

Considering the Impact of Indians in Trinidad on Visual Culture

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This paper proposes that a multivariied Indo-Trinidadian aesthetic contribution drawn from ritual, domestic, and imaginary space continues to remain historically and culturally submerged in both the definition of artistic practice and in the national consciousness of Trinidad society. The art works and artists analyzed here were selected from an exhibition held at the National Museum and Gallery in Port of Spain on the occasion of Indian Arrival Day 2017, which is celebrated as a public holiday annually. While there are reasons for the continuously delayed entry of Indo-Caribbean motifs and symbols into the nationalist aesthetic imagination, by the second decade of the twentieth century, there is no excuse of claiming fear of imposing on religious rituals. The intersection between the secular and the religious have been fundamentally important to innovations in other art movements in Europe and elsewhere. Nor can we assume an exclusivity or separateness on the part of Indian art and cultural practitioners, as there is sufficient evidence from the works of a desire to enter the public marketplace of ideas on visual culture. Leaving the space still open to interpretations this essay raises the important question that must be considered: beyond the acceptance of arrival and acknowledgement of the presence of Indians in Trinidad and in the Caribbean in general, what cross fertilizations of imagination and creativity have taken place that lead to aesthetic and artistic creativity and advancement for art and artistic practice in this region?

Keywords: visual culture, South Asian diaspora, Hinduism, Islam, fine arts

Este ensayo propone que una contribución estética indotrinitaria multivariada extraída del espacio ritual, doméstico e imaginario sigue histórica y culturalmente sumergida tanto en la definición de la práctica artística como en la conciencia nacional de la sociedad de Trinidad. Las obras de arte y los artistas analizados aquí fueron seleccionados de una exposición celebrada en el Museo Nacional y Galería de Puerto España con motivo del Día de Llegada de la India 2017, aniversario que se celebra anualmente como festivo. Si bien hay razones para la entrada repetidamente pospuesta de los motivos y símbolos indocaribeños en la imaginación estética nacionalista, en la segunda década del siglo veinte, ya no hay excusa para alegar miedo a imponer rituales religiosos. La intersección entre lo secular y lo religioso ha sido fundamentalmente importante para las innovaciones en otros movimientos artísticos en Europa y en distintos lugares. Tampoco podemos asumir una exclusividad o separación por parte de los profesionales del arte y la cultura indios, ya que suficiente evidencia existe en las

obras de un deseo de entrar en el mercado público de las ideas sobre la cultura visual. Dejando el espacio todavía abierto a las interpretaciones, este ensayo plantea la importante cuestión que debe ser considerada: más allá de la aceptación de la llegada y el reconocimiento de la presencia de los indios en Trinidad y en el Caribe en general, ¿qué intercambios entre la imaginación y la creatividad han tenido lugar que conducen a la creatividad estética y artística y el avance para el arte y la práctica artística en esta región?

Palabras clave: cultura visual, diáspora del sur de Asia, hinduismo, islam, bellas artes

Introduction

Indians have progressed far beyond the nostalgic sentiments of arrival, of newness to a landscape, of that tentative political claim to belonging to a nation, like a child entering a new school who must prove his or her worth before acceptance. As I have argued before (2017a):

The emphasis on arrival continues to position Indians in Trinidad as a persistently immigrant population as if a date of departure is still to be set. What would Trinidad born Indians return to if they journeyed to India, a memory, a dream, a pilgrimage to ancestors? In what ways do all migrants and post migrants continue to return to an imagined homeland when they extend the horizons of their place of settlement, grafting old and new imagery, integrating philosophies and blending spoken and visual languages?

For the past one hundred and seventy-five years, six generations of Indians, of which I can be counted among the fourth, have texturized the culture of the Caribbean region, more particularly in the territories of Guyana, Trinidad,¹ and Suriname in the Caribbean.

I argue that the Indo-Trinidadian aesthetic contribution—although perceptibly different on the landscape and internally dynamic within the ritual, domestic, and Indo-imaginary space—continues to remain historically and culturally submerged. Admittedly, some of the influences of Indianness are more easily recognizable, acknowledged, and increasingly embraced as constructs within nation-building identity; among these are cuisine, music, dance, agriculture, economic entrepreneurship, language, and the marking of religious festivals. Others such as the effect on visual culture and aesthetics are less obvious, and while popular elements such as fashion and jewellery are more easily absorbed, others remain external to what is considered either the making of art or a concept of an artistic visual culture of these societies. There is a perceptible slippage in writing about an Indo-Caribbean or Indo-Trinidadian aesthetic, in that Hinduism remains the dominant religion among the Indian population and stands out on this landscape as a starkly different “Eastern” set of markers that have traditionally and inseparably linked religion, language, and culture. For this reason,

¹ This paper unapologetically deals with the Indian aesthetic contribution to Trinidad in particular. While Tobago has been part of the twin island republic of Trinidad and Tobago since 1899 both demographically and temperamentally, in my view it has not accommodated an Indian presence that has made any impact on its cultural formation.

Indian culture and Indianness is perceived as if there is no secular life (apart from commerce and agriculture) outside of religious practice. Described by Nirad Chauduri (1997) as a way of life rather than religion, Hinduism as religious symbolism and rituals is threaded into everyday acts of devotion even within the home and workplace. Even Indians who converted to Christianity or those who followed Islam continue to manifest aspects of an Indian aesthetic that can be expressed in the choice of dress for a public occasion or the architecture of their homes and gardens.

Perhaps a surprise to all who viewed Indianness as below the radar of aesthetic contribution to this society's culture was Derek Walcott, who described witnessing Ramleela in a pivotal passage in his 1992 Nobel Prize acceptance lecture: "The performance was like a dialect, a branch of its original language, an abridgement of it, but not a distortion or even a reduction of its epic scale. Here in Trinidad I had discovered that one of the greatest epics of the world was seasonally performed, not with that desperate resignation of preserving a culture, but with an openness of belief that was as steady as the wind bending the cane lances of the Caroni plain."

Walcott explained that he was taking a group of Americans to view the spectacle of the Ramleela, an extract of the Ramayana dramatized in full costumery on a village green. The reference to Americans is not incidental. How others observe and digest culture is always important, not because we depend only on the outsider to determine taste, but because we get a snapshot of the everyday through the eyes of the other, perhaps only then being able to see what is unique or interesting about the commonplace in our midst. St. Lucia-born, Derek Walcott had spent a number of years in Trinidad working as a journalist and was instrumental in the emergence of the Trinidad Theatre Workshop where he served as founding director from 1959 to 1971. Owing to his unique talents as poet, writer, and artist and his love for the theatrical, he must be viewed as someone who had begun to hone into many aspects of Trinidad society's cultural phenomena as both outsider/insider, thus leading to his recognition of the uniqueness of the Ramleela.² This event had stood out as newsworthy from the 1920s in the then-colony of Trinidad when the Ramleela was reported on as a central feature of village life.

Despite this aperture and because Hindu traditions occur in the sphere of ritual performance enacted during prayer gatherings and among devotees, the artistic enterprise and appreciation of Indo-Trinidadian expressive arts were long limited to a closed circle. While a host of travel writers had commented on the curious presence of Indians on the landscape³ and photographed the temples, *sadhus* on the street, and bejewelled women, the French creole painter Michel Jean Cazabon (1813–1888) was the first European-trained painter to diarize Indians *en plein air* in the nineteenth-century painterly accounts of Trinidad society. Much of Cazabon's work in Trinidad was made between the late 1840s and 1888, when he died. By the time he began his landscape paintings and depiction of characters in various settings in Trinidad, he would have been exposed to the earliest Indian migrants on this landscape. One can speculate that, as an artist, he recognized their distinctive difference in

² See Rampersad 2019 and other works by this author on the history of Ramleela in Trinidad society.

³ See for example Kingsley 1871. There are numerous other travel books on the Caribbean in which visits to Trinidad identified the Indian population as different in the West.

dress and feature. Lawrence Scott (2012) describes Cazabon as “free coloured” occupying a no-man’s land between blacks and whites and “hated by both, lower and upper societal groupings” (in Mackintosh 2013). In many of Cazabon’s paintings, figures dot the landscape merely to provide context to the object or the scene as if the viewer were a voyeur looking through a telescope. His paintings are stylized evocations rather than to be relied on as historical narratives.⁴ Thus the same voyeuristic inventive viewpoint can be presumed for Cazabon’s treatment in two of his paintings that depict the Indian nuclear family, one of which is shown in Figure 1. Another of his paintings, the undated *Mookta*,⁵ presents an idealized, beautiful, well-dressed, and highly bejeweled Indian woman, such a figure seldom seen toiling on the estates. Even more interesting for the social historian, given that these were painted during Cazabon’s lifetime while the indentured labor system was still in its heyday, is that this representation of the Indian family is not supported by traveler’s records or nineteenth-century postcards, which tended to show extended family circles rather than any sense of a nuclear family.

In Figure 1, Cazabon depicts a man playing a musical instrument while the *orbrni*-clad woman holds an earthenware pot or *lotar* in one hand and clasps her daughter in the other. What symbolic markers was the painter noting of their presence on the landscape? I suggest he was simply observing different accoutrements of this group: dress, musical instruments, domestic objects. Even the position on which the man is crouched, albeit on a high bench, is a notable observation on the part of the painter—sitting on one’s haunches was a recognizable Indian way of sitting as viewed in the early postcards and photographs of Indians whether they were waiting on the streets of Port of Spain or at rest in their yards in the rural countryside. The earthen monotones of the painting also suggest a deliberate palette for the subject, referencing the rural location and connectedness to agriculture (as depicted by the banana fronds) that were associated with Indians at this time.

⁴ The exception being his architectural references and commissioned portraits, of which there are only a few.

⁵ The complete title of this work is *Mookta, female Coolie labourer, on the Garden Estate property of Alex Gray, Esquire, Trinidad, W.I.*



Figure 1. Michel Jean Cazabon, *Indian family*, (undated), Courtesy Albert Sydney

The Politics of the Visual in Constructing Nationhood

The project of early political nationhood by the mid-twentieth century was filtered primarily through an Afrocentric lens in order to reshape markers set by European culture, sidelining other

cultural aesthetics and iconography in an effort to create a sovereign identity. Although the debates on what constitutes nation identity have expanded since the mid-twentieth century to embrace the notion of a multicultural state (and admittedly there are genuflections to other cultural presences), the optics of the most recent National Policy on Culture and the Arts (Government 2019), titled “Celebrating National Identity: Maximising our Diversity,” is instructive. The report’s introductory epigraph quotes The Mighty Sniper’s 1965 calypso titled “Portrait of Trinidad”:

Trinidad is my land, and of it I am proud and glad...
Now, our steelband is the best talent in this world.
By calypsoes our stories are told,
With its rhythm to touch your soul;
So, Trinidad, this lovely land of my birth.
Small, but overwhelming in worth.
And as you know Carnival is the greatest frolic on Earth.

This sets the tone for a policy paper that explicitly centers culture as a saleable product, and what is not marketable to the wider world appears to have less value on the national identity scale. The actual references to the Indian contributions to the cultural life of the society are remarkably few in this document.

There is a reason for this continuously delayed entry into the nationalist aesthetic imagination. First, Indians as the last incomers in the twentieth century, still arriving up until 1917, were thought to be interlopers and a divisive element in the brutal historical battle between white and black. Indians were not viewed as having really suffered physically or culturally as a result of the indentured labor system, and for many it was thought that they had benefited excessively from land grants in lieu of repatriation, enabling the growth of an agricultural peasantry and landowning class, even during the seventy two years of indentureship. Second, as already referenced above, is that the visual culture of Indians was perceived as inseparable from religious rituals, symbolism, and performance as the recreation of an enclave within the newly developing nation. It is true that culture for Indians in the Caribbean had become a space of retreat for survival and that the Indian community has been collusive in preserving an isolation as a spiritual and emotional cocoon. All of this was a thick coat of protection from the slights against attitudes toward their cuisine, gendered norms of arranged marriages, and religious rituals that were practiced by the wider Indian community, including Muslims and Christians, well into the 1950s.⁶ It is likely that colonial and early postcolonial racial ideologies that have framed Indians as culturally saturated, separately enclaved, and set apart has some credibility up the 1990s, by which time Indians had not imagined a prime minister being of Indian descent or even of female Indian descent. By the last decade of the twentieth century, however, with Indians being represented in the highest office of government, the blurring of rural/urban boundaries, greater access to education and technology, and the growth of another generation of Trinidadians and Tobagonians

⁶ A parallel can be drawn with the outlawing of the African Trinidadian Orisha and Spiritual Baptist religions which were similarly submerged in the aesthetic and iconography of painting and did not surface until after the 1970s as legitimate subjects for art.

who share more in common with their peer group than differences that separated older generations, there is no excuse for assuming exclusivity or an enclave mentality among all Indians today.

What was lost in the early indenture migrations but was reinterpreted in many ways in Trinidad from memory or from pictures were elements of architecture, decoration of temples, jewellery, and pottery making. The holy scriptures, which both Hindus and Muslims brought as religions of the book, ensured some consistency of religious practice once there were readers and scribes to interpret the written word. Thus, it is safe to deduce that much of what constituted Indian visual culture before the increasing flow of mass media photographs, cinema, and merchandise from India was reinvented by Indians in this society.⁷

The third reason that an Indian aesthetic visual contribution did not seep into the artistic consciousness of the society has to do with the process that translates our visual reception into meaning. Rudolf Arnheim (1954; 1969) notes that artistic activity is a form of reasoning that is shaped by perceptual forces. I am not able to explore the complexity of Arnheim's insight, but use the ideas I grasp from his work to pose these questions:⁸ why are some objects or images, shapes, and design appropriated into our visual percept and others are not? Why do some get captured in the political and cultural imaginaries of a population, and others remain outside of what constitutes art and art making?

A recognizable visual marker and aesthetic is that of India fashions that have become a growth industry in Trinidad. This was stimulated by an influx of commercial goods which increased consumer demand for Indian imported clothing and fashions in the twenty-first century. Goods were brought into the society by Indian firms and sold at many temporary erected outlets filling a cultural gap in "ethnic" fashions that was left dormant for over a century. Jillian Ollivierre (2013) draws attention "to the cultural and political consequences of women's participation within 'Indian Expos,' retail fairs that vend clothing, jewellery and house wares to primarily female customers" as gendered examples of "local/global" cultural encounter that reaffirm identity. What is not so apparent is how Indian fashions have influenced design and designers today in Trinidad. There are but few examples of designers who nod to the "bling" or floating finery of India fashion. Among them is Trinidadian fashion designer Neeha Karina, who artistically works the Indian aesthetics of fashion, including colors, textures, and jeweled paste stones into her western-styled dresses.

Caribbean islands are steeped in epic memory, brimming with narratives of despair and conquest, exclusions, and oversights. They collide in ways that reinforce separation rather than explorations of otherness. For instance, a child is taught to draw in primary school what is considered

⁷ My sister, a highly skilled professional who was born into an Islamic family and was married into a Hindu household to a surgeon, remarked to me once that much of the ritual preparation that went on for weddings and *pujas* in Hinduism were transmitted orally. Those gathered to prepare for events would constantly rely on "they say" as the way things were done.

⁸ For Arnheim, perceptual forces are literal forces that act on perceived objects, with a point of application, a direction, and a magnitude. In this essay I do not venture into either the biological or psychological processes of visual perception extensively developed by Arnheim and others, but am focused instead on reception and meaning making as dictated by physical presence and engagements between people and things.

nationally “correct” emblems or accepted cultural artefacts rather than to explore the unusual or the multiple variations that coexist in their surroundings. In my primary school days (admittedly over fifty-five years ago) we would invariably be set the task of making carnival masks or designing costumes around Carnival time. I was never made to consider materials of art and craft making or a concept of light as envisaged differently (for example, in the Hindu Divali) than that viewed in paintings of Christ’s resurrection, or to represent in my drawings and collages the emblematic feel of Hindu *jhandis* colorfully waving around every other house in the countryside, or the green and white mosque with its minaret that sat next door to my primary school. These were taken for granted as the ordinariness of domestic or village culture and outside the realm of the artistic or remarkable. As I have written elsewhere: “The craft of transforming the basic raw material of wood and cardboard into lavishly decorated *tadjahs* (model tombs) did not fit into the concept of artistic practice, nor did the ritual decoration of the prayer ensemble of the *bedi*; not even the painted decorations on temple walls were considered for their aesthetic elements” (2018).⁹ The practice involved in creating the *bedi* compares with the similar act in Haitian Vodou of art making in the *vèvè* (symbolic design) drawn by the *oungans* or priests around the *poto mitan* (Vodou altar). The *oungans* were the earliest intuitive artists of Haiti with their skills honed through the creation of abstract representations of deities (Mohammed and Paddington 2007). This visual absorption that influenced one’s imaginary are a way of seeing, a construction of an aesthetic paradigm, if you like, despite of and alongside the historic battles being fought by competing religious sects.



Figure 2. Altar or Bedi after Hindu prayer meeting at the home of Krishendath Sumair, Trinidad, 2003 (Author’s photo)

⁹A *bedi* is a temporary altar comprised of a square mud pie in the center of which a small banana tree is planted. It is erected before and during the Hindu prayer ceremony to invite and make offerings to the gods. I gratefully acknowledge a useful comment from one of this article’s reviewers who points out that *bedis* are not timeless elements of Hinduism or even of Trinidadian Hinduism and were “primarily promulgated by Arya Samajists as part of trans-colonial contestation and debate within the Indian diaspora in the late colonial period and . . . what is now experienced as part of the perennial Hindu puja package was introduced in the second quarter of the twentieth century.”

Similarly, the making of *deyas* (an oil lamp made from clay) involved the craft of pottery, and the intricate laying out of *deyas* on the night of Divali by Hindus was itself an exercise in design carried out in every household and surrounding village field. Yet the indivisible and intuitive link between religion and art that dominated the history of Christianity, influenced the painters of the Italian Renaissance, and was confronted in the Reformation, was largely absent from the consciousness of a new world nation attempting to find its signature identity. Because the artistry of Hinduism was practiced not in a gallery but in huts and fields, streets and parks, it could not be labeled as art. This bears a certain similarity to current debates about curating Carnival as art with its rootedness in transient street performance (Tancons 2012). In all these cases, the visual product does not comply with the three elements that perhaps constitutes notions of Western art: first that the object being made can be mounted on walls or otherwise displayed; second that the venue needs to be that of an art gallery, museum, or studio space; and third that the performance does not combine visual art with a secular performance as in the case of Hinduism.

From 1929 onwards, there was, however, a move in the direction of defining the local as the subject matter for artists, challenging a strictly European philosophy and taxonomic view of what was the fit subject of painting in particular. The Society of Trinidad Independents formed in that year and, along with capturing the conventional tropical landscape and the ubiquitous Carnival references, introduced the work of Sybil Atteck and Mohammed Pharouk Alladin which began to admit the subject of East Indian religious festivals such as *Hosay* and the Indian wedding onto canvas. Only through the budding “art movement” that included a distinctive Chinese presence in The Society of Independents and later the Trinidad Art Society, do we see a space that accommodated and invited the contribution of the first fine artists of Indian descent, among these Alladin, Sonnylal Rambisoon, Samuel Ishak, and later Isaiah Boodhoo (Mohammed 2018). While pathbreaking as an avant-garde movement, both The Society of Independents and the Trinidad Art Society remained stifled within a neocolonial framework of visually constructing national identity; many of these painters engaged in symbolic referents of identity making in a society just beginning its postcolonial struggle for independence.

Like in Mighty Sniper’s “Portrait of Trinidad” quoted above, intuitive artist Leo Basso’s (1901–1982) painting *Symbols of Trinidad and Tobago Independence* produced in 1962, the year Trinidad and Tobago gained independence from Britain, optimistically represents in color and mood a nation in full flight to progress (Figure 3). Yet also echoing Sniper’s calypso is an absence of the aesthetic sensibilities that represent the different ethnic groups and the souls that have made up this nation. In this indistinct rendition of symbols that are meant to represent nation, a naïve figuration of architecture, geography, political moments, Christianity, airline, and people engaged in various tasks are assembled in colorful tones that have come to signify the tropics: blue skies, red flowers, and a vivid green landscape. What elements in this painting suggest other symbolic gestures or mark making that demonstrate cultural distinctiveness or aesthetic contributions to space and place? For much of the twentieth century, perhaps until the 1980s, an Indian aesthetic remained outside this confined cultural gallery artistic space. Wendy Nanan, one of Trinidad’s successful Indian female artists, described to me the challenges of her entry into the artworld in the 1980s after returning from art

school in the United Kingdom; her efforts to enter the marketplace were stymied both by her Indianness and femaleness.¹⁰



Figure 3. Leo Basso: Symbols of Trinidad and Tobago Independence, 1962
Oil on hardboard. (59.5 x 100 cm) Permanent Collection National Museum and Art
Gallery Trinidad

Thus, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, one struggles with what exactly has been introduced aesthetically that adds to the landscape, to the artistic imagination or elements of design in Trinidad, and ponders whether Indians have advanced any artistic or cultural creativity in this island. I offer no clear answers or even value judgements, and perhaps present my personalized reading of Indo-Trinidadian creative expression as a set of referents that may be drawn on to extend our metaphoric and symbolic imagination of what might constitute art and art practice in Trinidad in the future.

Introducing Asian Arts in Trinidad

With any migrant group, once passage has been secured and settlement takes place, cultures are never stagnant and much borrowing and lending takes place. So even in reviewing what constitutes Indian visual culture, everything has undergone a sea change. Although there was a highly sophisticated culture of fine arts in India that predated the Raj, such traditions as those of court

¹⁰ Interview by the author with Wendy Nanan in her studio in 2016.

painters or musicians, skilled sculptors, and woodwork carvers could not be reproduced faithfully as none of these groups traveled among the migrants. Under the indenture system, apart from a few who were themselves Brahmins or who had assumed this caste, and the more recent migrants who came as professionals or businessmen, the majority of migrants had humble beginnings. In the first instance the more utilitarian crafts, ones such as pottery and jewel making flourished. What emerged in the last two centuries therefore was an amalgam of memories, production of utilitarian objects for use and an injection of new products, markets, materials, and imperatives that are currently expressed in an artistic visual presence that might be perceived as Indian visual culture and its offshoots.

I am an Islamic-born Indian Trinidadian who grew up from the 1950s in the fortunate location of occupying an insider/outsider position relative to Indian culture. Islam is by and large iconoclastic in relation to figurative or highly decorated elements in its ritual observances. The complex floral geometry of Islamic art was not originally transposed in the synthetic religion that traveled from prepartition India to Trinidad in the nineteenth century. Unlike my childhood counterparts who were exposed to variegated colors, smells, and sounds of a Hindu *pūja*, *Ramayana*, *Phagwa*, or *Kartik ke Nabaan* festival, Islamic prayer gatherings or observances like *Eid Ul Fitr* were muted and colorless in comparison. What churned my imagination and imperceptibly unsettled the linear ordering that comes with an Islamic sensibility, was the profusion of colors, the titillation of the senses, and the ecstatic performance of worship that was also observed in other religions like Orisha and Catholicism.

The capacity—or is it willingness?—to absorb and embrace difference is a form of artistic reasoning. In village Trinidad we were invited to neighbors' houses for their *pūjas* or *Ramayana*. In front of one's eyes, the Hindu pundit would transform the *bedi* by distributing flowers, mango objects, lighted *deyas*, and different colored powders in a premeditated order as he read and interpreted the holy scriptures. The layering of flowers and objects against the lighted *deyas* and burning sandalwood, the eating on leaves (which is only now surfacing as an environmentally friendly practice), were a pleasure to the senses and remain so today (Figure 2). There is a family resemblance between the religious arts produced by Indian and African spirituality that remained under the surface of recognition as Caribbean aesthetic reinterpretations of culture. I have a similar emotional response to the Orisha feasts, the inspired layout and placement of colourful shrines in prayer grounds.¹¹ This is a first step to comprehending the intersection between art and religion in Indian culture, a feature which was also very much part of Catholicism as is evident in the Baroque period from 1600 to 1800 in Europe. The visual, oral, and sensual stimuli provoked the imagination, and art was used deliberately to communicate religious themes and direct emotional involvement. In the Caribbean, a hierarchy of beliefs denied the existence of other gods by inciting a stigma of heathenism on both Hinduism and African religions. This in my view has led to and continues to maintain a rarefied notion of what constitutes art, delaying the influences on artistic practices and image making that might very well benefit Trinidad in particular if there were easier and freer assented sharing of aesthetic values.

¹¹ Gleaned from research on Orisha feasts and shrines carried out for my book *Imaging the Caribbean: Culture and Visual Translation* (2009) and for my film *City on the Hill* (2015).

The *Rangoli* (Figure 4) presents such an example in Hinduism—a symmetry in design and color that serves the purpose of ritually purifying a space. It is admittedly a newly reintroduced form within Indo-Trinidadian practice, just as highly ornamental clothing and costume jewellery gained a more recent ethnic foothold in the society. In a previous examination of Asian art traditions I noted that “Aspects of an Indian aesthetic may appear to have undergone a rebirth but in fact there are persistences or trails which are not always apparent. For example, there were two traditions which were practised, first that of the *kohbar*, or drawings, around the prayer area in coloured rice flour, which decorated wedding feasts, and second that of the decoration of the body itself” (2009, chapter 7). The late architect/artist Glean Chase said that his stylised and symmetrical drawings and paintings were heavily influenced by seeing these in his younger days in San Fernando, south Trinidad.

Rangoli artist Richard Rampersad has revived this tradition, which closely resembles the *kohbar*, as an art form rather than ritual observance. The Rangoli is meant to be a sacred welcoming area for the Hindu deities to enter, propitiating the gods to ensure that one’s prayers are heard. This practice is parallel to the placement of statues and other icons that populate walls and naves of Christian churches, just as the elements on the *bedi*, where the number of leaves and flowers placed in a certain order represented deities that were being invoked from the holy scriptures. The symmetry and artistry required to make these temporary installations are all the more powerful: while they are ablaze with color and form, they are embedded with the message of nature, not unlike the *poui* tree that assures us in April, with a fleeting golden beauty that lasts for only a few days, that the rains are on their way to dry, parched ground.



Figure 4 Rangoli art by Richard Rampersad

While the Rangoli has more or less disappeared as a popular practice, many other aspects of Indian culture and traditions have been noticed for different reasons: some like the annual Muharrm observance locally called *Hosay*; the Indian Jab Jab mas player during Carnival; *Phagwa* or *Holi*, the festival of spring; pottery; and jewellery have entered the marketplace of consumption. Hosay was curiosity at first to scholars, being an unusual transposition studied by cultural anthropologists interested in persistence of postmigrant traditions. Hosay also came to public notice and notoriety because it was the site of political unrest and solidarity in plantation society in 1884, the latter brilliantly analyzed by historian Kelvin Singh in his *Bloodstained Tombs: The Muharram Massacre in Trinidad 1884* (1988). Because it was grounded in a sad affair of martyrdom and involved a highly creative element as well as a street procession over three days involving rhythmic *tassa* drumming and the dancing of the moon on the final day of the commemoration, the festival has always attracted multicultural attention. The *tadjahs* or miniature temples are the work of skilled craftsmen (Figure 5) but as with the Rangoli or preparation of the *bedi*, these are also built to be destroyed, a penance for sins and a reminder of the temporality of life. None of these remain for posterity other than in surprisingly few photographs or old postcards. It has been left to the fine artist to create memory and continually

decipher meaning as we shall see in the work of James Isaiah Boodhoo, the most important Indian artist to have found recognition in Trinidad in the twentieth century.



Figure 5. Tadjah from the *Hosay* festival in St. James, Port of Spain, 2002. Photo by the author.

In their efforts to mold a national art, the preindependence painters, among them Carlisle Chang, Sybil Atteck, and M. P. Alladin, all rendered various aspects of Hosay on canvas. Atteck's *Indian Festival* (1959) features the moon dance, one of the ritual elements of the procession, and has become the best known of these iconic paintings. Isaiah Boodhoo's (1932–2004) *Hosay Drummers* (circa 1990) (Figure 6) must be added to this collection of artistic interpretations. The tassa drummers are equally significant actors in the Hosay festival and by no means secondary to the ornate tadjahs that are carried like floats along the street. The insistent drums drive the mood of celebratory commemoration and repentance. In his painting, Boodhoo unifies this tableau of music and design with the concentrated bodies and hands of all the drummers into a single element on the canvas, separating its parts by almost geometrical splashes of color that barely mirror the mathematical precision of Islamic art and design. In doing so he marks out the drummers as if they are an embellished many-sided prism, constructing them into another moving decorated tadjah on the streets that hold our attention, combining the two emotive elements of the festival into one moving procession. Some of Boodhoo's paintings are more clearly figurative and narrative of moments of Indian history or religious passages in Hinduism, but his abstract work like *Hosay Drummers* "unites a

mastery of colour and gestural figuration with penetrating social and political commentary” transcending ethnicity and nation and gesturing to several movements in Western art (Mohammed 2019).

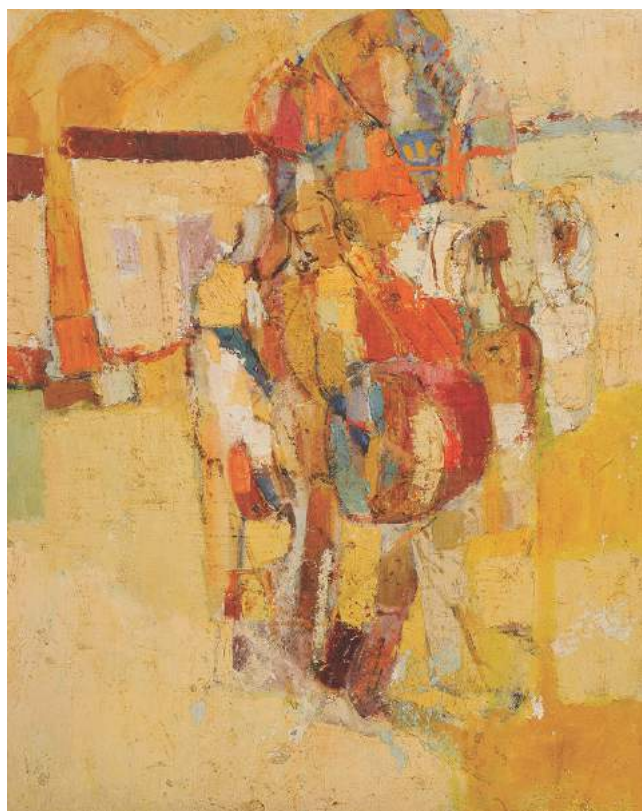


Figure 6. Isaiah James Boodhoo, *Hosay Drummers*, c. 1990. 74 cm x 59 cm oil on hardboard.

In more physical form and acknowledged as one of the Indian contributions to Carnival is the design and performance of the Jab Jab mas (origins in *Diabla Diabla*). The tradition of Indians in this mas go back for many decades. Ronald Alfred and his son, also named Ronald, are known as the whipmasters of the Original Jab Jab band and have claimed that the jab jab is a specifically Indian contribution to Carnival. Thus, along with work by Lionel Jagessar, the legendary bandleader in San Fernando who produces the “Indian mas” each carnival, the imprints of Indian handiwork are to be found in the bowels of this national festival. While the accoutrement of the Jab Jab resemble the harlequin and jester characters of Europe, from the *gunghroos* or musical anklets tied around the feet to the plaited hemp whip reminiscent of Kali Mai puja rituals (Figures 7 and 8), the Jab Jab costuming and persona have been a masquerade of choice by many Indian mas players in this society.



Figure 7. Jab jab mas. Photos courtesy Maria Nunes.



Figure 8. Jab jab mas. Photos courtesy Maria Nunes.

A little known tradition that had also entered the realm of Carnival is the *Sumaree*, not unlike the Burrokeet masquerade, where a human being is zoomorphized into a half animal figure, that of a donkey (Figures 9 and 10). The making of the *Sumaree* is carried out by the Somai family, building on the legacy left by Mrs. Somai's grandfather, Mr. Gurahoo, who started this tradition many years ago. Formed as part of a dance troupe, the Sumaree was easily appropriated into Carnival. Both the construction of the costume and the dance performance lent themselves to the rhythms of this festival.



Figure 9. Left, Sumaree costume.

Figure 10. Right, Raja Harrichand dancers.

The Supremacy of Color

Color is a key element of Indian art and ritual performance. Western art has a history of invention of pigments, the first developed through a combination of soil, animal fat, burnt charcoal, and chalk at least 40,000 years ago, creating a basic palette of five colors—red, yellow, brown, black, and white—which then continued to expand both in tones and versatility. By the fifteenth-century Renaissance, the color palette had evolved (Douma, n.d.): among the blues were azurite, ultramarine, and indigo; the greens were expanded to verdigris, green earth, and malachite; and the yellows included Naples yellow, orpiment, and lead-tin yellow. Renaissance browns were obtained from umber; whites were lead white, gypsum, and lime white; and blacks were carbon black and bone black.

To understand the sensibility of color introduced by Indian artists is to also explore a different palette that emerges in India especially within folk art and the textile industry because of the materials and dyes used. Once again, these colors are linked to religious symbolism and are associated with natural cycles of life. Smithsonian writer Victoria Finlay (2016) writes:

There is no naturally green dye in India, so dyers would often double dip their cottons and silks in indigo and in turmeric or pomegranate peel, which made vivid yellow dyes. Yellow is also associated with the third caste, of Vaisyas, or merchants. The 3,500-year-old *Rig Veda* book of sacred hymns refers to Lord Vishnu as *tantuvardhan*, or weaver, because he is said to have woven the rays of the sun into a garment for himself. He and Krishna are almost always shown dressed in yellow. In paintings of these deities, artists in India sometimes used one of the stranger pigments in history: Indian yellow. . . . [Blue] is the color of another manifestation of Vishnu, Prince Rama, who spent most of his life in exile in the forest. . . . Today brides and married women wear red. It's the color of weddings and life and festivals and all-around auspiciousness, not just for Hindus but also for Muslims, Buddhists and Jains.

Explaining his bold use of primary colors, British (Indian) artist Anish Kapoor says: "Color is a physical thing: It's not just a surface... It's that sort of interplay between the 'stuffness' of color and its illusory" (qtd. in Finlay 2016). The experimental documentary film *Coolie Pink and Green* (Mohammed and Mooleedhar 2009) directly references and deconstructs the negative ideas around the dominant colors that were once called "coolie colours" in Trinidad and assumed to be lacking in Western taste. I attempted to capture this "stuffness" of color and its illusory sensibility throughout the film, intuitively and experientially understanding that color was both taken for granted yet closely monitored, from the color of one's skin down to the chosen color of one's costume. One enactment on screen was that of Holi, the Hindu spring festival called Phagwa in Trinidad. While the narrator speaks the following verse, the white garb and body of the protagonist takes on all the colors of spring (Figure 11).

Take two pints of water from the Caroni flow,
Mix with a handful of abeer, but shaken, not stirred
No sindoor on my forehead, my white dress virgin and pure
The bleach bottles squirting a rainy downpour
Drenched in vermilion, and outrageous yellow,
Touched with indigo, and sprayed with a grass green and mellow
The wetness and wildness of a playground in heat
A crowd of revelers dancing to the *pitchikaree* beat
(Mohammed, excerpt of script *Coolie Pink and Green*, 2009)



Figure 11: Left, Poster of the film *Coolie Pink and Green*. Right, shot from Phagwa scene in film. Author's collection.

The festival of Phagwa has seeped into the visual percept of Trinidad and Guyana both because of its carnival-like revelry and the performance space it represents as street theatre. Participants come out dressed usually in white or light colors but are drenched with violently rich color made from the mixture of *abeer* (brightly colored powder) and water. Within a few hours, the grounds are transformed from a respectable gathering of well-dressed adherents to a mass of color, movement, and sound. There are no restrictions regarding who can be drenched with the different colored liquids. As noted by Finlay above, the vibrant and vibrating colors experienced at Phagwa each have a meaning although the natural organic dyes have long been replaced by artificial dyes in the same way that pigment making has evolved globally. Obviously a festival of spring celebrating fertility and rebirth, this renaissance each year has never been captured on paper but in my view has influenced one of the nation's most dynamic masquerade makers Peter Minshall.

Between 1983 and 1985, Minshall produced a trilogy of masquerades drawn from and elaborating upon the folklore of Trinidad and Tobago and its constituent cultures. The first in this trilogy was *River*, an Anansi-like allegorical tale in which the “river people,” clad in white and representing the purity of nature, are set upon by the villainous Mancrab. Through magic and trickery, the river people are enticed to douse each other in colored paint in “a frenzy of pollution” (Laughlin, Springer, and Popplewell 2006). Within the carnivalesque narrative of *River*, Minshall conceptualizes color differently than in the celebratory playfulness of Phagwa. His is a caustic response to the meaningless slogan “Carnival is color” that has been one of the critiques of his masquerade making and a comment on the growing dystopia of a consumer driven society. There is an unacknowledged but remarkable similarity to Phagwa in the process: a white-clothed band of masqueraders are sprayed

with colors on stage from hoses, having no control or protection from the drenching. Devonish and Baptiste (2019) observe: “What . . . was a sea of people wearing white is now a mass of soiled white clothing smeared with color.” In Minshall’s conceptualization,

The color is meaningless and ugly... Once the people of the river seek to throw the pretty colors of the river on themselves, they become an indefinite dark mess, reminiscent of petroleum gushing from oil wells... There is now a longing for the purity that once was. How much prettier and better the masqueraders’ and their rivers were when white!... The colors of this consumerist rainbow blend into an indefinite darkness, which pollutes everything, the rivers and the people (qtd. in Devonish and Baptiste 2019).

For Indians and Hindus in particular, the sharing of color during Phagwa is a reminder of the transience of beauty and of the fickleness of nature, the close alliance between purity and pollution, and the relationship between darkness and light, all of which are precepts of Hinduism. Though an obvious reference in creativity where everything is legitimately fodder to the artistic mill, to my knowledge this play between philosophy, light, and color has never been connected in this or other Carnival bands each year in Trinidad and Tobago. Like the Ramleela that Derek Walcott happened to discover and delight in, its possibilities for performance or fine art remain largely submerged in the discourses of art.

Color and Abstraction: Influence on Fine Art

The conventions that apply in analyzing the mechanics of works of art do not neatly address the expressions of creativity like Rangoli and Phagwa. Transient installations and performances are generally only perceived as art if they are captured in film or photograph and can be displayed in a gallery or exhibition or discussed in books or by art critics. With photography and film, a bridge between the two has been made, as currently everything seems currently collapsible into fine art.

In the 1950s very little would represent an Indian presence in fine art, except that done by members of the Society of Independents and those in the Art Society of Trinidad. The net is wider today as many painters have depicted themes of Indianness in their work. “Visual Arts after Indenture” (2017), a project coined by Andil Gosine of York University, is interested not in continuity of the aesthetic or the multicultural ebbs and flows of art and nation, but rather how artistic practices have moved ahead of or shaped different cultural futures. It is in the artistic practices and juxtaposition by this broader range of artists spanning generations that we begin to see connections, artists like Jackie Hinkson, Alex Baillie, Boscoe Holder, Leo Glasgow, Noel Vaucrosson, Wendy Nanan, Shastri Maharaj, Shalini Singh, Rex Dixon, and the Singh Brothers, as well as a new group of artists still trying to place themselves on the artistic landscape.

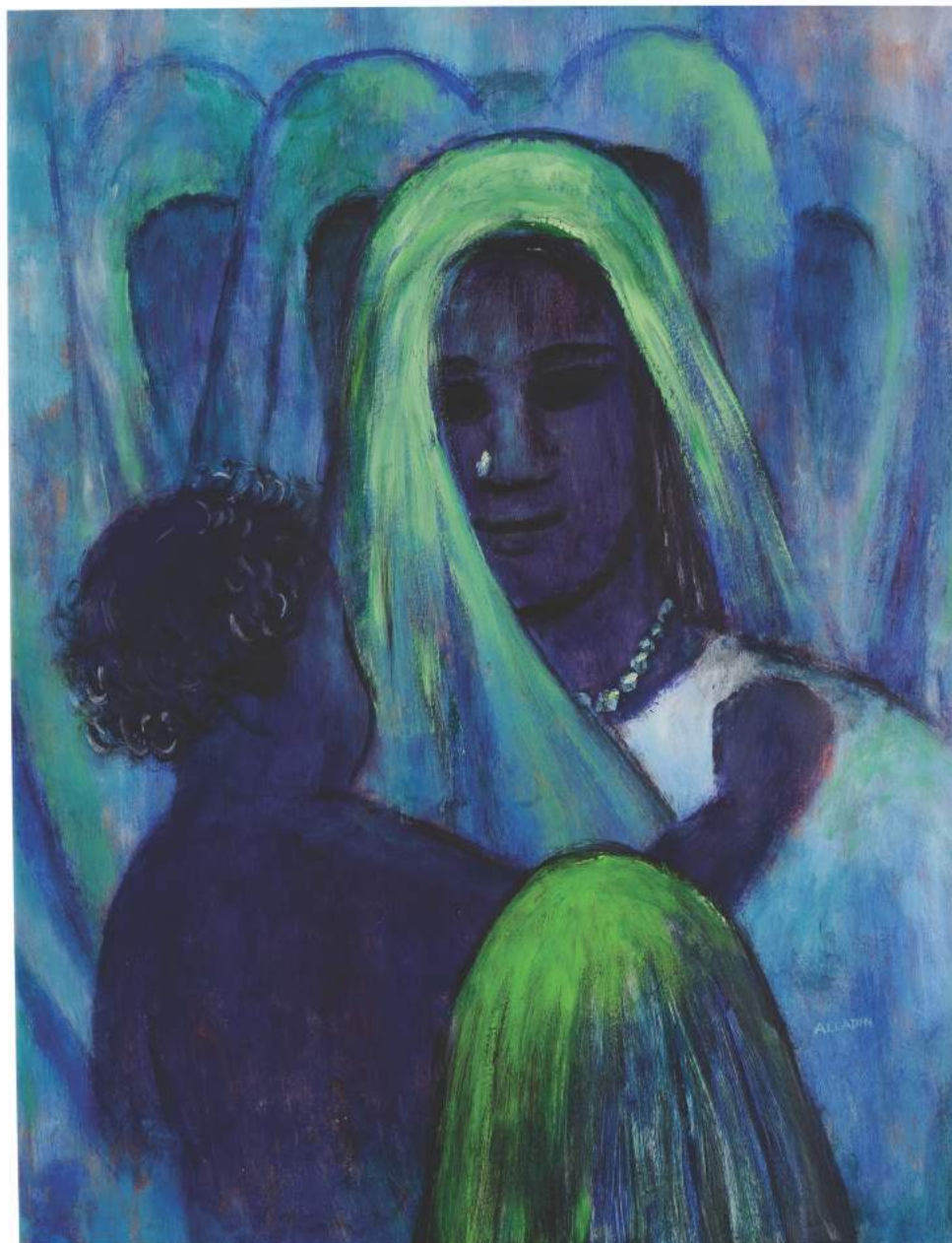


Figure 12. M. P. Alladin, *East Indian Madonna and Child*, Oil on Canvas (circa 1950s)

M. P. Alladin, for example, revisits in 1950 the classic theme of mother and child from an Indian perspective (Figure 12). His composition is rudimentary but the style and choice of palette is experimental. Influenced by cubism perhaps, the canvas appears almost like blocks of color. The white highlights of jewellery and blouse center the eye on the theme he addresses, that of motherhood. In another painting that deals specifically with the trope of belonging, Shastri Maharaj's *Inheritance* (Figure 13) is colorful and puzzling at a first glance. Studied closely, the content narrates a story of emergence and hope, a Buddha/Christ-like figure with hands outstretched, both welcoming and guarding at the

same time. Step back a bit from the canvas and a patriarchal face appears, the sagely old man with wisdom to spare, a history considered in masculine power, in rituals, and obeisance to another set of deities rather than to earthly political masters.

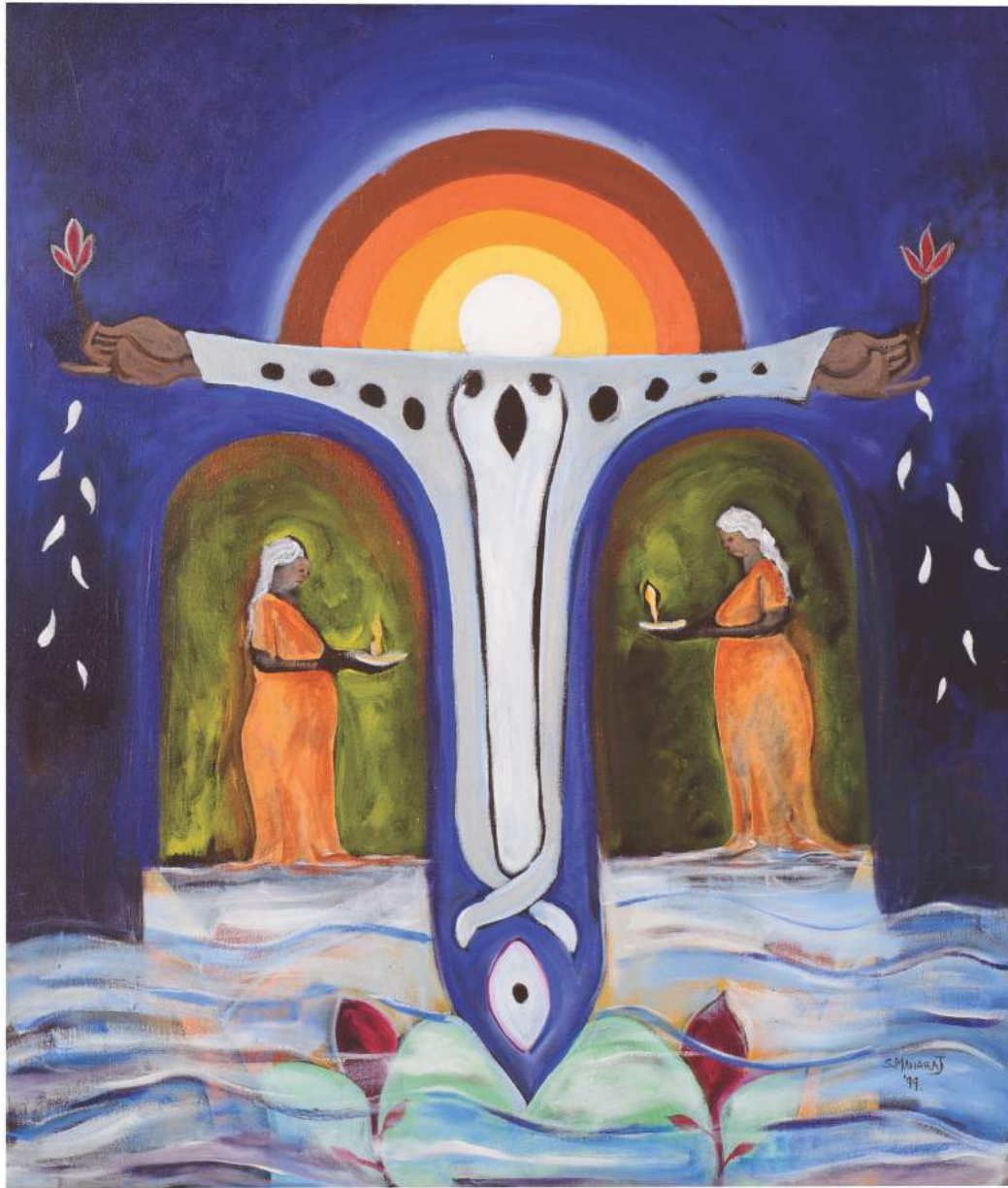


Figure 13. Shastri Maharaj, *Inheritance*, 1999, 106 x 91.5 cm, Acrylic on canvas

There are many parallels in the works of Trinidad-born Isaiah Boodhoo and Rex Dixon (b. 1939), an English contemporary abstract expressionist painter resident in Jamaica after 1985 and in Trinidad since 2000. Boodhoo's *Homage to Shiva* (Figure 14) is enigmatic: Shiva the creator, protector, and destroyer is an armless futurist, looking down on a bed of random objects and locations expressed by his varied blue color fields. This is very unlike the symmetrically rounded Shiva that we are used to

seeing cast in bronze. This canvas presents a pleasing squirt of shapes and forms that appear childlike in simplicity, yet consistent with Shiva's role of creator and destroyer. The painting is harmonized through a sophisticated color palette distributed cleverly and deliberately so that, like Shiva, there is a unity to the complex whole. Dixon's *Standing Idol: My Hanooman* (Figure 15) is one of several canvases referencing India that Dixon painted after returning from a trip to Delhi and Agra in 2010. He is influenced by the exposure to the different vibrant and multiple colours of Hinduism, the tall *jhandis* waving in the wind and *murtis* (statues) like those in the Riverside Road Temple in Curepe, Trinidad, watching you drive by, that reminded him of the distinctive differences between Trinidad and Jamaica. He said he was blown away by the larger than life statues that dot the landscape in India and the majesty of the Taj Mahal in Agra, the white marble building built as if it were floating on light. Dixon invents and summons Hindu deities to his canvas, applying color as meaning, the blue face of the god reminiscent of the blue of Vishnu and Shiva in temple art. Maharaj, Boodhoo, and Dixon have moved from the literal to metaphoric. And in the case of Boodhoo and Dixon, a further abstraction of form is created that absorbs color and feeling through gesture and paint, allowing the viewer a freer rein of imagination both into a culture and into the painter's intentions. Both these paintings defy the solidity of the simulacra summoning up in each viewer's imagination gods from other religions as the pantheon that now comprises gods and goddesses of this twin island state has continuously expanded over the years.



Figure 14. Isaiah Boodhoo *Homage to Shiva* Oil on Linen, 32 x 24 in



Figure 15. Rex Dixon *Standing Idol: My Hanooman*. Acrylic on Canvas 57 x 40 in, 2014

Imprints

An imprint refers to a mark or outline made by pressing something onto a softer substance. Translated into the language of this essay, the culture carried over in the migrants' baggage from India, long forgotten but resurrected in many ways, was pressed onto a more malleable geography where others were also stamping their marks onto the landscape. Some primary elements of the Indian aesthetic that were recurrently summoned in the various traditions and forms are first those of color and meaning, its profusion and difference, and its complicity with nature where any shade juxtaposed to another complements, as if nature can do no wrong with its own palette. Richard Rampersad is surrounded with his containers of turmeric, magenta, turquoise, and emerald green rice grains in this sensual profusion of tactile color (Figure 16). The second is that of the particular curvature of lines that are essential elements of Indian design, whether these are on the floors, walls, or the body. Maria Nunes sees the architectural balance and contrasting colors of a decorated panel above a dusty doorway of the Lion House in Chaguanas (Figure 17) that still echoes its strange majesty of another era. Mehndi artist Aneesa Karim transforms hands and arms temporarily into an evanescent henna miniature (Figure 18). How will all of these coalesce with other color palettes? What symmetrical or asymmetrical flows will create new and original juxtapositions and themes that are the living and breathing stuff of cultural growth and aesthetic advancement?

Many of the works I have discussed here were shown in a 2017 exhibition titled INPRINTS held to commemorate Indian Arrival Day at the National Gallery and Museum of Trinidad and Tobago. Curator Nisha Hosein attempted through her seeing eye to trace the various impressions of Indianness in this collection of artworks—a veritable “soup of signs” (Savan 1983)—with the goal of drawing attention to and nurturing the creativity and artistic diversity of this society. Responses to the exhibition were affirming. Hosein noted that some viewers appreciated the “out of the box” exhibition welcoming this mixture of formats and expressions in the National Gallery space. That the work of non-Indian artists was also included was appreciated as it demonstrated the bridges that were already being created by various artists. Others were surprised to make connections as, for instance, the influence of Indians on the *jab jab* and traditional “Indian” masqueraders in Carnival, commenting that they had not realized how much Indian culture had entered the cultural marketplace. Hosein suggests that the iconography of Indianness has in her view been fully accepted within the national psyche.¹² Perhaps the question that this essay poses is that beyond the acceptance of arrival and acknowledgement of presence, what cross fertilizations of imagination and creativity have taken place that lead to aesthetic and artistic creativity and advancement for all artists, regardless of ethnicity?

¹² Telephone interview with Nisha Hosein, October 2020.



Figure 16. Richard Rampersad, Making Rangoli



Figure 17. Maria Nunes, Photograph of Lion House in Chaguanas



Figure 18. Aneesa Karim, Mehindi design

In *Imaging the Caribbean: Culture and Visual Translation* (2009) and “The Caribbean Visual Palette” (2017b), I suggested that the Indo-Caribbean contribution, as with other cultural forms, remains a work in progress to be unveiled and explored from as many tangents and directions as artistic practices allow. This can only be done by combining other existing traditions and conventions rather than keeping identities in silos. The visual treasure and traditions of Indian culture remain largely submerged, perhaps thought to be still sacrosanct. There may be a fear of plagiarizing the ideological marks that represent belief systems. The act of cross-fertilization must be democratic, inviting all artists including Indians to look to other ritual spaces, to other styles and movements to expand their palette. In the unfolding translation of visual culture as it continues to be taught through art schools, branded by advertising companies, picked up by filmmakers, masquerade band leaders, and the young child in primary school, it is interesting to imagine how Indian forms and performances may infuse into another way of seeing and configuring new dimensions of what is defined as Caribbean culture in the future of this region.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an adaptation of a catalogue essay written for Nisha Hosein, curator of Soft Box Gallery and Studio in Port of Spain, Trinidad, for the exhibition INPRINTS held to commemorate Indian Arrival Day 2017 at the National Gallery and Museum of Trinidad and Tobago. I thank her for

permission to adapt the catalogue essay and for granting access to the use of the images herein contained.

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