

Pappal Suneja



Charles Fabri – An Art Critic

Building Bridges between India and Europe

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Foreword

This book is an invitation – it invites its readers to explore the writings of Charles Fabri, an art historian and critic whose work is little known.

Raised and educated in Europe, Fabri first visited India in 1931 and finally settled there for good in 1934. As a wanderer between different cultures, he provided Indian discourse with a perspective that was quite distinct. His voice stood out, and it is about time for a reappraisal of what he had to say.

This humble book offers a much-needed basis for that, as it collects articles published in magazines that are hard to find – at least in Europe.

Published in India, Fabri's texts were meant to contribute to discourses then developing in a country that was both looking back at its own legacy and ahead and into a world that was rapidly changing. To establish a sense of identity, India had to explore how its own culture was like and unlike others.

While Fabri's writings addressed Indian audiences when they were written, they may serve us today to broaden our understanding of cultural exchanges in the 20th Century and to see Modernism as a global phenomenon.

The writings of Charles Fabri offer an excellent starting point for those who'd like to dig deeper into the exchange between Europe and India that this book aims to illuminate. We have to thank Pappal Suneja for putting it together – and for having 'found' Charles Fabri in the first place. If the anthology presented here will allow other scholars to see for themselves and to broaden their perspectives it will well have served its purpose.

Jasper Cepl

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Introduction

Charles Fabri arrived in India in 1931 as part of a British expedition of archaeologists and later returned to his home country. Fabri's love for Indian culture and tradition brought him back to India as a permanent resident in 1934. Serving as an art and theatre critic for the statesmen from 1948, Charles Fabri's journey follows a fascinating trajectory from a background in archaeology to critiquing dance and theatre. In the last decade of his life, he contributed to art and architecture magazines such as *Indian Builder*, *Design*, *Marg*, *Roop-Lekha*, amongst others as a freelancer. The study of Fabri's viewpoints from the mid-20th century draws attention to the East-West modernism paradigm. It establishes a foundation for further research, fostering a 'dialogue' between India and central Europe from the 1950s onwards. This anthology shows the importance of *Indian Builder* and *Design* magazine alike and unlike diverse cultural contexts and cultural history from a critical viewpoint. Precisely due to this, the concept of the publication of Fabri's writings is a promising endeavor. There is a clear vision of how thoughts should be presented, ensuring a lasting impact and corresponding external influence. The approach of documenting selected articles from *Indian Builder* and *Design* is particularly fitting, not least because it is an ideal 'spin-off project' emerging from my Ph.D. research titled "*Modern Indian Architecture and the Emergence of a Post-Independence Discourse: the case of Design magazine (1957–1988)*" However, the compilation extends beyond my personal interest and could only materialise as an independent publication. This compendium is an attempt to generate newer debates related to the art and architectural heritage of India and Europe through the study of Charles Fabri's writings. With his unique perspective, Fabri provides a pronounced and sharp account of the art progressions between East and the West; he can genuinely be considered an ambassador of Europe in India and vice versa. The work on Charles Fabri's opinions is like a brick in the wall out of the work that I am doing so far. The history of postcolonial Indian art and architectural discourse is more demanding in comparison to the existing scholarships related to the 20th century Modernism phenomena. Presenting his contribution from the mid-20th century discourse aims to build bridges of understanding and strengthen a multicultural perspective on Modern art, architecture, and design. The dialogical exchange and access to information through this anthology will pave the way for consecutive research activities related to an overarching agenda of the global phenomena of Modernism. The primary focus is to benefit from the study of evolving Indian art and

architecture through the writings of Charles Fabri. Reading these articles as the state-in-the-art of research highlights the relevance of innumerable possibilities of doing research related to heritage of India and Europe. The influence of European art and architectural movements in India affirm that we are obliged to find the gap and contributions by global South in the Western ideology of Modernism. Fabri here can be considered as an advocate of the architectural critic's society bridging gap between India and Europe.

In the mid-20th century, modern goods like British radios, Swiss watches, and American cars were coveted, and Modernism was both promise and anxiety, reserved for specialists. During India's architectural modernism emergence, the periodical *Design* (1957–1988) played a vital role in reshaping perceptions. In the 1950s–1980s, 'modern' often equated with 'foreign' with three facets: material, technical, and moral-cultural. *Design's* dissemination in this context is pivotal and shall help decode modernism for India as an intrinsic feature. This showcases its presence in spaces crafted by India's first-generation designers. A comprehensive exploration, tracing across *Design's* issues, unveils the collective perception of Indian architectural modernism, potentially forming an open genre in better understanding of the global phenomena of modernism.

Charles Fabri – An Art Critic: Building Bridges between India and Europe is an excellent compendium of Fabri's writings on Indian art and architecture from 1956 to 1967, curated from the archives of *Design* and *Indian Builder* magazine. This period can be considered as a threshold of Indian independence and the desire for a nationalistic stand exploring the possibilities of internationalization expressed in art and architectural scene across the globe. The *actors* and *agents* of the time were disseminating and sharing information with one another both in India as well as abroad. In this milieu, *Design* (1957) emerged as an influential voice to use the journal both as a platform for discussion and a manifesto to introduce new design directions to the Indian Subcontinent. The vision of Patwant Singh (1925–2009), the editor of *Design* and *Indian Builder* brought together stalwart artists, architects, critics, and historians as editorial board members namely: Charles Fabri, Sigfried Giedion, Richard Neutra, Walter Gropius, N.S Bendre, Habib Rahman, and Marcel Breuer amongst others. In this periodical, Singh led from the front to bring a much-needed change to the design scene of India by voicing strong opinions and introducing newer discourses.

The writings of Fabri from *Indian Builder* and *Design* are an important venue to showcase a new image of India. It is a good medium to tell the story of how art and architecture practices from abroad influenced the Indian subcontinent;

here *Design* and *Indian Builder* act like a catalyst to absorb a new character of independent India steering away from the colonial past. The primary objective of this compilation is to bring out the voice of Charles Fabri in an institutional setting, from the second decade (1956–1967) of independent India, which would reflect the design story of the latter half of the 20th century. The book comprises of 8 sections namely: Art Appreciation, Critical Views, Artists Features, Art History, Art and Cultural Heritage, Architectural Modernism, Letters, and Obituaries (of Charles and Ratna from *Design*). The anthology also comprises of selected articles penned by Ratna Mathur Fabri, interior designer and Fabri's wife. In addition, the bibliographies of Charles Fabri's entire set of writings from 1945 to 1968 are compiled in the appendix along with short biographies of Charles, Ratna and Patwant.

Section 1 'Art Appreciation' comprises of the status of art in India in the late 1950s, attempts of modern art, national traditions, dramatic visions, and, a report on the state of the arts from the mid-1960s. Section 2 entitled 'Critical Views' consists of art critiques, chronicles, *Critic in the Capital* column, and artistic reflections at the Industries' Fair. Section 3, 'Artists Features' presents four emerging contemporary artists namely: Dhanraj Bhagat, Amrita Sher-Gil, Avinash Chandra, and Krishen Khanna. Section 4 'Art History' covers a critical approach to Indian art, exploring subject and form as a mistaken criterion of art history and criticism, detailing problems of Indian architectural history, and a state-of-the-art historical reflection of the art history in India from the 1960s. Section 5 entitled 'Art and Cultural Heritage' includes the sculpture journey of Masked Dancers of Orissa (present state Odisha, renamed in 2011), nudes in Indian Sculpture, newer editions to the National Museum, and the expansive message of the Indian monuments from the curious years of the second half of the 1960s. Section 6 titled 'Architectural Modernism' is an important highlight of the evolving critiques related to the quarters for low-income government employees, imaginative residential designs in Delhi, case exploration of the India International Center, New Delhi. In addition, this section also consists of Fabri's guest editorial attempt in *Design* called 'A Moment of Transition' from August 1963 and his travelogue about the reflections of architecture in Europe. Lastly, section 6 covers insightful views of Ratna Mathur Fabri related to 'Impressions of Design in America', and the case of Chandigarh Museum (Sector 10c) exhibits and display. Section 7 & 8 encompass 'Letters' about poster advertisements, the dichotomy of tradition versus experiment, and 'Obituaries' of Charles and Ratna from August 1968 and February 1972 respectively, as a tribute by Patwant Singh (Editor) in the *Design* journal.

Dear readers, I invite you to immerse yourself in a beautiful journey of ideation, thoughts, and reflections penned by Charles Louis Fabri. This critical hidden voice is introduced for the purpose of facilitating the exchange and transfer of envisioned knowledge, promoting collaboration towards jointly developing a manageable research. The essence of art and architecture can be viewed as completely transformed in the mid-20th century, and *Indian Builder* and *Design* magazine, founded in 1953 and 1957 respectively, were at the forefront of witnessing this evolution. *Design* may be considered here as a lighthouse that presented significant texts that set forth not just an agenda for the art and architectural profession but a new vision for independent India that shaped a newer world trajectory. This publication presents a curated selection of these viewpoints, as relevant today as they were when they first appeared in the 1950s to 1960s.

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Acknowledgements

The conception of this anthology, featuring writings from 1956 to 1967 by Charles Louis Fabri (1899–1968), a Hungarian-born art critic drawn from the archives of *Indian Builder* and *Design*, originated from a course I taught as part of Bauhaus.Modul in the summer semester of 2023. This course emphasised an extensive critical review, presenting well-informed articles by Fabri that delve into the transformations in art and architecture as well as the intense modernisation of Independent India. I extend my gratitude to Prof. Jasper Cepl, my Ph.D. supervisor, whose vision and encouragement guided me in understanding how a spin-off research can evolve from an existing project. My introduction to Charles Fabri is rooted from the *Design* (1957–1988) journal, a significant case of my Ph.D. Dissertation.

Section 1: Art Appreciation

1 Art in India Today, January 1957

By that curious form of obscurantism that reveals in the glorification of past achievements, "contemporary" art in India is usually meant to include everything from the end of the nineteenth century (Ravi Varman and Abanindranath Tagore) and is supposed to range over a period of some sixty years or more. By the same method of strange thinking bustles might be considered contemporary dress in Europe, and Victorian painting the art of today.

The painting and sculpture of today in India owes almost nothing to the type of art that prevailed at the turn of the century. The wishy-washy, sentimental, ill-drawn water-colour painting of the "Bengal Revivalist School." Originated by Abanindranath Tagore under the inspiration of the other Victorian and Edwardian, the Englishman Havell, is still being practised by a small, but steadily diminishing number of artists and a few others unable to live in their own age, backward in attitude, medieval in outlook, incapable of original creative work. These good and misled people consider it art education to copy laboriously, line by line and colour by colour, the works of their "masters," and believe in the astonishing dictum of Mr. Nanda Lal Bose, published in his article, that whilst other painters, European, American, and Chinese, may need education in studying the human figure, Indian artists should only study the paintings of their ancestors, not life.

Modern Indian art means a complete break with that school. It can be dated with an accuracy rare in the history of the arts, to the appearance of that meteor-like phenomenon on the horizon of Indian art, Amrita Sher-Gil. It was on her return from Paris and her native Hungary (her mother was an Hungarian operatic singer, her father a Punjabi nobleman of philosophical and literary passions) in 1934 that she suddenly discovered herself and began to depart boldly from the academic impressions training she had received. By 1937, in three years' time, she achieved the miraculous, a powerful, magic development of a strongly original style, entirely her own, full of the "sadness of things," with a lyrical and almost melancholy touch, that conjured up the quiet life of India, in her villages, in her hills, in her plains, with a deep feeling and an intense dramatic power entirely unknown since the days of the masters of Ajanta. A supreme bridge between East and West, the appearances of life in India were not the "exotic" curiosities that they were to a wonderstruck westerner such as Gauguin in his Pacific Islands; it was Amrita's own inheritance, her own people, to which she brought the full knowledge of modern technique and drawing learned in Paris and Budapest.

To impress that she made on modern Indian art is enormous. In Bombay, always a stronghold of western techniques, and in Northern India, her own home, the great painters turned to an inspiration that was an answer to their prayers: here was an art as modern and as Indian as could be. It did not look back into the past for imitation of old masters, even though her last few years' works was deeply imbued with the sense of organisation and design inspired by a study of Rajput miniatures in the Lahore Museum.

There came then a stream of pilgrims to Paris and London, soon after the end of World War II. We had a number of gifted young men and women coming back from Paris and attempting to paint under the impact of post-impressionist schools. We had here Rouaults and Cezannes, Dufys and Derains, even Chiricos, Picassos and Paul Nashes. The country was full of post-Marinetis, with imitators of Mr. Henry Moore and Miss Barbara Hepworth.

Among them the best soon began a struggle for a return to their native inspiration. In 1948 or 1949 our exhibition were full of paintings and sculpture that could easily pass for the works of a European artist, with not the remotest hint that they were the works of painters of this soil—this hot and dusty semi-tropical country, with its lush vegetation, with its kaleidoscopic variety of brown inhabitants. Had the signature on these paintings and sculpture been changed to Jean Lebrun or John Smith or Ivan Ivanovitch, nobody would have spotted them in an exhibition in Paris, London, or Moscow as not the genuine work of a local artist but that of an Indian.

Amrita Sher-Gil remained the sole exponent of an art that was thoroughly permeated by an Indian emotional content, and her early imitators (Mr. Hebbur at that time was among them) tried to capture something of this national element.

Fortunately, there was another great painter in this country, happily still among us, who, like Amrita Sher-Gil, struck a lonely path. For many years despised by his fellow-Bengalis for not "falling in line" with their anaemic style of painting, Mr. Jamini Roy found a fresh source of inspiration in the peasant art of Bengal. The impact of this remarkable folk art was so powerful, and Mr. Jamini Roy's absorption of these influences so intelligent and so beautiful, that with the decline of the Shantiniketan style even his enemies fell under the spell of his work. I should also add that Mr. Jamini Roy believes in mass production. A highly original man, he goes on painting, like the folk artists of Calcutta bazars, picture after picture, in his big, bold black outlines, with plain surfaces of poster paint, and sells copy after copy of every one of his compositions for a price that follows many a middle-class man to own an original.

The surprising thing about this folkish type of art is that it bears such a remarkable resemblance to the bolder type of modern painting. It was a combination of folk influences and of Amrita Sher-Gil's simplified oil technique that led to the discovery of this style.

The discovery of the Gujarati school, especially of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, mainly by Prof. Norman Brown of the University of Philadelphia, was the last help needed by the artists of Bombay. One by one they realised that here was a pictorial language translated-not copied or limited into modern terms it was as post-impressionist as the French could produce; it was capable of expressing formal organisation with a vast range for individualism, the mark of our age. The rise of this neo-Gujarati school, as I have named it, is the healthiest sign now abroad in Indian painting. Far more artists have come under its influence than they themselves know. Even Mr. M.F. Hussain has not escaped the impact of an art so close to his needs, so clearly an advance over his earlier, natural style.

There are, of course, several other tendencies abroad. This is what one must expect in an age of rampant individualism, and when there is a clamouring for an "original" style. But they may all be classed (as classification



Fig. 1 Steps by N.S Bendre



Fig. 2 Tree of life by Dhanraj Bhagat



Fig. 3 *Tyranny* by Satish Gujral



Fig. 4 *The story-teller* by Amrita Sher-Gil

is useful for organised thinking) as branches of expressionism, and even if they depart from the neo-Gujarati school, the return to the native soil is seen in all our greater painters, with very few exceptions. Mr. Ram Kumar is one of those exceptions.

There is another, lone genius among us, whose style defies classification. This is Mr. Satish Gujral. With marked elements of Mexican muralists (Ribera, Orozco, Siqueiros), Mr. Gujral's dynamic and apocalyptic paintings, sprung from a passionate and burning heart, are among the greatest things of contemporary India. The power of these violent and almost frightening canvases is so tremendous that they almost burst the frames in which so much power can hardly be constrained. They have a special quality of "Indianness," though the foreign element still predominates. There is little doubt that Mr. Gujral will find his own ultimate idiom.

Of sculpture little ought to be said in an article concerned with essential principle rather than with detailed catalogues. The few outstanding sculptures of India today who try to make a difficult living, have come to realise, I believe, that the greatness of their ancestors is not easy to challenge. Fresh creative power is needed, and a bold departure from down-on-earth realism, always despised by ancient Indian art. The greatest among them, Mr. Dhanraj Bhagat and Mr. Shankho Choudhuri, are creating memorable works of high originality. The reason why Mr. Bhagat is nearer to a solution that would make him an equal of his

forefathers is that he, like the ancient sculptors of this land, has turned away from earthly themes; themes such as the Tree of Life and subjects such as his numerous musician's and dancing Sivas, allow him to reach back to those roots of inspiration that made Indian sculpture great in the past. In these abstractions even a woman with a pitcher turns into a symbol of eternal momentum.

The state of Indian art is full of bright hope. The signs of spring are everywhere abroad.

2 Modern Art & National Tradition, July 1964

Controversy in affairs of art is as old as art itself. Because an artist's expression results from inner inspiration, and not what people expect of him, his work becomes controversial. What is forgotten is that creative people do not create to satisfy others. Essentially, and always, their work is an extension of creative urges within them. But where do those urges originate? How does an artist react to those aspects of life, others attach so much importance to, like for instance, national tradition in art expression? This is what we have tried to find out on the following pages. In India a debate is constantly under way, sparked off by the question: what is modern art about anyway? The traditionalists consider anything modern as non if not anti-Indian. As if India's creative men lived only in the past. In order to hear what artists and those connected with art have to say on the relationship between modern art and national tradition, we invited five persons to state their points of view on this controversial subject. – Patwant Singh, Editor, *Design*.

The value of national characteristics in art is connected with the question of value in art in general. And what is value in art is, as anyone who has wrangled with that problem knows, an extremely difficult question, difficult to define, confine, set down in plain black and white, codify or pontificate upon.

Nevertheless, it is extremely doubtful whether local characteristics, some national trait, elements of inheritance from one's past, can ever be important factors in evaluating art.

It would be, as anyone can see at once, ridiculous to suggest that Shakespeare's work is only or mainly valuable because it is strongly English, or that his plays with foreign backgrounds, Venice, Verona, Greece, or Denmark are worthless and only those of England, *Henry IV*, or *Henry V*, are truly valuable. You can not discard the whole French renaissance because it was a sequel, in obvious senses, of the Italian renaissance; or pooh-pooh what little Spanish renaissance there was, because it was not "Spanish enough". Impressionism was mainly French, no doubt, but some of the greatest exponents were English, Dutch and American, and their work is no less valuable for the lack of marked (or any) national characteristic.

You have, of course, a brave band of nationalists, like Rudyard Kipling or Alfred Tennyson; and some people at least feel that their work is dated or less valid for our days precisely because their quite genuine nationalism is not only dated, but outdated, and leaves a nasty taste in one's mouth. Hearts were, no doubt, stirred deeply, strong men shed tears, and ladies sobbed into their little lace hand-kerchiefs at a dramatic recital of the charge of the Light Brigade; but many of us, today, rather feel with the Frenchman who observed: "C'est magnifique, mais c'est pas la guerre".

And yet, if you contemplate some of the great works of the past, you will observe that certain national traits have, in fact, added spice to your enjoyment, gave you some specific delight. It would be difficult to deny that a Chinese landscape painting, say, by Sesshu, with a hint, an allusion, a symbolic finger at the Tao behind all living existence, touches one with its marked Chinese approach and solution; and that many of us found ourselves repelled when some Bengal revivalists, including the best known, made paintings in an obviously Chinese manner: these Chinese ink paintings, these branches of bamboo with little birds were delicious when the Chinese did them, rooted in a tradition that Taoism justified, but were downright repugnant when made by Indians. These revivalists may have felt deeply their sense of revolt against western artistic domination, as they felt deeply against western political domination; but did they have to turn to an art form so intensely national as Chinese brush drawing is?

I confess also to a pleasure on discovering good painting coming from the Bombay side these last ten years or so, in which elements of ancient Jain miniature painting have been incorporated, revitalized, resuscitated or reorganized to create what I have been calling the "neo-Gujarati" style; there have been some bad ones among these, but many corresponded to a rather typical Indian characteristic: the decorative treatment of composition, in which make-believe and trompe-l'oeil perspective are shunned; for what was amazing in this style was that it corresponded strongly to a modern tendency (anywhere in the west or east) to stylize and to express often by exaggeration, rather than represent and imitate.

Mr. Jamini Roy, of course, was the pioneer of rediscovering merits in peasant stylization, and that in a most endearing modern exaggeration. Long after everyone would smile indulgently at Bengali Revivalists, Mr. Jamini Roy's oeuvre would be highly valued – and not the least for having this strong element of local colour.

Personally, I admire Mr. Jamini Roy's early impressionist paintings, for they are admirable; but I am genuinely enamoured of his pata-style, and would be reluctant to admit that its "Indianness" has nothing to do with it.

When you come to Amrita Sher-Gil, you are confronted with the astonishing fact that her greatness did not prevent her from incorporating strong