Guggenheim Exhibition: 130 Years of Asian Influence on American Art

Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and Cologne, and the estate of James Lee Byars

James Lee Byars
The Death of James Lee Byars, 1982/94
Gold leaf, crystals and plexiglas, Dimensions variable

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John Cage
New River Watercolor Series 1, #5, 1988
Watercolor on parchment paper
45.7 x 91.4 cm

By VIBHUTI PATEL

Asian writings, philosophy, religion, colors, dances and crafts have influenced American art for more than a century. Many American artists have traveled in Asia, and many *are* Asian. A recent, ambitious exhibition at one of New York's premier museums gathered the threads together to present a new view of America's art history.

The exhibition entitled "The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia 1860-1989" that opened earlier this year at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, revised American art history forever by shifting the focus of the influence on U.S. artists from Europe to Asia. It is surprising that though many artists' individual engagement with Asia has been documented, this is the first time Asian thought has been examined as a fundamental undercurrent in the creation of a new visual and conceptual language in American creative culture.

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Above: The unique rotunda of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City.
Above right: Architect Frank Lloyd Wright (left) looks over his spiral shaped proposal for the Guggenheim Museum with artist Baroness Hilla Rebay and arts patron Solomon R. Guggenheim in 1945.

DIVERSITY/ART

The title of the show, taken from a collage-like work in the exhibit, reflects these artists' eclectic, random appropriation of Asian ideas into their own, new narrative of self-expression. "This is not about the East or the West, it's something new—a 'third'—something other, that's created from this new alchemy, a new alloy of culture and expression," explains Alexandra Munroe, the Guggenheim's senior curator for Asian art. "As for 'mind,' artists were looking to Asian philosophies, religious texts, meditative practices, aesthetics, performance traditions, literature, poetry for a new model of consciousness, of the act of living itself." In short, the show is nothing less than an intellectual history of 130 years of modern American culture being traced back to Asia.

The huge exhibition, on display from January 30 through April 19, 2009, was divided into seven thematic sections that spiraled upward in the Guggenheim's unique rotunda. Designed in 1959 by Frank Lloyd Wright (whose monumental legacy is on display in a retrospective to celebrate the Guggenheim's 50th anniversary), the museum has no walls, no rooms, no separated floors. It is one continuous whorl with huge, open bays where the art is displayed around a vast, open central shaft, down which you can look from every level.

The first section, "Aestheticism and Japan: the Cult of the Orient," displays the works of Japanese-inspired artists like James McNeill Whistler and Mary Cassatt from the 19th century. In 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry opened U.S. trade with Japan and overnight, that long-closed island nation kindled Americans' curiosity with its seductive mystique. The export of woodblock prints, ceramics and screen paintings brought Japanese aesthetics into American homes. Indeed, Japanese influence is felt overwhelmingly throughout the exhibit.

Asked about the comparative dearth of Indian-inspired pieces, Munroe explains, "We're a Pacific power, so East Asian immigrants outnumbered South Asians. So many artists and art teachers were Japanese-born, they influenced our aesthetic." Interestingly, she continues, "Indian art did not take hold because it's too fleshy. America is a Protestant country, 19th century intellectual discourse was shaped by the Boston elite for whom disembodied East Asian art—quasi ethereal, abstract—was more acceptable."

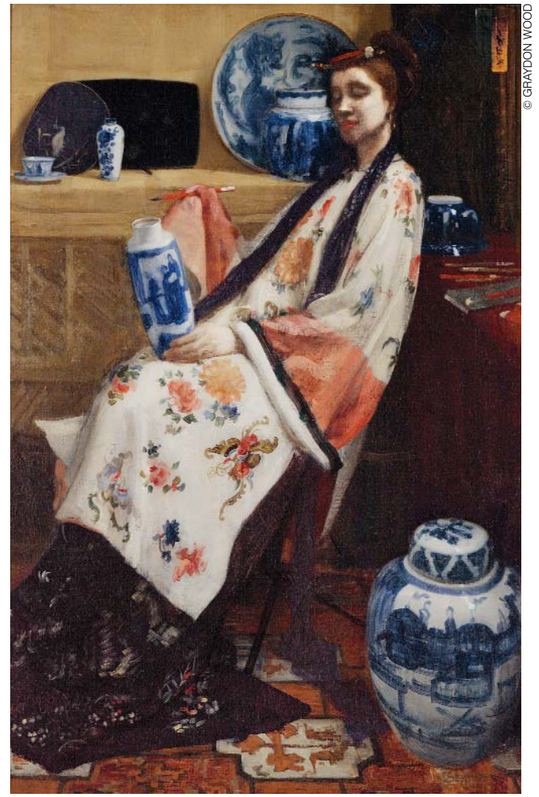
Another perspective is offered by Sandhini Poddar, an Indian from Mumbai who, at 32, is the museum's assistant curator for Asian art: "Japanese art got integrated earlier than Indian because Japanese Buddhism can be applied to daily life. India resists that—India's about the narrative, the symbolism. It's less accessible for American artists to apply in their lives and their art-making practices."

Where India's intellectual influence was keenly felt was through Hinduism. In the 19th century, writers Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and later, in the 20th century, poet T.S. Eliot, read the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*. Later still, yoga and transcendental meditation became popular; Indian music with its ragas and improvisation, first brought to America by Ravi Shankar, impacted American rock music through the Beatles. But there was no political awareness of India in this period other than America's continuing fascination with Mohandas K. Gandhi. The show's cutoff date, 1989, is a historic marking point—rise of the Internet, beginning of globalization.

Section two, "Landscapes of the Mind: New Conceptions of Nature," moves into the early 20th century. As Chinese painting and philosophy became accessible, West Coast artists appropriated ink brushwork and multiple viewpoints from Chinese landscapes. American intellectuals looked to Asia for spiritual values, they read the Theosophists and Swami Vivekananda, and artist Morris Graves criticized the "Western world's highly technicized, rational-mindedness."

"Ezra Pound, Modern Poetry, and Dance Theater" offers seminal riches going beyond visual art in section three. Pound's innovative translations of Chinese poetry and Japanese Noh plays radicalized free verse, influenced Eliot's poetry and W.B. Yeats' plays, and ushered in a poetic revolution that profoundly affected English literature worldwide. Pound's *Cathay*, a small book of 15 Chinese poems driven by concrete images and few adjectives, is given prime space. Eliot's groundbreaking poem "The Wasteland" is here in manuscript, Rabindranath Tagore's "Gitanjali" with Yeats' introduction is present, too. In 1935, sculptor Isamu Noguchi and choreographer Martha Graham collaborated to create their Noh-inspired dance theater. Eastern aesthetics changed American dance forever.

"Abstract Art, Calligraphy, and Metaphysics" brings us to the heart of this show: the experimentation that arose from the marriage of Eastern calligraphy with abstract painting. Calligraphic brush stroke and ink were used not for writing but as a symbol prized for its shape. It led to Abstract Expressionism as practiced by fine mid-century artists like Mark Tobey, David Smith, Jackson Pollock, Brice Marden and Indian-born Natvar Bhavsar, who uses dry pigment to create huge, brilliantly colored, mural-like paintings. "We



© GRAYDON WOOD

James McNeill Whistler
Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks, 1864
Oil on canvas
93.3 x 61.3 cm

© Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York

Mary Cassatt
The Letter, 1890-91, Drypoint and aquatint on cream laid paper, 34.4 x 21.1 cm

JUNG HEE CHOI © Jung Hee Choi 2008

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Above: **La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela**
Dream House, sound and light installation, 1962-present. La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela and The Just Alap Raga Ensemble performing Raga Sundara, 2008.

Left: **Jack Kerouac**
Face of the Buddha, 1958? Pencil on paper, 16.5 x 20.9 cm

© EDWARD PETERSON, JR.

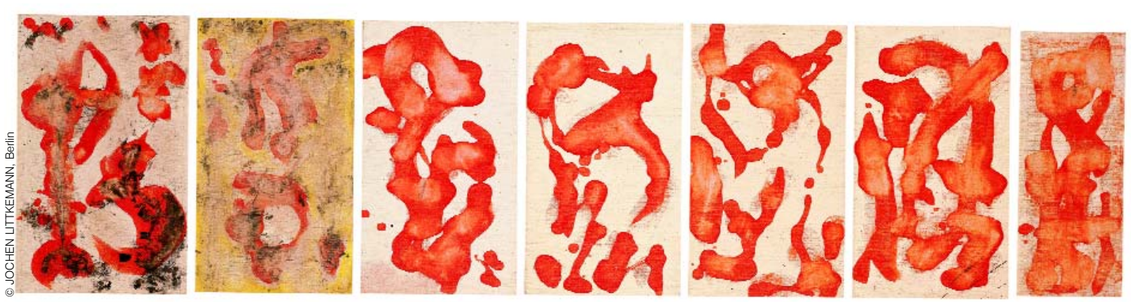
placed Natvar in the context of the early genesis of abstract art in America because his method of building up the surface through layers of dry pigment is his own," says Poddar. His enormous "Delwara"—172.7 x 428 cm—reigns over an entire wall because, as Poddar explains, " 'Delwara' is a lyrical work I chose for scale, it holds its own in that big bay. Many choices were made in response to the Guggenheim's architecture." Then she notes, "Though ragas, Sanskrit literature, Indian aesthetics and seasons are Natvar's sources of inspiration, his approach is similar to these Americans."

Bhavsar *is* an American, proud of his Indian heritage. He came to the United States in 1962, with a diploma from the Sir J.J. School of Art in Mumbai. He has had numerous museum shows and over 1,000 works in major Western collections. "I learned art from life," he says. "In India, we absorb aesthetics from Holi, Diwali, *rangoli*. We don't put art in museums. I was born into a family of printers. As a child, I was surrounded by tubs of color, I saw miles of fabrics drying in the sun. Motes of light coming through our tiled roof were like a universe." He adds, "My work is about formlessness, about movement—of motes, leaves, ripples in water, forms in clouds. This is a charge for me, so static art—still life and portraiture which I'd learned—went out of my vocabulary." Bhavsar was changed by seeing master works for the first time in Philadelphia. "I felt a closeness to them. In India, I had seen a [Mark] Rothko painting in a Museum of Modern Art show that came to Ahmedabad in 1957. That stuck with me. I painted "Trees" then, which is all red and black; you can't see the trees. In America, I realized I was interested not in storytelling or painting from objects or nature but in color, which fills the universe. Color invites you to explore yourself. I removed all references that might shift the focus away from the expressive strength of spacious experience. I was excited, I felt at home in America."

Natvar Bhavsar
Delwara, 1982
Acrylic and pigment on canvas, 172.7 x 428 cm

For Bhavsar, the colorist, the whiteness of "Delwara" evokes silence: "Complete silence of the cave, of speechlessness, of meditation. Looking at nature, you're entranced.... Your physicality melts into the largeness of the experience, you become part of the work. When I enter my studio, everything disappears—including myself. That power which draws me—I never know why—is what compels me to paint." He expounds on his innovative dry pigment process: "I work with colored powders. As a young man, I'd made an 80-by-25-foot *rangoli* in Ahmedabad. It took 15 days and nights to make. I have enormous energy and put down colors fast—in layers. Multitudes of color presences are laid out with dry pigment, through a mesh screen, onto the canvas. Then strokes are brushed over it with huge, specially made brushes that move the pigment upward or downward; the whole is sprayed with oil and a plastic medium which makes the colors stick to the canvas. Up to 200 layers embrace each other, craters build up. Laying down color with such freedom is a unique process, similar to *rangoli*—which you can't hang on a wall—but more complex, more sophisticated. The idea of *rangoli* was important because of the visual power of dry pigment: paint loses luster. Just as Jackson Pollock did something new with the drip method by freeing himself of brushes, mine is a new, freer process."

Jackson Pollock
Untitled [Red Painting 1-7], circa 1950
Oil on canvas in six parts, and enamel on canvas; smallest 50.8 cm x 20.3 cm, largest 53.3 x 33 cm



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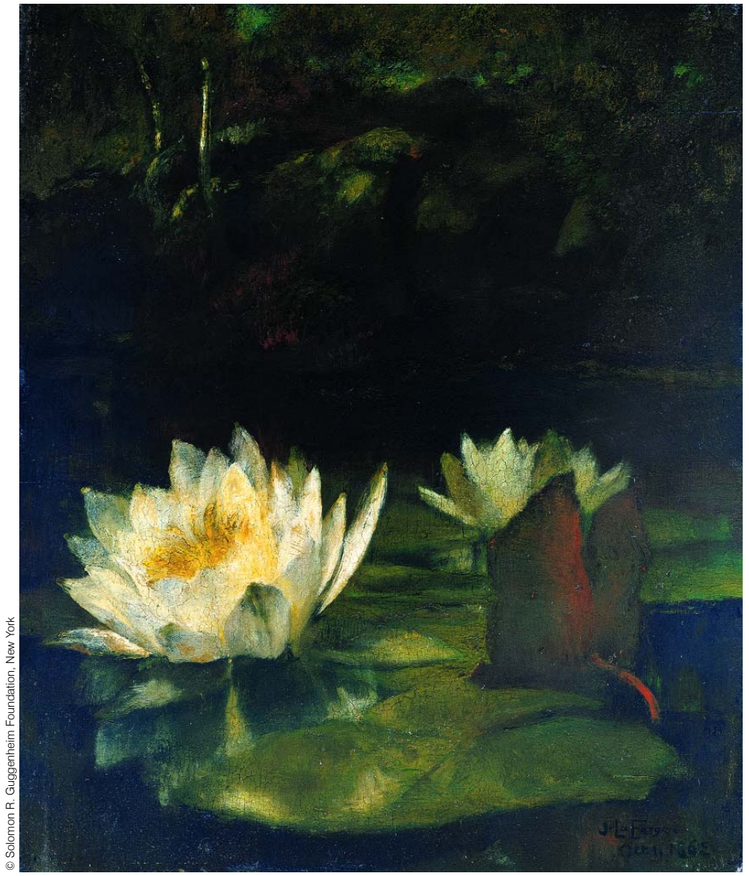
The following section, "Buddhism and the Neo-Avant-Garde," deals with disillusioned postwar artists who turned to East Asian Buddhist thought and created an anti-art movement that rejected the bourgeois values of the 1950s for the poetry of quotidian existence. Zen musician John Cage, in deference to Buddhism's ideal of emptiness, wrote silent music (literally, with the piano closed!). But Cage was a visual artist, too, and the exhibit showcases 20 of his abstract paintings. His statement, "Art is not self-expression but self-alteration," summed up these artists' zeal for Zen. Contrastingly, India's appeal emanates from an abstract painting by Lee Mullican titled "Evening Raga," and in "Dream House," a sound-and-light installation by minimalist composer La Monte Young and light artist Marian Zazeela. The two were disciples of Hindustani vocalist Pandit Pran Nath who taught, "Nada Brahma" (sound is god). Their large installation encouraged viewers to walk through without shoes. Young claimed that the sound and light could transform the listener's psychic state into a "drone state of mind."

The work of the Beat writers claims its own area. Novelist Jack Kerouac discovered Buddhism, published *Dharma Bums*, and advocated total freedom. Allen Ginsberg's iconic poem "Howl" defined a generation that defied conservative postwar thinking. Cultivating yogic breathing and mantra chanting, Ginsberg developed a new poetic measure corresponding to human breath. In the exhibit, his numerous black and white photographs chart his travels through Japan and India.



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John La Farge
The Last Waterlilies, 1862
Oil on wood, 23.5 x 19.1 cm

Scattered throughout are fascinating works by big-name artists: Robert Rauschenberg's "Gold Standard," assembled from street-collected junk in an onstage Tokyo performance; Jasper Johns' abstract-seeming "Dancers on a Plane," focused on a Tantric, Tibetan Buddhist deity adorned with skulls, which Johns dedicated to dancer-choreographer Merce Cunningham.

Next, "Art of Perceptual Experience: Pure Abstraction and Ecstatic Minimalism" displays monochromatic minimalist works by artists like Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin and Indian American Zarina, who all drew upon the self-transformative powers of contemplation (late 1950s to mid-1970s). Reinhardt's dark abstract paintings induce intense concentration by focusing the mind. In shifting consciousness, they are like prayer. Zarina's two minimalist works similarly quiet the mind.

"Zarina's poetic pin drawings are rooted in minimalist practice," Poddar observes.

For more information:

Guggenheim Museum

http://www.guggenheim.org/

The Third Mind

http://web.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/exhibition_pages/thirdmind/index.html_Us

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Morris Graves
Time of Change, 1943
Tempera on paper,
61 x 76.2 cm

© DAVID M. HEALD

Zarina
Untitled, 1977
Laminated paper, pierced with sewing needle,
60 x 50 cm

"She uses the grid as a framework with a feminist overlay. It's an intellectual, compositional method similar to the conceptual frameworks of Martin and Reinhardt. This great body of work hadn't been shown before so we integrated Zarina into the canon by putting her on the same democratic platform. Her later, better-known, woodblock prints about home have a political narrative about displacement; the pin drawings are a pure response to minimalist abstraction."

Zarina concurs. "I've been here 30 years, I knew the work of these artists. I'm curious, I see many shows and think about the works. People connect my work to Japan and I do like the sparse all-white Shinto aesthetic. But these 'pin drawings'—[printmaker] Krishna Reddy called them that—came from 'woman's work' which I learned growing up in India. I find it comforting to sew. I'm into systems, I like order, putting things together."

She comments on the provenance of her work thus: "When you take stitches apart, unravel the thread, it leaves a mark, a texture on the surface. The little indentation's like a tear, a wound, a memory of that gesture. I was playing, trying different things, when I realized the thread's not necessary. In 1977, I did not have a studio, I was in a new city, living on my own, I did not know many people. This is what I did then, late at night, alone in my loft. I like small work—you have to come very close to see the texture—and love the tactile quality of the material."

Zarina called this "pleasurable" process "unraveling memory" after the Urdu word for breaking stitches, removing them. "It's also reminiscent of the holes insects make on the pages of a book. My father had a library in Aligarh—I'd seen insects come out of a shell, leaving holes in it. Growing up in a small town, I watched everything: insects, ants going up the wall. My work is based on such observations, watching nature, being connected to it. I didn't go to art school, never had formal training, I've taught myself."

Her method consists in laminating two thin sheets of paper with rice paste, then passing them through a press so it becomes layered like cardboard. "This process was used in Japan and in Indian miniatures," Zarina says. The laminated sheet is put on styrofoam and perforated with a needle. "There's no pattern; the hand does what it wants. I let my hand guide me intuitively, I don't edit. An outside force guides the hand and the material—it's divine intervention. I'm a small instrument in the large scheme of things. It's hard to explain why I do what I do. Something I've seen in passing may emerge years later, one doesn't know where in the antipodes of one's mind that sound or sensation was hiding. Then one says, 'Oh, I knew this;' or, 'Here it is.' "

Does she wait for inspiration? "I think about what I want to do for a long time; then I just do it. Even if I plan it, once I'm with the material, it takes over. I never know how it will look because it's about creativity, it's not reproduction." That could describe every one of the 234 diverse pieces in this encyclopedic show: each is about creativity, none about reproduction.

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