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Kinetic Art Drawings with 'Aum' (aumkara series) by Narendra Srivastava

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# Kinetic Art Drawings with 'Aum' (*aumkara series*) by Narendra Srivastava

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## ABSTRACT

The earliest pieces of evidence of human ability to communicate and desire to create are represented by symbols, hieroglyphics and sign language. OM' is the root syllable of origination and dissolution, *Bija'* of all mantras. Yet, it is significant to value the differences in form and expression of OM according to each culture. It is important to observe different forms of OM as independent, individual forms, and yet not just variations of OM after appreciating the difference in thinking, sense of beauty, and artistic creativity, you may envelop them in the profound meaning of OM again by seeing Narendra's kinetic art drawings of OM. His chronicle as a graphic artist and a creative painter is awe-inspiring; he is one of the earliest artists to use typographical designs in his paintings. He adopted the geometrical forms of kinetic art and introduced the sacred symbol OM in different geometrical forms. And the result was a genuine blend of the art of East and West obsessed with 'OM'. His "Om" series of drawings is the highlight of his career. His drawings are a broader form of kinetic art.

**KEYWORDS:** Spiritual symbolism, Aum, Brahma, OM, Kinetic Art.

## INTRODUCTION

The earliest evidence of the human ability to communicate and the desire to create is represented by symbols, hieroglyphics and sign language. The early human / primitive human can be attributed to the origin of these forms of expression. It could also be traced back to the art of primitive society, folk, traditional, tribal, tantra and other regional and local arts. Images and symbols are the representatives of the philosophical principles in form of visual art. Symbols could be appreciated as an abridged and simplified communication or motifs of animals, vegetation, humans, abstract concepts, divine or inanimate objects, attributes and auspicious powers.

As art is a manifestation of our spiritual construct. Religious/spiritual symbolism in Hinduism is a concept of understating the almighty which cannot be perceived through sensory organs. Since the old ages, symbols have been the independent & important communicators of recording, explaining, and revealing and explaining the meaning of the divine without using graphical/written language. Hindus discovered art forms as a tool to invoke spirituality. Spirituality in Prayer is a fundamental attitude of spiritual expression, and the immediate result of prayer is the inner comfort that comes with acknowledging one's limited capacities and accepting a higher power than oneself.

*AUM (OM)* - the sacred symbol of Aum is the powerful symbol of God. Therefore, Om is the name of Brahm; the cause and basis of creation; Om as a sound symbol is used in prayers

(chanted before and at the end of every Mantra); and in meditation as a most potent, most natural sound. Hindus believe that Aum the first initial and eternal sound was produced at the creation of the universe. Hence AUM covers the entire phenomenon of sound. Aum stands for pure consciousness called *pranava*, which runs through Prana (breath). Thus, Aum is the highest Mantra which creates a vibrating effect on the human mind to create harmony, peace and bliss (*Aum iti aksharam* – Mandukya Upanishad, Atharva Veda), force (God), and being found in the water, it also symbolizes that everything is evolved and dissolved into the water.

OM' is the root syllable of origination and dissolution, *Bija* of all mantras, the whole universe, the infinite, and the very essence of existence. It has three factors, A.U.M. It is absolute and at the same time, it stands for three manifestations of the supreme being, represented by Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, each being associated with a specific cosmic function. It is infinite and yet represents three forms of time, past, present, and future. The three is one and one is three. These are the key numbers. Consciously or unconsciously every mode of expression, whether artistic, religious or scientific, is to reach that ultimate reality. In Indian scriptures, the sacred syllable Om is considered to be the primordial sound from which all sounds and creations emerge signifying the supreme energy.

OM belongs to all mankind, OM is a mystical or sacred syllable in the Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist religions. It is important to observe different forms of OM as independent, individual forms, and yet not just variations of OM after appreciating the difference in thinking, sense of beauty, and artistic creativity, you may envelop them in the profound meaning of OM again by seeing Narendra's kinetic art drawings of OM.

Narendra Srivastava (1931-2016) 'Narendra' as he is known to his innumerable friends in India and abroad, was an unassuming and modest person. A Jawaharlal Nehru Fellow, his many prestigious works include the famous symbol of Pierre Cardin (the renowned French fashion designer of the 1960s), the Asia-72, and Jahre teller by Rosenthal in 1975 and decorations on crockery for Rosenthal, the 7<sup>th</sup> non-aligned Summit, NDMC (New Delhi Municipal Corporation) and many others. His chronicle as a graphic artist and a creative painter is awe-inspiring; he is one of the earliest artists to use typographical designs in his paintings. He had composed various Devanagari alphabets in black, white, and red. His revolutionary achievement is the use of Devanagari Scripts and their improvised forms, which has become his main forte. His graphic skills have brought him international acclaim.

Being an Indian, he was a firm believer in Indian philosophy. He concurrently was greatly inspired by Vasarely's kinetic art and used to observe Vasarely's manifestations and exhibitions of kinetic art. He took on 'OM' as a mystical symbol and he tried to put the western technique in the Indian context by using the sacred symbol of 'OM' with the optical illusion of kinetic art. While rediscovering the Indian Graphic tradition, he was faced with the western world and stimulated by the vitality of graphic art in Europe. He was struck by the techniques and inventions of the west and wanted to draw from those sources some energetic element that would give a new vitality to the elements of his Indian background. He believed it would serve his purpose if he selected one graphic form which would symbolize that background and submitted it to say a Kinetic treatment. He thus studied the kinetic manifesto, as well as Vasarely's school, and during the winter of 1970,

he made a series of exercises based on "OM" which is the graphic sign for the mystic syllable "AUM".

### **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

The whole series of OM drawings which influenced kinetic art had its origin in France in 1950, a group of artists joined under the patronage of Vasarely at Denise Rene gallery presented a yellow manifestation of kinetic art. There are two kinds of kinetic art, real and virtual; real in which the object moves and virtual where the object does not move but the spectator moves, the objects look moving by their virtue. Though Narendra's drawings of OM have the western influence of Vasarely's kinetic art, the art in its essence is Indian. There is a primary influence of Indian philosophical thoughts in the conceptualization of OM as an art form. There are strong inspirations in the visualization of philosophical ideas behind the sacred symbol OM. The tenets of Indian philosophical thoughts like stages of meditations, concentrations, and oneness to multitude and multitude to oneness have been amply augmented in his drawings. Number 9, which holds an important place in Indian philosophical thoughts, is one of the tenants that he had religiously amalgamated into his works. In Indian religion, the magical number 9 holds a pivotal place. Indian mythology speaks of 9 incarnations of Lord Vishnu and 9 Goddesses (Durga). There are 9 Mudras and, 9 Rasas which all together make the number 9 an auspicious number in Indian culture. He had done a series of works on the symbol 'OM'. He adopted the geometrical forms of kinetic art and introduced the sacred symbol OM in different geometrical forms. And the result was a genuine blend of the art of East and West obsessed with 'OM'. At the same time, he was not overtly religious. When you have religion in your mind you cannot take liberty with 'OM'. But as an artist, he could do that. For example, if he feels like writing 'OM' upside down he can do that. "For me it is a work of art", he explains.



(Plate No.1) Drawing with Indian ink 'OM' 24"x24", 1971

His "Om" series of drawings are the highlight of his career. His "Om" drawings reflect pace, wherein his creations are still and tranquil, but the viewer is overwhelmed by a feeling of movement, energy, and effervescence. Having used "Om" as the foundation, he has fashioned numerous different designs with "Om". He has given "Om" square, rectangular, hexagonal, and circular shapes which reflect pace, peace, and tranquillity and gives an unsaid feeling to the viewer. These creations are wonderful from not just the artistic point of view but, also spiritually stimulate

the viewer. He has not used "Om" as a religious symbol but as a graphic symbol only. It shows 'OM' is a circle, symbolizing that the Brahma enclosed a path for clockwise flow, the worshiper performing a metaphysical journey tracing with his mind and eyes.



Plate No. 2 - Drawing with Indian ink 'OM'24"x24",1971

In this drawing (Plate No.2) the 'OM' is shown in a lotus shape which is done beautifully by the artist. With concentric circles creating an astonishing ripple effect, it shows his command over the execution of lines, detailing, and finishing. Its oriental form of a lotus flower also symbolizes the 8-fold path of Buddhism.



Plate No. 3- Drawing with Indian ink 'OM'24"x24",1971.

In these drawings, he depicted all stages of meditation. (Plate No.3) This drawing depicts the first stage of meditation, 'concentration'. He has represented concentration by drawing in circles. By showing 'OM' overlapping with repetitions of concentric circles going outward and into center in which 'OM' is a circle. It is eternal - has no beginning and no end. By an engaged analysis of this painting, one will find 'OM' retreating and emerging, disappearing and appearing again, assimilating, pulsating and ever-present. By deeply absorbed engagement with these paintings,

one becomes a part of them, creating a very religious and spiritual atmosphere around them. It gives the viewer a feeling of peace, calm, and serenity which lets one come to terms with the stresses of life.



Plate No. 4 - Drawing with Indian ink 'OM'24"x24",1971.

This is one of the lesser-used geometric contours by the artist. By drawing in a square the artist has rendered an exquisite depiction of a state of meditation where one wants to explore the depths from multitude to oneness, oneness to the multitude, an eternal progression. (Plate No. 4) In this it looks like the word OM is moving and 'OM' overlapping by repetitive squares going towards the center and coming out. This shows his draftsmanship and great execution of geometrical lines.



Plate No. 5- Drawing with Indian ink 'OM'24"x24",1971.

This is another of the lesser-used geometric forms by the artist. (Plate No. 5). Here the symbol of 'OM' is placed inside a pyramid or triangle. This is a symbol of upward movement, progress, and infinity. The movement is shown with repetitive vertical lines in thick and thin shapes

in black and white color done in Indian ink, overlapping the word 'OM' creating a very traverse optical effect of illusion. Here he had shown the graphic representation of 'OM', the sacred symbol (prayers), and tried to depict the process of desire in life. There is a desire, to fulfil that one does some action, and to end that action one must gain knowledge. Here he had created an illusion of depth. In all these drawings he represented Indian philosophical ideas in kinetic art.



Plate No. 6-Drawing with Indian ink 'OM'24"x24",1971.

This is one of the paintings which have been rendered differently by the artist (Plate No.6) A unique fact about this painting is that the components utilized by the artist in the formation of the painting are purely geometric in form and minimal, just a white square contour filled in with black circles in multiple of nine (Nine in each row and column).



Plate No. 7 - Drawing with Indian ink 'OM'24"x24",1971.

In this drawing, OM is shown in a square with nine dots in each row and column being influenced by the magical figure of the number 9. The canon of Indian philosophical thought like stages of meditations, concentrations, oneness to the multitude, and multitude to oneness has

been richly amplified in his drawings. Number nine which holds an important place in Indian mythology and philosophical thought has been aptly depicted in this painting. In Indian religion number 9 holds a crucial place. Indian mythology speaks of 9 incarnations of Lord Vishnu and 9 Goddesses (Durga). There are 9 Mudras, and 9 Rasas which all together make the number 9 an auspicious number in Indian culture. He has tried to captivate the importance of the magical number 9.

This is a very interesting drawing that is a visual delight to the observer. (Plate No.7) Such is the presence of this drawing that it has the propensity to grow on the viewer. In this drawing, he had shown the 'Virat' form of the symbol 'OM'. The omnipresence of God or 'Om' has been depicted in this drawing; it gives an overwhelming feeling of his presence. As in *Gita* at the time of war, Lord Krishna demonstrated his 'Virat' form to Arjun to accentuate the omnipresence of a Supernatural being over every entity and every aspect of human life. Here too the artist had a well-conceived notion of the omnipresence of supernatural beings while making this drawing. He has depicted 'Om' in varying sizes smaller to bigger size, in black, white, and shades of grey colors. He has used the linear feature to accentuate the 'Virat' form, and the vertical lines highlight the progression and augmentation of 'Om'. The use of vertical lines gives a three-dimensional effect and gives an effect of 'Om' zooming out.



Plate No.8 Drawing with Indian ink 'OM'24"x24", 1971.

In this drawing, he has consciously made the effort of drawing 'Om' encased in a circle. (Plate No.8) For one circle depicts an all-encompassing trait and gives 'Om' an omnipresent attribute and concurrently the main idea behind drawing in a circle is to depict the stage of deep meditation where a person reaches a stage where s/he glimpses a small light is coming while he is in deep meditation with his eyes closed. A close and measured observation would highlight the profound effect of this drawing; the lines have been drawn in a measured way to give an effect of light emanating from the center of 'Om'. It has an overwhelming spiritual presence. It is also reminiscent of the fact that if one introspects sincerely and sees within and explores oneself, he or she is sure to find 'The Light' or his truthful and enlightened existence. He has placed 'OM' in a



circle with vertical and horizontal lines crossing each other, creating a very appealing and spiritual effect.

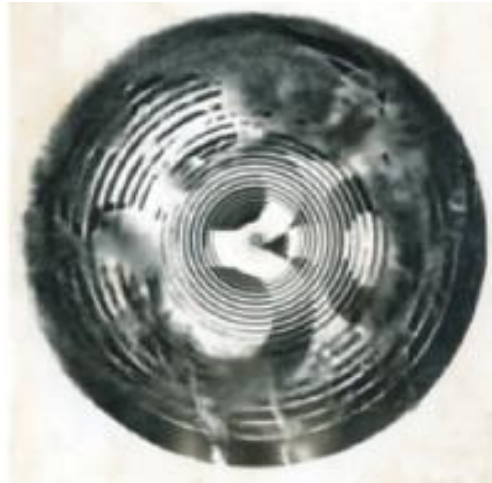


Plate No. 9, Drawing with Indian ink 'OM'24"x24", 1971

This is one of his drawings that is reflective of present-day turmoil and erosion of cultural ethos. (Plate No. 9) Here again he has shown 'Om' in a concentric circle with blurred background. The drawing shows as if 'OM', was getting distressed by modernity. The drawing explores the modern-day dilemma, divide, and disconnect of the present generation with the past and their cultural ethos, this erosion and turmoil are synonymous with the present generation where one is forgetting our rich heritage and blindly copying the west and adopting their culture. The 'Om' has been depicted here encased in concentric circles with a blurred background which is reflective of distress and disconnect by modernity. Even the 'Om' has been blurred, which is symbolic of the fact that distress, disconnect, and erosion are so pervasive that it has even put fissures and blurred our spiritual and cultural moorings. The 'Om' though has been depicted clearly in the center, which is reflective of the fact that our cultural ethos moorings are very strong and there is still hope and light.

## SUMMARY

He adopted the geometrical forms of kinetic art and introduced the sacred symbol OM in different geometrical forms. And the result was a genuine blend of the art of East and West. He had done a series of works on the symbol 'OM'. By giving a vision to this abstract concept, his work in this field is a trendsetter for typography (Askara), simplifying the forms of the letters to the essentials, creating the idea of the Absolute". The attempt is not to be mystical, but to arrive at the truth, through an illustrative exposition of letters, which are from the Devanagari script. The form of these letters is not as legible as one or other languages, but it gives the impression and feel of these letters through uniform colors in black, white, and red which he had employed. The idea is to limit the freedom of art as a matter or discipline so that the rules are applied to reach a depth of intuition. Like philosophy in India gives significance to intuition. His "Om" series of drawings is the highlight of his career. Having used "Om" as the foundation, he has fashioned numerous different designs with "Om". He has given "Om" square, rectangular, hexagonal, and circular shapes which reflect peace, tranquility and gives an unsaid feeling to the viewer. These creations are

wonderful from not just the artistic point of view but, also spiritually stimulate the viewer. He has not used "Om" as a religious symbol but as a graphic symbol only.

His drawings are a broader form of kinetic art. 'Kinetic art is not what the artist makes, but what the spectator sees'. At certain angles, the designs seem to move. His kinetic drawings revolve around the word 'OM' and he had tried to give a fourth dimension to it. "My graphics symbolize eternal prayers" he explains "my conception of drawing is not only to give physical and visual pleasure but mental pleasure too'. His 'OM' gives that relief. It is all based on Indian philosophy. Take a wheel for instance it is not the spokes that make the wheel. It is the space inside between the spokes that makes it. Asian philosophy teaches the value of space and sound and that is what he tried to depict in these paintings.

All these drawings appear so visually appealing creating an illusion of depth, energy, movement, evolution, and growth. This provokes one to see it again and again and generates emotions and religious feelings among the viewer like in baroque art. These drawings are in a state of motion to create emotion. He had drawn these to express his inner feelings of experimenting and exploring philosophical ideas of the sacred word 'OM'. It is however not exclusively associated with religion, but certain aspects of it were distinctly spiritual and religious-centric. The motion in these drawings was created through circular or diagonal compositions.

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