

Between Prabhakar Barwe and Paul Klee: Yantra as a Nexus

By Li Ziji, 2025

Who are Prabhakar Barwe and Paul Klee?

Sitting cross-legged by the banks of the Ganga, the sound of the Pandit's chanting drifts to your ears. In front of you, the serene and wide Ganga River slowly flows. What thoughts come to your mind? Perhaps you think of motion, transience, or even eternity? But how would you materialize these concepts that only exist in your mind? Prabhakar Barwe has the answer.

In this article, I will first analyze one of Barwe's yantra-style paintings, focusing on aspects of line, (a)symmetry, and esoteric signs. Barwe's own reflections on the inner and outer forms will also be discussed. Then, I will turn to one of Paul Klee's paintings and explain why it resonates with Barwe's work, particularly when interpreted through the lens of yantra. Finally, I will suggest that yantra could serve as a nexus linking Barwe and Klee within the ecology of modernist painting. Before entering these two artists' visual worlds, let me briefly introduce their biographical background and the art of yantra.

Prabhakar Barwe (1936-1995) was born in Nagaon, Maharashtra in 1936, pursued art education and then graduated from the J.J. School of Arts in Mumbai in 1959. From 1961 to 1965, Barwe lived in Varanasi and worked at the Weavers Service Centre as a textile designer. During his time in Varanasi, Barwe encountered tantric philosophy and its artistic embodiment: yantra, which had a lasting influence on his creations (Vadehra 1997, 90). Yantra (fig.1) is a geometric diagram used by tantric practitioners for meditation and transcendence. It illustrates tantric practitioners' vision of the structure of the cosmos (Khanna

1981, 9). Some of the paintings Barwe created after his time in Varanasi markedly possess the basic pattern of yantra.

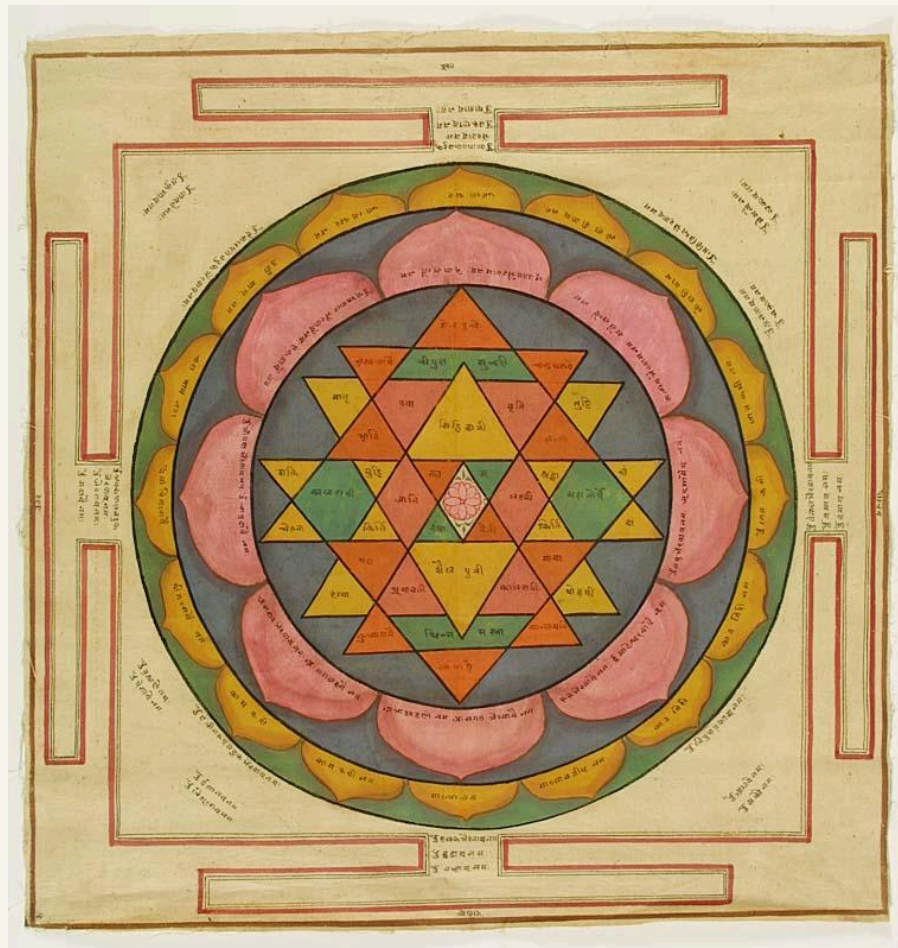


Fig. 1, unknown author, *Shri Yantra*. 1800s.

Paul Klee (1879-1940) was a German-Swiss artist born in Switzerland in 1879. Klee began studying art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich in 1898. In 1911, Klee joined the German Expressionist group *Der Blaue Reiter*, which made him establish relationships with Wassily Kandinsky. In the 1920s, Klee was appointed to the faculty of the Bauhaus in which he studied colour theory and thought about using art to explore the hidden laws of nature. After being forcefully dismissed by Nazis from teaching positions, Klee moved to Switzerland and died in 1940 (Franciscono 2024).

Barwe's oeuvre shows a variety of styles and interests, and one of them, by engaging with the visual language of Yantra, shows Barwe's exploration of the spiritual world. This article will focus on this specific aspect of Barwe's artistic creation. Barwe explores the spiritual world through geometric shapes, linear patterns, and symbolic elements. However, what makes Barwe's work unique and significant in the domain of modernist painting is his development of a distinctive "language of painting," which he incorporated into his artistic creations. Similarly, we can observe a pursuit of the independence of visual art in Paul Klee's work. Both artists are interested in the inner form embedded in the objective world. Establishing a connection between these two artists and making meaningful comparisons will challenge the dominant discourse about modernist painting which, based on a Eurocentric perspective, assumes that non-Western modernist painters are followers of European painters, and their work only simulates the latter's style (Mitter 2008, 543). However, one of the purposes this article aims to achieve is to challenge such a view, by focusing on the relationality between European and non-European artists, i.e., between Paul Klee and Prabhakar Barwe. To investigate that topic, this article is focused on the following set of interrelated questions: What is the meaning of the elements in yantra? What makes Barwe's tantric painting innovative, and how should we interpret his neo-tantric works? In what sense does Barwe's painting resonate with Klee's work? Can yantra serve as a nexus between Barwe and Klee? This article argues that Barwe's creative use of line and compositional (a)symmetry in his neo-tantric painting embody his meditation on the principle of cosmic becoming which, represented by the combination of polarized force, is also made visible by Paul Klee in his yantra-like painting. Thus, yantra becomes a nexus between these two artists.

Both Barwe and Klee's paintings belong to the modernist style. How to conceptualize their relationship becomes necessary against the background of current research that shows that artistic modernism is a worldwide

phenomenon. Monica Juneja's scholarship on modernism is particularly useful in analyzing the relationship between European modernist painters and their counterparts. According to Juneja (2023), "[c]hronology can no longer provide the single key to signposting the modern on the map of art history" (149). Rather, modernist art, from its inception, is a "multi-centred, always and already transcultured phenomenon, whose actors dynamically engaged with its sites in Europe without, however, presuming the universality of the models they encountered" (150). Importantly, this perspective emphasizes the multi-vocal essence of modernism. Modernism is a relational process. It is not a linear, seamless, progressive cause, but a multitemporal, multi-centred event. Through this understanding, we may explore the nexus between Barwe and Klee's work while reflexively amplifying the echo of modernist rhythms.

Prabhakar Barwe: Neo-Tantra as the Representation of Inner Form

I argue that Barwe, by (a)symmetrizing triangles, curving the line, and drawing esoteric signs within the framework of yantra pattern, successfully made modernist Indian painting resonate with global art. It is not surprising that Barwe drew on yantra paintings, as their composition is the manifestation of inner visualization, something Barwe had pursued. To understand Barwe's passion for inner visualization, it is essential to consider his understanding of forms. There are outer forms, which represent the outline of objects, and inner forms, which represent the principle of becoming, essential to the whole universe. As Barwe noted: "every form carries within itself an abstract inner form, or a part of itself, with its own independent form. An artist might find this inner form more appealing or significant than the outer one. In his picture, this form represents the essence of the whole" (Hattarki 2023). Realizing the essence of the whole through individuals at the micro-level is what tantric practitioners strive to achieve (Kumar 2000, 7), and yantra becomes an instrument in this pursuit. Next, upon close inspection of one of Barwe's paintings, we will see how Barwe

visualized his understanding of “inner form” by drawing a neo-tantric painting.

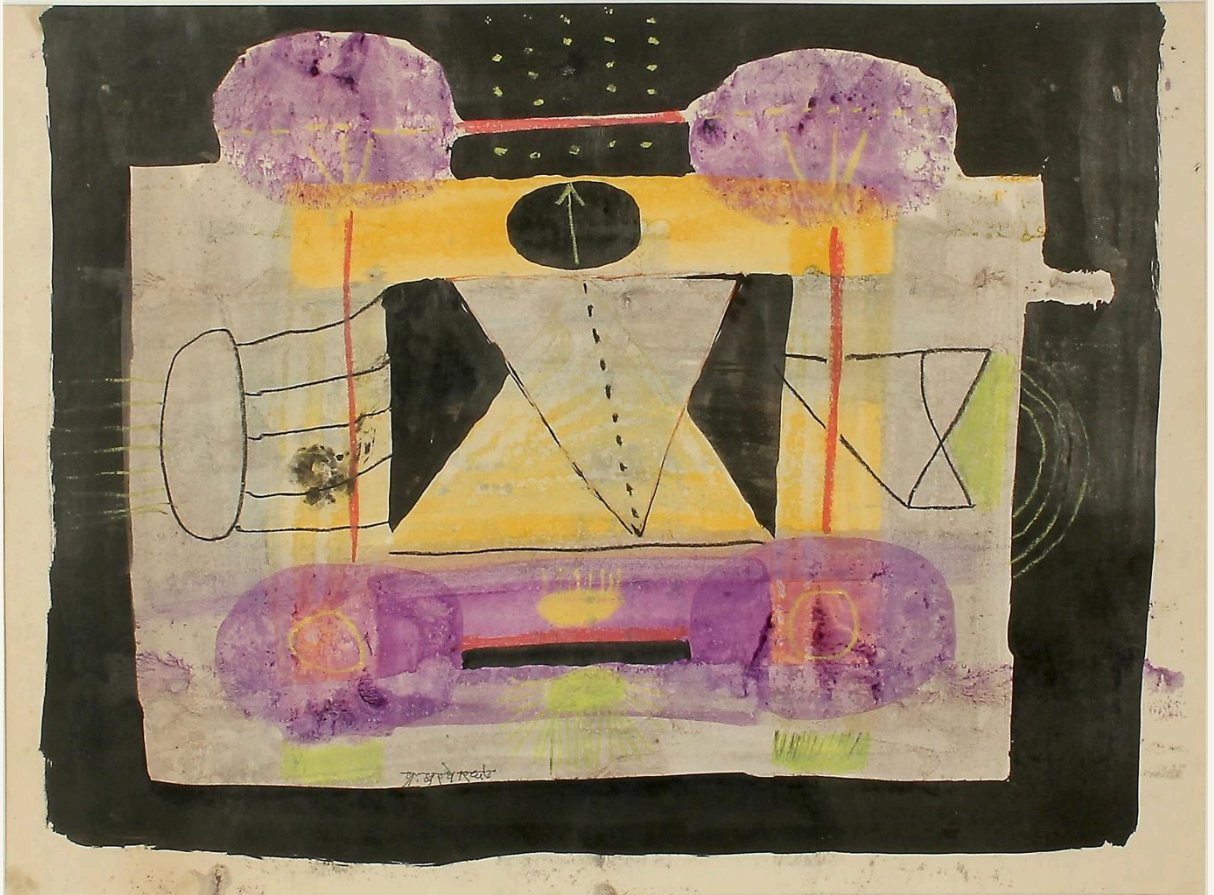


Fig.2, Prabhakar Barwe, *The Untitled*. (1967), Collection Zapurza Museum of Art and Culture, Pune.

Barwe paid great attention to the independence of lines. Lines play a vital role in Barwe’s *The Untitled* (fig.2) in which the square outline, centred triangles, and linked lines evoke the classic pattern of traditional yantras. In Barwe’s painting, lines form the shapes of geometric patterns through closure and connection, such as the overlapping triangles in the center—a typical motif in yantra compositions. However, unlike straight, rational, and rigid lines of traditional yantra (fig.1), Barwe’s lines in this painting are lightly curved, uneven, and slanted—the lines hesitate between forming and unforming. In other words, as an expression of the principle of becoming and creation—the ultimate goal of

meditating on yantra—these lines exist in an in-between state: between rationality and intuition, actualization and potential, the knowable and the unknowable. Indeed, such in-betweenness is the essence of becoming. According to tantric tradition, Shiva, seen as upward triangles, represents static energy and Shakti, seen as downward triangles, represents a kinetic movement (Feuerstein 1998, 23). The spirit of becoming, as a dynamic state of cosmic energy, lies somewhere in between—between static energy and kinetic movement. Barwe's lines embody this in-betweenness. His innovative use of lines is inseparably linked with his reflection of the relationship between outer and inner forms.

Meanwhile, Barwe's creative use of lines also draws attention to symmetry. Is this painting symmetrical? Upon closer inspection, *The Untitled* is not perfectly symmetrical. For example, the two triangles in the center have rough and uneven contours, so the overlapping triangles and the black quadrilateral shapes on either side cannot align perfectly. Each diagonal shape awkwardly attempts to align with the other but ultimately fails, creating an ineffective symmetry. Additionally, this painting contains unidentifiable symbols, such as the yellow marks inside the purple circle at the top. What are they? In my opinion, the uneven lines, ineffective symmetry, and esoteric symbols resist being captured by logos. They reject being 'disciplined' or confined by rationality and narrative. This rebellion allows Barwe's creation to transcend traditional tantric art and enter the domain of neo-tantric art which, according to Brown (2003), "looked to Buddhist and Hindu tantrism for its esoteric, abstract symbols and re-made this tantric language into a contemporary Indian modernism" (42). By breaking away from harmonious symmetry and replacing idealized regulation with uncertain, unstable forms, Barwe created his own language and encouraged viewers to reflect rather than merely accept. Again, the enigma of becoming only reveals itself in precarious, undetermined, and indistinct in-betweenness. Furthermore, in traditional yantra, the triangles at the center are conceived as

the first closed figures to emerge from chaos, or from the Bindu, a central point represented as a dot. “On a metaphysical level, the Bindu represents the unity of the static and the kinetic cosmic principles, which expand to create the infinite universe of matter and spirit. A meeting ground of subject and object, this is exactly the kind of spiritual oneness that the tantra artist strives for” (Kumar 2000, 3). In *The Untitled*, where is the Bindu? It is seemingly situated above the overlapping triangles, represented by a black dot with a yellow arrow inside. Its heavy black color suggests a static reservoir of ‘becoming power’, from which the kinetic movement, symbolized by the arrow, obtains energy. This is how genesis begins. One obvious fact is that in Barwe’s painting this vital point is not centrally located; instead, it is decentered. What is the significance of decentering in yantra-styled painting? To answer that question a comparison with a painting by Paul Klee proves fruitful.

Paul Klee: Repetition and Difference

Comparing Barwe’s painting and visualized thinking with Paul Klee’s work helps us better understand the landscape of global modernist paintings. It has become a common place in research and central to the exhibition project “Intersections & Interventions: Barwe & Klee”, for which this article was commissioned, that Barwe was inspired by Klee’s work during his early years (Zaheer 2008, 49). But what does being ‘inspired’ entail? For one, a similar interest in creating visual manifestations for spiritual pursuits. Despite working in spatially and temporally separated spheres, both artists enjoyed immersing themselves in the inner structure of the cosmos and visualizing the results of their meditations. In his *Creative Credo* first published in 1920, Paul Klee stated that “abstract formal elements are put together like numbers and letters to make concrete beings or abstract things; in the end, a formal cosmos is achieved, so much like Creation... The relation of art to creation is symbolic. Art is an example, just as the earthly is an example of the cosmic” (1961, 79). As the quote indicates, like Barwe, some of

Klee's paintings also deal with the representation of cosmic creation and illustrate the principle of becoming, as the painting called *Eros* from 1923 indicates (fig. 2).

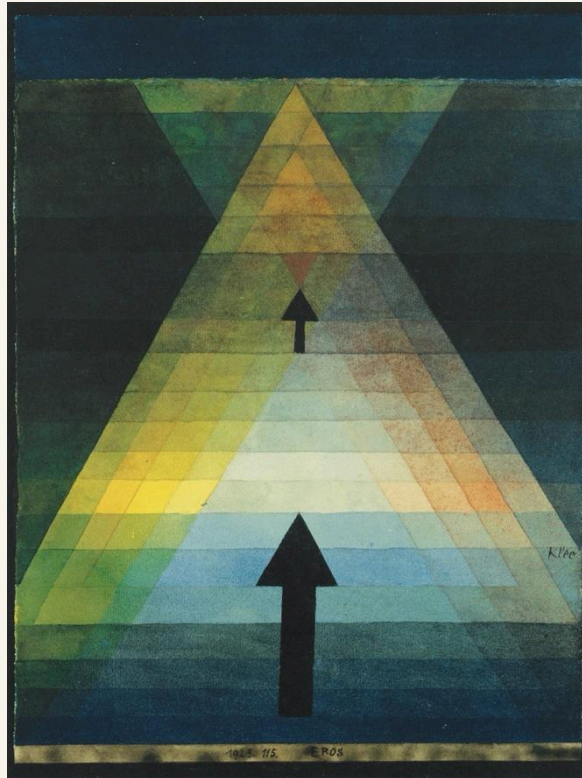


Fig.3, Paul Klee, *Eros*. 1923, watercolour, 24.5 x 33.5 cm, The Rosengart Collection Museum, Lucerne.

The composition and patterns in *Eros*—crossed triangles and quadrilateral shapes created by such overlapping—remind us of the core structure of yantra and Barwe's *The Untitled*. For Klee's work, the titles often provide viewers with clues. The title *Eros* connotes desire, intercourse, and the love between individuals. Eros could become an invisible force that draws polarized sides together, similar to the significance of the overlapping triangles in yantra. Regarding the yantra pattern, the downward triangle symbolizes feminine power, the creative impulse of the universe, while the upward triangle represents masculine power, the creative essence of the universe. When these

two triangles penetrate each other, forming a hexagon, they symbolize the fusion of polarities (Kumar 2000, 4). This is when creation begins its dynamic movement. We can find that the motif of polarization is also prominent in *Eros*. Perhaps Klee's fascination with polarization is related to his thinking about the possibility of any concept: "[a] concept is not thinkable without its opposite. The concept stands apart from its opposite. No concept is effective without its opposite" (Klee 1961, 15). The concept of creation is no exception.

Interestingly, at first glance, *Eros* appears illusory. Viewers might initially interpret it as a combination of regular geometric patterns due to its simple structure and repetitive small shapes, implying harmony and repetition. However, upon closer inspection, much like Barwe's *The Untitled*, Klee's yantra-like *Eros* does not have a perfectly symmetrical composition: disproportionate triangles, slanted arrows, decentered focal points, and uneven lines give the painting a sense of differentiation. Thus, this is a game of repetition and difference—repetition as differentiation. The interplay between repetition and difference reveals the secret of becoming because difference permeates everything as a force of becoming (Deleuze 1995, 289). The process of repetition is not mere replication without becoming, rather, repetition is to create, to add, to transform. This is evident in Barwe's *The Untitled* (fig.2), where repetitive triangles and lines added the element of differentiation into the yantra pattern. "The original meaning of a form changes...if it is repeated several times"(Barwe 2014, 39)—after repetition and differentiation, *The Untitled* begins to unveil the meaning of inner form, in-between, and becoming.

Resonance in Yantra

The purpose of this article was to trace the elements of yantra art in the work of *The Untitled* and *Eros* so to establish a nexus between Barwe and Klee. I argued that Barwe's innovative use of line and compositional (a)symmetry in his

neo-tantra painting, *The Untitled*, embodies his contemplation on the principle of cosmic becoming which is also made visible by Paul Klee in his yantra-like painting, *Eros*. Thus, the work of Klee and Barwe invokes echoes in the conceptual arena of the tantric world. Additionally, by analyzing the significance of yantra elements and investigating how Barwe and Klee creatively incorporated these formal elements into their works, this article aims to enrich our understanding of the spiritual worlds of these two artists.

Furthermore, investigating Barwe's and Klee's use of formal elements related to yantras enables us to challenge the notion that the modernist project is a straightforward, continuous progression. Indeed, modernism unfolds in dynamic relationality, folding chronological time and geo-culturally distanced space. Creating a nexus between Barwe and Klee will crack open the potentiality of modernist art in which artists with different backgrounds contribute to the symbiosis of global artistic activities. Barwe and Klee visualized their contemplation about the cosmos and its inner form, and they resonate with each other at the holy arena of yantra in which they strive for the universal composition of cosmic becoming. Thus, global modernism links the contingencies of different places where local artists created unique and distinctive artistic work for the modernist rhythm.

Finally, I conclude this article with Barwe's words which, I believe, also encapsulate what *The Untitled* tries to express and inspire: "What is this universe all about? What and where is my place in it? Who am I and why do I experience these things? Is it mere coincidence, or is there a design somewhere? Am I really moving from one point to another, or is it an illusory journey? What is the truth of it? At the root of all these questions, I feel the presence of an invisible and mysterious power" (DHNS 2016).

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