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A Century Of Artistic Transformation: The Madras School Of Arts (1850–1950)

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Abstract: Painting, sculpture, and various other art forms have existed in Tamil Nadu for many centuries. After the establishment of British rule, specialized art schools were founded in several parts of India to provide formal training in the arts. Among them, the Madras School of Arts played a particularly significant role — it was, in fact, the first art school in India. The British who ruled Chennai established this school both to meet their own needs and because they were deeply impressed by Tamil Nadu's traditional arts. They engaged local students to produce various artworks, which were used by the British themselves and also exported to many other countries. Many of the artworks created in this school are still displayed in renowned museums around the world today. Seeing these works reveals that Tamil Nadu was home to many exceptional artists, skilled in diverse forms of art. Furthermore, the British introduced their own artistic practices and techniques into this school's curriculum. This study examines the circumstances and developments that arose from the curriculum implemented between 1850 and 1950, during which these cross-cultural exchanges and artistic transformations took place.

Index Terms –: Madras School of Arts, Syllabus, Photography, Arts and Crafts, Alexander Hunter, Fine Art

I. INTRODUCTION

The existence of art in India for many centuries is evident from the artistic evidence we have today — in the form of paintings, sculptures, and architectural monuments. Historical writings record that many kings, after conquering other lands, attempted to destroy the architectural heritage of those regions but were often unable to do so completely. Art forms such as painting, sculpture, dance, and music, which have existed for centuries, continue to be preserved and have achieved significant progress over time.

In Tamil Nadu too, art forms like painting and sculpture have flourished for many centuries. During the British colonial period, numerous art objects—particularly those involving woodwork and metalwork, which greatly attracted the British—were exported from Tamil Nadu to various countries. The Madras School of Arts, one of the earliest institutions for formal art education in India, was established by Dr. Alexander Hunter in 1850. His objective was to promote industrial and artistic training through a structured syllabus that combined European academic principles with Indian craftsmanship. This study focuses on the art curriculum of the Madras School of Arts between 1850 and 1950, examining the courses offered during this period and the changes that took place within them.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

When the Madras School of Arts was established in 1850 by Dr. Alexander Hunter, the institution offered courses in Drawing, Modelling, Lithography, Wood Engraving, and Etching on Copper. (1)

In 1853, courses in Paper Manufacture and Pottery Manufacture were introduced. However, the Paper Manufacture course was later discontinued. (2)

In 1856, Mr. A. Cole introduced the Class Teaching Method along with subjects such as Practical Geometry, Freehand Drawing, Plan Drawing, and Flower Drawing. At that time, he served as the Head of the Art Department. (3)

As the scope of the institution expanded to include industrial arts, new subjects related to industry were introduced, such as Bricks, Fire Bricks, Paving and Roofing Tiles, Water Pipes, Ornamental Building Materials, and Blacksmith Works. (4)

Between 1862 and 1863, Photography was introduced as a subject by Dr. Hunter, but it remained part of the curriculum only until 1876. (5)

In 1877, under the leadership of R. F. Chisholm, a Women's Division was established in the school. The art curriculum was reorganized to align with that of the South Kensington School of Art in London, introducing new subjects such as Enamelling on Glass, Decorating in Oil Colour, Metal Work (Repoussé), and Wood Carving. (6)

In 1880–81, the Certificate Grade System was introduced, and the courses were categorized as follows:

First Grade

- Linear Geometry
- Freehand Drawing from the Human Figure
- Freehand Drawing
- Model Drawing in Outline
- Drawing from the Round (in Chalk)
- Sepia Drawing from Model Study
- Chalk Drawing from Models
- Oil Painting in Monogram

Second Grade

- Sepia Drawing from Models
- Drawing from the Round (in Chalk) (7)

In 1887, E. B. Havell introduced Lacquer Work Printing. (8)

In 1897, Alfred Chatterton initiated the Aluminium Industry, incorporating it into the Metal Work department. He also introduced Cotton Weaving and conducted experiments in Chrome Tanning and Cotton Weaving. (9)

In 1901, when Handloom Weaving was introduced in Tamil Nadu, related experimental training was conducted at the School. (10)

After W. S. Hardaway assumed charge, in 1921, the institution was renamed the School of Arts and Crafts. Separate departments were established for different crafts, including: Cabinet Making, Metal Work, Silversmithing and Jewellery, Wood and Copper Engraving, Die-Sinking, Lacquer Work Painting, Designing, Copper Weaving, Modelling, and Geometrical Drawing. (11)

In 1927, under the leadership of D. P. Roy Chowdhury, the existing Certificate Course was restructured into a Diploma Programme, and the institution was renamed the Government School of Arts and Crafts.

The School was organized into three major departments: Painting, Modelling, and Commercial Art. Both Diploma and Certificate qualifications were awarded.

The major subjects included Painting, General Drawing, Sheet Metal Work, Engraving, Goldsmithing, Enamelling, and Design, while other allied subjects formed the supplementary components of the curriculum. (12)

Research Methodology

This study is divided into four sections:

1. Importance of the Study
2. Review of Literature
3. Research Methodology
4. Conclusion

Importance of the Study

The curriculum in colleges plays a crucial role in the growth and development of students. In art schools and colleges that focus on disciplines such as painting and sculpture, new programs incorporating modern art practices are continually being introduced.

In both India and abroad, art-related curricula were initially designed by the British to integrate artistic and industrial practices within art schools and colleges. The Madras School of Arts, the first art institution established in India, followed this same model in structuring its syllabus and courses.

In this study, the Madras School of Arts (1850–1950) is examined for its curriculum and the ways in which it evolved over that hundred-year period. The institution, which began as a school, gradually developed into a college, and its programs underwent significant transformation.

The art courses that existed more than a century ago differ greatly from those offered today. Therefore, by analyzing the art curriculum that existed over this 100-year span, this research aims to help future artists and scholars understand which programs were introduced, modified, or discontinued during specific years.

Furthermore, this study sheds light on the art practices and techniques that were part of those earlier curricula, making it a valuable resource for understanding the educational and artistic evolution of the Madras School of Arts. The study also acknowledges the contributions of various art educators such as Dr. Alexander Hunter, E. B. Havell, Alfred Chatterton, W. S. Hardaway, and D. P. Roy Chowdhury, who each influenced different phases of the institution's growth.

For this study, several books published about the Madras School of Arts and a few online articles have been used as primary sources. In addition, secondary sources such as artworks produced as part of the school's curriculum, photographs taken by students, and information about prominent artists who studied at the institution have been referenced to support the research.

Conclusion

Although Photography played a significant role in the curriculum of the Madras School of Arts, its discontinuation after a certain period can be seen as a major loss for students. This is especially evident today, when photography has become an integral part of modern life worldwide—something clearly reflected in the ubiquity of cameras on mobile phones.

Over the years, many new subjects have been added to the school's curriculum. Historical records show that even engineering students once came to this institution to receive specialized training in artistic subjects. Furthermore, artworks created at this school have been displayed in renowned museums across various countries, and the school has had a substantial influence on the architectural heritage of Chennai.

All these factors demonstrate that the Madras School of Arts played a vital role in shaping the artistic growth and creative development of its students, leaving a lasting impact on both Indian art and education.

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