



Research Paper

Unearthing M.V. Dhurandhar's Influence: Exploring the Socio-Cultural Significance of His Paintings and Their Impact on Indian Art

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ABSTRACT

M.V. Dhurandhar, a renowned Indian artist, left an indelible mark on the world of Indian art through his unique style, technique, and thematic choices. This paper aims to delve into Dhurandhar's artistic contributions, focusing on his socio-cultural significance and the lasting impact his paintings have had on Indian art. Dhurandhar's works are considered a distinct style that blends traditional Indian aesthetics with Western artistic techniques, creating a unique visual language. His thematic choices often reflect the socio-political environment of his time, portraying everyday life, social customs, and significant historical events with a keen observational eye. By considering his style, technique, and themes, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of Dhurandhar's artistic prowess and the socio-cultural context in which his works were created. This exploration not only highlights Dhurandhar's role in shaping modern Indian art but also underscores the enduring relevance of his artistic vision in contemporary discourse.

KEYWORDS: Themes, Techniques, Impact, Cultural Context and Contribution.

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I. Introduction:

The history of Indian art is rich and diverse, stretching back to ancient times, but a significant transformation in India's visual culture began in the latter half of the nineteenth century with the advent of Company-Style paintings. This period, coinciding with British colonial rule, saw a dominance of Western artistic expressions and techniques. Wealthy Indian patrons, princely states, and native painters began to incorporate Western styles into their work. As members of royal families, industrialists, and social reformists traveled abroad, they encountered Western technology, industry, and art, leading to the dissemination of British expertise and knowledge throughout India. This exposure spurred local artists and artisans to adapt, with many successfully integrating Western styles, mediums, and techniques into their work. This era also marked the increasing popularity of oil paints as a medium in Indian art (Howes, 2014).

The journey of modern Indian art began with Early Bengal Paintings, traditional Kalighat paintings, and chromolithographs from the Calcutta Art Studio. It then expanded to Maharashtra, showcasing the contributions of significant regional painters. Artists from various regions explored similar themes, uniquely representing jewellery, costumes, and expressions influenced by social practices, cultural contexts, and geographical boundaries. The exploration continued into southern India, focusing on Travancore, where the Western Academic style art by artists like Cheduvaranga Naidoo, SekharaWarrier, and Raja Ravi Varma gained popularity. In Thanjavur, traditional arts encountered modern printing presses and coloured boxes of Sivakasi, thanks to artists like C. KondiahRaju and C.G. Ramanujam. G.V. Venkatesh Rao popularized depictions of deities such as Rama and Krishna through lithographs (Fig. – 1), while Mysore court painter K. Kesavayya immortalized people through his portraits. Traditional Indian faces adapted European features, and images of Indian Gods were retouched and printed in Germany, England, and Italy. Scenes like Krishna dancing with Gopis in Italian castles and Dattatreya adopting a muscular physique exemplified the blend of realism introduced by Westerners, which was then mastered by Indian artists (Guha-Thakurta, 1992).



Fig – 1

Venolola, 1922, Krishna Artwork –G V Venkatesh Rao - Raja Ravi Varma Press

Retrieve from: <https://www.tallengestore.com/products/venolola-krishna-artwork-g-v-venkatesh-rao-raja-ravi-varma-press-vintage-indian-art-print-art-prints>

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Bengal experienced a surge in the Revivalist Movement as a counter-response to British academic influence. This movement, a crucial component of Indian Modernism, focused on rejuvenating Indian culture, politics, and art. It emphasized the revival of folk art, Hindu symbols, and a celebration of humanism. Renowned artists like Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Sunayani Devi, MukulDey, and Asit Kumar Haldar were pivotal figures in this movement.

The Revivalist Movement aimed to bolster domestic industry and art by promoting distinctively Indian styles. The conceptualization of a new Indian art and aesthetic is often attributed to Abanindranath Tagore, emerging around the late 1800s—a period when European realism, particularly evident in Company paintings and the works of Raja Ravi Varma, dominated Indian art (Molcard, 2019).

Simultaneously, artists in Bombay were developing artwork that showcased a strong academic approach in technique and portrayal, while also highlighting indigenous themes. Among these artists, Mahadev Vishwanath Dhurandhar (1867-1944) stood out as a prominent figure. Dhurandhar skillfully blended academic realism with popular commercial art, drawing inspiration from Raja Ravi Varma (Bahulkar, 2023).

Mahadev Vishwanath Dhurandhar, an oriental realist, is best known for his illustrative series depicting the city of Bombay and its people, 'Women of India' (Fig. 2), scenes from Hindu mythology, and 'The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' (Fig. 3). He played a crucial role in shaping the early Indian art scene. In addition to being a notable painter working in various mediums, Dhurandhar was also a formidable arts educator and administrator, serving as the first Indian Director of the Sir J.J. School of Art from 1930.



Fig – 2

Illustration of a woman in a Pink Dress from PatharePrabhu community, Water Colour, from the 'Women of India' series, published in 1920. Illustrated by M.V. Dhurandhar. Retrieved from:

<https://artguide.artforum.com/artguide/dr-bhau-daji-lad-mumbai-city-museum-9324/m-v-dhurandhar-the-artist-as-chronicler-1867-1944-160721>



Fig - 3

Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam Series 01 (Poster), Water Colour, - M V Dhurandhar
<https://www.tallengestore.com/products/omar-khayyam-series-01-m-v-dhurandhar-indian-painting>

II. OBJECTIVES

This paper intends to carry out

- Socio-cultural significance representation through the brush of M.V. Dhurandhar
- Transition and impact of M.V. Dhurandhar's works in Indian art.

III. STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

After excelling in the intermediate grade examination at Rajaram High School, MahadevViswanath Dhurandhar received valuable guidance from artist AbalalRahiman in Kolhapur. He then journeyed to Bombay to take his matriculation examination and was captivated by the Sir J.J. School of Art's collection of Graeco-Roman statues. In 1890, he joined the school for advanced art education. By 1896, Dhurandhar was invited to join the Sir J.J. School of Art as a teacher, and in 1910, he became the Principal. By 1930, he had become the first Indian director of the art school. During this time, his individual and group exhibitions gained significant popularity across various societal groups (Nikam, 2023).

During his tenure at the school, Dhurandhar was influenced by European and British artists, owing to the predominantly British faculty. While Eastern art focused on line drawing, Western art was more pictorial, leading Indian students to emulate the European Academic Art form. Dhurandhar, a product of this influence, created notable works such as 'Women at Work' (Fig. 5), which earned him recognition, including the British Government Award in 1892 and a gold medal for 'Marriage Ceremony' (Fig. 7) in 1908. Over his lifetime, Dhurandhar produced over 5,000 paintings and 50,000 illustrations, receiving numerous gold and silver medals (Robert, 2021).

Dhurandhar developed a distinctive painting style that was more dramatic than that of Raja Ravi Varma. His 'Sarasvati in Red Nauvari' (Fig. 4) portrays the goddess seated gracefully on a peacock, playing a sitar instead of the traditional Sarasvateveena, with notable differences in the placement of the rosary and pothi book. However, Dhurandhar made an error by depicting more than 20 frets on the sitar. His depiction of Lakshmi during Samudramanthana (Fig. 6) shows her in a white saree instead of red and features over-ornamentation. The splashing water on the lotus with the blurred background of gods and demons performing Sagaramanthana adds vitality to the painting, suggesting Lakshmi has just emerged from the water.



Fig - 4

A rare Oleograph 'Shri VidhyaSaraswati' from Ravi Varma Press.

Original composition by M V Dhurandhar. Retrieved from:

<https://i.pinning.com/originals/01/00/61/010061dcffebef78447f35b132423747.jpg>



Fig – 5

‘A fishwife of Bombay’ from the ‘Women at Work’ series a watercolour by Rao Bahadur M. V. Dhurandhar, 1928. Retrieved from: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fishwife.jpg>



Fig – 6

SamudraManthan‘Laxmi’, Oleograph, M. V. Dhurandhar Oleograph, Raja Ravi Varma Press. Retrieved from: <https://www.beyondsquare.co.in/product/samudra-manthan-laxmi/>

Dhurandhar’s portrayal of women in nauvarisarees marks the early phase of naturalistic art in the Bombay school. In his painting ‘Hindu Marriage Ceremony’ (Fig. 7), he uniquely depicts over thirty PatharePrabhu ladies on a single canvas. His ability to depict numerous figures in a painting is uncommon, and his paintings often feature magnificent and grand backgrounds. Dhurandhar’s accurate portrayal of life forms is elegant and influenced by Mannerism, embodying an old colonial charm with a unique combination of European idealism and Indian aesthetics and symbolism (Dahisarkar, 2017).



Fig – 7

‘Scene of Hindu Marriage Ceremony’, M.V. Dhurandhar. Retrieved from: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:M.V._Dhurandhar%E2%80%99s_Scene_Of_Hindu_Marriage_Ceremony.jpg

Dhurandhar’s artistic style can be described as a fusion of academic realism and traditional Indian art forms. M.V. Dhurandhar pioneered the development of refined, classical applied art in India. Over thousands of years, Indian art has evolved through various visual styles. The influence of foreign invaders introduced different art forms, which eventually took root in the region. The early art forms of Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, Patna Kalam, and the local visual language merged over time to create a hybrid art form (Joshi, 2020).

This cultural synthesis resulted in art styles such as Mughal-Persian, Warli, Deccani, Rajasthani, Pahari, Basoli, Kangra, and Madhubani. Originally two-dimensional, these art forms transitioned into a three-dimensional form during the British colonial period when Greco-Roman influences were introduced. The work of academic artist M.V. Dhurandhar exemplifies this synthesis. However, the progressive art movement of 1947 completely wiped out the 'Bombay School,' which was heavily influenced by the British Empire during India's National Movement for Freedom. 'Shantiniketan' symbolized the national spirit in opposition to the 'Bombay School,' though it was largely a myth created by a few individuals to demonstrate their patriotism. When examining the career of M.V. Dhurandhar, who explored various art styles over nearly fifty years, his work stands out as authentically Indian and innovative in style (Joshi, 2020).

Dhurandhar was significantly influenced by renowned Indian painter Raja Ravi Varma and his works. He was drawn to Varma's art because of its realistic presentation of Indian mythological narratives. Dhurandhar skillfully combined Western techniques with Indian aesthetics, creating a visual language that resonated with both Indian and international audiences. His meticulous attention to detail, vibrant colours, and realistic portrayal of subjects showcased his technical expertise and ability to capture the essence of his subjects.

One of Dhurandhar's notable techniques was his use of light and shadow. He employed chiaroscuro to create depth and dimension in his paintings, infusing them with a sense of realism. By skillfully manipulating light, he accentuated the features of his subjects, bringing them to life on the canvas. Dhurandhar's art mainly focused on depicting scenes from Indian history, literature, and mythology in a Western academic style. The Kolhapur-born artist was considered the second most popular Indian artist in the first half of the twentieth century, after Raja Ravi Varma. His popularity among the masses, artistic finesse, and services to the British government led to him being awarded the title of Rao Bahadur in 1927. Dhurandhar significantly contributed to the academic style of the time by creating impactful works that blended the European style with Indian ethos, thereby expanding the discourse around contemporary Indian art in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Cooksey, 2016).

IV. THEMES IN DHURANDHAR'S PAINTINGS

M.V. Dhurandhar's paintings often focused on themes that reflected the socio-cultural fabric of Indian society during his time. He depicted various aspects of everyday life, covering a wide range of subjects such as portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes. Dhurandhar's most remarkable skill was his ability to convey personality and drama through his characters. Whether it was the illustrations in 'Women of India' or the figures in his postcards and paintings, each person he drew possessed a distinct character or action element that made them memorable. When considering 19th-century Indian painters and artists, quite a few names instantly come to mind, and a quick Google search would likely feature Mahadev Vishwanath Dhurandhar as one of the prominent names.

Limited research has been conducted on Dhurandhar in the English language. Notable mentions are Partha Mitter's chapter on him in his influential book *'Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1920'* and Allan Life's article *'Picture Postcards by M.V. Dhurandhar: Scenes and Types of India-with a Difference'* in *Visual Resources*. (Mitter, - 1995)

British colonial rule significantly impacted Indian art forms. Popular art in the 18th century was bold and uninhibited, particularly in the depiction of women, drawing criticism for not aligning with Victorian notions of chastity. In response, many Indian artists attempted to blend Victorian aesthetics with Indian traditions, including Raja Ravi Varma and Dhurandhar. Compared to Ravi Varma, not much has been written about Dhurandhar, despite his work being encountered numerous times without receiving the recognition he deserves in contemporary times (Baig, 2021).

Dhurandhar's education at the institute helped him develop a sense of realism and the classic technique of chiaroscuro, using light and shadow to create three-dimensional portraits. He was the first Indian gold medal winner of the Bombay Art Society in 1895. Dhurandhar's work is best known for his documentation of city life, his paintings of Indian mythological figures, and, most importantly, his depiction of women navigating the realms of the private and public spheres. His charcoal drawing, 'Household Work' (Fig. – 8), depicts two Maharashtrian women chatting while carrying out their errands. The artist spent hours by the promenade, observing people as they went about their mundane activities, capturing the essence of their actions in his intricate drawings.



Fig – 8

M. V. Dhurandhar, 'Household Work.'

Dhurandhar, the first Indian to win an award Rs. 50 for his painting 'Household Work' at The Bombay Art Society's (BAS) Exhibition, when he was still a junior student. This early work showcased his growing fascination with depicting human figures in everyday and intense scenarios. The artist's talent and attention to detail are evident in this powder shading drawing.

Retrieved from: <https://dagworld.com/mvdhurandhar-collaboration.html>

The manifestation of Maharashtrian society and its cultural celebrations is especially remarkable. In retrospect, Dhurandhar's work also provides insight into the sartorial sociology of Bombay and offers a clearer picture of the status of women in society as perceived from the inner sanctum. As one of the few commercial painters from India, he illustrated women from different regions for Otto Rothfield's book 'Women of India' (1920). A detailed study of these illustrations draws attention to the garments worn by women across regions and socio-economic strata, making his work a valuable resource for historians and art lovers (Varade, 2021).

V. SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Dhurandhar's artworks hold great social and cultural importance as they provide a glimpse into the past, capturing the lives and experiences of individuals from various backgrounds. His works serve as historical artifacts, offering valuable insights into the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of early 20th-century India. Dhurandhar's art documented everyday life, societal norms, and the cultural ethos of his time, making his pieces an essential resource for understanding the period.

Moreover, Dhurandhar's art played a significant role in elevating the status of Indian art on the global stage. His fusion of Western techniques with Indian themes challenged the prevailing notions of what constituted authentic Indian art. By blending the best of both worlds, he created a unique artistic language that resonated with audiences both in India and abroad. This cross-cultural synthesis not only broadened the appeal of Indian art but also positioned it within a global context, fostering a greater appreciation for India's rich artistic heritage.

VI. IMPACT ON INDIAN ART

M.V. Dhurandhar's impact on Indian art is profound and multifaceted. He navigated the fast transformations of colonial India, utilizing keen observation and cultural understanding to create a compassionate and insightful record of his era. His artworks offer a distinct portrayal of Indian life from a native perspective, capturing both substance and style with authenticity.

Skilled in European naturalism yet adept at adapting to colonial aesthetic norms, Dhurandhar innovated expressive techniques that garnered acclaim. His ability to depict Indian deities with an indigenous naturalism in response to Western ideals reflects his artistic versatility and cultural sensitivity. Art historian ParthaMitter highlights Dhurandhar's departure from the romanticized outsider artist trope prevalent in the modernist imagination of his time (Mitter, 1995).

Dhurandhar's illustrations stand out for their deep understanding and realistic portrayal, influenced by his close ties to Mumbai's thriving Marathi and Parsi theatre scenes. Beyond mere scientific studies, his artworks captured lifelike qualities and cultural nuances. In his personal life, Dhurandhar embodied a blend of modernity and tradition, emphasizing moral values and artistic dedication.

Formally educated at the Sir JamsetjeeJeejebhoy School of Art in Mumbai, Dhurandhar's membership in the Bombay Art Society solidified his prominence. His paintings vividly depict scenes from diverse social strata, including bustling streets, traditional festivals, and everyday life, showcasing his commitment to realism and meticulous attention to detail (Joshi, 2020).

Dhurandhar's paintings serve as invaluable visual documentation of late 19th and early 20th-century Indian life and culture, marking the transition from tradition to modernity while preserving significant aspects of

India's cultural heritage. His influence on contemporary Indian art is enduring, inspiring artists who continue to draw from his techniques and subjects. Modern Indian artists frequently emulate his realistic style, attention to detail, and incorporation of cultural elements, reflecting his lasting legacy in shaping the trajectory of Indian art (Kochhar, 2018).

Anthropologists engage in the study of nature, humans, wild animals, and their activities to gain insights into the process of evolution. In a similar vein, M.V. Dhurandhar's temperament and commitment to the nationalist spirit are evident in the 'Romantic Realist' exhibition at NGMA-Mumbai. This exhibition, curated with support from DAG (Delhi Art Gallery), celebrated Dhurandhar's keen observational skills and meticulous documentation of life through sketches and drawings.

Dhurandhar's artworks showcased in the exhibition reflect his commitment to capturing the intricacies of daily life with a nationalist spirit. For instance, his depiction of a traditional middle-class 'woman serving sweets'(Fig - 9) exemplifies Indian hospitality and cultural practices. Another piece, 'Woman Wearing a Blouse'(Fig - 10), likely explores themes of identity and attire within societal contexts. The mundane morning moment of 'bowl cleaning'(Fig - 11) captured in another artwork provides a glimpse into everyday routines and domestic life.



Fig - 9

'A Traditional Middle-class Woman Serving Sweets'. M.V. Dhurandhar. Retrieved from: <https://www.slideshare.net/joranjan/4-dhurandhar-and-applied-art-final-article-229482751>

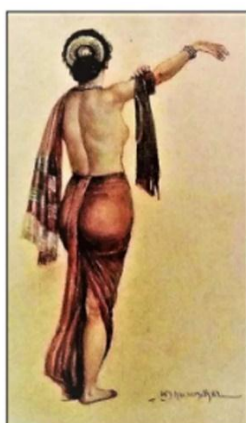


Fig - 10

A woman wearing a blouse. M.V. Dhurandhar. Retrieved from: <https://www.slideshare.net/joranjan/4-dhurandhar-and-applied-art-final-article-229482751>



Fig – 11

A mundane morning moment of bowel cleaning. M.V. Dhurandhar. Retrieved from:
<https://www.slideshare.net/joranjn/4-dhurandhar-and-applied-art-final-article-229482751>

These sketches not only document behavioral patterns and gender dynamics but also offer socio-cultural insights akin to the study of human behaviour in anthropology. They invite viewers to contemplate the nuances between nudity and nakedness, reminiscent of Desmond Morris' observations in 'Man-Watching'.

Overall, Dhurandhar's artistic postcards serve as valuable visual records that not only celebrate Indian culture and societal norms but also contribute to a deeper understanding of human interactions and cultural practices, much like anthropological studies delve into the evolution of human societies.

VII. CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, the exploration of M.V. Dhurandhar's influence reveals a profound socio-cultural significance in his paintings, which have left an indelible mark on Indian art. Dhurandhar's works, characterized by their intricate detailing and vivid portrayal of contemporary life, reflect the confluence of traditional Indian themes with Western artistic techniques, symbolizing a transitional period in Indian art history. His paintings not only document the societal norms and cultural practices of his time but also critique and celebrate them, offering a nuanced perspective on the Indian socio-cultural landscape. Dhurandhar's impact extends beyond his immediate artistic contributions; he played a pivotal role in shaping modern Indian art by mentoring future generations of artists and fostering a deeper appreciation for indigenous art forms. Through this research, it is evident that Dhurandhar's legacy is integral to understanding the evolution of Indian art, providing valuable insights into the cultural and historical contexts that have shaped its development. As contemporary artists and scholars continue to draw inspiration from his work, M.V. Dhurandhar's influence remains a vital force in the ongoing narrative of Indian art. In essence, M.V. Dhurandhar's artistic contributions transcend his time, leaving an indelible mark on Indian art history and continuing to influence artistic practices in India today.

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