



Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930–1990

By Sonal Khullar

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The purpose of art, the Paris-trained artist Amrita Sher-Gil wrote in 1936, is to "create the forms of the future" by "draw[ing] its inspiration from the present." Through art, new worlds can be imagined into existence as artists cultivate forms of belonging and networks of association that oppose colonialist and nationalist norms. Drawing on Edward Said's notion of "affiliation" as a critical and cultural imperative against empire and nation-state, *Worldly Affiliations* traces the emergence of a national art world in twentieth-century India and emphasizes its cosmopolitan ambitions and orientations. Sonal Khullar focuses on four major Indian artists—Sher-Gil, Maqbool Fida Husain, K. G. Subramanyan, and Bhupen Khakhar—situating their careers within national and global histories of modernism and modernity. Through a close analysis of original artwork, archival materials, artists' writing, and period criticism, Khullar provides a vivid historical account of the state and stakes of artistic practice in India from the late colonial through postcolonial periods. She discusses the shifting terms of Indian artists' engagement with the West—an urgent yet fraught project in the wake of British colonialism—and to a lesser extent with African and Latin American cultural movements such as Négritude and Mexican muralism. Written in a lucid and engaging style, this book links artistic developments in India to newly emerging histories of modern art in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Drawing on original research in the twenty-first-century art world, Khullar shows the persistence of modernism in contemporary art from India and compares its function to Walter Benjamin's ruin. In the work of contemporary artists from India, modernism is the ground from which to imagine futures. This richly illustrated study juxtaposes little-known, rarely seen, or previously unpublished works of modern and contemporary art with historical works, popular or mass-reproduced images, and documentary photographs. Its innovative art program renders newly visible the aesthetic and political achievements of Indian modernism.

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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

“Beautifully written, compellingly argued, Sonal Khullar’s book not only offers a major contribution to the study of Indian modernism, it also advances our methodological understanding of modern art at large. A vital addition to an exciting body of emerging art-historical scholarship that promises to fundamentally transform received ideas on modernism in the coming years.”—Iftikhar Dadi, Cornell University

“An important intervention in the history of artistic modernism in twentieth-century India. Khullar makes the critical move of connecting these artists with the larger ‘art worlds’ in which they stand—worlds constituted by the institutions of art education, art criticism, art collecting, art exhibitions, and the forming of new art publics.”—Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata

“Sonal Khullar makes her debut with an original and provocative work on India’s role in twentieth-century global art. She forces us to rethink many of the issues one takes for granted, based on her fresh reading of four iconic figures: Amrita Sher-Gil, M.F. Husain, K.G. Subramanyan, and Bhupen Khakhar. Provocatively argued, this book is a must-read for art students, critics, and all those who are interested in modern Indian art, as well as all concerned with global modernism.”—Partha Mitter, University of Sussex

“A welcome offering in the emerging field of twentieth-century South Asian art; it presents a rich rethinking of Indian artists’ relation to modernity, postcoloniality, and the global art world. In addition to its important contribution to the discipline of art history, this work will speak to scholars in literary studies, gender and sexuality studies, history, anthropology, museum studies, and anyone with a wider concern with global, transnational histories.”—Rebecca M. Brown, Johns Hopkins University

“Khullar is a wonderful storyteller. In this original and persuasive study, she develops Edward Said’s term, “affiliations” to describe India’s modern and contemporary art as the unmaking and remaking of the dominant tropes of modernism, and the regimes of global capitalism to which Indian artists were exposed through British colonial rule, world travels, education, and the cosmopolitan culture of Indian cities. Art making becomes world making in Khullar’s account as she promotes her historical method as a rigorously conceived dialectic of past and present, and explores in contemporary art the presence and persistence of mid-century modernism as a “ruin” of global histories.”—Ajay J. Sinha, Mount Holyoke College, author of *Imagining Architects: Creativity in the Religious Monuments of India*

About the Author

Sonal Khullar is Assistant Professor of South Asian Art at the University of Washington, Seattle.

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