

# The Significant Role of Art in Society: A conceptual analysis of ‘Sociology of Art’

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Kanu Priya

Assistant Professor  
Department of History of Art  
Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Vrinda Chauhan

Ph.D Sociology

**Abstract-** The culture of Indian society varies within the heritages of traditional customs, ethical values, technologies, art and artifacts that originated in or are associated with Indian sub-continent since time immemorial. According to various sociologists, art is not just a creation of a man but also an expression of socially conditioned individuals. There is a sociological significance of art through various expressive artforms such as sculptures, paintings, music, dance, drama etc. It has always helped to dig the old mounds and to form an idea of the material life of the people in the past. The amalgamation of two fields i.e. art and sociology is paramount, as it signifies the multiple functions that art plays since glorifying the culture of ancient civilization to perceive the contemporary emotions. Thus, the paper attempts to provide an understanding of the concept of ‘Sociology of Art’, which is relatively a new field, with sociological explanations and, the contribution of art in examining the social situations.

**Key words:** Art, Artist, Culture, Society, Sociological.

## Sociology of Art

Sociology of art elicits and defines the sociological significance of the field of art with propounded explanations by various art historians and sociologists. Defining both art history and sociology together signifies as the cultural discourse or genres given on social basis under the routinized social relationships and patterns of actions. Sociology of art comes from the same newly emergent period when both sociological writings and art history began to rise. This period responded towards the profound social changes which marked the development of modernity in the west (Tanner, 2003).<sup>1</sup> Both the discourses witnessed, how patterns of economic organization disrupted moral order, eroded social integration and reduced humanity to the one-dimensional adjunct of a rationalized and mechanistic capitalistic ‘cage’ (Tanner, 2003).<sup>2</sup> In the context of sociology of art, man is considered as a social animal, who socializes, communicates and integrates in the society through various modes of expression. These modes often include theoretical as well as artistic discourses to express the prevailing conditions in the society. And art has preserved what historical records could not: the lived experience of a particular place at a particular time. In this sense, art is communication that uses visuals, sound, and stories to bring the life of the people from different times and cultures in present. Thus arts, including painting and sculpture, as well as music, writing and other forms, are sometimes regarded as the cultural memory of a society because art imitates society

## Art and Society: A Sociological Interface

In human society, the cultural development is a possible cause involving certain abilities and capacities, drawn naturally and in inherent ways. Man develops codes, languages and artistic capacities to create and perpetuate those cultures. Further, human activities are motivated and guided by these cultures. Every step of evolution and change in society’s culture is based on its own determined and peculiar principles. As Hegel has incorporated his historicist vision regarding distinctive period and cultural tradition, some necessary steps of evolution of national spirit have been propagated. He viewed “Every step being different from every other one, has its own determined and peculiar principles.....It is here that it expresses concretely all aspects of its consciousness and will, its total reality; it is that imparts a common stamp to its religion, its political constitution, its social ethics, its legal system, its customs but also its science, its art and its technical skills. These particular qualities must be understood as driving from that general peculiarity, the particular principle of a nation” (Gombrich, 1984).<sup>3</sup> Determining the importance of various aspects in the society, art has been understood with its necessity as according to Hegelian vision. He further opined art as a privileged vehicle, an ‘expression of the divinity’<sup>4</sup> that reveals truth manifested within the history of the world. Art, which is trivially perceived and considered scarcely worthy of study under the discipline of art history, becomes an object of sociologically extreme works. Moreover, sociologists such as Max Weber ((Weber, 1912 (1958))<sup>5</sup>, have distinctively studied western aesthetic culture, which features the aesthetic domains of art and its ‘refinement’. He quotes erosion of aesthetic value and rationalization process being the reason behind it. This implies that the interest area of sociologists in aesthetics impinges upon the social explanations, where social processes and social structures are their primary objects. As Bourdieu (Panofsky, 1967)<sup>6</sup> in his study on the pattern of cultural consumption, delineates conceptualization of ‘High Culture’. “High culture encompasses the cultural objects of aesthetic value, which a society collectively esteem as exemplary art” (Williams, 1983).<sup>7</sup> According to Bourdieu’s work, the relationship between cultural consumption and class structure is considered as the expense of large, sophisticated and urban-based wealthy organizations. These intelligentsia produce and mediate high culture forging towards how the products of that particular culture becomes prestigious conferring to the consumers and valued as ‘High art’. They provide with large scale milieu training, finance for work and sourcing materials. This signifies the role of high-class culture in establishing a profound space for betterment of only few privileged artisans

who fulfill their high-class status needs. Sociology of art has been defined by Witkin (Witkin, 1995)<sup>8</sup> as the virtue of semiotic and functional necessity in the society. He argues that the system of visual forms is characteristic of the society and social relations correspond with the two virtues. Accordingly, art and its style of tonal contrasts, shapes, colors etc. order sense values. In relatively simple societies, where survival depended upon hunting and gathering, the modes of production relied heavily on environmental and natural factors such as availability of food to be gathered and movement of animals to be hunted. However, when society turned into more complex form, the rules of controlling social actions became increasingly abstract such as increasing division of labor, and increase in moral density, variety of social interactions etc. With the changing rules of social structure, art styles have also been through evolutions, relatively. In simple societies, the simpler form of natural creations with flat tonal effects in concrete form expressed nature and environment. In contrast, complex societies replayed art styles to more abstract form.

Now question arises how does art and artist affect culture and society? Art has an effect on society because it changes the attitudes and conveys the ideas and thoughts. It touches the core of the individual. Whereas artist has a unique and essential role to play in making our society better, healthier, and more prosperous. With their creativity, they can bring joy, connection, and inspiration in the society and can also provide critical analysis of our political, economic, and social structures through their expression, which can encourage and prompt people to think critically and engage constructively to take action towards social progress. As an artist possesses the capacity to feel strong, to be sensitive to objects and to express this through the way they paint, the way they gesture, or the color they use. The artist can feel the ambience, the aura of a space or the recollection of a sensation and capture it in their work. In some cases, the artist may find it difficult to bear the burden of being so sensitive. And being sensitive is not easy for artist.



**Abu Ghraib**

Jogen Chowdhury, *Abu Ghraib*, mixed media on paper

A very renowned Indian artist Chowdhury's works are characterized by their gloomy, really dark drawings, full of sensitivity which draws attention to the traumatic consequences of the partition and the problems of the time. He's been through a lot, from the Partition to the dislocation and isolation caused by the war in the country, and his drawings are very clear reflection of that. His depressing figures reflect an insatiable loneliness which cannot be expressed through words, as they are highly provocative. His characters are usually more emotional, writhing in agony with open cuts on their bodies. He observed the gradual transformation of society and culture towards a state of chaos and cruelty, a state of domination over humanity, their tranquility, and this disquieted him, which manifested itself in the cuts and bruises of a human body, his emotions. Everything is a reflection of the surroundings, the culture, the state of things at the time. This juxtaposition of opposing emotions, real and imagined, familiar and unfamiliar, is what makes an artist's work not only self-expression but a reflection of collective and individual consciousness.



Jogen Chowdhury, Wounded (Face), dry pastels on paper, 35cm x 25cm

Thus very accurate is the sociological significance of art as given by Riofrancos determining the importance of artists stating that- "Art is an individual creation destined by its nature to supersede the limited sphere of its creator in the form of creation for others. Art is social in twofold sense:

1. It is a unique creation of a socially conditioned individual and,
2. It satisfies both the creator and consumer's need for expression" (Riofrancos, 1993)<sup>9</sup>.

This takes into account with the social context of art, thus emphasizing that art is a creative production by man who is socially conditioned.

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