture and literature.



Ben Enwonwu (1921-1994), *Untitled*, 1967. 50 x 40 in (127 x 101.5 cm). Oil on canvas. Sold for £320,750 on 28 June 2018 at Christie's in London. Artwork: Courtesy of The Ben Enwonwu Foundation

In 1920s Paris, an interest in black culture had become highly fashionable. European avant-garde artists scrutinised and appropriated art, music and dance from Africa, developing their own forms

of modernism in the process.

The Négritude artists and writers turned this on its head, declaring Africa and its diaspora to be the home of Surrealism and developing their own marvellous form. Those artists associated with the movement included **Ben Enwonwu** (1917-94), **Wifredo Lam** (1902-82) and **Ronald Moody** (1900-84).

During the years of and around the Second World War, many Négritude artists and writers left Europe, taking the concept out into the wider world. Césaire went to Martinique, where he established a Négritude magazine. Senghor headed to Senegal where he became president in 1960, and instigated a government-wide scheme to promote Négritude across the country through academies devoted to art, music and theatre. His writings, together with the poems of Damas and Césaire, inspired many later revolutionaries, including the liberation leader Amílcar Cabral.

## **Egyptian Surrealism, Egypt, 1940s**

Art and Freedom was an Egyptian Surrealist group that emerged in Cairo in the mid 1930s. In 1937 it published a manifesto called *Long Live Degenerate Art*, which voiced solidarity with the avant-garde artists and writers being persecuted in Nazi Germany.



Ramsès Younan (Egyptian, 1913-1966), *Contre le mur*, 1944. Oil on canvas. Sold for \$387,000 on 23 March 2019 at Christie's in Dubai

Founded by Georges Henein (1914-1973), a revolutionary Egyptian poet who wrote polemics on the autocratic nature of Egypt's cultural institutions, Art and Freedom devoted much of its output to highlighting the extreme inequalities of Egyptian society. The paintings produced by group members included violent depictions of deformed and dismembered bodies, created in part to expose the rot in Egyptian society, and later in horror at the Second World War.

The group stood against order, logic and beauty and initially drew on the European model of Surrealism, which had been introduced to them by the poet André Breton (1896-1966) and the photographer Lee Miller (1907-77). Later, they forged their own distinctive character known as Subjective Realism, which was free from any formal style or subject matter.

Art and Freedom's progressive ideology influenced many painters and poets, including the British-based artist and critic Victor Musgrave and the photographer Ida Kar.

## The Calcutta Group, India and Bangladesh, 1940s-1950s



In 1943 eight ambitious young artists met in Kolkata to discuss a crisis in Indian painting. Many of the artists had trained with or been influenced by the Bengal School, but had become disillusioned with the movement's inability to recognise advances in modern art.

As committed revolutionaries and anti-colonialists, these artists also believed that India's art needed to reflect the state of the nation.

'The Calcutta Group core members, Subho Tagore (1912-85), Gopal Ghose (1913-80) and Paritosh Sen (1918-2008) were brought together by their common concerns about recent socio-political disasters in the region,' says Christie's specialist Nishad Avari. 'These included famine, rioting and the refugee crisis that followed the partition of the subcontinent.'



Gopal Ghose (1913-1980), *Untitled*, 1959; two works on paper

'The time to preoccupy oneself with gods and goddesses was over,' wrote the sculptor Prodosh Dasgupta. 'The artist could no longer be blind to his age and surroundings, his people and society.'

The Calcutta Group sought to democratise modern art, freeing it from elitism. Early works were Social Realist in theme and depicted the hardships endured by the people, but soon the artists began incorporating influences from Europe, taking inspiration from Picasso, Matisse and Brâncusi. The two fiery pastels by Gopal Ghose (above) reflect the group's synthesis of realist themes and European Expressionism.

## Progressive Artists' Group, India 1940s-1950s

The influential yet short-lived Progressive Artists' Group (PAG) was formed in Mumbai in 1947 during the year of Indian Independence. Its principal founder and spokesperson was the provocative artist **Francis Newton Souza** (1924-2002), a charismatic and rebellious individual

who had been expelled from art school for making pornographic drawings and criticising Western academic teaching.



Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002), *Untitled*, 1984; two works on paper. Mixed media and chemical alteration on magazine paper. Sold for \$10,000 on 30 June 2020 at Christie's Online

Having come into contact with the Calcutta Group, and finding inspiration in its outspoken desire for an all-Indian art, Souza and his friend Sayed Haider Raza (1922–2016) decided to form the PAG. Stylistically, Avari says, their art ‘combined avant-garde styles with Indian subject matter, and was alive with religious and mythological symbolism’.

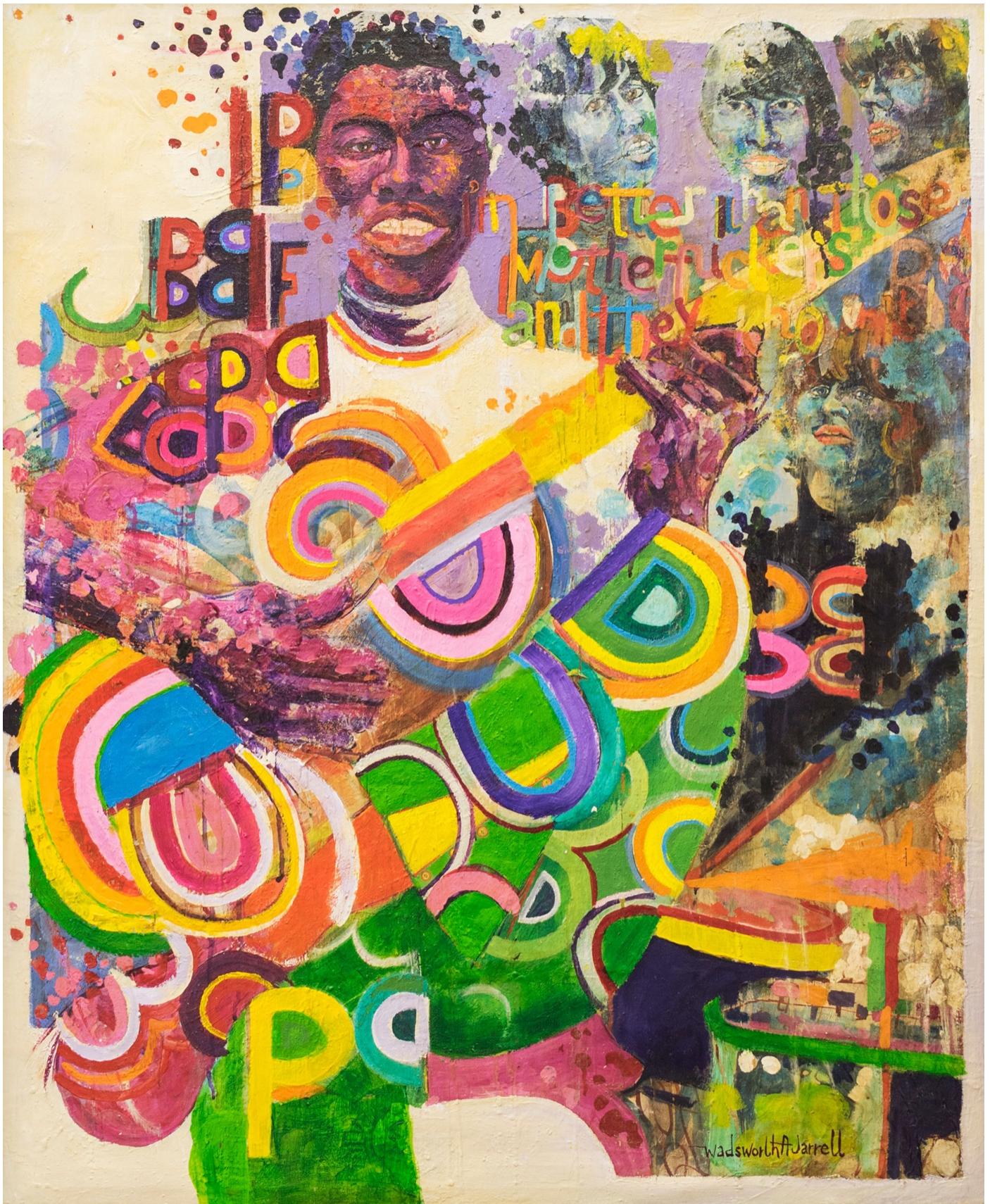
Souza and his fellow collaborators met frequently at the Chetana Restaurant in Mumbai, the bohemian centre of the city. In the optimistic atmosphere that sprang from independence, discussions took place with the nationalist poet Mulk Raj Anand and the metaphysical writer Raja Rao about what a new modern art should look like.

The Progressive Artist Group’s last exhibition was in 1951, with Souza and Raza having moved to Europe by this time. Another key member, Maqbool Fida Husain (1915–2011) was driven into exile in London in the 1990s by repeated death threats from Hindu fundamentalists.

## **Africobra, United States, 1960s**

Of the great Black Power art groups in the United States, few were more influential than the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (Africobra), the Chicago-based movement formed in

1968 to breathe a new aesthetic into the world following the assassinations of civil rights activists Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.



Wadsworth Jarrell (b. 1929), *I Am Better than those Motherfuckers and They Know It*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, gold foil and silver foil on cardboard. Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta

In his essay *Ten in Search of a Nation*, founder member **Jeff Donaldson** (1932–2004) set out what this new black aesthetic should be: one that would combine influences from Africa with those from America. Images would have rhythm and be inspired by African music and movement; there would be a vibrant multi-coloured palette that corresponded to the flavours of the soft-drink Kool-Aid; and the art should gleam — ‘we want the things to shine, to have the rich lustre of a just-washed “fro” and spit-shined shoes.’

The aesthetic was called ‘surreal’ — it was celebratory and contained positive messages for the black community that promoted empowerment. While the group continued to operate throughout the latter part of the 20th century, it has only recently come to prominence thanks to exhibitions such as *Soul of a Nation*.

## New Vision Group, Iraq, 1960s-1970s

In the late 1960s, a vibrant art scene emerged in Iraq. The socialist Ba’ath party, which had assumed power after the revolution in 1968, established a well-supported cultural system, out of which emerged the New Vision Group. Founded by the painter **Dia Al-Azzawi** (b. 1939), its followers espoused the ideas of Pan-Arab unity and called for a new Arabic modernism that connected artists ideologically and culturally.



Dia Al-Azzawi (b. 1939), *A Wolf Howls: Memories of a Poet*, 1968. Oil on canvas. 84 x 104 cm. Courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation, photographed by Capital D

Pan-Arabism was a political and cultural ideology that first gained traction during the colonial era as a way of unifying and modernising the Arabic-speaking world. For artists, it was a potent concept that could help develop a new form of Arabic art.

The New Vision Group promoted a form of abstract painting that incorporated the Arabic script — a style known as Huroufiyah, which they believed symbolised Pan-Arabism’s unifying ideals. Unfortunately, the brief blossoming of the arts in Iraq soon wilted as the Ba’athist regime evolved into a dictatorship. The group had its last exhibition in Beirut in 1972 before disbanding, with Al-Azzawi going into exile in Britain.

## **Fight Censorship, United States 1970s**

Anita Steckel (1930–2012) was a woman of action. The feminist artist and former girlfriend of Marlon Brando confronted society’s hypocrisies with a razor-sharp humour. In 1973, she founded the Fight Censorship Group after attempts were made to shut down her solo show at the Rockland Community College in Suffern, New York. The show featured erotic imagery including, most controversially of all, erect penises.



Anita Steckel (1930-2012), *Nostalgia, Giant Woman on New York*, 1973. Photo collage and pencil on paper. Brooklyn Museum, New York. Photography by Jason Mandella. Courtesy of Suzanne Geiss, New York © Anita Steckel

At the time, Steckel was one of a number of American artists who was representing sex from a female perspective. Her response to attempts by the local authorities to censor the show was to form a feminist group that would fight discrimination against sexual art made by women. She sent a letter to the press announcing her intention, arguing that 'if the erect penis is wholesome enough to go into women, then it is more than wholesome enough to go into the greatest art museums'.

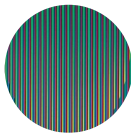
Those who signed the petition included Louise Bourgeois, Hannah Wilke and Joan Semmel. The fight came at a critical time, when historians and curators were re-examining the history of Western art and raising questions about the lack of female representation.

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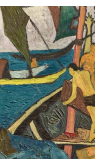
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