

POPULAR ART : NEW ANGLE

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Art in its most basic meaning signifies a skill or ability. The definition holds true for its Latin antecedent, *ars*, as well as its German equivalent, *Kunst (to be able)*.¹ One who has acquired a skill may be designated an artisan or artist. His abilities may have directed principally toward a utilitarian or an aesthetic purpose. While art continues to be associated with basic skills (e.g. the art of gardening, or the art of warfare), the term more generally carries the connotation of non-utilitarian activities (e.g. the art of painting, the art of poetry and the art of music). Such non-utilitarian aesthetic activities are called fine arts. The fine arts are those that are cultivated more for their own sake and for the intrinsic pleasure they offer to the mind and emotions of those who experience them (for example, the art of drawing, painting etc.) The artist may attempt to communicate a sense of beauty or he may react to his impulses and attempt to express them in various media. He accepts a sort of a style for his specific work and executes it to the best of his capability. These basic attitudes are broadly debated in art, which includes a review of the history of art and discussion of trends in arts, in terms of western and oriental approaches. Pop art is a new concept of present era in art, which is occasionally studied by the western aestheticians. Pop arts take position in popular arts but all popular arts may not get the status of pop arts.

In this article, attempt is made to define nature, characteristics and concepts of popular and pop arts in philosophical and psychological framework. It describes the difference between traditional folk arts and contemporary pop arts. The simplicity, universality, social and economic

considerations of popular arts is also discussed. Finally, a reference is made to effects of pop and popular arts on modern society.

The hypothesis is, that popular art is not always the degenerating taste of art but generally hurriedly produced art in the disguise of pop art. Modern society has its own style. Anything sells only when it is hot and fresh. Pop art lives in present. "Now" is its slogan and momentariness is the key word to it. Flux or change is its salient feature. It is as universal as art itself is !

Pop Arts and Other Arts

Pop is a thrust, an unexpected push. Pop is also an abbreviation of popular. Hence pop arts are arts based on modern popular culture and mass media.² Pop arts are like commercial product. They are need based and have a short shelf life. They are generally distinguished from classical arts and folk arts. Classical arts are specifically created arts. They are developed according to set standards or norms for some purpose, as classical music is written chiefly for concerts, operas and ballets. Folk arts are the traditions of a particular group, such as an occupational, ethnic, religious or regional group. For example, folk music is usually learned by listening to another person rather than by reading musical notes. There are no water-tight compartments like classical, folk and popular arts. Sometimes they overlap. For instance, there is a tendency to sing lyrics in different styles. Pop art is an urge to create something different from the beaten path. Thus, it is largely a deviation from heritage and assertion of new media and expressive forms in the face of past. Pop arts are comparatively easy to learn, easy to understand, easy to get mastery over, easy to present and finally easy to get popular acceptance.

Art, in general, is a language of heart. it is a pure contemplation of an idea in a moment of emancipation from the will. There is extreme indefiniteness of the vocabulary, one is obliged to employ while describing it. This is because in each cultural epoch, time, ideas, and individual views, no one concept or image is considered ever final. All works of art exist in present and since new ideas are constantly appearing, all such works become links in the chain of evolution of new forms. In contrast, the popular pop arts are like a craze. A certain artist is able to break through the

conventional ways of looking at things, is able to pick out one element which is really in all of us but we are unable to perceive till it is made obvious. We recognize it when it takes an art form. It is a recognizable discovery. In this sense this art merely reveals, it never creates. Any one type of style remains in its apex of popularity for some time and then descends to give way to the other style. It is like a fashion, which is fickle and unpredictable. Both these things are based on almost same psychological principle, the mob psychology of public mind. Popular arts are more subjective than objective, as more personal emotionality is involved in them. There is somewhat detached intellectuality appearing in pop arts, as quick emotional appeal gains upper hand. For instance, popular music largely expresses sentiments of love, while other popular songs serve as a vehicle for social commentary. Generally speaking, pop arts carry a short time relevance in which they are created. However, many popular pop art pieces and songs have survived for many decades. If, again, we consider some definite illustrations of pop music of different decades, we find, Rock 'n' roll of 1950's, Beatles of 60's, Rock of 70's, Rap of 80's and Disco of 90's having survived for longer duration. Most of these styles were imitated to suit Indian context. It seems that it is only by accident, and in one sense only, that the artists produce a freak, which gets popular to such an extent. All this time, in music, most of the artists used the theme of social protest and began to write their own songs. In fact, many rap groups use the form to comment on such social problems as racism and poverty. Some rap artists have generated controversy because their lyrics deal graphically with sex and violence.³ Abraham Kaplan describes popular art as, 'a revolt against the artistic establishment, a reaction against the oppressiveness of the academic and familiar'. He further says that, 'popular art may be bad art, but the converse is not necessarily true.'⁴

Folk Arts and Pop Arts

Man's primary concern is not knowledge but action, hence he creates the art forms. Words 'folk art' and 'pop art', are used here in connection with dance, song, lore, drawing, painting, customs etc., indicating the characteristics that are distinctive from those associated with the word 'folk', and 'popular'. The French word '*chansons populaires*', does give meaning of folk as well as popular, which in English conveys two distinct

meanings. They have some similar traits but one is not synonym of other.⁵ Folk arts reflect communal characteristics. They are mostly integral part of tribal customs. In many parts of Africa, Asia, and India these arts have religious content. They are also known as 'ethnic', 'rural', or 'village' arts. It is a collective art contributed by unknown hands of the people, by the people and for the people. They are very common people, the anonymous people, who unknowingly create a style of art, which becomes popular in later period. Following is the definition of folk music accepted in 1954 by the International Folk Music Council :-

"Folk music is the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the tradition are (i) continuity which links the present with the past, (ii) variation which springs from the creative impulse of the individual or the group, and (iii) selection by the community, which determines the form or forms in which the music survives. The term can be applied to music that has been evolved from rudimentary beginnings by a community uninfluenced by popular and art music and it can likewise be applied to music which has originated with an individual composer and has subsequently been absorbed into the unwritten living tradition of a community. The term does not cover composed popular music that has been taken over readymade by a community and remains unchanged, for it is the refashioning and recreation of the music by the community that gives it its folk character."⁶

This definition can be broadened easily to other arts by substituting "arts" for "music".

The people creating folk arts have no self-consciousness as artists. They, most of the time, are unaware that they are the initiator of popular art. Recently popularized Warli paintings and Terracotta earthen pots are good examples of such folk and now popular arts. Folk arts become pop arts by accident. Artist gets pleasure, happiness and a feeling of satisfaction of creation, particularly when his art graces the social and festive occasions. Sometimes, he also gets adequate money for his artwork in such festivities. From such art, imitator picks up the style, which is not patented by the simple folks and makes it popular in the affluent group of people. Gradually,

with media popularity, the goods based on an anonymous idea, are flooded in the market. Inferior commodities (as goods are changed into commodities when mass production takes place) by bad imitation are readily available for affordable price. In this way, folk arts come in the market under the disguise of pop arts. This work is not aesthetically explicit. It is not the art of essence. Innocence of artist is lost. The capital 'A' of action in 'Art' changes into 'a' of popular art. Getting lot of money when the style is 'the in thing' is the only parameter applied by commercial men. At regular intervals, some changes are made in initial design for continuation of 'fashion' for some more time. Later buyers get a slightly different version. Thus, at the fag end of fading of popularity of the item, some more money is made.

In folk dances and folk songs, simple instruments are used. Dance is mainly based on rhythm. Songs have unbelievably simple and straightforward but mind catching tunes. Folk songs describe everyday occurrences of life like, change of seasons, harvesting, festive occasions etc. To folk people, art is mainly, a group activity, a relief from the routine hard work, an occasion to look forward. There is simplicity in selection of materials. The front wall of their hut is the ideal place for display of art. Natural colours are made and used. Designs drawn are absolutely simple. They are symbolic to nature, a raw imitation of nature. Mostly stick drawings are used to depict figures. There is no shadow work, perspective, three dimensionality or use of cubism in these drawings. Simple faces devoid of expressions and with only essential features clearly convey the message which artist likes to present. Most of the folk arts of any particular tribe generally carry a common style, which is its stamp. This is because though the arts differ, themes and their sequences mostly remain the same. Deliberate attempt of pop or popular art on folk art, does not carry the genuine identification mark. In the market, commodities are supplied as per the popular demand. While folk art is full of life, there is no heart in the popular art.

Talents of the folk artists are appreciated by mere words or seldom by giving them awards. Recently outlets are open to sell their 'art goods' at real worth. Generally, genuine artifacts have to face stiff competition from pop art items. Artist and art still continue to be the versatility of the

village folks. Even if it reaches the urban market, it never disappears from its place of origin. Pop art flourishes on its own. It rarely needs media attention. A very little cosmetic is required to get mass popularity. If two almost similar goods are introduced in the market at the same time, one reaches at the top of the sale in no time whereas the other remains at the bottom with no genuine reason. Producer of pop art is little concerned about the social considerations.

Popular Art and Social Considerations

Utility items are produced, reproduced and repeatedly produced by number of members of the family, and members of the same caste. For instance, a leather worker and his family are always known as people from cobbler caste (*chamar*). How many generations are working in the profession and how much (quantity) and how fine (quality) 'goods' are produced is immaterial. The caste of a person hardly changes with the skill he gains, popularity he deserves, honors he gets or awards he bags. As per the increased demand, more people from castes often join in learning skills of manufacturing. Thus they get an identity without changing their original caste. Exchange of siblings in matrimonial alliances and sharing of food are still resorted to be people of the same caste.

In modern times changing of profession is not looked down upon. Middle class people change their professions and skills as per demand of the goods in society. Industrialization has brought only two social classes, the owner and the worker. Capitalism changes 'Art into Commodity'. It plays with the psyche of people and forces them to accept luxurious items as necessities. Rare artifacts gradually vanish and large commodities get flooded into the market. Owner of industries squeeze maximum profit. Rich gets richer. Cost of the commodities made on machines in a large quantity, are considerably cheaper to compete. The cost of handmade products is related to the number of man-hours it takes to manufacture. Therefore the genuine artists suffer.

Quality of Goods

In popular art, quality and quantity work somewhat in inverse *order*. Consequently, quality suffers when the quantity or demand increases. In such a case, pop art changes into junk art. The conventional beauty becomes

imperceptible. There is an ugliness or meaninglessness in what is conventionality extolled as beautiful⁷. The goods become rare as the difficulty level of manufacturing them increases. The individual artists, who are able to break through the conventional ways and create transient waves to isolate their art, become rare. Spinoza's dictum that "all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare" is proved. To suit the new designs and styles, different materials are tried out, alloys are made, research and development units are formed, machines are made, and workers are trained. Extensive experiments are done. Repetitive attempts bring refinement in art. Hand dexterity is still appreciated howsoever perfection machine brings in the "art good". Art is art when it passes through the craftsman's magic hands. The lover of art buys it irrespective of its cost. Unlike consumer goods it is the value that is more important to an art lover. Its value is judged by authorized and expert evaluators. Though the craftsman hardly gets his worth, he is not discouraged to pursue creative work. Very rarely artists from different parts of the world, come together, exchange their embellished craftwork and discuss their skills. Middleman conveys essence of changes in goods, necessary from art lovers to artists. In any case, notwithstanding changes suggested, the artist implicitly maintains purity of art for generations. The name or the place of the artisan's family gets attached to the style of art, like 'Kirana Gayaki', 'Benaras Thumari' in Indian classical music or 'Rajasthani' miniature painting in fine art. Intricacy and exquisiteness in work of art is the taste of unblemished style.

The artist acts as both dreamer and creator. His work of art is on one hand a universal object, on the other hand, a unique experience. This unusual imaginative experience of an artist is superlatively harmonious and is of more than personal significance. His art becomes the symbol of order, Endeavour and goodness of his time.

Universality in Popular Art

"Art should endeavour to show the universal in particular." This is a phrase that is constantly used by art critics. It is also a revelation of infinite in finite. Popular art is a fine example of this revelation. Popularity of pop art spreads universally if it is a genuine work. Once the universal popularity is gained, the art becomes vulnerable to imitation. Such imitation

items are available at comparatively lower prices and product gains wide acceptance. Famous philosopher and thinker John Dewey calls it an "Art Product" which is perceptual and psychodynamic in nature.^{viii} Variations are tried to suit the local ideas. Art needs no language. It is self-explanatory. Particularly fine arts, plastic arts and few performing arts are comprehensible, just by perception. Social customs, traditions play some role in the making of art. To understand this art, language of heart remains universally same. Unsophisticated simplicity helps art turn universal. There is little qualitative parameter to pop art, but there is definitely a quantitative measure, which makes it popular art. The new exposures to the world of art leave its imprint. Change is the vital factor in pop art, which provides a pivot for popularity. Generally, art selects what is significant and suppresses the trivial. For popular art standardization is the need and with that comes simplicity.

Simplicity of Popular Art

Popular arts may very well appeal to a mass audience. They have characteristics that distinguish them from other varieties of mass art and have distinctive contexts and patterns of presentation. Popular art is popular in all strata of society because it is closer to human heart. Everyday life, daily chores, relationships, food items, feelings etc are the general themes. Spontaneity is the basis of this art. There is no question of 'why' this, and not 'that' in the selection of theme. Everything under the sun can qualify as a theme of popular art. Method of presentation is open to ingenuity. Sometimes, one tends to feel it to be a madness of new generation. The common man thinks this art is easier to imitate and hence it appeals him. Tunes are easy to hum, words are simple to understand. Figures are quick to draw, colour, contrasts are vivid. For instance, in a drawing, circle is a head, triangle is a body, two slant and two straight sticks are arms and legs, few streaks on head depict hair. All parts of the body are drawn in their places, but without any obvious proportion or special artistic sense. The unique feature of this art is its non-artisticity. The popular art is a straightforward thing with no surprises attached. In Henri Bergson's words, "what is vital in art is endlessly variable."^{ix}

Popular art is devoid of no specific structure or body. It is like a

structureless scarecrow. Only difference is that, nobody gets scared away by it. Popular art is neither any type of invention nor any discovery. It is a sort of simple repetitiveness and therefore, easier to understand. In computer terminology popular is like, cut, copy, and paste sequence. Generally it does not hurt the morality. It creates a wave but does not disturb the universe. It is so appealing to mind that sometimes well-known artist also likes to copy its simplicity. There is simplicity in texture, melody, acting, singing, backdrops, rhythm and beats. Therefore, one feels like honored guest in his own house or a respectable host in other's house. Also, there is a joy of nostalgia, the nostalgia of soothing memories. Popular art is sometimes a step ahead or some other time a step behind the social norms. The only common reaction we find in appreciation is, "I like it".

Effects of Popular Art

Popular art is a leisure time activity. It prospers only when people have their basic necessities fulfilled. It brings festive mood. It is a symbol of happiness. Young and old all enjoy together. It has the charisma to spellbound thousands of people together as Michael Jackson does in his concerts. 'It is a craze', 'It is madness', some people opine. The wave of popularity catches everyone, the artist, as well as the audience. In this stressful world of today, to forget all our worries is essential. Popular art gives sheer joy, save for some exceptions when group psyche crops up and the crowd changes into a hostile rudderless lot. Controlling of this mob itself is a challenge. For a quick production of art, many times, deficient art is accepted without any reservations. Bake it when the oven is hot, is the general attitude. Hence aesthetic beauty is the very first casualty. At some stage, when a person comes to know that such type of art does not need any special quality, he tries his hand at it, resulting in dilution. Vulgarism becomes fashion.

For sometime parameters of beauty changed to ugliness, thus giving impetus to wrong doers. The art of ugliness was accepted as the "in thing". Struggle for existence, suffering, atrocities, heinous acts and crimes described in the modern literature, were also staged in theatres. The darker side of popular art was undesirable contamination of this art. In literature, certain under-privileged neo-literates tried to give vent to their sufferings. Unintentionally, this brought unparliamentary language in literature though

the feelings were intense and too real to believe. The established authors tried to emulate the style of deprived neo-literates to attain quick popularity. All these developments brought in, a new type of literature in popular art. Although this was a passing phase it had a profound effect in terms of couldn't careless attitude of the young generation. A sort of compulsive acceptance to this style became then the need of the hour. Peer pressure was too hard to resist. Critics were not against the presentation of a reality in suffering, but they were worried about the presentation of only this one perspective. Some miscreants took undue advantage of the situation and spoiled the harmony of the society. The novelty whipped away flagging interest. At the same time the repetition minimized the sale-demand. Infantile need for protection felt. Once upon a time society was safe on the old and familiar ground. Fortunately, wheel of popular art rotated in full circle and gradually people again started realizing the importance of good art. There dawned a new bright morning in popular art. The age old thought of art is to give happiness to all was once again established.

Conclusion

The happiness through popular art is generally a temporary phase. It is a child's play, like playing with paper boats in bathtub. Yet, it is not a fantasy. It is not escapism. It is a need. Today, popular art is becoming more and more sophisticated, a symbolic representation of reality. It makes audience aware of latest issues. In John Dewey's words, 'Art today is the beauty parlour of civilization'. It occupies some important place in busy and stressful life. Television works as a producer and advertiser of popular art. With the heavy work scheduled the old hobbies and arts are reducing almost to nil. Elite few have to make future generation aware of the importance of qualitative life through arts. According to old Sumerian culture, art is a mirror of mind. Popular art is a mirror of society.

Popular art is too often talked about, viewed on, on no other basis than its popularity. The popularity is mostly judged in terms of media attention. It is considered as a social status symbol to give opinions at the high place. The personal taste need not always match the judgment given in public. Right time, right mood, and right feeling created by right arts are always the healthy traits of a rightful society.

NOTES

1. *Encyclopaedia Britanica*, Vol. 2. Encyclopaedia Britanica Inc. USA, 1968. pp 484-495.
2. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 6th ed, 1977.
3. *The World Book of Encyclopedia*, Vol. 15, 1999. pp 669-671.
4. Abraham Kaplan : 'The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts', *American Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1966 Vol. XXXIV Spring.
5. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 9, 1968, pp 516-527
6. *Ibid*
7. Abraham Kaplan : 'The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts' *op.cit.* p 351
8. *Encyclopaedia Britanica*, Vol. 9, p 516.
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