BEHIND LENS THEY LEARN HOW TO LOOK AT ARTWORKS, EQUIPPED WITH SCIENCE

IITGn students study science behind Indian art

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In one of the most innovative courses offered at the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar, students of cognitive science have tracked people's eye movements to perceive art. As part of a unique course titled 'Experimental Aesthetics', that blends science with art, students learnt how to look at artworks, especially those of Indian artists, through a scientific lens.

"This may be the first time that a course has introduced experimental and cognitive science perspectives to study art, and applied them to the Indian context," Dr Leslee Lazar, a visiting faculty at IITGn said. Dr Lazar, a cognitive neuroscientist, combines his knowledge of neuroscience with visual art to understand what makes great artwork tick. Lazar took up the idea of offering the course when a few of his students showed interest in studying art and science together. "The response was extremely positive, he says.

Students developed a foundation in art appreciation as the course introduced art history, placing Indian art within Western periods. Then, they went on to study psychological theories of art followed by recent work in Neuroaesthetics, a pioneering field that deals with how the brain sees art.

"I aimed to bring my students to a level where they can conduct their own experiments with art. This way, they can go on to explore scientific avenues with Indian art.", Lazar said.

Classroom discussions took the students on a journey through time: starting with the ancient sculptures of the Indus Valley Civilization, touching upon modern artists like Amrita Sher-Gil and the Tagore brothers, all the way up to contemporary artists like S. H. Raza, M. F. Husain and Anish Kapoor. "I was fascinated by Raza's work.", said a student, Dhwani Sadhphal" After taking this course, I have an idea why our brains are mesmerised by the geometric patterns in Raza's paintings"m she said.

As part of the course, the students also visited city-based art museums and learnt to analyse the paintings they had seen. For their final projects, the students used scientific techniques, like tracking people's eye movements at millisecond precision while they looked at art to learn how they perceive art.

ART OF THE MATTER

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