

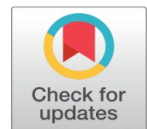


RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM IN THE WORKS OF GRAPHIC ARTIST- NARENDRA SRIVASTAVA



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ABSTRACT

Religious symbolism implies the use of unique symbols by a particular religion, that describe anything pertaining to its culture and psyche, including archetypes, events, natural phenomena or even the art that evolved in that land over a period of time. All religions of the world, irrespective of how ancient or modern they are, use symbols to help create a resonant ethos, which in turn, reflects the moral values, teachings, and culture of that society. The concept of religious symbolism is very ancient and may well have had its roots from the start of mankind itself. This can be seen in the series of paintings with the word 'DHARMA' painted in 1984, done basically for calendar, depicting six great religions of world Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, and Judaism by renowned graphic designer, eminent artist, and art educationist, Narendra Srivastava. By seeing these drawings, it seems that artist must be highly religious which is not true because he had used the word graphically only. He did it for his pleasure of creating something new out of it, which makes his artworks very creative. These paintings do have some religious symbolism in it, which the artist had graphically depicted in a very innovative and impressive style.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Narendra Srivastava (1931-2015) is a renowned graphic designer, eminent artist, and art educationist, was born in 1931, in a humble middle-class family that lived in simplicity. In 1947 he joined College of Arts in Delhi, which was a polytechnic in those days. As a painter of more than five decades he has pioneered an engagement with Devanagari scripts. In his tenure as teacher and professor of typography at Delhi College of art, and through numerous intensive research work and projects, his symbols and painting exhibitions had made a great contribution to the development of Devanagari script. In his works one can see the celebrations of letters and he had dedicated his whole life for his passion for Devanagari scripts doing as a positive contribution in contemporary Indian art. (N. Srivastava, personal communication, June 22, 2010)

In 1973, he was awarded the Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship for designing a family type for the Devanagari Scripts. A man who has not only designed the famed Pierre Cardin 'PC' symbol but who was also invited to design a plate for Rosenthal porcelain works, closer home, the prestigious Asia 72 symbol and NDMC logo are some of his greatest achievements. Over the years he had participated in numerous International and National, Festivals and Exhibitions and had several one man shows, both abroad and in India. He was also awarded the Sahitya Kala Parishad Samman in 1993.



Narendra Srivastava, for me is the contemporary masters in Indian art scene by his works which bloom with a new flourish, creative intensity. His works have grown brighter by years both visually and spiritually. His works reflects his spiritual inclination, which is not religious in the commonly understood terms. But these works reflect intricately he weaves his thoughts through his letters. His works can be called a mystic statement that cannot be read, can only be experienced through open mind, meditation, deep observation, and concentration. (N. Srivastava, personal communication, November 16, 2010)

In These paintings there is a combination of image (symbol) and the word 'DHARMA', representing the six great religions of the world. In every painting there is a symbol of community, depicting the character or philosophy of each religion, like the 8-fold path philosophy of Buddhism, Allah written in Arabic calligraphy, in Chinese there is yin and yang, symbol of swastika in Hinduism, symbol of cross in Christianity, and menorah (seven- candle stand) in Judaism shown in uniform colours of black, white and red.

This painting depicts one of the six great religions of world, Hinduism. In this particular painting he had tried to represent the combination of image or symbol of Hindu religion with the word 'DHARMA', The word "DHARMA" is juxtaposed at right angle to each other on another religious symbol of Swastika, forms the mainstay of the painting, Painted in Bright red with its four arms projecting in four different directions. These arms employed as keystone have been used to place the word 'DHARMA' in bold manner, upside-down in all four directions. "OM" another of the Hindu sacred symbols graces the nucleus of this painting in white colour.



Figure 1 Paintings with the word 'DHARMA 'depicts Hinduism

Source Late Artist- Shri Narendra Srivastava

This painting represents one of the most important religions of world, Buddhism. Here artist has reflected upon and shown the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism, which form the basic doctrine of the religion, which has been depicted in red colour along with the word DHARMA in black, in a very rhythmic manner. The syllables in the word Dharma have been Figure 2 Paintings with the word depicted calligraphically and rhythmically. The word Dharma has been used eight times in two different drafts in combination of four each. In one of the designs the syllable "Dha" and "Ma" have been fused rhythmically into each other to form the word,

Dharma. In the second draft the “Dha” of the earlier design has been used and a separate “Ma” has been used to complete the word.



Figure 2 Paintings with the word 'DHARMA' depicts Buddhism

Source Late Artist- Shri Narendra Srivastava

The use of word Dharma is such that syllable “Ma” is protruded eight time outwardly, reflecting the core tenets of Buddhism. The hub of the painting forms of circular design with four projections painted in red colour, this circular design symbolizes the “Four Noble Truths”. The design is such that it gives manifestation of movement and flows, giving it a musical connect. The “Oriental” mooring of the design gives to the design a Buddhist representation and connect, as Buddhism has been always popular in the Orient.



Figure 3 Paintings with the word 'DHARMA' depicts Christianity

Source Late Artist- Shri Narendra Srivastava

The painting represents one of the important six religions of world, Christianity. Here artist has written the word DHARMA' in red in a stylized manner, overlapping the symbol of Holy cross creating a spiritual effect. The contrasting colours used to reflect Cross gives it a prominent focus and makes it easily recognizable. Contrasting use of geometric design to represent the Christian symbol and circular free flowing design to paint Dharma reflects both the paradox in practice as well as homogeneity in tenets of different religions.



Figure 4 Paintings with the word 'DHARMA' depicts Islam

Source Late Artist- Shri Narendra Srivastava

This painting represents the religion of Islam. Here also the artist has used the word "Allah" as a symbol, written in Arabic calligraphy along with the word 'DHARMA', creating an intersecting design in a calligraphic manner. Though Islam is popular religion spanning its influence over every continent and country of the world, its basic association is perceived to be of Arabic descent, and it is with this fact in mind that the artist has used Arabic symbolism to depict Islam.

This painting depicts Confucianism; the Chinese religion, which is not an organized, unified system of beliefs and practices. Here he had shown the symbol of yin and yang in black and white colour on which the word DHARMA is shown upside down in white, creating a very appealing effect. The use of word Dharma in white against Red and Black backdrop is very appealing also the use of word Dharma in a form which is more reflective of Chinese script gives it more rightful character to represent Confucianism.



Figure 5 Paintings with the word 'DHARMA' depicts Confucianism,

Source Late Artist- Shri Narendra Srivastava

This one represents the great religion of world, Judaism. Here also he had shown the word a very 'DHARMA' in stylized manner with the symbol of Menorah shown in red colour.



Figure 6 Paintings with the word 'DHARMA' depicts Judaism

Source Late Artist- Shri Narendra Srivastava

Later in 1986, he painted a series of paintings with the word 'KARMA', which is again a word which is very much related to the Indian religion, considered to be the pivotal philosophy of it. Both the series of paintings with the word 'DHARMA' and 'KARMA', later they had been used in calendars also by him. While drawing from his experiences in Paris and being an Indian he has also been inspired by Indian metaphysical thought. Due to which he painted most of paintings with the words like OM, DHARMA, and KARMA, MA which keeps him experimenting and exploring new forms and ideas and help him to evolve as a creative artist. By seeing these drawings, it seems that artist must be highly religious which is not true because he had used the word graphically only. He did it for his pleasure of creating something new out of it.



Figure 7 Series of Paintings with the word 'Karma'

Source Late Artist- Shri Narendra Srivastava

In the second one, shown the word 'KARMA' in a very bold and angular manner in uniform colours of black and white at the top of letter 'M'. Here the words are legible and shown with sharp edges, creating a remarkable effect. Here he had created very magnificently compositions with the word 'KARMA' by showing the letter 'K' in bigger size and the letter 'M', 'R' in a smaller size ,he had painted two paintings with the same compositional design , in one shown the letter in black against the white background with letter 'M' shown in straight white colour and in the second one shown the letter against the red background in black uniform colours with letter M' shown in slanting manner creating a impact of movement and energy.

It is Narendra who has explored much farther in this direction and he started to paint with Devanagari alphabets forms using a single word or letters as a whole composition because for him letters are not just letters to read but he see them as a division of negative and positive spaces but instead of a cursive, flowing and calligraphic approach, uses a structural, and constructivist one to derive near-abstract creative variations from them. In his works one can see the celebrations of letters and he had dedicated his whole life for his passion for Devanagari scripts doing as a contribution in contemporary Indian art.



Figure 8 Series of Paintings with the word 'KARMA'
Source Late Artist- Shri Narendra Srivastava

Narendra conceivably is the first and the unsurpassed Indian artist to have matched the Europeans in the field of graphic art. It is Narendra who has given Devanagari script its due place and recognition internationally with his rendition of Devanagari script as an art and used it in fashion also for the first time. Through his art he has transformed boundaries and taken Indian cultural ethos to the world. His playful engagement with the Devanagari script has given Devanagari a type of form and artistic recognition, his artistic excellence has given it splendour and enchanting grace. He had always researched on and experimented with the new and novel ways of working with the Devanagari script. He still after decades of working is a student of this script. He continuously has been researching on scientific and artistic rendition of Devanagari script. (N. Srivastava, personal communication, November 19, 2010)

In my observation, He was one of first and foremost artist to explore and use Devanagari letters as focal theme of his creative works. Though in past a few artists have experimented with scripts and that to not as the focal theme. He was first to explore the possibilities and dimensions of Devanagari scripts in a through, research and scientific manner. The depth of his understanding and research along with his passionate association with Devanagari scripts is amply exhibited in all his works. Though his styles of paintings have glimpses of European art influence, his paintings are truly a treasure trove of Indian ethos and are truly Indian in content. In spite of the content and character being Indian, his paintings have a truly international appeal and very much ahead of their times. (N. Srivastava, personal communication, December 18, 2010)

The article is an insight into the life and thought process of one of the foremost and renowned Indian graphic designer, eminent artist and art educationist, Narendra Srivastava. It gives a creative insight into the artist's mind and the universality of art forms which is best exemplified by the fact that he designed the world-famous logo of Pierre Cardin. It also dwells on the single-minded focus of artist in creation and development of new art form with use of Devanagari letters and traces artist's growth from a humble milieu into an artist of international reckoning and acclaim.

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