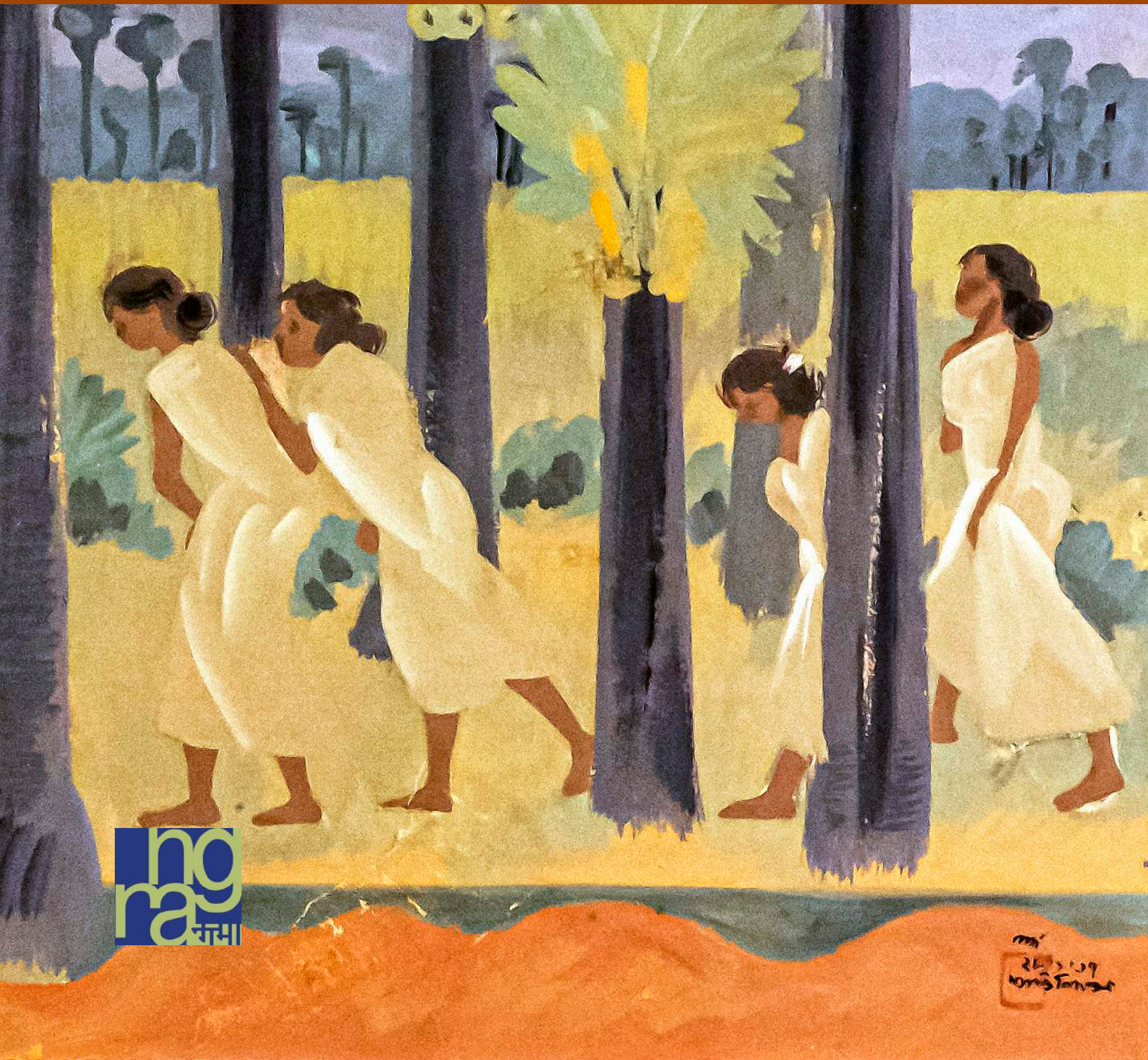


# The NGMA ART JOURNAL

May - July 2022



2022  
NGMA



Published by the National Gallery of Modern Art. All rights reserved.  
No parts of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical including photographing, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the National Gallery of Modern Art.

Date of Publication: May 2022

Editor:  
**SUJATA PRASAD**  
Advisor, National Gallery of Modern Art

Administrative Support:  
**TEMSINRO JAMIR**  
Director, National Gallery of Modern Art

Publication in Charge:  
**DR. SHASHI BALA**  
Curator, National Gallery of Modern Art

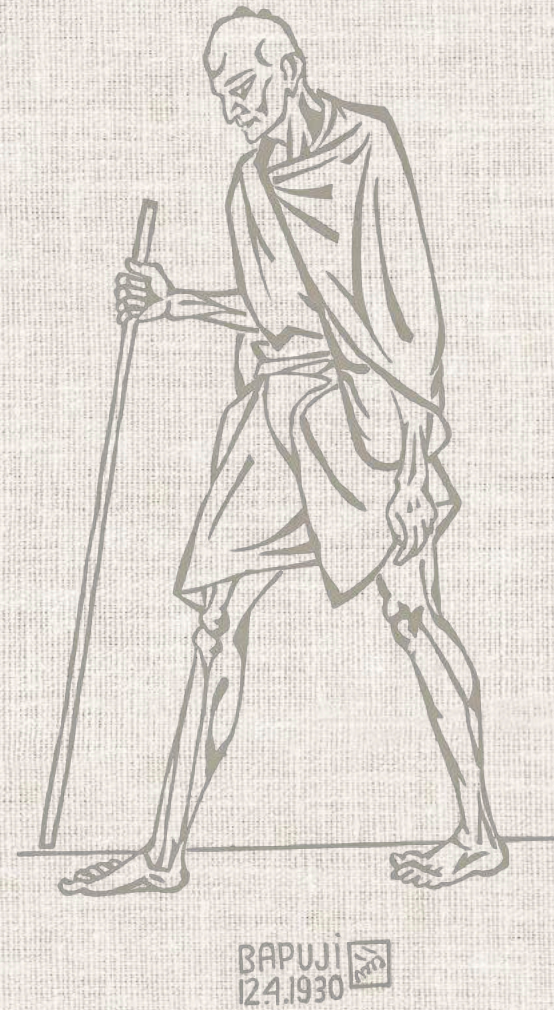
Design:  
**AJEESH RAJ**  
Deputy Curator, National Gallery of Modern Art

**V.B.HARILALKRISHNAN**  
Graphics Designer, National Gallery of Modern Art

Editorial Support:  
**SURABHI SHUBHAM**  
Research Assistant, National Gallery of Modern Art

Copyright@ NGMA National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi  
All Rights Reserved  
Jaipur House, Sher Shah Road, India Gate, New Delhi-110003, India  
Phone: +91 11 23386111  
<http://www.ngmaindia.gov.in/>

Cover:  
National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi



Nandalal Bose, **Dandi March**  
12.4.1930, Linocut, 17.5x29.8 cm, Acc. No. 4893



# Contents

Editorial Note:  
Sujata Prasad

A Conversation with Adwaita Gadanayak, on Indigenous and Contemporary Art Traditions in India  
Gargi Sen, Simar Puneet, Surabhi Shubham

Nandalal Bose: The Man, His Art and His Pedagogic Practice  
R. Siva Kumar

Ramkinkar Baij: Reminiscences of a Student  
A. Ramachandran

Upendra Maharathi: An Artist Extraordinaire  
Mahashweta Maharathi

Nicholas Roerich's Artistic Legacy in India  
Dr. Vladimir Zaitsev

Art Dialogue: In Conversation with Krishen Khanna  
Vandana Kalra

Cover Image:  
New Clouds, 1937, Tempera on Paper, 69.4x42 cm, Acc. No. 4804





## The NGMA ART JOURNAL



## Editorial Note

The National Gallery of Modern Art has played a crucial role in shaping the understanding and appreciation of visual arts. In recent times, its transformative engagement with indigenous artists and art forms placed outside the art-history canon has further enriched the process. On the anvil is the revival of publications and fortification of art conversations through frequent workshops and conclaves, webinars, and podcasts.

The NGMA's quarterly Art Journal is a step towards creating a contemplative communicative space to illuminate the legacy of India's incredible art practitioners. The Journal seeks to explore new dimensions of art economics, art history, the interdisciplinary link between art and social and cultural history, and aspires to shed light on contemporary museum practices.

Our first issue is devoted to Hastantaran, a process critical to transmitting the traditional knowledge that forms the core of India's rich art vocabulary and history. The issue opens with a conversation with Adwaita Gadanayak, the DG of NGMA. He deliberates on the need to rethink the philosophical/conceptual precepts on what constitutes art by recognizing and reinforcing visual art practices and expressions developed in indigenous communities over centuries and millennia.

Prof R. Siva Kumar's scholarly essay on Nandalal Bose's art and pedagogic practice decodes the artist's tryst with contextual modernism. Renowned sculptor, painter, litterateur, and teacher, A Ramachandran reminisces about Ramkinkar Baij. He unlocks the artist's mythos and opens a fascinating window on the maestro's unorthodox, irreverent praxis.

Upendra Maharathi's daughter Mahashweta explores the ground-breaking potential of Hastantaran in her

article. Working at the creative intersection of art, craft, and design, Maharathi's commitment to the revival of art and weaving traditions on the verge of extinction is remembered as one of his most worthwhile contributions.

Nicholas Roerich's meditative and transcendental body of work evokes the resonant echoes of Hastantaran. Positioning India at the forefront of a global crusade for peace and spiritual regeneration, the mystic philosopher, poet, artist, archaeologist, and writer found his muse in the Himalayas. Art-historian Vladimir Zaitsev deliberates on Roerich's cross-cultural synthesis that left an indelible influence on generations of artists and scholars.

Last but not least is a conversation between Krishen Khanna, and a senior writer at The Indian Express, Vandana Kalra. This dialogue explores his wondrous art cosmos and love for poetry and literature.

As someone once said, art is the medium in which history dreams. It also nestles in fluid time, nurtured by the intellect and ardour of viewers and connoisseurs. This journal hopes to document the best of visual art, report on ground-breaking exhibitions, review significant art publications, celebrate the present, and memorialize the past.

**Sujata Prasad**  
Advisor, National Gallery of Modern Art





Adwaita Gadanayak, 'Dandi March' ( A monumental sculpture of Gandhi ji )  
Granite, Raj Ghat, New Delhi.



A CONVERSATION WITH  
ADWAITA GADANAYAK  
ON INDIGENOUS AND CONTEMPORARY ART  
TRADITIONS IN INDIA

Gargi Sen, Simar Puneet, Surabhi Shubham





***Tell us a little more about your hometown, Dhenkanal in Odisha?***

Dhenkanal, where I was born is a place that feels like heaven on earth. It is a big forested area with nature all around— mountains, river, jungle... mostly inhabited by tribal people. If one had to describe it, one could say it is nature in its purest form. That is why I like it a lot. Guruji says, ‘To search for the formless in an ocean of form.’ And I have found both these there. There is a place right next to my village where they believe in the formless, it is revered there. And then on the other side is a huge Shiva temple. So, on one side the ‘form’ is worshipped while on the other, they don’t believe in it. My village is in the middle, what could be better than that? So, from childhood, I would sometimes believe in the form and sometimes I wouldn’t; it is something that still continues for me today. Growing up in the village, my mother would mostly pray to nature—she would pray to the trees, water, stone...

Guruji says,  
‘ To search for the formless  
in an ocean of form.’

I am doing the same today too. Jagannath is a manifestation of nature. When the worship takes place, we first pray to the Jagannath. We seek permission to take one tree and carve the form out of it. It is taken in a procession too. The process of creating the form is very abstract, much like tantric traditions. But once the forms are created someone wakes them up, brushes their teeth. There is even some dance and music before they are put to ‘sleep’. The entire process is natural, but the forms are very abstract. Even today, the process feels very contemporary to me.



Kailash Temple, Ellora Caves, India

***You said that the National Gallery of Modern Art is for everyone—especially for the common man. And you have talked about how craft and art have been kept separate, that the Adivasi craftspeople, for instance, have never been given the status of artists. Please tell us more about this.***

Actually, and I say this to everyone, we shouldn’t label Adivasi art as ‘craft’. It is a precious part of our brilliant indigenous art tradition, which has existed for thousands of years. Think about the Konark Temple or Ajanta-Ellora, our ancients imagined it all. And now we don’t even have the courage to accept that we made those amazing places, some say it wasn’t built by humans but by aliens! It feels absurd to call them crafts...we shouldn’t even be having these casteist conversations.

***Could you please elaborate?***

We have made the conversation about arts and crafts somewhat casteist. Craftsmen are seen as people with no thinking capacity, we have placed them somewhere and they cannot move beyond that. ‘We, the designers and the artists, will guide you,’ - we tell them. But for me, they are the most innovative and creative designers. They design the

bullock cart in the village, they decide the material needed for their homes- So, they design things in accordance with nature. Who designs the furniture in their houses? They do. But we tell them, ‘You cannot do it. We engineers, designers and artists, who have studied these things will design your homes.’

It was a big mistake that we never gave them a chance. Let us talk about weavers who wove exquisite Dhaka mulmuls, malmal sarees used to be transported inside a matchbox, inside a ring, can you imagine? You cut off their hands and legs, refused them work. Sent everything to Manchester for the processed cloth. And what did we do after we got our freedom? We froze them in their place and denigrated their status to craftsmen and craftswomen, instead of giving them the same recognition that we gave to artists. There must have been some deliberate policies that underpinned that decision.

In Odisha, near my village, there are people who do Dhokra work, who mostly work in the forest. I was the director of KIIT University in Bhubaneswar and we worked with them for 2-3 months. After those months I noticed that one by one they were running away. So, I went



to their homes and asked them what the problem was. ‘The government is doing everything for you. They’re making houses for you, making studios for you, they’re even giving you free material! They’re giving you a market in Delhi. What’s the problem?’ ‘Sir you are very nice, you did a good job. But our heart isn’t in it. The thread that goes in the wax? It doesn’t set itself. Our forests tell us, our mountains tell us, our rivers tells us how to make it. We have farmland, so we do a bit of farming. 2-4 months we spend in that and 2-4 months we spend doing this. We can not breadth there, how will we work?’

The government plans to bring them into the mainstream. But if we at least join forces with them, our art will live. Otherwise, the bull or the horse that was being made in Odisha, even the horse that are made in Bankura, slowly these are all changing. Designers go and say they want hundreds of pieces. They make a mould and replicate. But that shouldn’t happen, it is a sensitive issue. They should be supported but in a way that the essence of yheir artwork is not destroyed. We should keep their art alive. Moreover, if we constantly tell them what to do, their work becomes labour.



Dhokra work makes its way to the everyday life of people



**Indigenous Australia,**  
Masterworks from the National Gallery of Australia exhibited at National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi

*Correct, our approach should be different...*

We should first meet, talk to them, spend time and gain their trust, become friends. Talk about their community life and take them around. Familiarize them to our mechanized world.

Take for instance the Aboriginal Art from Australia. Look where it has reached. Their contemporary and traditional art run side by side. They are comparable even in price. Whereas in our art-cosmos and in our perception of work done by a karigar and a Hussain painting, you can’t even dream of bridging the gap.

Their entire ecosystem is being destroyed. For instance, in the past, when a wedding would take place in the village, the entire village would participate in the process. The karigars, working in clay, bamboo, wood and stone would make everything and decide what the mandap would look like, how it would be decorated... Now event managers have even reached our villages. Where is the community effort and the work executed by our traditional karigars and artists?

I’ve seen artists working in Odisha. We may not consider white a colour but they do! ‘So, tell me what white are you talking about’, they’ll say. ‘The white of the sparkle in the eye or the white of freshly fallen dew or the white of a gushing river?’

When I was studying at the Slade School in London- if any material... a chair, for instance, was broken they would just throw it away. Since their repairing cost is high, they had no system... materials were easy to come by, we had a surplus of things. We don’t have such thinking in our culture- here, if something is not functioning, we repair it. And we think this belongs to my father. My son in turn thinks that the chair belonged to his grandfather... We both have an intimate relationship with it. Whereas their culture is different, they don’t possess this relation, this level of depth... that is why they consider everything as material. But we think beyond this and the relation that we possess is unthinkable to them.

Even when a dancer dances, she touches the ground, asking it for permission.... I am stepping on you... what a



relation! If we work with a materialistic mindset, then how can we imbue our work with emotions.

When you enter a temple, you come across a large gate. Why was it made? You tend to bow down. You surrender a bit before proceeding to the sabha mandap where discussions are held. If you go further, there is a natya mandap where kirtans and dances are performed. Then you come to a garbha griha. It is never direct- you have to go through different levels of spiritualism and temple art.

Most of all there is a relationship. The relationship of a sculptor with the stone... Anyone can call it 'stone' but that is not what it signifies. There is life in it and the artist can definitely feel that life.

Our ancestors believed that some stones are male while others are female. When we minutely grind a stone a metallic sound is produced. We hammer it and analyze its texture. Stones with minute grains are considered female stones. They are very hard, that is why they have a metallic sound and are used to create ornaments. It is opposite in the case of a male stone, which is much softer and has thick grains, making it easier to carve. Female statues are made out of these male stones.

I work in stone. Initially, my sense was not developed and I used to carve my stone a lot...but now when you see my work, I carve very less and just try to open a space for people to enter and feel. When you touch stone, it vibrates. Your energy gets transferred...

There are certain pillars that produce musical notes, sa re ga ma, when they vibrate... think of their connection, their relationship with people. That unique relationship is getting lost. There was a time when artists could communicate with stones. They could surrender. They considered that there was god everywhere. We don't do that anymore. We are contemporary artists and have enormous egos. We think we can do this or that, but in reality, we can rarely do anything.

The earth is so beautiful and when you are near nature you can obliterate your own identity. Look at Roerich's paintings executed in Nagar... they are ethereal, the sky feels as if it is constantly changing colour. Today we make a small painting, a small sculpture and call it art. This is not art, we are working for our bread and butter. Today our art doesn't connect...practicing art that does not connect is probably of no use. I see art as a medium to spirituality and connectedness to our inner core.



I work in stone.  
Initially, my sense was not  
developed and I used to carve  
my stone a lot...but now when  
you see my work,  
I carve very less and just try to  
open a space for people to  
enter and feel. When you touch  
stone, it vibrates. Your energy  
gets transferred...



Honourable Prime Minister Narendra Modi at National Police Memorial



National Police Memorial

*How is NGMA planning to bridge the chasm between indigenous and contemporary art traditions?*

We have been making major efforts to recognize and reinforce indigenous visual art practices and expressions. The regional Kala Kumbhs organized by us have reinvigorated dozens of traditional art forms. We have essentially used the powerful vocabulary of indigenous art forms to create a unique meta-narrative of India's glorious history and culture.

To cite a recent example, we organized a workshop in Bhubaneswar. The workshop tapped into the innate creativity of young contemporary artists and traditional Pattachitra, Talapatra Chitra and Jhoti-Chitra artists of Orissa, the Medinipur and Kalighat Patachitra artists of Bengal and their Hooghly and Birbhum Bankura and Burdwan variants, Bihar's Manjusa and Madhubani artists, the Jadu Pati artists from Jharkhand and the traditional harvest Sohrai art practiced by Santhala, Munda, Oraon and Prajapati artists, Chhattisgarh's Pithora and Mirua artists, and artists from Andhra carrying forward Machilipatnam traditions.

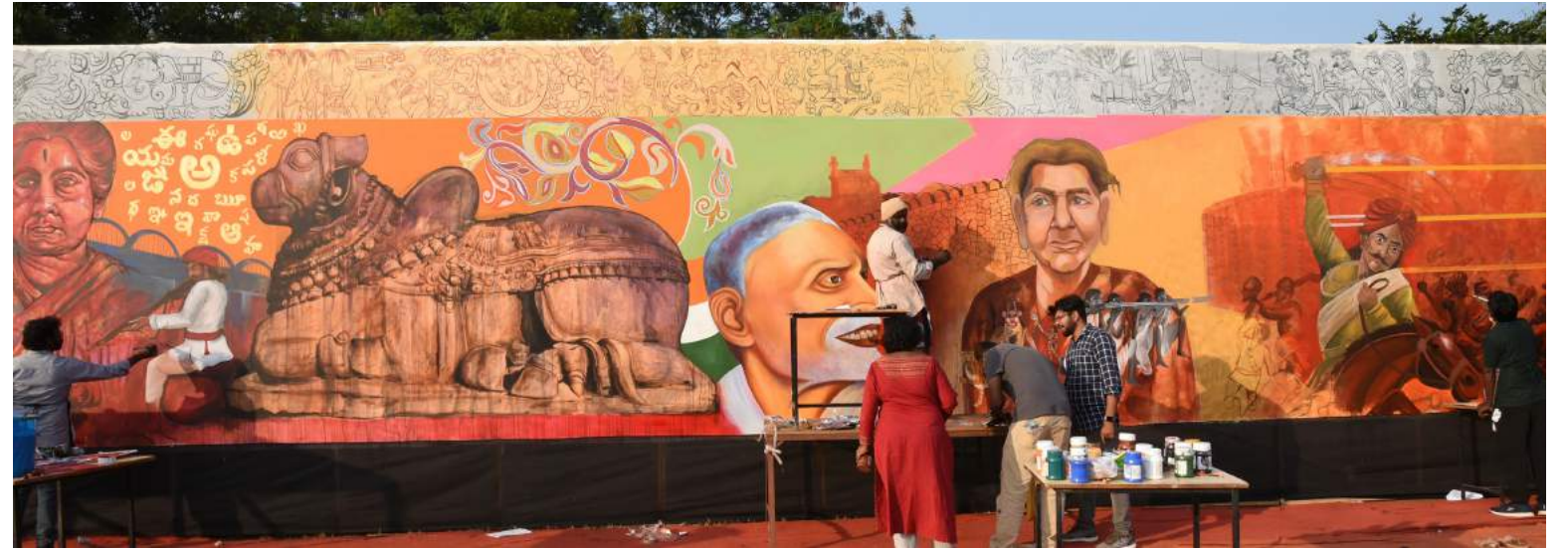




Honourable Prime Minister Narendra Modi at National Police Memorial



Scroll-painting by artists from different parts of India



Artists from Andhra Pradesh depicting Unsung Heroes.



Artists from Rajasthan narrating the visual stories of Unsung Heroes.

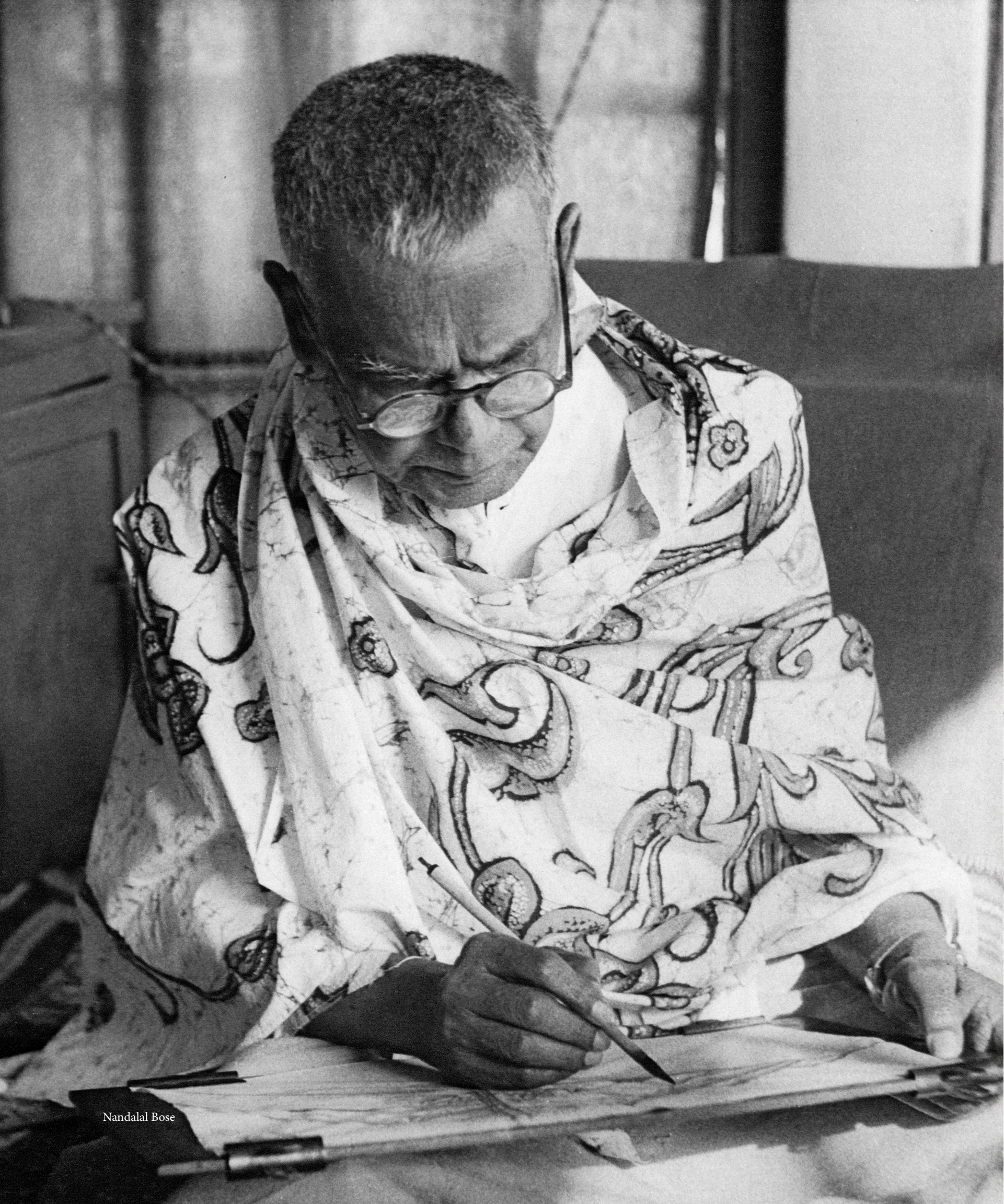
We are using traditional art to commemorate India's incredible history and culture and its spectacular journey of 75 years. We organized another regional workshop with artists from eight states in Chandigarh. We will continue to take this concept to different regions of the country.

Later in the year, we are planning to host a mammoth Art Festival. Biennale like, in scale, it will be a

mega- celebration of India's Independence, with visual art exhibitions, public art installations, performances, concerts, perhaps also some literary events. The main venues would be Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore, Calcutta. But there would be several smaller venues near India's major rivers and their tributaries. The idea is to connect with as many artists and Indian art forms as possible and bridge the widening chasm between the traditional and the contemporary.







Nandalal Bose







Nandalal Bose, 'Birds, Tiger and Fish', Linocut on Paper, 8x8.2 cm, Acc. No. 4894

# NANDALAL BOSE: THE MAN, HIS ART AND HIS PEDAGOGIC PRACTICE

R. Siva Kumar



Rabindranath Tagore & Nandalal Bose

*I have seen Nandalal from close quarters as man and artist. Rare is it to come across such a union of intelligence, sympathy, skill, experience and insight. The students under his care feel this strongly, and his friends who see him in the daily business of life are drawn to him by his magnanimity and deep understanding.*

Rabindranath Tagore<sup>1</sup>

*Short, dark shy, taciturn, work-engrossed in his waking and sleeping hours, he looked more like a monk than a master artist, singularly lacking in swagger and flamboyance we see in modern contemporaries....But those who had a chance of going near him could not help being bowled over; he radiated intelligence, good humour and affectionate solicitude and his brief, and often cryptic, conversation sparkled with flashes of rare insight and wisdom, capable of investing one's sense of enquiry with a new seriousness and leading it into unforeseen tunnels of experience.*

K. G. Subramanyan<sup>2</sup>

Rabindranath saw promise in young Nandalal, took him under his wings, gave him opportunities, and saw him grow into a resourceful artist and teacher. Subramanyan studied under Nandalal when the latter was at the height of his powers and benefited from his intelligence as an artist and teacher. They, so to speak, came to know him from two diametrically different positions, and yet their estimates of Nandalal were similar. Both speak of his intelligence (which in the case of an artist also includes his artistic intelligence) and sympathy—or “affectionate solicitude” as Subramanyan puts it—, and admired the man as much as his art. Rabindranath, in his note on Nandalal, argued that in artists and writers, perhaps more than in philosophers a man's work is ‘closely related to his character and temperament but it is not always possible to discover the relationship.’ Not having had the privilege of knowing him in person we are compelled to look at him through his works, but hopefully, they will also help us to glimpse the man behind the work.



Nandalal was born in 1882 in Kharagpur, Bihar, to Purnachandra Bose, the estate manager of the raja of Darbhanga, and Kshetramani Devi who was accomplished in village crafts. After his early education at the local school, he moved to Calcutta in 1897 and passed the Entrance Examination in 1902. Although he was enrolled in the FA course he neglected his studies and began to cultivate his artistic interests with the help of his cousin Atul Mitra who was a student at the Government Art School. At this point, most of his works were copies of Ravi Varma and Raphael. Eventually, in 1905 he joined the art school and came close to Abanindranath Tagore who had also joined the Art School as the Vice-Principal in the same year after much persuasion from E. B. Havell who was the Principal of the School at that time. Abanindranath too was drawn to Nandalal and accepted him as his first student, and, along with Surendranath Ganguly, in 1908 he was introduced by Havell in an essay in the *Studio* as one of Abaindranath's 'most promising pupils'. The same year he also won an award for his painting *Sati* from the newly founded Indian Society of Oriental Art.

His early works like *Sati* and *Vikramaditya and the Vampire* (reproduced by Havell) demonstrate how quickly Nandalal had mastered Abanindranath's wash technique and how well deserved his early success was. Sister Nivedita writing from a nationalist perspective saw an expression of Indian values in his works and wrote effusively about them. But Nandalal did not rest on his early laurels. He used the prize money to visit sites of art historical importance in northern India, followed by a similar tour of the south. The high point of his early effort at gaining an intimate knowledge of Indian art culminated with his visit to Ajanta during the winter of 1909-10. He was sent to Ajanta, together with Samarendranath Gupta, Asitkumar Haldar, and K. Venkatappa, by Nivedita and Abanindranath to assist Lady (Christiana) Herringham in copying of the murals. Around the same time, he also began to take notice of local folk and popular painting traditions. These exposures to varied aspects of Indian art made a deep impact on Nandalal. He recognized that Mughal painting from which Abanindranath drew his inspiration was only one facet of Indian art, and that the wash technique developed



Nandalal Bose, *Sati*, 1907, Wash & Tempera on Paper  
25 x 35.1 cm, Acc. No. 4797



Nandalal Bose, *Siva & Sati*, 1947, Wash & Tempera on Paper,  
38.5x49.5 cm, Acc. No. 4793



Nandalal Bose, *Jadugriha Dahan*, 20.5.1940, Wash and Tempera on Paper, 30.4 x 47.3 cm, Acc. No. 4798





Nandalal Bose, **Siva drinking world poison**, Wash & Tempera on Paper, 54x76 Cm, Acc. No. 4792



Kolam, Tamil Nadu ( South India)

by Abanindranath and adopted by most of his students, including himself, was a personal innovation by the master and a new addition to the vast repertoire of techniques that traditional Indian painting offered.

The impact of his exposure to Ajanta was immediately visible in his work. The first visible effect was a change in the rendering of the figure. A new figure-type that was neither naturalistic nor weightless but more substantial, although not muscular and somewhat mannered but not overtly delicate, characterizes several paintings from this period, such as *Jadugriha Daha*, *Head of Siva*, *Siva Drinking Poison*, *Siva and Sati*, and *Parthasarti* (all done between 1910 and 1913). They were painted in the wash technique but often combined with touches of opaque colour. Like the supple bodies combined with dreamy eyes, the opaque touches, with a hint of materiality combined with the sheerness of wash painting, suggest not a new resolution but an inner conflict in Nandalal's mind and art, a pull between the desire to follow the new path opened by his teacher and to strike out on the

strength of his own sensibility. A set of twenty-six small-sized illustrations of the *Ramayana* (1911) in tempera in flat opaque colouring and linear accentuations and details in black and white can be seen as a first tentative step towards a resolution. A change of medium was to be a part of the solution, but it took a few more years and other interventions for that to happen.

The second impact of his visit to Ajanta was the birth of his interest in mural painting. While Havell and Nivedita called for the resurgence of public art or civic art as they termed it, it was not a part of Abanindranath's work or teaching programme. In a marked deviation, soon after his return from Ajanta, Nandalal painted a few murals on the walls of his house. And this interest in mural painting and the impression that the Ajanta murals made on him lived on and found resonance not only in his first substantive mural decorations at the Bose Institute (1917) in Calcutta but also in his first experiments with mural painting in Santiniketan in 1923. At the same time, inspired by popular practices like kolam (which he saw on



Nandalal Bose, **Radha in the Grove**, Tempera On Paper, 23x14.5 cm, Acc. No. 1010

his tour of South India) and local pat painting, he did floor graphics at home and tried to emulate the representational and marketing practices of the patuas in an effort to reach out to a wider public. Around the same time, he also made an early foray into designing and made stencils and moulds for a local tile maker.

Abanindranath had a profound impact on young Nandalal, but his sensibilities and talents were different from his teacher's. There was a cultivated and rarefied side to Abanindranath's art and personality; by contrast, Nandalal was earthier and thought through the world with his eyes and hands. Although both Abanindranath and Nandalal came to the fore riding on the wave of Swadeshi, their way forward was different. While Abanindranath moved ahead by receding into the personal world post-1910 and charting an individual trajectory, Nandalal chose to move beyond the personal and step out into the public sphere as both artist and teacher. The former moved forward by weaving an enchanting web of thought and imagination linking literature and painting, and the latter did so by addressing social and practical needs and finding functional solutions to them, linked by a shared aesthetic. As a result, while Abanindranath is remembered as the

initiator of a modern movement in Indian art, Nandalal, his most accomplished pupil, is seen as being instrumental in freeing it from excessive historicism, linking it with local experiential realities, and broadening its functional goals. He did this not by a single act of revolt or a spectacular expression of originality but through a slowly and carefully cultivated intellectual and artistic eclecticism.

Several individuals Nandalal came into contact with around the turn of the first decade of the twentieth century played an important role in his self-fashioning. He not only drew the attention of Sister Nivedita but also came into close contact with several monks associated with the Ramakrishna mission, like Ganen Maharaj and Mahendranath Dutta, the younger brother of Swami Vivekananda. That gave him an enduring interest in artistic nationalism as propounded by Nivedita and also grounded him in the earthy and liberal spiritualism of Ramakrishna. Comparing Vivekananda and Ramakrishna he wrote:

*The aim of Swamiji [Vivekananda] was the fulfilment of aesthetic ideals through the path of knowledge and Ramakrishna's was the realization of knowledge and perception. Only their ways differed. To me Ramakrishna's*





Foundation Ceremony of Visva-Bharati in 1921.

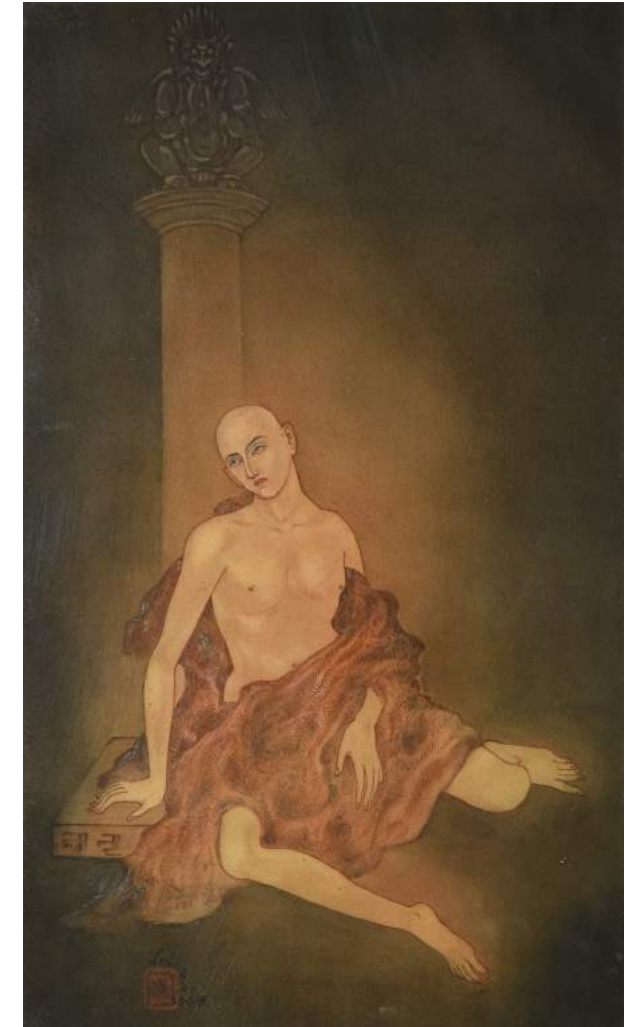
*mode of perception is more helpful to the artists. The artists always follow this mode. Beauty is realized through form and knowledge through abstraction. The artists concern themselves with illusion (Maya). But the artist is likely to be a failure unless his perception is coupled with knowledge. On the contrary it is sometimes difficult for the learned to have an adequate insight into the feeling and aesthetics. Of course it is different with prophets, their ways are inscrutable.*

On the other hand, his close association with Coomaraswamy (1910-11) and the experience of assisting him in cataloguing Gaganendranath's and Abanindranath's collection of Indian art, which he later memorialized in a drawing, gave him an insight into the cohesive character of traditional visual cultures and encouraged him to read them as language systems. He put this idea to the test, as we can see in the comprehensive documentation of arts,

crafts, and everyday life he made during his visit to Orissa in 1917 and to China and Japan in 1924, and later adopted it as his practice. His Encounter with Okakura Kakuzo, the prophet of Pan-Asianism, in 1912, and the artists of his circle was equally fruitful. While Okakura impressed upon him the need for balancing engagement with tradition with individuality and contact with nature in an artist's work, from Japanese artists he not only learned the technique of ink painting, as exemplified by a set of ink drawings from 1913, but also its underlying linguistic rationale. And finally, Rabindranath helped him gather all these insights together under a cohesive vision and provided him a platform for putting it into practice.

Nandalal came into contact with Rabindranath in 1909. Although he was a leader of the Swadeshi movement, Rabindranath was by this time exercised about the new

art movement's obsessive engagement with tradition in the quest for cultural identity. That, he felt, made it turn a blind eye towards contemporary realities, environment, from personal experience. Having learned from his own experience of the previous decade how being connected to the world and the life around can add vitality to one's work, he was keen on seeing this change in the field of art too. He began by inviting artists in his circle to illustrate his writings. These had mixed results because while some texts encouraged the artists to look at their immediate environment through an experiential lens, others allowed them to continue with their familiar literary and allegorical imagery. It was in this context that Nandalal first came into contact with the poet. Soon afterward, he was invited to Santiniketan in April 1914 and given a public reception during which Rabindranath expressed his appreciation of the young artist with a poem. From a letter written to Asitkumar (8<sup>th</sup> January 1914), we learn that Nandalal too was keen on coming to Santiniketan and being associated with Rabindranath. Next year, he is invited along with Suren Kar and Mukul Dey to the family estates of the Tagores in Shilaidaha. Following these visits, Nandalal, who had grown up in the rural environs of Kharagpur, began to respond to nature with enthusiasm. With paintings like *Over the Padma in Winter* (1915), *Rain Swept Konarak* (1916), and *Lost in the Woods* (1918), nature began to gradually replace mythological subject matter in his paintings.



Nandalal Bose, **Shri Chaitanya under Garud Stambha**, Wash & Tempera on Paper, 22.8x40 cm, Acc. No. 4791



The **kalo bari** (black house), is another significant architectural project in Santiniketan





Nandalal Bose, **Himalayan Orchid**, 1938, Water colour on paper, 23x25.7 cm, Acc. No. 4811

In 1916 Rabindranath visited Japan for the first time, and he was overwhelmed by Japanese art and culture. Although he was familiar with certain facets of Japanese art, he now saw that the Japanese painters observed nature with great astuteness and worked on a monumental scale combining ambition with restraint. Further, he noticed that this unique aesthetic sensibility ran through the entire gamut of their culture and touched every aspect of Japanese life. Their love for nature, their eloquent restraint, and its percolation into their everyday life, appealed to him and came close to what he wished to see achieved in India. He

wrote letters to Abanindranath and Gaganendranath and other members of his family, drawing their attention to these factors. He also got paintings by Shimomura Kanzaan and Yokoyama Taikan that appealed to him, copied and sent to Calcutta; and persuaded Arai Kempo who made the copies, to travel to India and teach at the Vichitra Sabha, an informal cultural circle he started at his home in Calcutta in 1916. However, dissatisfied with the response his ideas and efforts generated among the artists in Calcutta, he decided to begin a new art school at Santiniketan and started to put his thoughts into practice in 1919.

Rabindranath was keen on getting the services of Nandalal for Kala Bhavana, as the art school came to be called. During this period, Nandalal was employed by Abanindranath and was working under him at the school run by the Indian Society of Oriental Art. Nandalal's association with Abanindranath was long; after he completed his course at the art school he was at first recruited by Abanindranath to work from Jorasanko on a small monthly stipend, and was subsequently entrusted with the informal classes run at the Vichitra Sabha, and finally from 1918 employed by the Society of Oriental Art to run its courses. Abanindranath was reluctant to let go of his services, but Rabindranath was equally keen on having him in Santiniketan, and Nandalal too was, as we have noted, interested in working with Rabindranath even at a salary lower than that he was receiving at the Society. So, though he shifted to Santiniketan and took charge of Kala Bhavana in June 1919, he was soon called back to Calcutta by Abanindranath. Rabindranath was hurt, and in a letter to C.F. Andrews dated 13 November 1919, he wrote, 'Nandalal has left this place. He has his employment in Calcutta. This has been a lesson for me. I accept it. Solitude shall be mine and I must see that is fulfilled.' However, putting aside his hurt Rabindranath wrote a fervent letter to Abanindranath, arguing that Nandalal's being in Santiniketan will contribute to Nandalal's growth as an artist and would be beneficial to Indian art. Eventually, Abanindranath relented and Nandalal returned to Santiniketan for good by mid-1920. In the interim, Nandalal kept visiting Santiniketan during the weekends.

During Nandalal's absence, Asitkumar who had already spent a few years in Santiniketan (1911-1917), returned and took charge of Kala Bhavana. Trained under Abanindranath like Nandalal, he and Surendranath Kar continued with Abanindranath's teaching methods during the interim period. With the establishment of Visva Bharati, the international university, in 1921, and Nandalal's return to Santiniketan, Kala Bhavana began to develop a distinct approach writ large all over it. Rabindranath wanted Visva Bharati to be a creative hub and a platform for East-West cultural dialogue more than a conventional university. To achieve this, he wanted the arts and cultures of the East brought together in Santiniketan so that the East could meet the West as equals. Having already made contacts with the East and its creative minds, he now invited several Western scholars to Santiniketan, including Stella Kramrisch, a young Vienna-trained art historian who introduced Western art history to Santiniketan while committing herself to the study of Indian art. All this helped in enlarging Nandalal's thought horizon and quickening his sensibilities, as Rabindranath

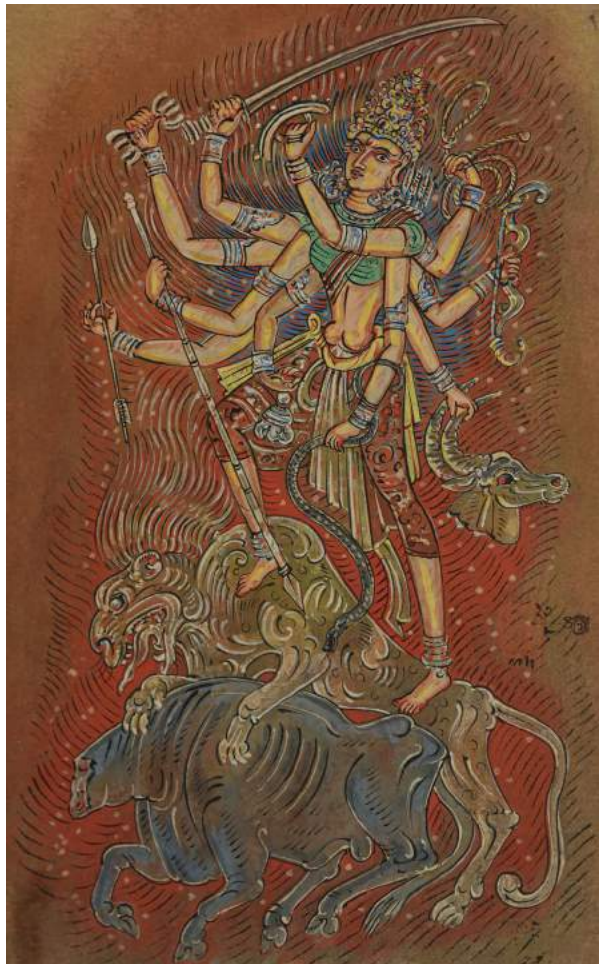


Nandalal Bose, **Sal tree**, 1941, Water Colour on Sumi-e Paper 30x102 cm, Acc. No. 11502





Nandalal Bose, **Untitled**, Tempera on Cardboard  
26.5 x 38 cm , Acc. No. 11516

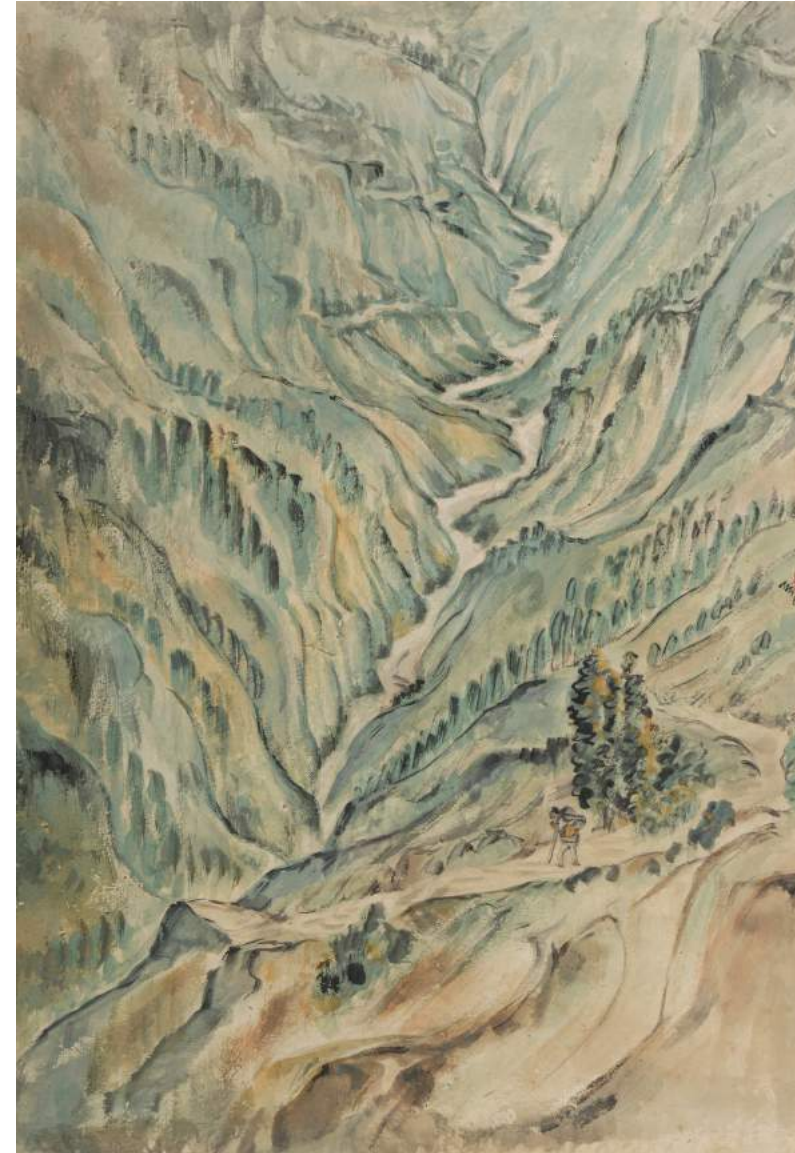


Nandalal Bose, **Durga with the hallow of fire**, 1949,  
Tempera on Paper, 18.3x30.6cm, Acc. No. 5182

had predicted in his letter to Abanindranath.

Nandalal began by putting into practice the ideas Rabindranath had put forward after his visit to Japan. To begin with, he got the students to observe and learn from nature and the life around them. That was in marked contrast to the historicist and studio-based teaching method practiced by Abanindranath and the posed-model-based method of academic training followed in the colonial art schools. In January 1921, together with Asitkumar and Suren Kar, he made a trip to the Bagh caves to copy its mural. That rekindled his old interest in murals, and he introduced mural painting into his teaching programme and made it a part of the institution's annual calendar. With it, he began to take art out of the studio and introduce it into community spaces as Havell, Nivedita, and Rabindranath had urged. By making them collective projects in which the teachers and students worked side by side, he also ensured that the skills and the inclination to create public art were passed on to his colleagues and students. Concurrently, working closely with Rabindranath and contributing to various projects he initiated, such as the calendar of seasonal festivals which called for visual inputs; the plays he wrote and produced for which Nandalal and his students provided scenography and costumes; the design support they offered to the weaving, pottery and leather-craft workshops that were set up as part of the rural reconstruction programme, and the book illustration projects they undertook, etc., he also tore down the wall between art and craft, and brought art close to everyday life on the campus.

Though small in themselves, cumulatively, these innovations brought about a radical change of outlook in art education. Under Nandalal students were not trained to become a specialist in any one aspect of art but a kind of visual polymath at home in the larger world of visual culture. Today this might sound familiar, but in the 1920s, it was new and radical thinking. To bring about these changes Nandalal had to transform himself into an artist different from the one he was trained to become under Abanindranath. Let us look briefly at three crucial areas of change. One, in order to replace history and mythology with life as the primary source of art, he had to make drawing from the living world a regular and lifelong practice. This made him a close observer of nature and the everyday life of the peasants and tribals who lived around Santiniketan, and he used it to explore the cultural specificities of the places he visited. Two, the introduction of mural painting and crafts into the teaching programme that required learning a host of mural techniques and various crafts skills. For this, he either went to traditional



Nandalal Bose, **Alakananda (On the way to Mayamati)**,  
Tempera on Paper, 54.3x79.8 cm, Acc. No. 4817



Nandalal Bose, **Darjeeling and Fog**, 1945  
Tempera on Paper, 34.6x62.6 cm, Acc. No. 4988

artists and artisans or invited them to Santiniketan to demonstrate and teach their work methods and, on such occasions he worked alongside students, indicating that an artist was never too old or elevated to learn and the only hierarchy that matters is the one between the more resourceful and less resourceful artist. Three, to train students to become resourceful artists, as a teacher he had to develop an analytical approach to practice and demonstrate and spell out the structural and linguistic principles behind different visual traditions, and their representational, communicational, and expressive potentialities. The impact of all three can be noticed in Nandalal's work from the 1920s onwards.

During his early years in Santiniketan, Nandalal continued to paint mythological subjects alongside subjects from everyday life, but the former was progressively

replaced by the latter. A simple listing of paintings done between 1920 and 1923 will make that clear. For instance, in 1920, alongside *Dhritarashtra and Gandhari* he also painted *Noonday Work* and *The Fawn*. In 1921 he painted *Kali Dace*, *Uma's Penance* and *Grief of Uma* but also *Advent of Spring*, *Night Journey to Santiniketan*, and *Labourers*, and in 1922, he painted *Krishna and Arjuna in the Camp* but also *Noonday Expectation*, *Expectation*, *Veena Player*, *The Owl*, *At Rajgriha*, and *Rest House*. However, from 1923 we have paintings like *Out on a Stormy Night* and *The Jaba Flower* but no major painting based on mythological subjects. The change in thematic preference coincided with a parallel shift from wash painting to tempera during the same period. Until 1921 an overwhelming majority of paintings were done in the wash technique. And from 1921 until 1926 both mediums are used side by side. But from 1927, he began to paint primarily with opaque



colour, using a freer brushwork, which he called “touch-work”, and the use of the wash technique almost ceased. We also notice that even the mythological paintings began to be based on observations from local life—*Sabari in Old Age* (1919) and *Uma’s Grief* (1921), for instance. However, this was not consistent. Sometimes his rendering of local subjects—*Santhal Dance* (1918) and *Santhal Girl* (1919), for example—during this period was overtly romanticized, but gradually even paintings with mythological titles became metaphorically inflected representations of scenes from life, representations of the present lit up by a ray from the past—*Radhika in the Grove* (1939), and *Evening* and the *Sabari* series of 1941 are examples of this.

Commenting on this change in his attitude which went beyond a change in thematic preference Nandalal wrote in 1943:

*A Chinese artist has said, ‘In the eyes of a real artist the image of a blade of grass and that of God are equivalent; each can evoke the same aesthetic experience’..... Born in a Hindu family, I have grown up with its traditions and tenets. At one time I made paintings of gods and goddesses. Now, I make paintings of divinities as well as facts of common life; I try to derive equal delight from both. I used to think once that imagined visions of divinities are higher in kind than images of ordinary things; now that I know better, I am not concerned with these hierarchies anymore. I see them all as*

*diverse images and rhythms of the same reality. In all forms, ordinary or extraordinary, I seek that life rhythm (prana-chhanda) of the reality whose vitality has generated the whole world and all its forms, actual and imaginary, and pulses within them. In other words, I used to formerly see the divine in the images of divinities alone; now I see it in the images of men, trees and mountains.*

The change Nandalal refers to above was the product of his endless curiosity, insistent observation, and constant learning from nature and a host of art traditions. 1924 marked an important point in this process. Rabindranath, who had written from Japan how much he hoped that either one of his nephews or Nandalal was with him to see what he was seeing and draw lessons from it, took Nandalal with him on his visit to China and Japan in 1924. Rabindranath and his team spend nearly two months in China and a month and a half in Japan with stopovers in Burma and Kuala Lumpur. They travelled widely in both countries, and that gave Nandalal a chance to meet their artists, to see important art collections, and record different facets of their culture in numerous drawings that stand testimony to his curiosity and powers of observation. Leonard Elmhirst, another member of the entourage, after recounting various examples of Nandalal’s keen observations of natural and cultural facts in China wrote: ‘Nandalal’s eyes were penetratingly open, as the eyes of all great artists are. Long after he had caught some vision of



Nandalal Bose, **Village Hut**, Water Colour and Wash on Paper, 36.5x19.6 cm, Acc. No. 1893



Nandalal Bose  
**Evening**  
Tempera on paper  
43x71.2 cm  
Acc. No. 4803





Nandalal Bose, **Ganga Avtaran**, (Mural: Kirti Mandir, Baroda)

beauty he was able to communicate it to us by his pen and brush, and so to present something of the real essence and form behind the surface impression.’

Keeping a record of his everyday encounters with the world became a habit with Nandalal after shifting to Santiniketan, and he also encouraged his associates and students to make drawing from life a regular practice. Although he always carried a pack of cards and a pencil or a pen or a small bottle of ink and brush with him, since he was drawing from moving, living objects and not from posed models, the drawings had to be quick and notational or done from recollection. That called for more and better observation rather than less. Most of the large body of drawings he has left behind, chiefly on small cards, were like a daily record of his life recollected in tranquillity after he had lived through the moment. That was also the way he painted. Explaining this to a student, he said: ‘Do not paint as soon as you have had an experience or are driven by an impulse; hold on to it. Then, as an embryo grows in the mother’s womb day after day and is born one day as a

child, beautiful in every limb, the original impulse in the artist’s mind will grow and find expression as a meaningful creative work.’

Nandalal’s interest in Chinese and Japanese calligraphic approaches to ink painting, as we have noticed, can be traced back to 1913; but after he visited Japan, inspired by its yamato-e style, he began to flatten the image, break the motifs into flat colour areas, use contours expressively, and combine naturalism with decorative design. These features can be noticed in several paintings he did soon after his return — for instance, in

“ Here is a real difficulty;  
but it is a difficulty of our  
own making. ”

*Jalasattra* and *Poye Dance* (1924) and *Guru Abanindranath* (1926). Later, as we shall see below, he combined them with elements drawn from other sources to form different eclectic styles in which they came to the fore sometimes and provided sympathetic resonance on other occasions.

The exploration of styles and the elucidation of their representational logic and their expressive and aesthetic possibilities were closely tied with his pedagogic objectives. To Abanindranath, discovering a visual language that suited his sensibility was paramount. As a teacher, he gave freedom to his students, and, using the analogy of the sleeping beauty and the prince who awakens her using a magic wand, he told them that an artist’s success lay in awakening the sensibility lying dormant within them. But he did not tell them where or how to find their magic wands, and most of his followers borrowed his style and fruitlessly swung it over everything they fancied as it were the wand. Nandalal realized that the challenges Rabindranath placed before him went beyond the pale of personal expression, and what he wanted to achieve through the art school at Santiniketan was the creation of a new visual culture strung together by an aesthetic thread as he had noticed in Japan. From Coomaraswamy, Nandalal had learned that this was achieved in the past by modulating a given art language to meet various art functions running from the functional and decorative arts to the narrative and the symbolic. He also realized that, in the modern world, while visual culture continued to be shaped by different, albeit new, social functions, artists exercised the right to make individual choices. In this changed circumstance, the teacher had to not only allow freedom to each student but also help him or her to develop a visual language and to discern its possibilities. As a teacher, this led him to explore the linguistic rationale of different styles and how a coherent communicational system can be constructed using their inflections.

Thus his role as a teacher and cultivating resourcefulness as an artist were connected. And that led to what is often seen as an absence of stylistic coherence or individuality in his work. Nandalal, of course, saw it differently; explaining his position, he wrote: ‘Paintings are of two kinds; one where the artist is the maker; another where he himself has become the picture. In each good painting the artist has to be present with the subject and the means.’ Both as an artist and teacher, following Okakura’s advice, he saw originality as part of a triad of concerns whose other elements were tradition and nature. Originality came from an artist’s personality, his response to people and things, and his aesthetic sensibility. The refinement of an artist’s sensibility requires

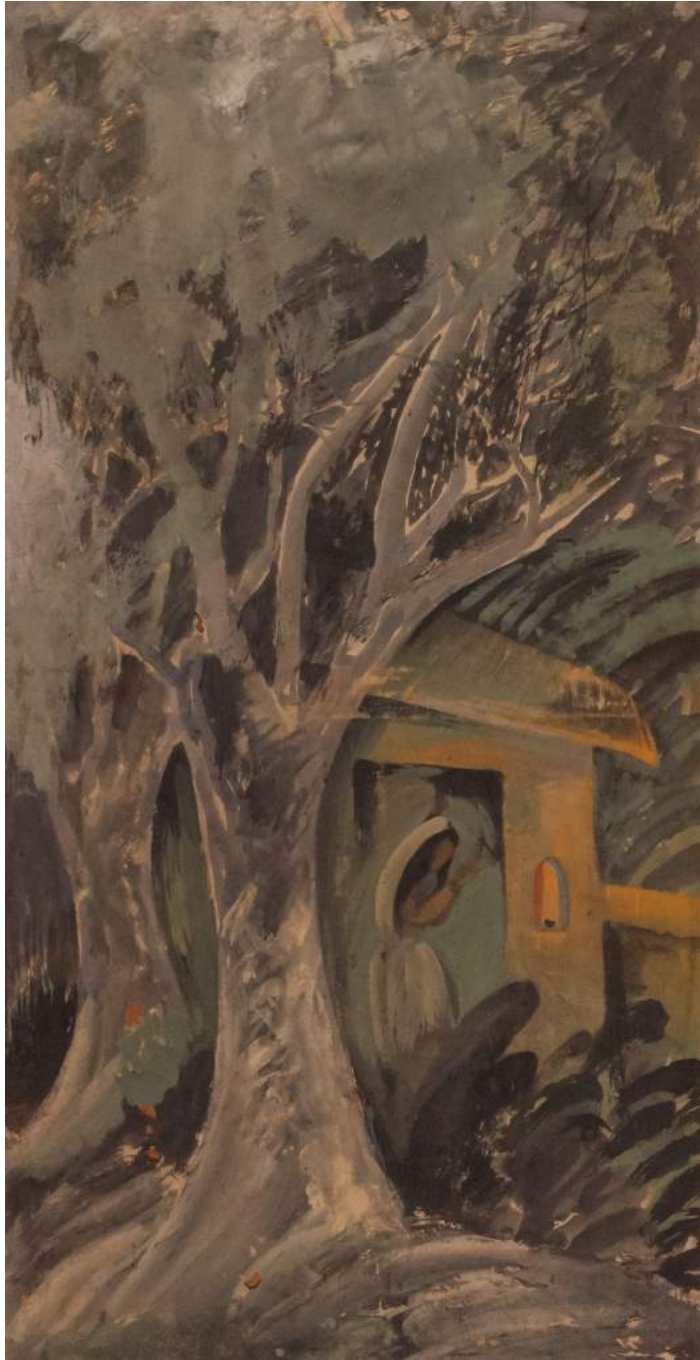


Nandalal Bose, **Ganga Avtaran** (A cartoon for Kirti Mandir mural, Baroda), Tempera on Paper, Acc. No. 4935

discipline or study of art traditions and study of nature. Originality without nature and tradition to regulate it, he argued, would be mere idiosyncrasy, following tradition without observation of nature, and individuality to critically modulate it would be mechanical repetition, and representing nature without individuality and tradition would be pure imitation. While he proposed this as a guiding principle, he also suggested that each artist had to discover a dynamic interrelation between them based on his or her inclination and talent. His role as a teacher in the modern period, he believed, was to familiarize his students with a wide repertoire of knowledge and possibilities to facilitate this.

One of the areas in which his work and his pedagogical method met was mural painting, and he did several of them between 1922 and 1946. After returning from the Bagh Caves, Nandalal, with the help of his students, painted a few decorative panels on the landing and pillars of Dwarik, the building in which Kala Bhavana was then housed. They were based on the Ajanta murals but not done in the technique of the original murals. Although he had copied the murals of Ajanta and Bagh, and we can in retrospect say that they were some of the best that were ever made, they were done in watercolour on paper and not in their original method. In the same vein, along with Benodebehari and his daughter Gouri (later Gouri Bhanja), Nandalal painted scrolls of flowers and fruits running around the upper reaches on the four walls of a room in 1923. That too was inspired by the





Nandalal Bose, **Evening lamp (Autumn)**, 22-4-1931  
Tempera on Paper, 35.3x68.9cm, Acc. No. 4807

decorative scrolls of Ajanta, but the motifs, the colour scheme, and the freely done brushwork were different from the original, and the technique was a total improvisation.

Although Patrick Geddes praised their very first effort at Dwarik and advised them to continue with the effort even if they were technically deficient, and despite the even greater success of his next mural, Nandalal was keen on learning traditional mural techniques and expanding his technical repertoire as a muralist and teacher. Gradually, by scouring through ancient treatises and experimentation, he not only recreated the Ajanta

technique but also introduced other techniques like the Jaipuri fresco technique or *arayeres*, the Italian wet process or fresco buono, the dry process or fresco secco, egg tempera, scraffito, and relief modelling, etc. into the mural practice at Kala Bhavana, by learning them from other practitioners and experimenting with them himself. Besides demonstrating their possibilities in his murals, he also recorded these and various other techniques and published them along with his personal observations in his book *Silpacharcha* for the benefit of future students and artists.

Besides his mastery over diverse techniques, Nandalal's murals demonstrate his dictum that an artist should express himself by integrating his subject with the natural felicity of his means. In the *Halakarshan* mural (1930), using the possibility of drawing and modelling with colour washes that fresco buono allows, he presented scenes from a recent historical event as a commemorative



Nandalal Bose, **Dandi March (Bapuji)**,  
12.4.1930, Linocut on Paper, 17.5 x 29.8 cm, Acc. No. 4893



Nandalal Bose taking Gandhi around the Indian National Congress pandal at Haripura Photograph, 1938

narrative frieze of figures in relief. In the multi-panel mural decoration on the ground floor veranda of the Path Bhavana (1933), keeping with the nature of the *arayeres* technique, he painted discrete panels presenting a kaleidoscopic vision of culture and nature around Santiniketan as a collage of images combining flat colour areas either without lines or enlivened with a minimum of strokes or contour. In the Cheena Bhavan version of *Natir Puja*, exploiting the possibility of free brushwork (or touch work as he called it) that egg tempera facilitates, he created a tracery of strokes and gestures running across the length of the mural to tell the moving story of a dancer who turns her art into the worship of the Buddha. The underlying thought was close to his heart, and in this mural, he deviated from his usual practice and painted spontaneously without using a cartoon. In the Kirti Mandir murals *Gangavataran* in 1939, *Meera Bai* in 1940, *Natir Puja* in 1943, and *Abhimanyu Vadh* in 1946), he explored different stylistic possibilities of tempera painting harmonizing it

with the discrete tenor of his themes. The *Gangavataran* is a single iconic figure surrounded by decorative swirls in flat colours and looks like a large Tibetan *tanka*. By contrast, Meera Bai and Natir Puja are broken into scenes—discrete and episodic in one and continuous and narrative in another. In both, the figures are bound with contour lines, and the scenes are structured through arrangements of flat color areas. However, in the former, the colours are softer and closer in tonal values, the lines are finer, and elements in each panel are held together by a fluid rhythm; in the latter, the colours are more tonally separated, the lines are heavier, and the scenes are linked by an open architectural grid that progresses across the mural in a staccato rhythm. *Abhimanyu Vadh* is an amalgam of five distinct episodic panels bristling with visual details or action, and in each panel, flat colors and lines are combined in different ways to achieve distinct expressive gestalts that recall Japanese Heian period paintings. These four murals, taken together, represent an exploration of the different

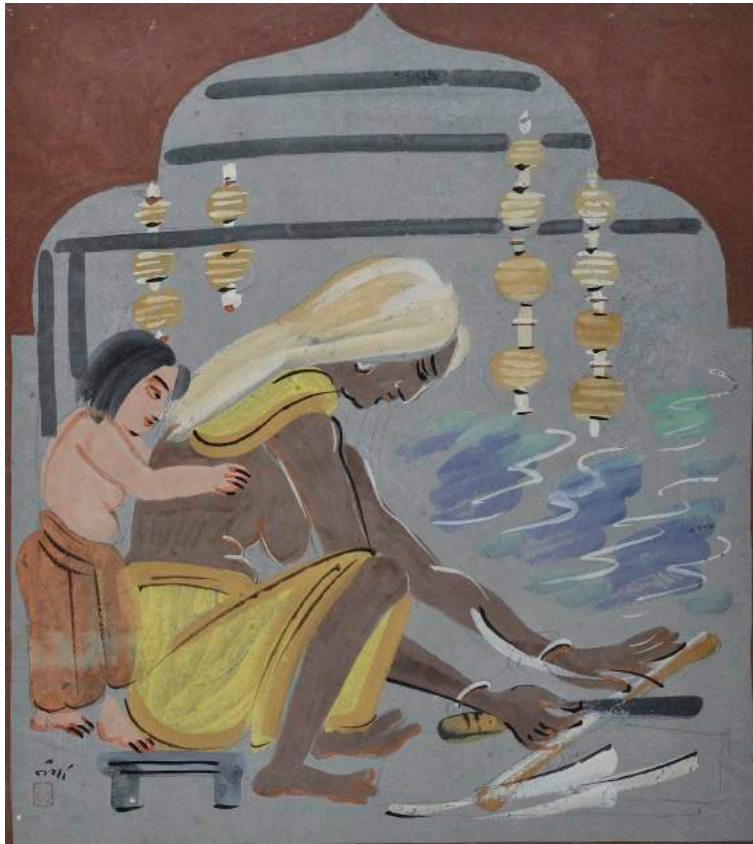




Nandalal Bose, **A Gardener (Haripura Congress Panel)**, 1937, Tempera on paper, 59.5x63.3cm, Acc. No. 5018



Nandalal Bose, **Cotton Spinning (Haripura Congress Panel)**, 1937, Tempera on Paper, 57.2x63.7cm, Acc. No 5013



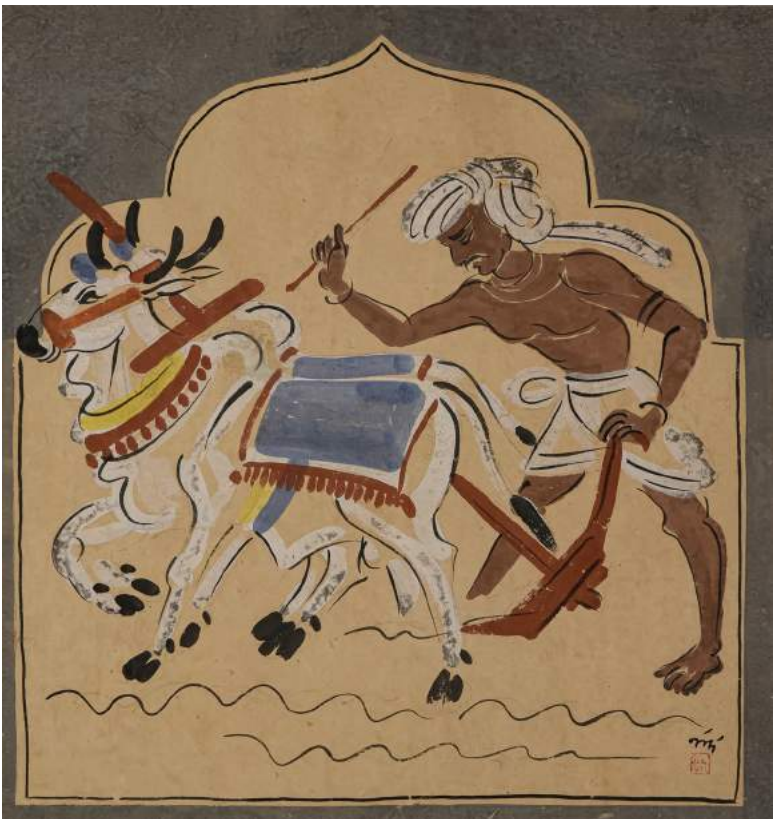
Nandalal Bose, **Pith worker, (Haripura Congress Panel)**, 1938, Tempera on Paper



Nandalal Bose, **Annapurna (Haripura Congress Panel)**, Wash & Tempera on Paper, 26x40.3 cm, 1943, Acc. No. 4794



Nandalal Bose, **A Dhuniya or A Cotton Carder (Haripura Congress Panel)**, 1937, Tempera on Paper, 59.5x62.7cm Acc. No 5034



**Tiller of the Soil (Haripura Congress Panel)**, Tempera on paper, 54.5x62cm, Acc no. 149

possibilities of combining the iconic, the narrative, and the decorative using the technical possibilities offered by a single medium.

Nandalal's experimental spirit, assurance, and versatility are equally evident in his paintings from the 1930s. Like the murals, they too have diverse approaches that rose from his pedagogic needs. Each one of them, like his murals, demonstrates how materials, tools, and techniques determine the artist's language and how that influences the choice and presentation of subjects and impacts the final image. The decade begins with the linocuts he made to illustrate *Sahaj Path* (1929-30), the Bengali primer written by Rabindranath. Eschewing details and reducing each motif into a flat bold gestalt in black and white; he created a set of minimal yet distinctive and vivid images of things with which the child would have been familiar. They visually opened an imaginative world for the child reader that complemented the accompanying text without illustrating it literally. The evocative and communicative power that such stark images can unleash was also used to good effect in another linocut from 1930 commemorating the Dandi March. Simple and yet eye-catching and effective as the Dandi March, the resolute image of Gandhi walking, holding a walking staff in hand,

etched in stark white against a black field has become the definitive image of Gandhi outliving hundreds of others produced during his lifetime.

These were followed by a series of four paintings evoking *Afternoon (Summer)*, *Krishnachura Flower (Spring)*, *Evening Lamp (Autumn)*, and *Night (Winter)*—all from 1931. Done in bold patches of colour, Nandalal emerges in these as a different kind of artist. In them, the fine delineation of contours and details that was paramount in much of his early work, and his contemporaries, is replaced by opaque colour and loaded brushwork. In such touch-works, an object is known by its mass, texture, and structure, and the image, he argued, is grasped as a totality of form and feeling first by the mind and then traced by the brush that follows it, 'like a wheel-track following the cartwheel, or a shadow following a moving man or animal.' Developed concurrently with his experiments with arayed, where objects have to be broken down into flat colour areas, touch-work may be seen as its opposite, a kind of calligraphic painting with colour. Nandalal distinguished it from flamboyant brushwork or the mechanical application of standardized brush strokes, which stand detached from the forms of things represented and their felt experience. Different in quality from 'slowly-built paintings,' he





Nandalal Bose, **Saraswati**, 1941, Tempera on Paper, 16.2x38 cm, Acc. No. 4800

associated it not with virtuosity but an artist's maturity and assurance. In Nandalal's oeuvre, they occupy a position similar to that of flung ink painting in Chinese art, which represents the unity of mind, body, and the pictorial act embodied in spontaneous brush marks or gestures, and flag the emergence of a more matured and assured artist.

A change in perception is also visible in Nandalal's landscape paintings beginning in the mid-1930s. His engagement with nature began with his trip to Shelidaha in 1915, and its impact was immediately reflected in *Over the Padma in Winter* (1915) and several drawings he did soon afterward. As we have already noted, soon after taking charge of Kala Bhavana, he made drawing from nature a part of his teaching programme and an integral aspect of his art practice. This is noticeable in his drawings from the twenties onwards, but in the mid-1930s, we notice a more intense engagement and a deeper empathy in his landscape paintings. For instance, take three important paintings from this period, *Ashram* and *Way to Bolpur* (1934), and *New Clouds* (1937); they represent more than an eye for the local landscape. Besides capturing the physical features of the local landscape and its seasonal and diurnal moods it also records the life of the rural community that is interwoven in body and rhythm with the nature that surrounds them. And this interwovenness is materialized through the means of rendering. Through form and texture, colour, and painterly gesture, he tells us that men and nature live and move together and are inseparable in his new view of life. In these paintings, he not only observed nature more astutely but also recognized it as an essential part of a way of living and responded to it with feeling.

The crowning glory of the 1930s, however, was the *Haripura Posters*. Nandalal began his career in the Swadeshi period and had internalized its values more than Abanindranath, and they were not abandoned even when he came under the influence of Rabindranath, who had himself moved away from Swadeshi nationalism after 1909. The arrival of Gandhi on the Indian political scene gave it a fresh fillip and a new direction; he moved from asserting national identity through the representation of historicist subject matter to creative and artistic responses to national causes and functional requirements. Here Nandalal saw a convergence between Rabindranath and Gandhi; in their different ways both favoured constructive actions rather than historicist recall. Both were committed to rural uplift, interested in culture beyond the city, and in bringing vast numbers of people together for a common cause. Nandalal was already employing art to address these issues in Santiniketan, and as Gandhi became interested in some of



Nandalal Bose, **Mayavati Asram**, 3.7.1942, Ink on Paper, 42.1x69.5 cm, Acc. No. 4826

these issues in the course of his political activism he took notice of Santiniketan's role. He, in his own way, realized that culture too can move and bound a people as much as political actions and sought Nandalal's services for his work. In 1936 he asked Nandalal to organize an exhibition of art alongside the annual meeting of the Congress at Lucknow. Gandhi was pleased with the result and asked Nandalal to organize a different kind of exhibition at Faizpur. He wrote explaining his needs to Nandalal:

*You gave much at Lucknow, I want now more for Faizpur and falsify the proverb that "much wants more and loses all". For the first time in the history of the congress, it is to be held in a village pure... The exhibition will be the... attraction for the numerous villagers who are expected to flock to Faizpur. It must provide solid education for them. And the whole show must be in the village setting. How is that to be? We have to forget the city scale of bigness and great expenditure. Your art has to come to the rescue. I have asked Shankerlal Banker not to spend more than Rs 5000 on the exhibition. I know that it can be done for that*

*amount and yet be made attractive. The village Sarangi provides all the music that the most expensive piano has ever provided. But it takes a musician to yield the music the little instrument holds. Will you be the architect for the Faizpur exhibition? Can Gurudev [Rabindranath] spare you for the time!*

Although Nandalal was initially hesitant, he eventually could not resist Gandhi's persuasion, and the result of his efforts at Faizpur received Gandhi's approval. It was, Gandhi thought, the exact expression of what he had in his mind. At the opening of the exhibition on December 25 1936, he said:

*Credit for the arrangements here belongs to the architect Sjt. Mhatre and the artist Sjt. Nandalal Bose. When Nanda Babu responded to my invitation a couple of months ago I explained to him what I wanted, and left it to him to give concrete shape to the conception. For he is a creative artist and I am none. God has given me the sense of art but not the organs to give it concrete shape. He has blessed Sjt. Nandalal Bose with both. I am thankful that he agreed to take upon himself the whole burden of organizing the artistic side of the Exhibition and he came and settled down here some weeks ago to see to everything himself. The result is that the whole Tilaknagar is an exhibition in itself, and so it begins not where I am going to open it but at the main gateway which is a fine piece of village art. Of course our thanks are due also to Sjt. Mhatre who has spared no pains in bringing the entire plan to completion. Please remember that Nanda Babu has depended entirely on local material and local labour to bring all the structures here into being.*

Gandhi was the last mentor from who Nandalal learned an important lesson; no material is unsuitable for creative expression, and in art, less can be more. Although it was not practiced as an infrangible principle working with limited and local means was common in Santiniketan due to the modest resources at its disposal. But Gandhi helped him to discover both an artistic opportunity and ethical value in it. Thus when Nandalal was called on to take a greater challenge at Haripura, he was not unprepared. Once again, the conditions were stringent, the materials and skills had to be locally sourced, and the expenditure had to be minimal. Nandalal rose to the occasion magnificently. Along with Ramdas Gulati, an engineer who had also worked at Faizpur, he conceived and built a temporary township using local materials with the help of local craftsmen. D. G Tendulkar wrote about it as follows:



Set in simple yet beautiful surroundings, Vital Nagar revealed the artists’ skill. Nandalal Bose and Ramdas Gulati, an imaginative engineer, who had created a bamboo city at Faizpur, once again performed a great miracle. There were fifty-one gates... structures of bamboo and wood, and on the top were mounted earthen bowls of various shapes and sizes turned upside down...and the beauty of these structures was heightened by square panel pictures which adorned the sides and tops of these gates and some of the leader’s huts.

The square panels Tendulkar refers to are the *Haripura Posters*. Nandalal painted 83 of them in Santiniketan, and his assistants replicated them and produced several sets. Though painted in advance and taken to Haripura, drawing on his experience of Fizpur, they were conceived as temporary mural decorations to go with the bamboo structures. Painted with broad patches of flat opaque colour and finished with spontaneous brush lines in black, which gave coherence and gestural vitality to the motifs, they invoked the style of pat paintings but carried the mastery and imprint of his individuality. Located in a rural setting Nandalal anticipated that most of the visitors to the congress would be from the villages. Keeping that in mind, he chose to represent subjects drawn from the life and world the rural visitors were familiar with—various types of village musicians and drummers, artisans pursuing various crafts and trades, men and women engaged in daily chores, and real and decorative animals. An estimated 250,000 people visited the exhibition, many more should have visited the site to listen to the leaders, and an overwhelming majority of them came from nearby villages. Deceptively simple in appearance and invoking folk painting, the posters were meant to harmonize with the modest architectural setting and charm the rural crowds that visited the site. And yet, bold in their simplification of forms, and adroit in design and execution, they were also appealed to the urban delegates to the congress and the aesthetic sensibility of the more informed viewers. To Nandalal, it was an exercise in designing a total environment of which art was an integral part.

Experimentation with visual languages of different traditions, which was a part of his pedagogic programme continued alongside such innovative work. Adaptations of the visual languages of Rajput miniatures, Egyptian painting, and Japanese decorative screens, can be noticed in paintings such as *Radha’s Viraha* (1936), *Golden Pither* (1935), and *Radha in the Grove* (1939). A careful viewer will further notice that these adaptations were not independent exercises but part of an effort to initiate a conversation between historically distinct conventions

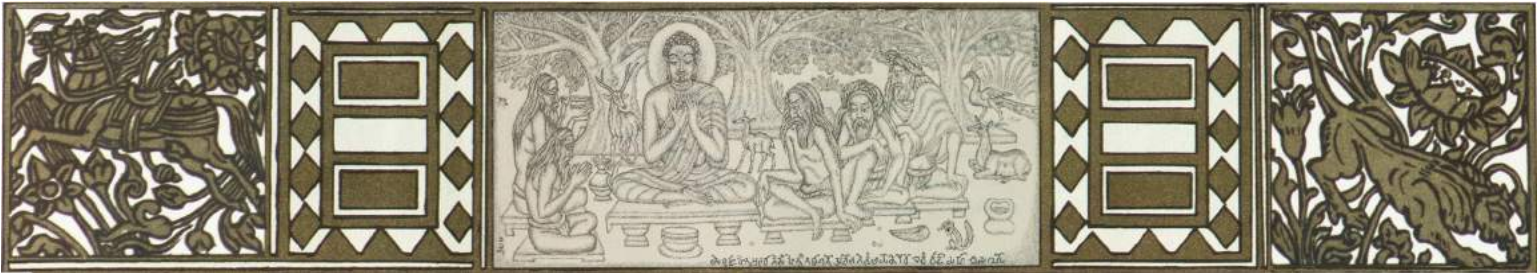


Nandalal Bose, **Head of Shiva**,  
Wash and Tempera on Paper, 37x44.5 cm, Acc. No. 74

and discover points of convergences between them. If we expand this list to include the *Buddha Series* (1938) *Saraswati* (1941), *Evening* (1941), the *Kirti Madir* murals and *Pratiksha* (1946), etc., we would see that there was also a parallel conversation between the symbolic, the narrative and the decorative possibilities of different visual languages taking place in his work. In them, Nandalal subsumes the iconic, the symbolic, and the narrative under the logic of a decorative visual language and puts forth a view about decorative painting similar to that of Matisse. Like Matisse, through such works Nandalal seems to be telling us:

*The thought of a painter must not be considered as separate from his pictorial means... I am unable to distinguish between the feeling I have about life and my way of translating it.*

*Expression, for me, does not reside in passions glowing in a human face or manifested by violent movement. The entire arrangement of my picture is expressive: the place occupied by the figures, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything has its share. Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painter’s command to express his feelings.*



Nandalal Bose, An Illustration from *The Constitution of India*

Such similarities with Matisse can be noticed not only in Nandalal’s work but also in the articulation of his idea of decorative painting. For instance, he wrote: ‘In decorative painting an artist may use the ricefield’s green on the sky, on the clouds or on the mountain, without any harm. For, what the artist learns from nature are the subtle relationships of colour and colour, their music, their deep intimacies; beyond this he is free, independent.’ And he concludes by pointing out, ‘This can be seen in old Rajput, Mughal, and Persian paintings. Their works are no worse for this: they are instead, better.’ Similarly, Matisse wrote about colour as follows: ‘You are representing the model, or any other subject, not copying it; there can be no colour relations between it and your picture; it is the relation between the colours in your picture which are the equivalent of the relation between the colours in your model that must be considered.’

All through the 1930s, we see a close convergence in Nandalal’s work as an artist and teacher, and much of it spills into the 1940s as well. However, the 40s was also a period of change and considerable rethinking. Some of it resulted in new artistic explorations, and some led to caution and retrace. In retrospect, both external and personal factors appear to have contributed to these changes. In August 1941 Rabindranath died, creating, in Nandalal’s view, a crisis in leadership. Rabindranath had been a sympathetic and forward-looking interlocutor under whom Nandalal had the opportunity to experiment and to build and lead an institution into fruition following his intuitions. Being a creative person himself, Rabindranath understood the need for freedom in the

arts and kept the academic and administrative structures of the University flexible and responsive to such needs. With his death, this sympathetic guidance and protection became unavailable. Moreover, the University was never flush with funds; the financial arrangement was, at the best of times, unstable. Without Rabindranath, he knew that it could only become worse; there was no one half as charismatic who could attract funding without strings attached. Rabindranath had zealously refused government funding while he was alive and safeguarded the institution’s independence. In his absence, Nandalal foresaw inevitable erosion in all these matters, and he was not alone in thinking so.

Nandalal was also nearing 60 and approaching his retirement, and under the circumstance, he became apprehensive about the future of Kala Bhavana. His best pupils and colleagues, Benodebehari and Ramkinkar, whose artistic achievements he explicitly recognized, he feared, were too individualistic and lacked the administrative acumen to face the challenges posed by the changed circumstances. He expressed as much in an open meeting the heads of the various departments had with Gandhi during his last visit to Santiniketan in December 1945. In this meeting, Nandalal is reported as having said: ‘Kala Bhavana had begun as a studio. But it had now become a teaching institute. Teaching and administrative work made heavy inroads upon his time and the art suffered. The chief difficulty was to find a suitable successor who would command the willing allegiance of his colleagues and at the same time worthily represent the spirit of the institution.’ And to that Gandhi replied as follows:



Nandalal Bose, An Illustration from *The Constitution of India*



As I listened while Nanda Babu and Kshiti Mohan Babu (Kshitimohan Sen) were speaking, I said to myself: ‘Here is a real difficulty; but it is a difficulty of our own making.’ If a person conducts a big department he is expected to transmit what he stands for to someone who can be termed as his successor. Yet it is the dominant cry of the two stalwarts that they are unable to find a suitable successor for their respective departments. True, these are departments of a special character. I know these departments and I know too Gurudev’s views about them. Speaking generally, may I venture to suggest that there is no difficulty but can be overcome by tapascharya?

On the question of financial difficulties the institution was facing, raised by Ratindranath, Gandhi said, ‘I would plead with you...not to waste a thought on finances and you will find that the difficulty lies somewhere else rather than in the lack of finances. Set it right and the finances will take care of themselves.’

Gandhi’s response to the questions raised by the various stalwarts of Santiniketan was rational, but it would not have helped lessen Nandalal’s burden. And these difficulties seem to have played a role in bringing a new turn to Nandalal’s work during the 1940s. The presence of nature and ordinary people in his art was growing ever since he moved to Santiniketan. And his works from the 1930s, as we have noticed, also convey a growing sense of intimacy with the place and its people. Some of this continues into his later work, but by the late 1930s, we also see examples of landscapes bereft of human presence. Some of them, like *The House at Tagda*, showing a little cottage on a hillock with the hint of a solitary figure standing at the furthest edge and looking into the uncharted distance, has a picturesque ring about them. But within a year or two, a shadow of the sublime falls over the picturesque. Many of his paintings from this phase are devoid of figures—*Mayavati Ashram* (1942), *Hazari Bagh Road*, *Parasnath Hill*, and *Mahua Grove* (all from 1943) *Mukdum Kunda* (1944), *Darjeeling in Fog*, *Morning Cloud* and *Rajgriha Hill* (all from 1945), *Lal Bandh at Night*, *Santiniketan Mango Grove*, and *Santiniketan Hillock* (all from 1948), and *Building in the Rain* (1955) for instance. In others—*Burning Pine* and *Way to Mayavati* (1942), *Bagdar Road*, *The Hour of Cow Dust* and *Barakar River* (from 1943), *Dear in the Forest* (1945), *Floating a Canoe*, and similar images of Fishermen at Gopalpur (1947), and *Dhumka Sal trees* (from 1944) for instance—a single figure, an animal or a small group of men are pitted against an expanse of nature.

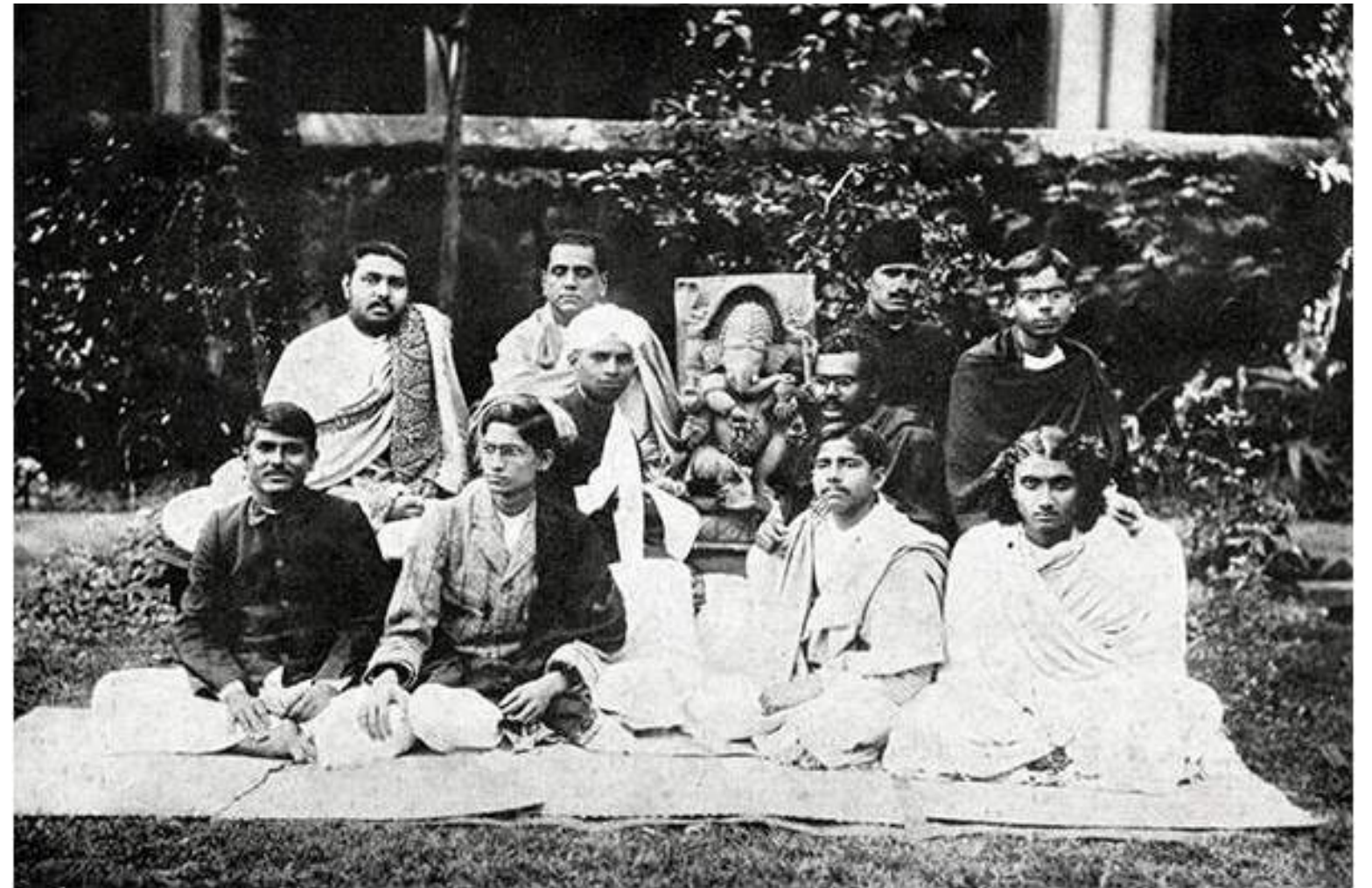
Like the figures, the viewers too are brought face to face with the immensity and overpowering presence of



Nandalal Bose, **Children beneath an umbrella**,  
Linocut on Paper, 12.7x8cm, Acc. No. 4904

nature in these paintings. The figures are either lost in the folds of the mountains or made null by the vast expanse of the valleys. Similarly, the Gopalpur fishermen, equipped with rudimentary catamarans, are shown standing near the shore gingerly testing the restless ocean, not triumphantly riding the waves. In these pictures, we get the impression that human ingenuity is short before nature. The space in these pictures is not only immense but overwhelming; it engulfs the figures and makes it difficult for them to order and tame it. In the 1940s, he repeatedly travelled to the mountains and the sea as if seeking out these encounters, and these paintings carry keenly observed and deeply realized impressions of those visits and are not even remotely symbolic, yet they reflect a state of mind that evokes a sense of being out of depth that is not seen in Nandalal’s earlier paintings. From the mountains, he wrote to Kanai Samanta: ‘We, I realize are creatures of the plains. The mind is out of breath in the mountains. Here the sky is important. With its chest expanded, crowned in snow, the mountain pushes itself into the foreground. It does not wish to bow down.... Men, trees, stones, animals all are at odds with the mountain in proportion—like the hair on the body of an Elephant.’ A few months later, discussing the paintings he did after his return from the mountains, he again tells Kanai Samanta: ‘All the paintings, done from the memory of my visit to Almora are not equally successful. They are imbued with an element of human association, like a tavern where one finds shelter and rest after a day of exhaustive wandering. They express fear mixed with wonder—like a forest on fire.

To be in harmony with the immensity of nature, he goes on to tell Kanai Samanta is something the Chinese had learned from Lao Tsu. Besides representing vast expanses of nature, most of his landscapes from the



Abanindranath Tagore (top, second from left) with his first batch of students at Government School of Art in Kolkata. Also in the picture are Nandalal Bose (second row, to the right of the idol), Asit Kumar Haldar (first row, second from left) and Kshitindranath Majumdar (first row, extreme right) Image Courtesy: DAG Modern

1940s are also monochrome ink paintings like those of the Chinese. They bring Chinese landscape paintings to our mind just as he brings the Taoist perception of nature into his conversation, but his response to the vastness of nature was different from theirs. Unlike the Chinese, he did not feel at home but lost before the immensity of nature; he told Kanai Samanta that a landscape without at least one figure would be sapless. In an equally revealing conversation from a few months before, where he again invokes Lao Tzu without naming him, he is reported to have said: ‘I look at nature and look at life—all this is someone’s pathway, proof of someone’s movement. You cannot see the wayfarer; but you can see his way, and the movement. If we have a vision of this wayfarer in the mind then alone can we understand, experience and enjoy the way’s innate beauty, the movement’s inherent sweetness, the meaning of it all.’ Nandalal was familiar with both the painterly logic and conceptual underpinnings of Chinese landscape painting, but his view of the pathway did not correspond with theirs. What kind of a wayfarer was he?

What was his path like? How did he reach here? In his early work, nature had little presence; the figure dominated the image both physically and conceptually; it was the fate of the character that the figure represented that was his main concern. He did not give this up entirely, but by the 1930s, nature and man became equal partners in his paintings; he saw both nature and life on the same scale in them, and the wayfarer’s path became clear to him. Going ahead, in his landscapes from the 1940s, in comparison to the landscape, the presence and importance of the figure shrank and receded into extreme insignificance, upsetting the man-nature harmony of the earlier phase.

These works reflected Nandalal’s current state of mind, which unlike that of the Taoists, was restless and not in harmony with the world around him. Not long after the above conversation, he had told Kanai Samanta: ‘I cannot remain solitary. That is my nature. Maybe Benode and Kinkar can do that. I want at least one or two people near me.’ His sense of loneliness rose from his anxiety about the



future of Kala Bhavana and Santiniketan, for he concludes the conversation by saying, ‘I don’t know what the future has in store. Who knows what will happen if this nest is destroyed! Maybe suffering will be beneficial. What if I am left alone? Maybe others will join.’ This connection between his sense of loneliness and his anxiety about the institution’s future is made clearer in a long letter to Indulekha Ghosh, a student who was close to Nandalal:

*I sometimes sit under the Chatim tree (near the mud-house for boys)... thinking of many things—thoughts flow like a stream—of good and bad, hurt and anger, happiness and misery joy, hopes and prospects, of painting, of life, of friends, of what I have done or am doing, of what will be—all gushing up in my head like the foamy head of wine. I hear a voice say, “Get away”: and I get my mind ready for that. Eyes well up with tears. Gurudev’s peaceful figure floats in and stands in front. Then everything gets washed away... all is empty both at home and the heart.*

*I see Benode now and then—but he likes solitude. So I do not disturb him too much. It does not seem he is very cheerful. I see him at times hurrying towards Jogin’s shop; other times talking briefly with Kinkar. Occasionally I join*

*them. The talk continues; but there are times I sit silent. Then I rise to leave. Suddenly one day I hear that Benode has gone to Banaras, without my knowing.... I feel bad.... I too wish I could do that; but I won’t be able to.... How happy he is without a thought for anyone. I too am quite self-centred—don’t you think so? [...] Kinkar can be seen sitting quietly on one side of his studio. You do not hear his loud singing anymore; he has, I hear, a bad throat.*

*Boundary walls are springing up all around the ashram. There is no escape, because it was planned that way a long ago. We shall have to suffer the consequences. But is this the end of it? They are like prison walls—but what can be done? Everyone wants to come in and the place is gradually crowding up.*

*I am waiting for Indra’s thunder-bolt. He is the Rudra who destroys and harbingers the new.*

Besides a deep sense of isolation, there is also an obvious tinge of regret, melancholy, and nostalgia in his letter to Indulekha Ghosh. He felt consumed from within by this loneliness. Referring to his painting *Burning Pine* (1942), he told Benodebehari, ‘This is life; burning to



Nandalal Bose, **A Sketch from Album No. 36**, Medium: Ink on paper, Size: 13.4x8.1 cm, Accession No.: NGMA 7861

ashes from within but still standing.’ In post-Rabindranath Santiniketan Nandalal felt lonely, his old instincts were clipped, and he became a little unsure. On the one hand, while this anxiety, as we have noticed, added an entirely new dimension to his work, and he painted some of his most compelling images of nature, on the other hand, it also made him look backward and take comfort in his past. Many of his early paintings as we know them today are later versions painted during the 1940s. The extant version of *Sujata*, for instance, is from 1942, of *Sati and Jadugriha Daha* are from 1943, of *Siva and Sati* and *Chaitanya under the Garuda Stamba* are from 1947, and of *Siva’s Head* is from 1948. Some copies of his early works were made on request from people who continued to admire his early works from the Swadeshi period, but not all of them. The paintings listed above were versions he had painted for himself, and they remained with him until his death and were acquired by the National Gallery of Modern Art from his family on the occasion of his birth centenary. About the same time as he was embarking on the second or later versions of his early paintings, he wrote: ‘I have been here for the last twenty-one or twenty-two years. During this time our way of painting has changed a lot. I

cannot now paint like the way I did before; I do not want to; I do so only in case of dire necessity. Whatever that may be, the influence of Rabindranath has been active at the root of this change.’ Yet soon after Rabindranath’s death, despite the path he had taken being seen as irreversible, he returned to his early work, and that requires an explanation. A reasonable assumption would be, that confounded by the uncertainties he experienced in post-Rabindranath Santiniketan, he, from time to time, took shelter in the nostalgic security of his past.

Besides altering between oppressive landscapes carrying impressions of a new experience in which the human figure is lost and second versions of narrative paintings from his early life wherein the figure rules, Nandalal’s fears for the future also left a mark on his work as a teacher. To ensure that all was not lost and that what had been achieved was preserved, he tried to provide a framework for Kala Bhavana’s teaching programme. He outlined the new system he introduced in another letter to Indulekha Ghosh:

*A new training schedule has been introduced in Kala Bhavana. Groups will take turns, a month with each teacher.*



Nandalal Bose, **After the mela**, Medium: Water colour on paper, Size: 35.4x21.7 cm, Accession No.: NGMA 4802



*Teaching will be done only in the mornings, the afternoons will be free. If they wish they can do their own work. The teachers will regularly exhibit their work in the museum. No teacher will indulge in criticism of another's work, they will only discuss them. That too with regard to the artistic points. In teaching more stress will be laid on original work. The teachers will devote more time to doing their own work than to teaching. I am hoping this will be more fruitful. For it suddenly struck me that we were turning into school masters—the effort is to liberate all. The students will learn on their own initiative. We won't drive them. I feel relieved to introduce another rule as well. We shall not keep an eye on students' private affairs; if the authorities wish, they may. I am very firm on this matter this time; I have suffered far too much.*

The programme by itself looks liberal even by today's standards. But it marked a drastic departure from his practice of the previous twenty years, where freedom, experimentation, constant innovation, and openness were the guiding principles. It also moved away from keeping the student's natural talent being at the centre of pedagogy. In the past, students were also not mandated to spend an equal amount of time under every teacher; a student either gravitated towards a teacher according to one's temperament or was guided towards a particular teacher according to his or her needs. The institution worked like a large family. Nandalal acted as the paterfamilias of this close-knit circle, and other teachers functioned as his lieutenants according to the project at hand. In contrast to past practice, the new system was an effort to establish parity between teachers and reduce any cause for friction between them in his absence, and to that extent, to replace freedom with regulation. At the same time, he wished to ensure that teachers remained creative and did not breathe down the necks of their students or vitiate their freedom. It was a balancing act between a normative structure and a liberal outlook, triggered by a wish to safeguard the institution from disintegrating after his departure.

Nandalal retired at the beginning of 1951. But his last public commission was yet to be completed. The newly independent nation, mindful of his contribution to the freedom movement and the nation-building projects of Rabindranath and Gandhi, approached him to illustrate its constitution. He accepted the challenge, and with the help of a small team of assistants, he pictorially inscribed India's past into the document that was to guide its future. Within a few months of his retirement, Visva Bharati also became a Central University, and some of his misgivings began to come true. But having relinquished charge, he got over his anxieties slowly and began to liberate himself as an



Nandalal Bose, **Drawing Book No. 9**, Medium: Pencil on paper, Size: 20.5x15.9 cm, Accession No.: NGMA 4912

artist once again. In 1954 a major retrospective showcasing various facets of his work was held in Calcutta. Looking at his own oeuvre in retrospect, he felt both a just satisfaction and a sense of painful wanting in them. Explaining the point more elaborately, he wrote to Kanai Samanta:

*‘The sense of fight and challenge that can be seen here and there in my paintings is not there in those of Guru Abanindranath.... This comes out of my spirit of nationalism. Seeking to establish the glory of Indian art and demonstrate that we too are adept in technique, and in no way inferior to the Japanese and the Chinese. Of course I have been, later*



Nandalal Bose, **Saal Forest**, Medium: Dry point, Size: 15.1x8.5cm, 19.3.37, Accession No.: NGMA 4802

*in the day, impressed by the achievements of Western artists, but in the beginning I did not have a chance to gain access to their glory. I do not anymore have the spirit of challenge; I now know that with such a spirit you lose on the side of rasa; and realize why Abanindranath used to be worried about my work. I now pray to Visvakarma that he may (in my next life) give me access to the rasa of all great art from everywhere.’*

One area of Nandalal's work that was delightfully free from the sense of fight and nationalism he regretted in his paintings was drawing. Being a more intimate form of practice, in them, he was constantly responsive to the materiality of sensory experience and fleeting thoughts. Driven by curiosity and a spirit of experiment, he did not lapse into settled conventions in his drawings. Challenged by new experiences his eyes, hands, and mind were kept constantly alert, and searching for new ways of communication. Arranging them by date should give us a detailed biography of his artistic life, a story of what his eyes saw, his mind grasped and his hands made visible. In the final phase of his life as an artist, he longed to enter such a state of effortlessness and to remain there permanently. Somewhat exasperatedly, soon after the retrospective exhibition in Calcutta, he wrote to Kanai Samanta in 1954: ‘When shall my artist's mind break loose

from this material body? Or the difference between the instrument and player wipe out? Or I be able to attain to that supreme uninterrupted ecstasy of the “maestro” who plays the instrument?’

In certain respects, he comes close to this kind of freedom in his last works. Post-1954 he eschewed colour and began to work almost entirely in monochrome with brush and ink. Initially, the narrative and the purely visual intermingled. Alongside he did little playful collages with bits of torn paper to which he gave identity and animation with minimal pen marks. Failing health gradually made him largely home-bound, but he fought back and kept himself active, painting a picture a day from 1959 to 1961. In most of his work from 1959, he went over his memories, recalling places he had visited or scenes he remembered from his early life. Gradually he shed details, the motifs became simpler, and the brush marks became minimal. The touch became light and evocative. By late 1962 the brush began to flit over the paper, tracing the path of the eye and the mind across vast expanses of emptiness, rendering the images weightless like grass swaying in the wind, like butterflies fluttering over flowers. Some of these were the most minimal, near-abstract, and yet deeply evocative images of the perceived world he ever created. They encapsulated in their meagre bodies the experience



of a lifetime of looking at the world. In them, as he had wished, his artist’s mind broke loose from his material body. On 16 October 1965, he was struck by total paralysis, and he died on16 April 1966 at the age of 84.

Nandalal had a long and fruitful career as an artist and teacher. Without him, Rabindranath’s ideas about a new art movement that was rooted and responsive to the immediate environment and local experiences and yet open and cosmopolitan in outlook would not have taken off. Without him, Santiniketan would not have become home to the first modern experiments in art education in India. Without him, Gandhian ethics would not have

found a convincing aesthetic expression. Without him, a study on Indian art from the perspective of visual language, complementing the historical, iconographic, and anthropological readings but forward by Havell, Coomaraswamy, and Kramrisch, would not have developed contemporaneously. All this is over and above his achievements as an artist, which was multifaceted and a remarkable achievement in itself.

Endnotes

1.

Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Rabindranath Tagore on Nandalal Bose’, Visva Bharati Quarterly, Nandalal Number, vol.34, nos. 1-4, 1971, p.9.

2.

K.G. Subramanyan, ‘Nandalal Bose: A Biographical Sketch’, Nandalal Bose, NGMA, New Delhi, 1983, p.18.

3.

For details of his early life and other biographical details see, Panchanan Mandal, ‘A Biographical Sketch’, Visva Bharati Quarterly, Nandalal Number, pp.182-196. For a more detailed biographical study see, Panchana Mandal, Bharatsilpi Nandalal, especially volumes one and two, Rarh Gaveshana Parishad, Santiniketan, 1968 and 1984.

4.

E.B. Havell, ‘The New Indian School of Painting,’ The International Studio, vol. 35, no. 137, July 1908, pp. 115.

5.

Gouri Bhanja, ‘Amar Pita O Guru Nandalal,’ Sushobhan Adhikari Ed., Mastermoshye Nandalal Basu, Lalmati, Kolkata, 2016, pp.93-95.

6.

Nandalal Bose’s letter to Barendranath Neogi dated 25-2-54, ‘Some Letters’, Visva Bharati Quarterly, Nandalal Number, p.20. The letter also reveals that Nandalal noticed that Nivedita’s comments on art were also historicist rather than aesthetic.

7.

Nandalal’s letter is quoted in Goutam Halдар, Ranger Kabi Asitkumar Halдар, Signet Press, Calcutta, 2019, p. 115.

8.

From a letter Rabindranath wrote to C F Andrews on 13 November 1919 we get to know that Nandalal had returned to Calcutta, see, Prasanta Kumar Paul, Rabijibani, vol. 7, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1997, p.448

9.

Though clear dates of Nandalal’s joining, departure, and rejoining Kala

Bhavana are not available it can be deduced that he was there when Kala Bhavana opened in June 1919 but left during the puja vacation (October) of 1919 and rejoined before the end of 1920. The lack of clarity is partly because there are records of his presence in Santiniketan throughout this period due to his interim visits, in vol. 1 and 2 of Santiniketan, Visva Bharati’s first monthly Bulletin. If a later conversation, quoted by Panchanan Mamdal, Nandalal says that he had returned to Santiniketan permanently in March 1920. Panchanan Mandal, Bharatsilpi Nandalal, vol. 1, p. 495.

10.

This listing is based on the chronological list of Nandalal’s paintings drawn up by Biswarup Bose et.al. and published in World Window, vol.1, no.3, April – May 1961. The dates as the authors claim are approximate and I have followed them wherever the date cannot be corroborated with other external evidence.

11.

Nandalal Bose, ‘The Art Pursuit’, Vision and Creation, Visva Bharati, Calcutta, 1999, pp. 14 and 18. The essay was originally published in Prabasi, Poush, 1349 (1943), PP.264-266.

12.

The team had set sail from Calcutta for China via Rangoon on 21 March 1924 and returned to Calcutta from Japan on 17 July 1924.

13.

L. K. Elmhirst, ‘Nandalal Bose,’ The Visva Bharati Quarterly, Nandalal Number, p.14.

14.

Nandalal Bose as recorded by Kanai Samanta, Vision and Creation, p. 285.

15.

Nandalal Bose, ‘Speaking of Art’, Vision and Design, p.43.

16.

See Nandalal Bose, ‘The Fundamentals of Art,’ Vision and Design, p.33-34.

17.

Nandalal, “The Art Pursuit,’ Vision and Design, p. 14.

18.

The freedom and assuredness with which Nandalal painted these murals, as evident from old photographs, is now fully preserved only in the Natir Puja mural in Santiniketan. In the other murals, the original verve of touch has been lost due to later restorations.

19.

Sahaj Path was published in 1930 and a (September?) 1929 letter from Rabindranath urges the artist to complete the illustrations so that the book can be published without delay. See, ‘Chithipatra’, Visva Bharati Patrika, Nandalal Bose Number, 1393 (1966), p.1.

20.

Nandalal Bose, ‘Touch-Work’, Vision and Creation, p. 194.

21.

Gandhi’s letter to Nandalal from Wardha dated 23-9-1936, accessed from Nandalal’s personal archives.

22.

Gandhi’s speech at the opening was reproduced in Harijan dated 2-1-1937 and is reproduced in ‘The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, vol. 64, The Publications Division, Government of India, New Delhi, 1976, pp. 171-172,

23.

D. G. Tendulkar, Mahatma, vol. 4, Vitalbhai K. Jhaveri and D. G. Tendulkar, Bombay, 1952, p.260.

24.

Henri Matisse, ‘Notes of a Painter,’ Jack Flam Ed., Matisse on Art, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, pp. 37-38.

25.

Nandalal Bose, ‘Ways of Seeing,’ Vision and Design, p.43.

26.

Jack Flam, ‘Sara Stein’s Notes,’ Matisse on Art, p. 45.

27.

Payrelal Nayar, ‘The Santiniketan Pilgrimage,’ Visva Bharati News, vol. 14, no. 8, February 1946, p.38.

28.

Payrelal Nayar, ‘The Santiniketan Pilgrimage’, p. 39.

29.

Payrelal Nayar, ‘The Santiniketan Pilgrimage’, p. 40.

30.

Letter to Kanai Samanta from Almora dated 8-4-42, Silpiguru Nandalal, Visva Bharati Gaveshna Vibagha, Santiniketan 1988, p.122.

31.

As told to Kanai Samanta on 29-10-1942, Silpiguru Nandalal, p.100.

32.

As retold by Kanai Samanta on 3-10-1942, Silpiguru Nandalal, p.78. The translation quoted here is from, Vision and Design, p.289.

33.

As told to Kanai Samanta on 3-10-1942, Silpiguru Nandalal, p.90.

34.

Ibid, Silpiguru Nandalal, p.91.

35.

Nandalal’s letter to Indulekha Ghosh dated 11-05-1942, Vision and Design, pp.249-252.

36.

Benodebehari Mukherjee, Nandalal, Chitrakatha, Aruna Prakashini, Calcutta, 1984, p.275.

37.

We may add to this the small group of five paintings based on the Ramayana that recalls his twenty-six Ramayana paintings from 1911.

38.

As told to Kanai Samanta on 22-5-1942, Vision and Design, p.291.

39.

Letter to Indulekha Ghosh dated 22-12-1942, Vision and Design, p. 255.

40.

Letter to Kanai Samanta dated 30-3-1954, Vision and Design, p.275.

41.

Letter to Kanai Samanta dated 27-5-1954, Vision and Design, p.276.

42.

This date is provided by Panchanan Mandal, Bharati Silpi Nandalal, vol. 3, Rarh Gaveshana Parishad, Santiniketan, 1988, p. 315.

48

49



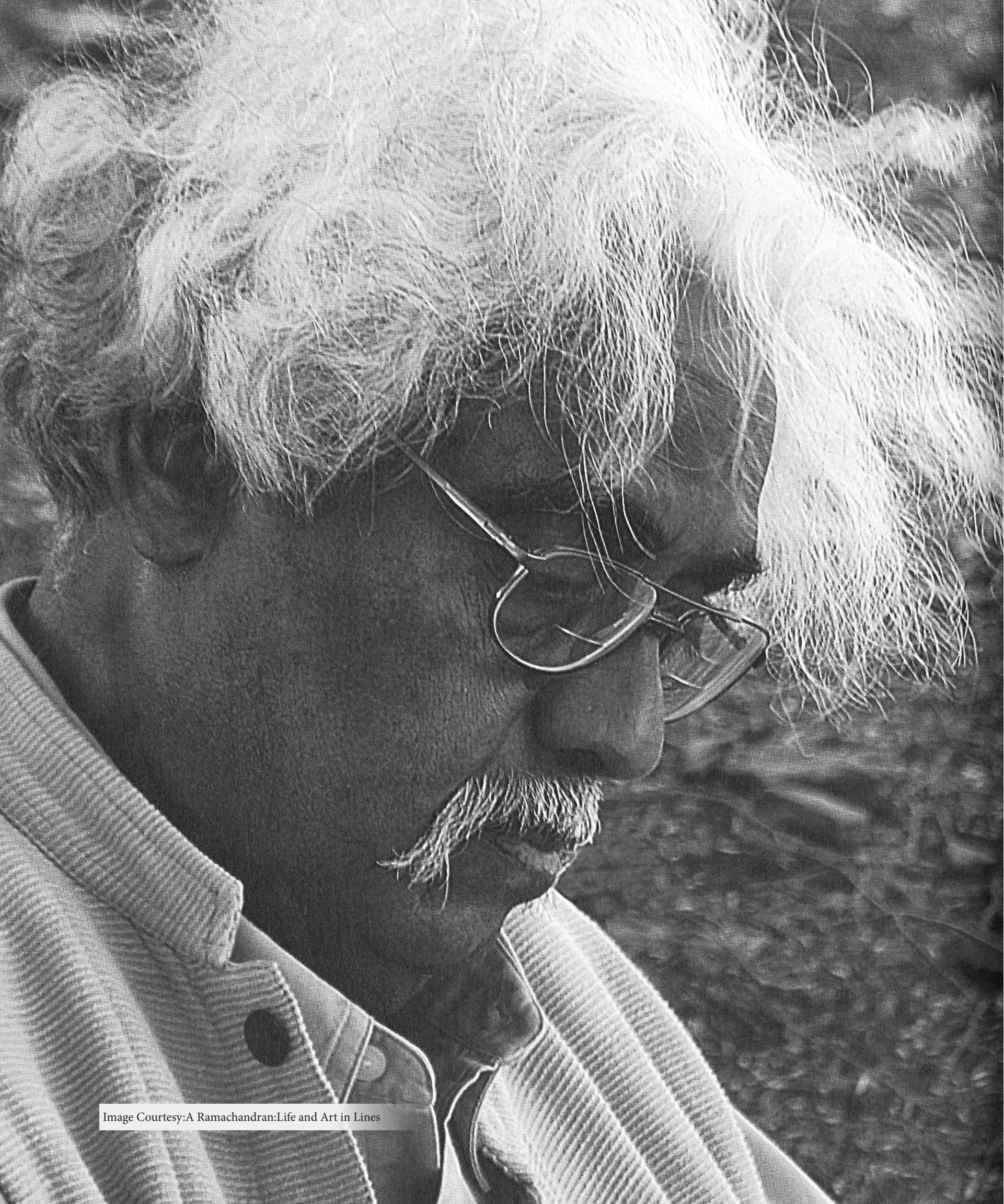


Image Courtesy:A Ramachandran:Life and Art in Lines



Ramkinkar Baij, **Farmer**, Etching, 12.3x19.1 cm, Acc. No. 4384



# RAMKINKAR BAIJ: REMINISCENCES OF A STUDENT



A. Ramachandran



Ramkinkar Baij, **Mill Call**, a sculpture in Santiniketan, iron armature, concrete, laterite pebbles, and gravel



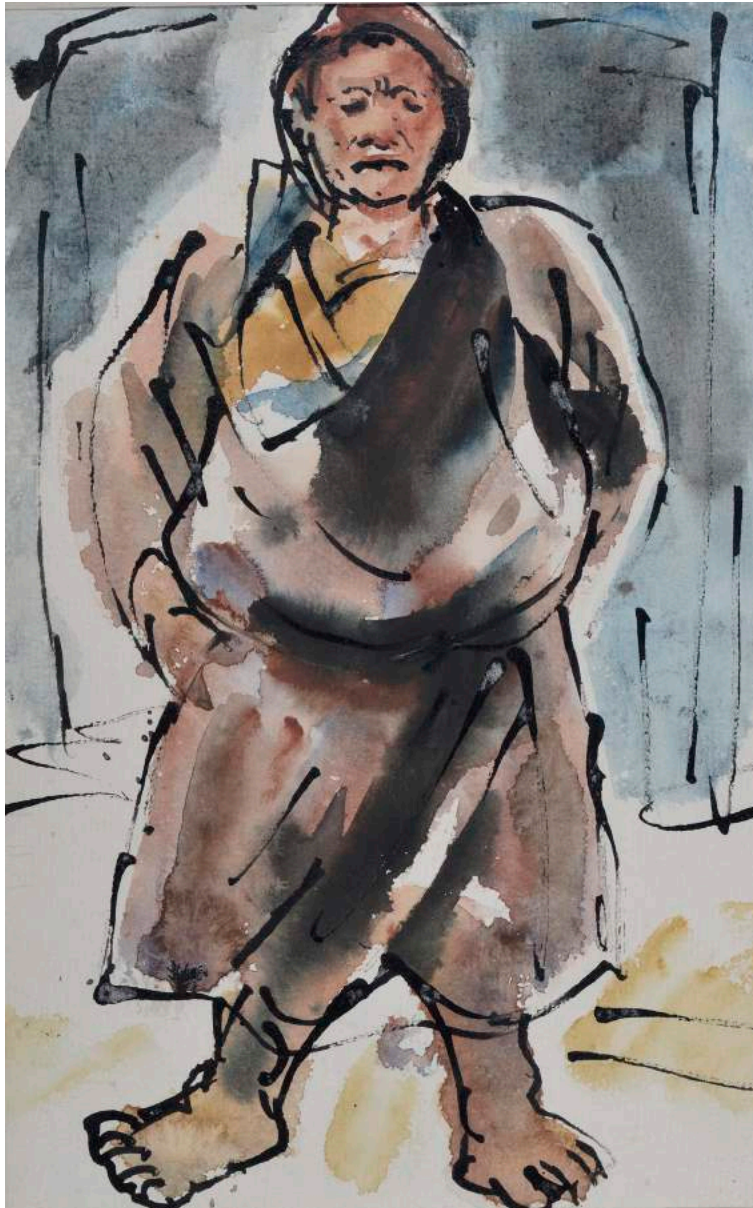
Ramkinkar Baij, **Farmers**, Etching, 12.3 x 19.1cm, Acc. No. 4384

No one else has described the personality of Ramkinkar as precisely as K. G. Subramnyan, who called him ‘Khepa Baul’. This Bengali word refers to the mystic cult of Baul singers and their unconventional, detached way of life, wandering from village to village singing songs of love and god. Their negation of social norms and complete devotion to their art make them outsiders, hence society regards them as ‘Khepa’ or crazy. Kinkarda also led an unconventional life completely devoting himself to his art by producing a large body of robust works of great significance.

Trying to define him for a student like me is like trying to describe a train sitting inside one of its compartments. Students like Sankho Chaudhuri and K. G. Subramanyan saw him as a revolutionary young artist whereas I met him in his middle age when he was more sober and introspective. It is but natural that his later students would be more reverential as Kinkarda had by then become an icon of modern Indian art, with honours and recognitions pouring in. With the result, the cautious approach of his earlier days not to offend the sensibilities of the ‘Bhadraloks’ around him gave way to defiance, forcing them to accept his way of life and his visionary creativity in the end.

Within a span of seven years, Kinkarda left a deep impact on my life as a teacher, as well as an artist. Half a century has passed since then. In the twilight of my life, I realise that he had opened my inner eye and let me venture into the vast world of art and creativity to explore all the possibilities of my inner self, and to find my own path, and discover the promise of never-ending innovations. In that solitary search, I found that he had become an inseparable part of me all through my creative life. So closely fused





Ramkinkar Baij,  
***Bhutia***, 1949, Water colour on paper, 17x24.5cm, Acc. No. 2836

has been his sensibility with mine that when I made my first monumental, totemic sculpture, years after I left Santiniketan, I juxtaposed the portrait of his head with mine.

Kinkarda was a self-taught sculptor. He learnt by the trial and error method trying to solve his problems with whatever materials available. Clay was his elementary medium and he used cement and pebble mixture for his outdoor monumental sculptures. Kinkarda used to take classes in the morning and in the afternoon he would start his own work and remain totally engrossed in his creativity till late at night. Occasionally, I used to peep through the window and, almost like a thief, observe him working.

Kinkarda working on a sculpture was quite spectacular. First, he would throw large chunks of clay on a sturdy armature. Next, he would start attacking the mass of clay like a wild animal attacking its prey. Merciless slashes with a long modeling knife would gradually carve out the intended form. He would go around and look at the shape from every angle, like the animal assessing its prey before the next round of attacks. He would go on adding clay and slashing away the redundant till he got the correct form. For finishing, he would use both his hands with their claw-like nails, literally clawing the sculpture into its final form. From time to time he would fill his mouth with water to spray on the sculpture, an unconventional way of keeping it wet.

I lingered around for one whole year hoping to draw Kinkarda's attention to my work. There was no specialization in those days and we had to attend classes in painting, sculpture, graphic art, batik, leather craft etc., which engaged us in each discipline for two weeks by rotation. But the students were allowed to work in the sculpture studio during any spare time. I seized this opportunity to make a terracotta sculpture by coil process almost similar to making a pot without a wheel and a sculpture without an armature. The image had to be built from the base with coils of clay pressed together following the contour of the maquette. Since the thin wet clay wall could not hold much weight, one had to work slowly and carefully. After one month's painstaking work every night, I had almost completed enlarging the four inch model of a 'mother and child', into a four feet tall sculpture when Kinkarda came and shouted, "Where is the structure?"

Obviously, he had found some major fault in the enlargement. Before I knew what was happening, he picked up a heavy wooden block and hit hard on my work. In a moment, my one month's labour collapsed and the wet mud scattered all over the studio. "Pick up all the clay, prepare it and start all over again," he ordered.

Quietly and obediently, I picked up all the clay because I was only too happy to realise that at last he had accepted me as his student.

Kinkarda developed the sculpture department single-handed within a few years of his stay in Santiniketan. In spite of his village background and without any formal training in art, his exposure to some of the foreign sculptors who visited Santiniketan gave him the clue to conceive a system of teaching, in the process of developing the department. His studio and sculpture classrooms were pathetically poor



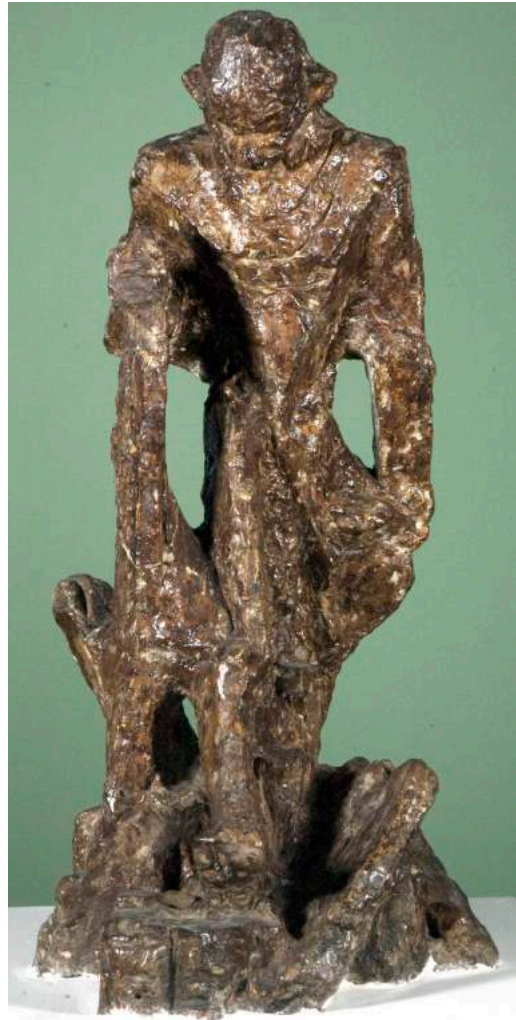
Ramkinkar Baij,  
***Portrait of Abanindranath Tagore***,  
Bronze, 24.5x27x38 (H) cm  
Acc. No. 2568





Ramkinkar Baij, **Harvester**, Oil on Canvas, 142.5x85.5 cm, Acc. No. 2555





Ramkinkar Baij, **Gandhi, Dandi March (2)**, Plaster, 23x29x49(h) cm, Acc. No. 4447



Ramkinkar Baij, **Gandhi, Dandi March (1)**, Cement, 33.5x29.5x47(h) cm, Acc. No. 4446

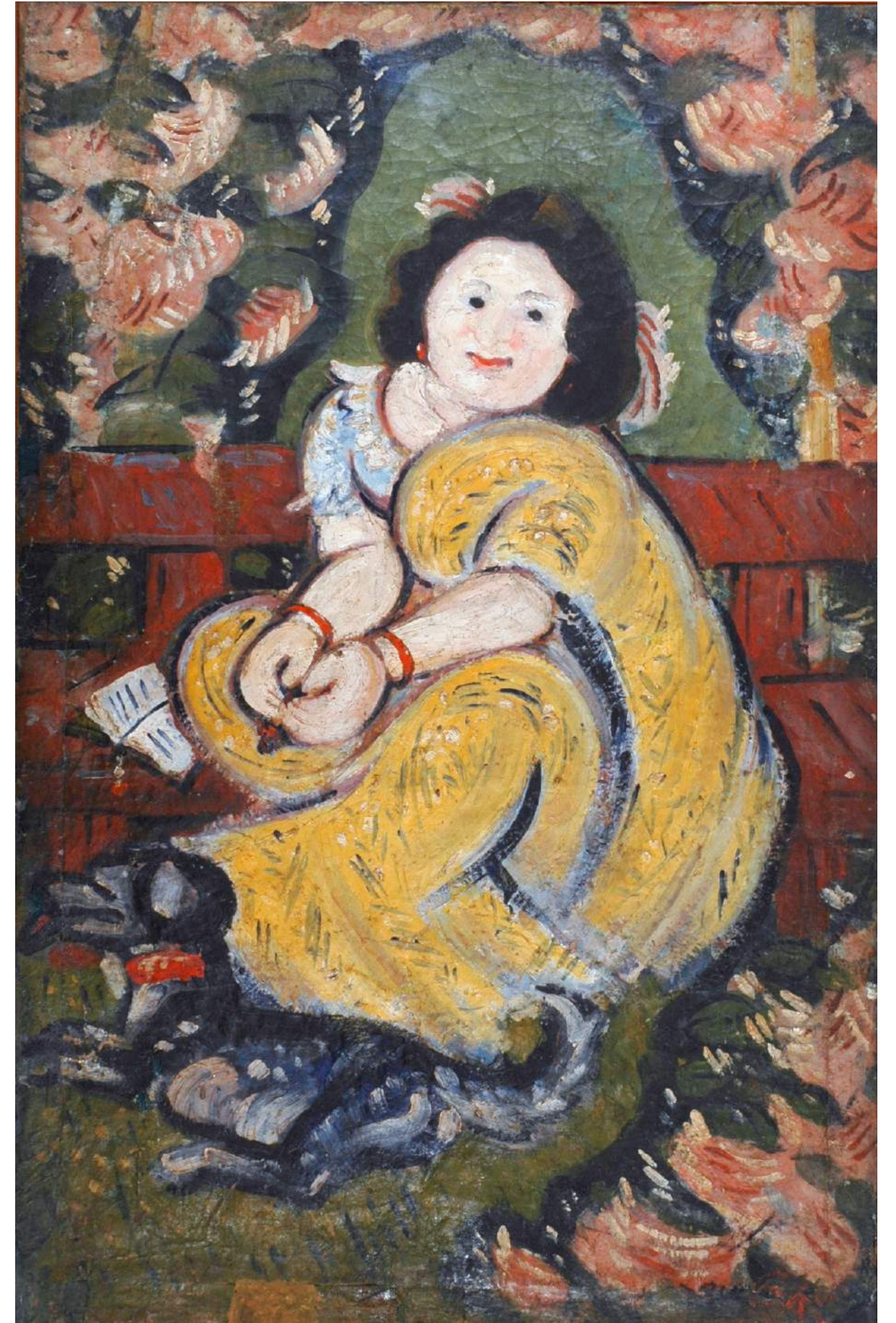
and with only a tub of clay and a few revolving modeling stands. We had to prepare our own clay and only those who could afford it would cast their work in plaster of Paris or cement, and bronze casting was unheard of. But in spite of all these limitations, Kinkarda could teach and also express himself more forcefully than any other modern sculptor in India.

The two maquettes of Dandi March, which are now at National Gallery of Modern Art, were meant for monumental outdoor sculptures. Out of the two, one with more recognisable likeness of Gandhiji is closer to Nandalal's Dandi March. The outdoor sculpture from the same maquette in Kala-Bhavana complex made later with the assistance of students does not do justice to the original model. The second more stylised and vigorous piece seems to be based on Gandhiji's Noakhali tour during the traumatic days of Partition. It shows Gandhiji walking over heaps of skulls symbolising destruction of human values and life.

Even though Kinkarda taught only sculpture, my seven years association with him inside and outside the



Ramkinkar Baij, **Three animals (Cat family)**, Lithograph, 30.2x40.6cm, Acc. No. 4404



Ramkinkar Baij, **Girl with a dog**, 1932, Oil on canvas 80x122cm Acc. No. 4406





Ramkinkar Baij, **Lotus Pond**, Watercolour on Paper, 27.2x19cm, Acc. No. 2851



Ramkinkar Baij, **Binodini**, Watercolour on Paper, 26.2x30cm, Acc. No. 2820



Ramkinkar Baij, **A lady with a pitcher**, Watercolour on Paper, 18.2x27.7cm, Acc. No. 4125



Ramkinkar Baij, **Buffaloes**, Watercolour on Paper, 34x24.3cm, Acc. No. 4128

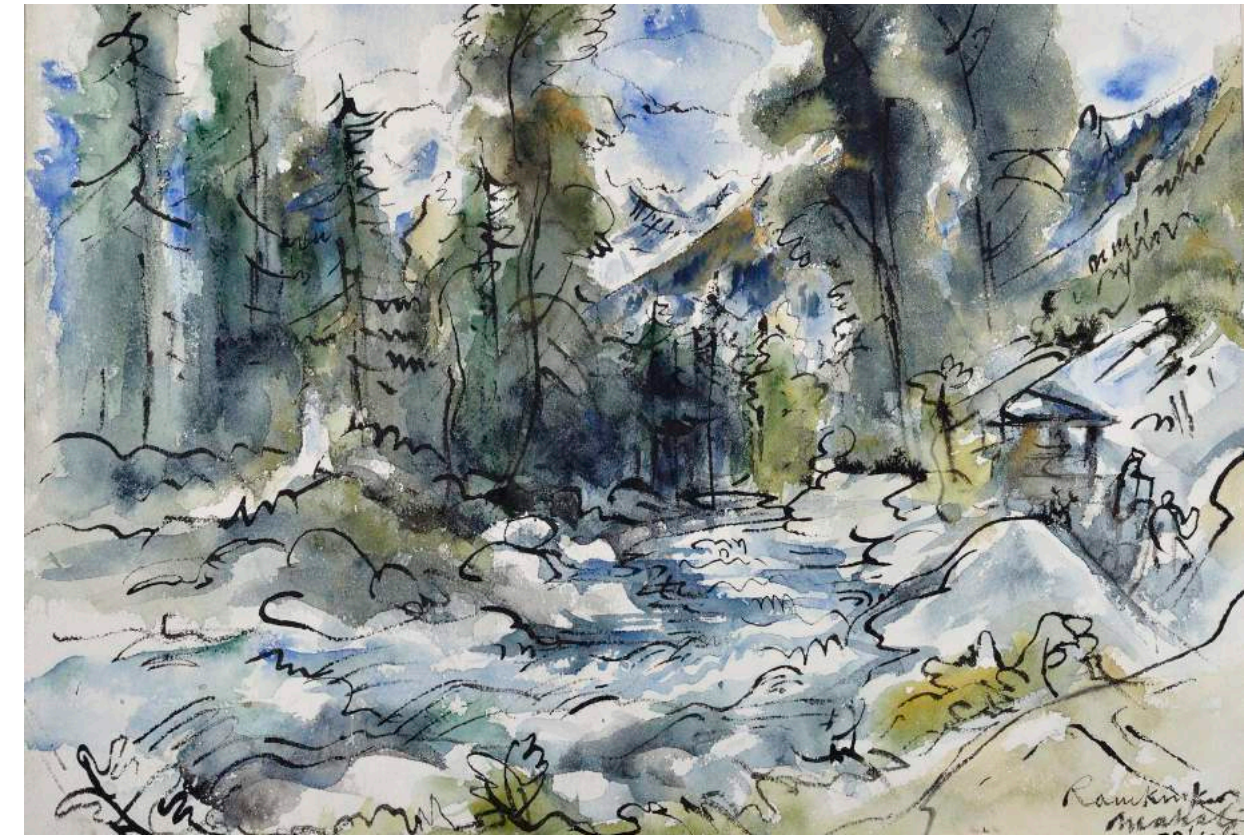
classroom gave me precious insight into what constituted art and creativity while groping in the wilderness of contemporary theories and schools. I never heard him talking about any particular school or 'ism', which had influenced him. He never gave any direct answer when asked about modern art movement like Cubism or Expressionism. Nor did he expound any theoretical statement except that of his teacher Nandalal. Some of his early students have talked about his going to the Kala- Bhavana library trying to learn about modern movements. But I do not know how much Kinkarda could have concentrated on the text part. I think, with his uncanny sense of observation, he could grasp the spirit and aim of various schools through reproductions. Like Rodin, Epstein and Picasso, he too used the elements of simplification and distortion in the formal structure of an image. But at the same time he tried to compare modern elements with our own cultural traditions to recreate the convincing images of our time. His system of teaching was based on the principles of western art and the inherent rhythm of the conceptual art of India. This he must have learnt by copying some of the images of classical Indian art like the panel of dancers from Aurangabad cave.

K.G. Subramanyan once told me that while in England some artist had commented that his method of drawing learnt in Santiniketan, was based on Renaissance principles rather than today's academic principles based on light and shade. Nandalal started the tradition of sketching from life and nature through contour lines based on oriental practice of China and Japan. Kinkarda added the sculptural dimension to it. For animal studies, students first learnt to draw contour lines of the animals on the clay wall and build skeletal system on both sides. Strips and muscles were then added to the skeletal system which was covered by a thin layer of clay like the skin and finally the negative space of the wall removed. This exercise was done on the basis of scientific drawings of the skeletal and muscular systems. In the process, Kinkarda pointed out the differences and characteristics of each animal. The same process was used to explore human forms. I have seen a large number of small sketchbooks in which Kinkarda made numerous drawings and studies of animals and human beings to understand their muscular and skeletal systems and their different body movements. This laborious exercise was to acquaint the students with the basic structure of each form.





Ramkinkar Baij,  
**Rabindranath**,  
Cement, 50x46.5x68.5(h) cm  
Acc. No. 4462



Ramkinkar Baij, **Kulu Landscape C**, Watercolour on Paper, 37x26.5cm, Acc. No. 2835

Kinkarda believed that only by understanding it, the artist could express conveniently on two or three dimensions and even take liberties with its usage.

Like his teacher, Nandalal, Kinkarda, also believed that the ultimate aim of an artist was to capture the life rhythm of the image which could be done through few minimal strokes rather than its excessive usage. In both paintings and watercolours, Kinkarda could create a relief-like quality almost carving out the image on canvas or paper surface, marking the negative space with suggestion of contours. He always qualified the empty space with a few strokes suggesting modeling finally finishing the picture with forceful outlines.

I believe later he often referred to me as a friend rather than a student, I do not know why. We continued to have frequent discussions on art. Now that I had started painting in oil, I could understand the weakness of Kinkarda's technique and methodology. He used ordinary jute cloth as canvas preparing the gesso, ground with zinc white and

double boiled linseed oil. His colours were cheap powder colours from the local market used for banner painting. We used to have frequent arguments regarding his use of substandard materials since I was much concerned about the permanency of his great creations. I often entreated him to use proper canvas and colours. But he always brushed aside my protestations saying he was following the indigenous method of oil paintings, not realising that there was no Indian method of oil technique. My worries turned out to be true. Discolouration and deterioration noticed on painted surface today of many of his oils are the result of not using time-tested materials.

In 1964, I left Santiniketan for Delhi, looking for my future as a professional artist. Before leaving, I went to Kinkarda for his blessings. After touching his feet I asked him,

“Will you forget me?

He said, “How can I?

After all you are ‘Ramchandro’. I am only Ramkinkar.”

Source: Ramachandran, A. 2012. *Ramkinkar: The Man and the Artist*. New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art.







Upendra Maharathi







Upendra Maharathi, **Sketch**, Chinese ink on rice paper, 21.6 x 29.3 cm, Acc. No. 14086/50/12

## UPENDRA MAHARATHI: AN ARTIST EXTRAORDINAIRE



Mahashweta Maharathi

It has been three-quarters of a century since the tricolour was unfurled, thereby heralding a new dawn of Indian history. From the fatalism of the yesteryears, the national zeitgeist has turned a corner and now yearns for greatness. While greatness has an economic and a military dimension, it is in the cultural sphere that the efflorescence of the human spirit can realize its true resplendence. From architecture, sculpture, folk craft to painting, ancient Indian art is a treasure trove of motifs, themes and vignettes. Its very essence is derived from the same wellspring of profound spirituality, whence came forth Indian philosophy, religion, yoga and the wider Indian culture. With such a rich heritage at our disposal, it is a pity that the idioms of modern Indian art that have hitherto dominated the intellectual discourse, have been so completely denuded of this ancient spirit that they appear more alien in character than national. Even so, there has been a counter current all along to this Westernizing tendency. The Bengal School of Art is a case in point. Its exponents created an extraordinary array of work that drew heavily from ancient Indian art. Champions of Indian folk art and craft spawned all over the country who worked tirelessly to rejuvenate dying art forms. In 2022, as we celebrate 75 years of India's independence we turn to the legacy of one such artist, who embodied the true spirit of the nation.

The year 1940 was the best of times and it was the worst of times. The Second World War was raging and the dark forces of fascism were looming large. On the other hand, the burning desire for independence was as iridescent as ever in the minds and hearts of Indians. It

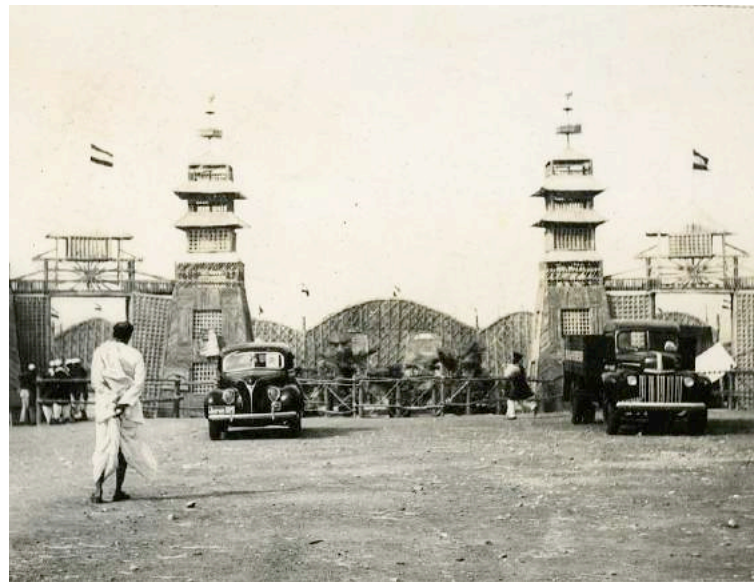
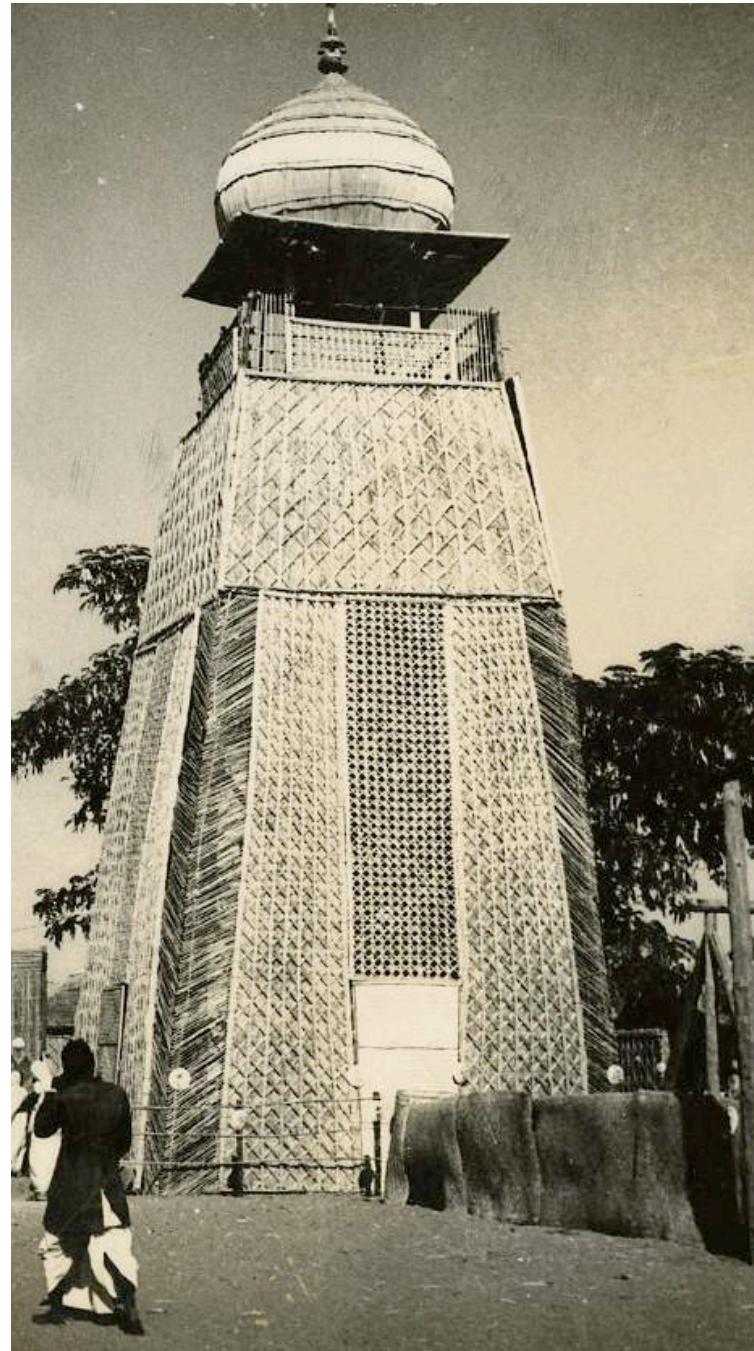


Upendra Maharathi, **Dandi March** ( Gandhi ji ), Illustration



was against this backdrop that the Ramgarh Congress was convened. While the who's who of the freedom movement made a beeline to Ramgarh, it was the towering presence of Mahatma Gandhi that pulled in the masses. Amongst them was a young artist from Orissa, settled in Bihar, called Upendra Maharathi. At the age of 32, his genius was widely recognized—so much so that he had been commissioned by the Congress to create a series of paintings on the theme 'The Glories of India'. In fact, the entire Ramgarh complex was designed by Maharathi who embellished it with motifs and artifacts borrowed from diverse folk art traditions. As the sessions rolled on, Maharathi, seated at close proximity to the Mahatma, sketched him exhaustively, capturing Gandhiji in his many moods as he went about his business. In Gandhiji, Maharathi saw glimpses of another great Indian, the ascetic who was the first proponent of the creed of non-violence: Lord Buddha. The influence of these two great men shaped Maharathi's philosophy of life and they became the theme of many of his great works.

In a single life, Maharathi accomplished the works of many lifetimes. Maharathi's journey as an artist began in 1925 in the hallowed portals of the Government College of Art and Craft, Calcutta. As the spirit of Swadeshi spread over pre-independence India, a rejection of all things western and a yearning to hark back to the authentic Indian spirit was but natural. It was in this context that



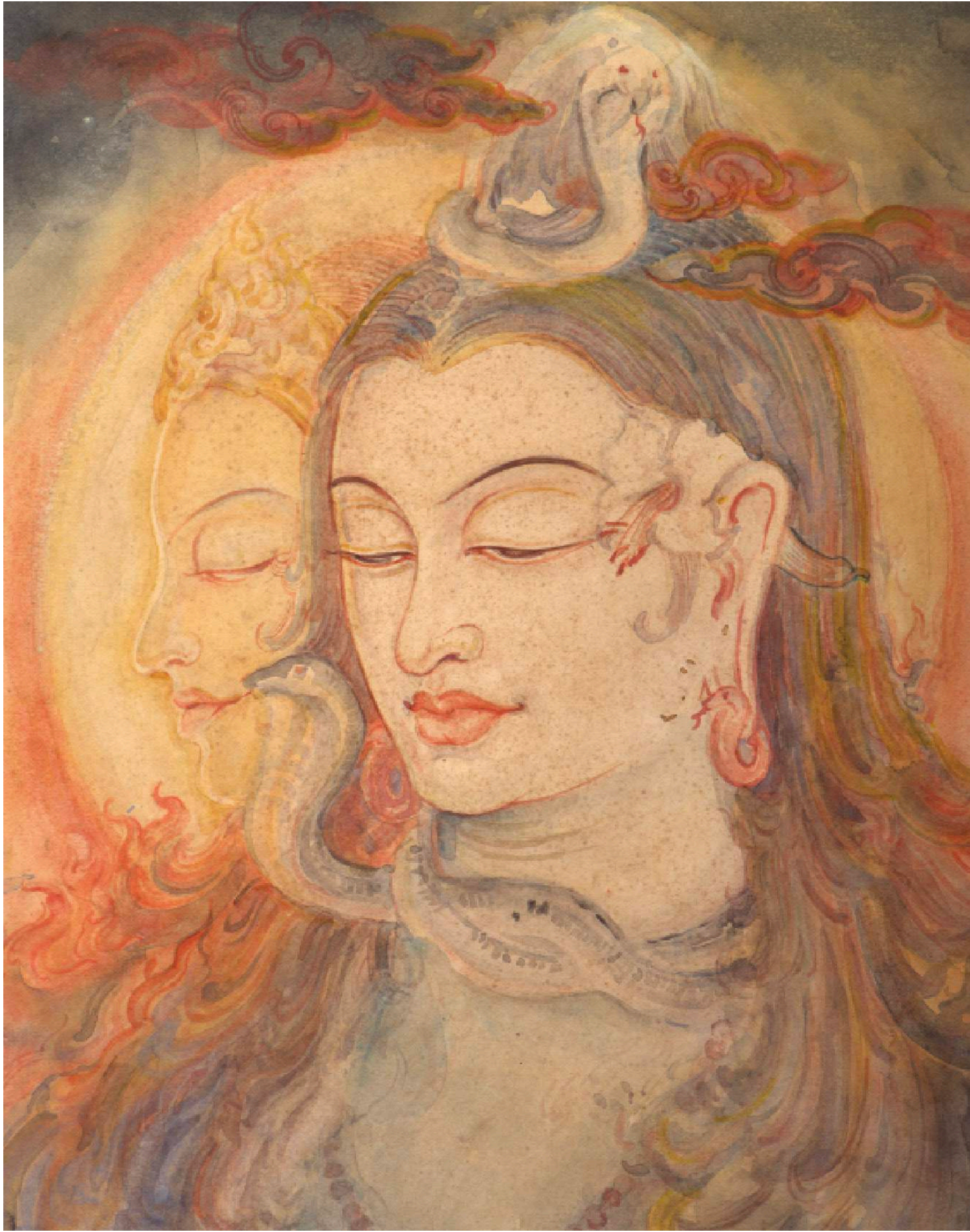
Decoration of Ramgarh Congress by Upendra Maharathi

the renaissance school of Indian art, the Bengal school, came into existence and Maharathi became one of its young proponents. He was deeply influenced by Mauryan art and architecture as well as the frescoes of Ajanta and Ellora. Many of his masterpieces (the danseuse Amrapali holding a crowd in thrall or the sorrow of Yashodhara as she learns of her husband's renunciation) have the same ethereal and sublime quality as the frescoes of Ajanta. However, Maharathi's vision was not restricted to any era, his style



Upendra Maharathi, **Lord Buddha bidding farewell to venuman**, Watercolour on paper, 21.6 x 29.3 cm, Courtesy: Rajgir Vishwa Shanti Stupa





Upendra Maharathi, **Ardhanarishwari Uma Vaktra**, Wash on Paper, 35.5 x 25.5 cm, Acc. No. 14005



Upendra Maharathi,  
**Chhau Dance**,  
Tempera on Paper, 33x40 cm,  
Acc. No. 14025



Upendra Maharathi, **Lord Buddha's Sermon in Sarnath**, 1940, Water Colour on Paper, 79 x 52.5 cm, Courtesy: Patna Museum





Upendra Maharathi, **Woman**, Watercolour on Paper, 11.8X 15.3cm, Acc. No. 14041



Upendra Maharathi, **Labour Women of Jaipur**, Watercolour on Paper, 17.7 x 12.5 cm, Acc. No. 14039

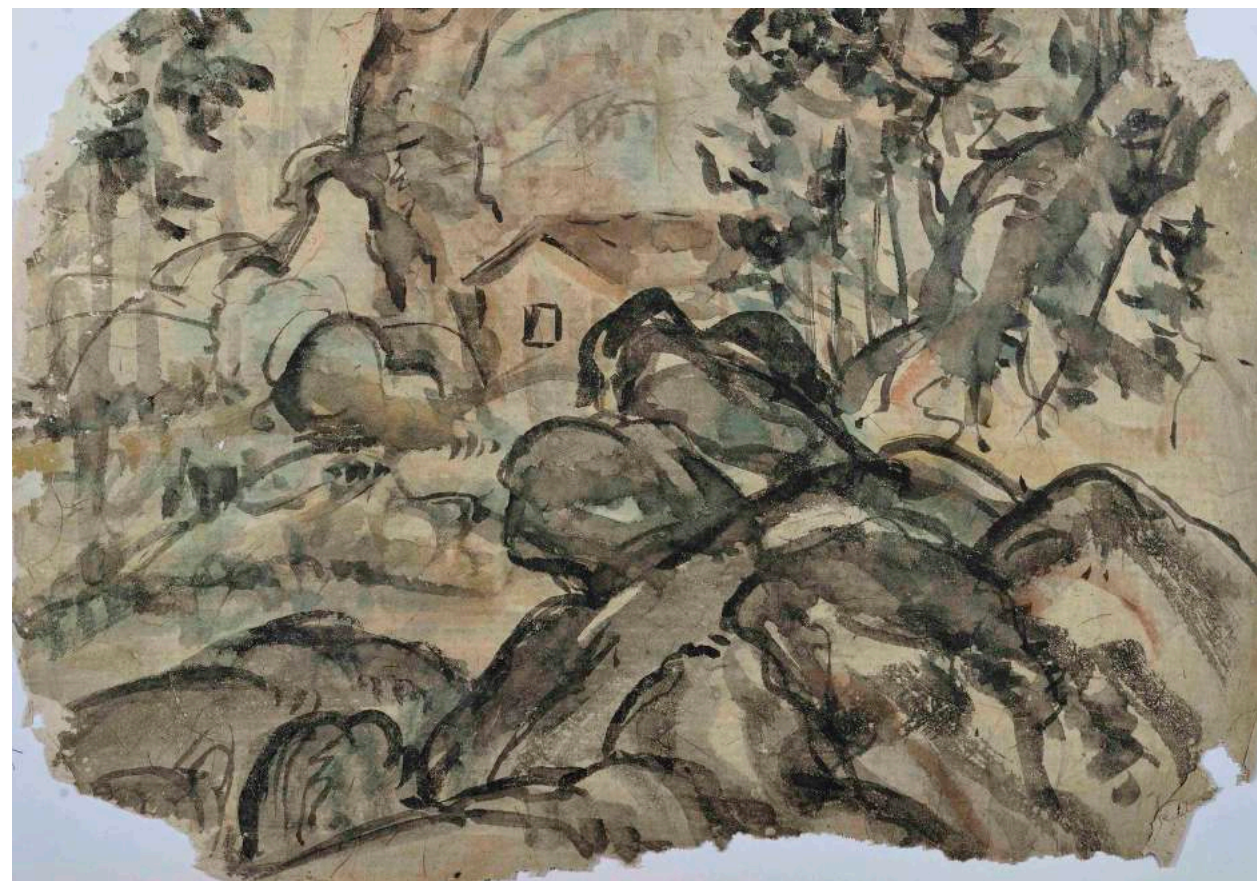




Upendra Maharathi, **Kanchanjanga**, Watercolour on Paper, 35.3 x 25.3 cm, Acc. No. 14050



Upendra Maharathi, **Mountain**, Watercolour on Paper, 27.5 x 18.5 cm, Acc. No. 14044



Upendra Maharathi, **Ink Drawing-55**, Acc. No. 14089



Upendra Maharathi, **Ink Drawing**, Ink Drawing on Paper, Acc. No. 14089-48





Upendra Maharathi, **Tree**, Ink on Paper, 20 x 30 cm, Acc. No. 14126



Upendra Maharathi, **Sketch**,  
Chinese ink on rice paper, Acc. No. 14086/50/32



Upendra Maharathi, **Sketch**, Chinese ink on rice paper, Acc. No. 14086/50/34



Upendra Maharathi, **Drawing**, Ink on Paper, Acc. No. 14093-15



Upendra Maharathi, **Drawing 16**, Drawing on Paper, Acc. No. 14093-16

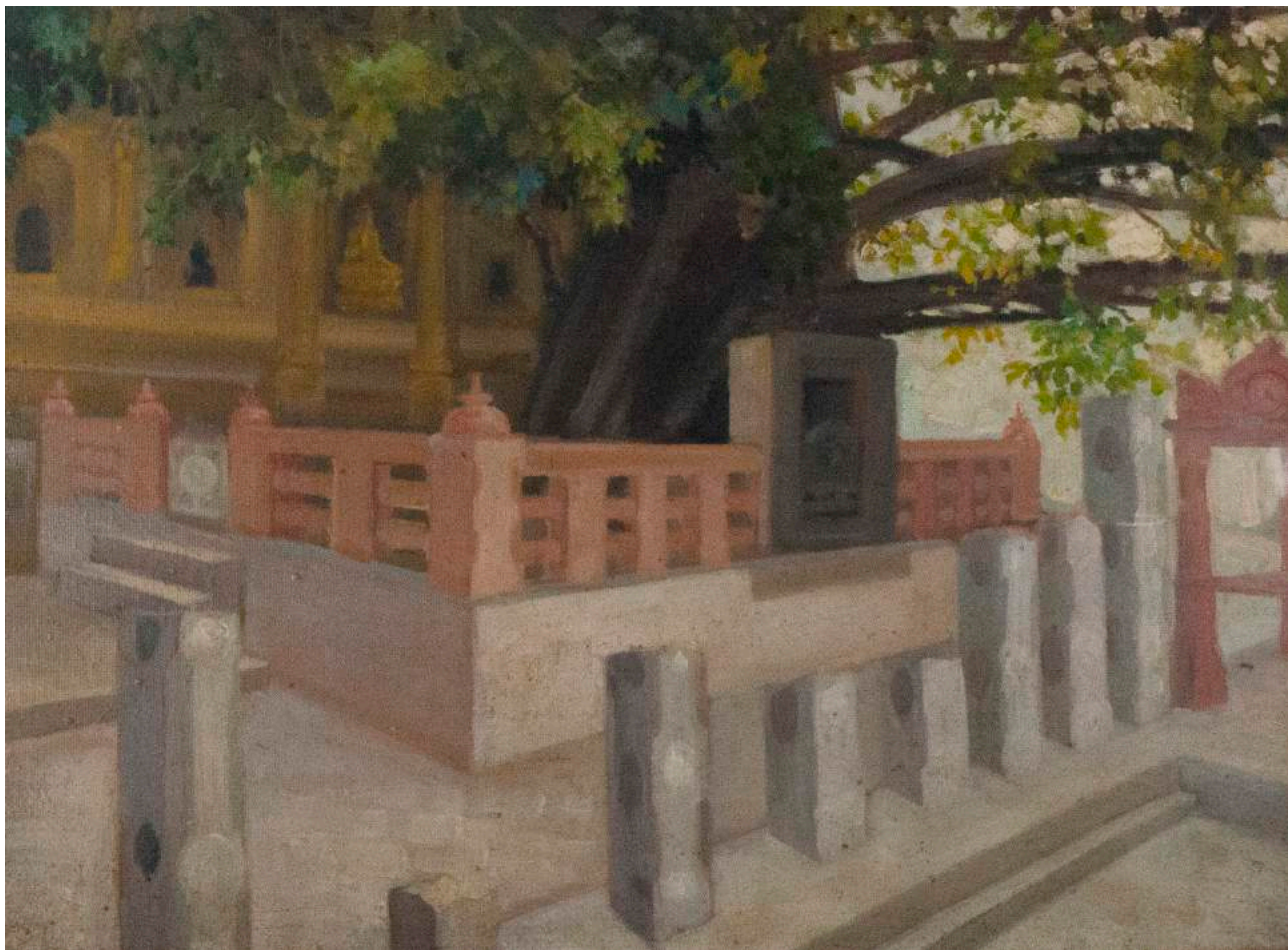




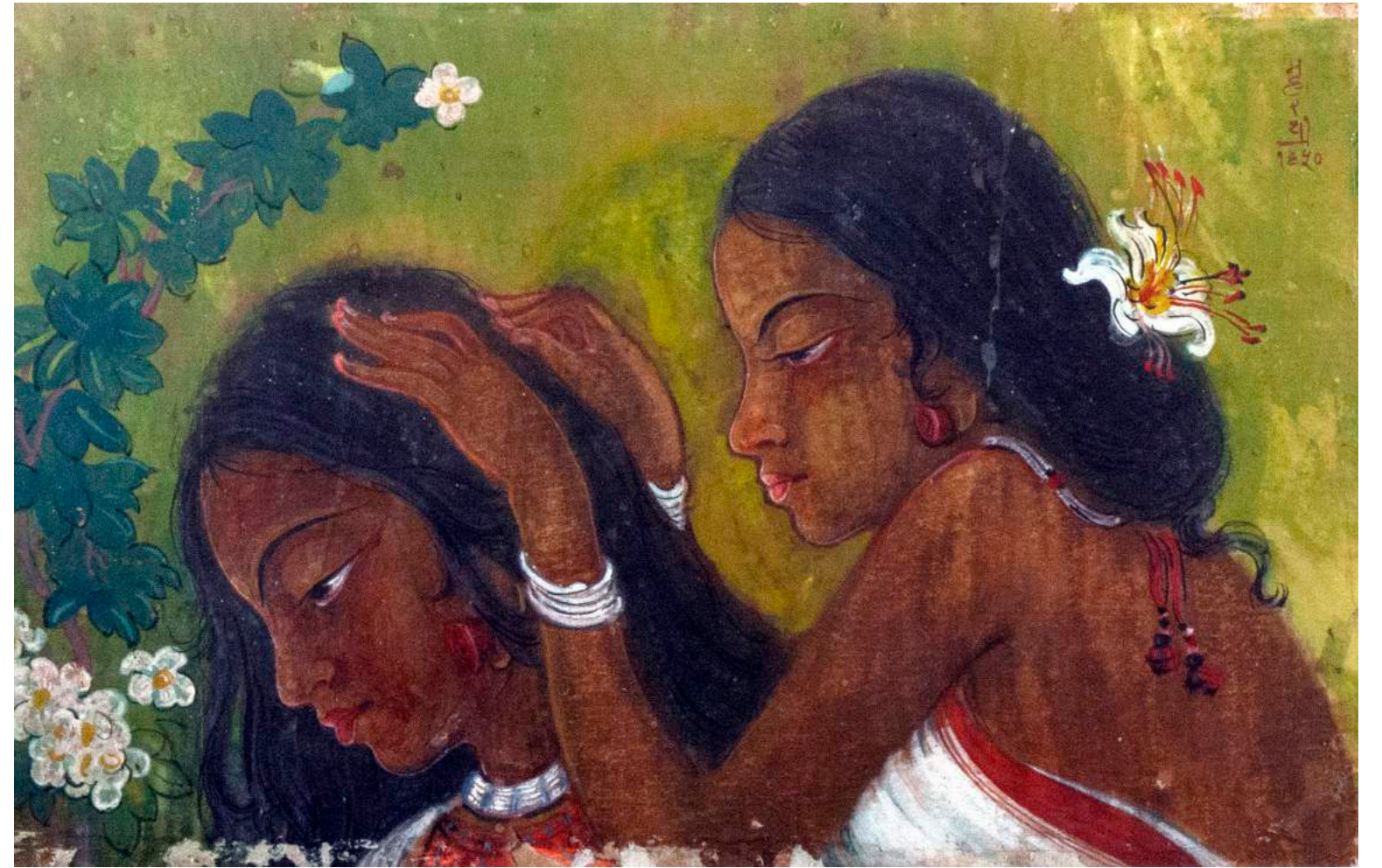
Upendra Maharathi, **Vimal Mitra**,  
Tempera on Silk, 50.8 x 38 cm, Acc. No. 14026

not confined to a single school nor his spirituality in any way a narrow one. Like an eternal seeker he beheld India in all its eternity. On the vast canvas of his art, he could paint the cosmic glory of Shiva and Parvati, trace the divine footsteps of Buddha's life, depict the imperium of Ram as he commands the sea to give way or capture the splendour of Samudragupta's court. From the abstract and the historical, Maharathi could switch his vision to the here and now, directing it towards the bucolic charms of village life, the simplicity and elegance of a village damsel, the wisdom and stolidity of an old woman and to the great questions confronting mankind in his time.

The brush and the pencil were not the only instruments that Maharathi wielded. He was as much a craftsman as he was an artist in the conventional sense, and devoted his life to reviving the moribund art traditions of Bihar. Madhubani art holds a great debt to him for its survival and so does the Bawanbooti style of making sarees. Himself a consummate artisan, Maharathi was able to breathe new life into these old traditions. Even today



Upendra Maharathi,  
**Bodhi Tree**,  
Oil on Board,  
66 x 48 cm,  
Acc. No. 14070



Upendra Maharathi, **Two Adivasi Girls**, Watercolour on Paper, 32 x 20 cm, Acc. No. 14049

many old artisans, who survive in the villages of Bihar, recount with deep gratitude Maharathi's contributions, that included the foundation of the Institute of Industrial Research in Patna in 1956, later named after him.

The artist, who died in 1981, straddled every genre and medium, leaving deep imprints in not only art and craft but also architecture. The Rajgir Vishwa Shanti Stupa (an Indo-Japanese collaboration) and the Gotemba Peace Pagoda in Japan were both designed by Maharathi. In this context, it is worth noting that Maharathi spent a few years in Japan as a UNESCO representative, studying Japanese art. Some of the other notable examples of Maharathi's designs are the Nav Nalanda Mahavihara, the stone railing

encompassing the Maha Bodhi temple in Bodh Gaya (a world heritage site), the Vaishali Museum, and the Gandhi Mandap at Gaya, amongst many others.

In 2019 the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), New Delhi held a grand exhibition at Jaipur House, celebrating the scale and diversity of Maharathi's oeuvre—his paintings, sketches and handcrafted objects, all straddling a plethora of themes. In November 2021, the NGMA, Bengaluru inaugurated a retrospective exhibition of Maharathi's work entitled 'Shashwat Maharathi: The Eternal Seeker'. In 2022, the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (FAAM) in Japan will hold an exhibition to honour the life of this extraordinary artist.





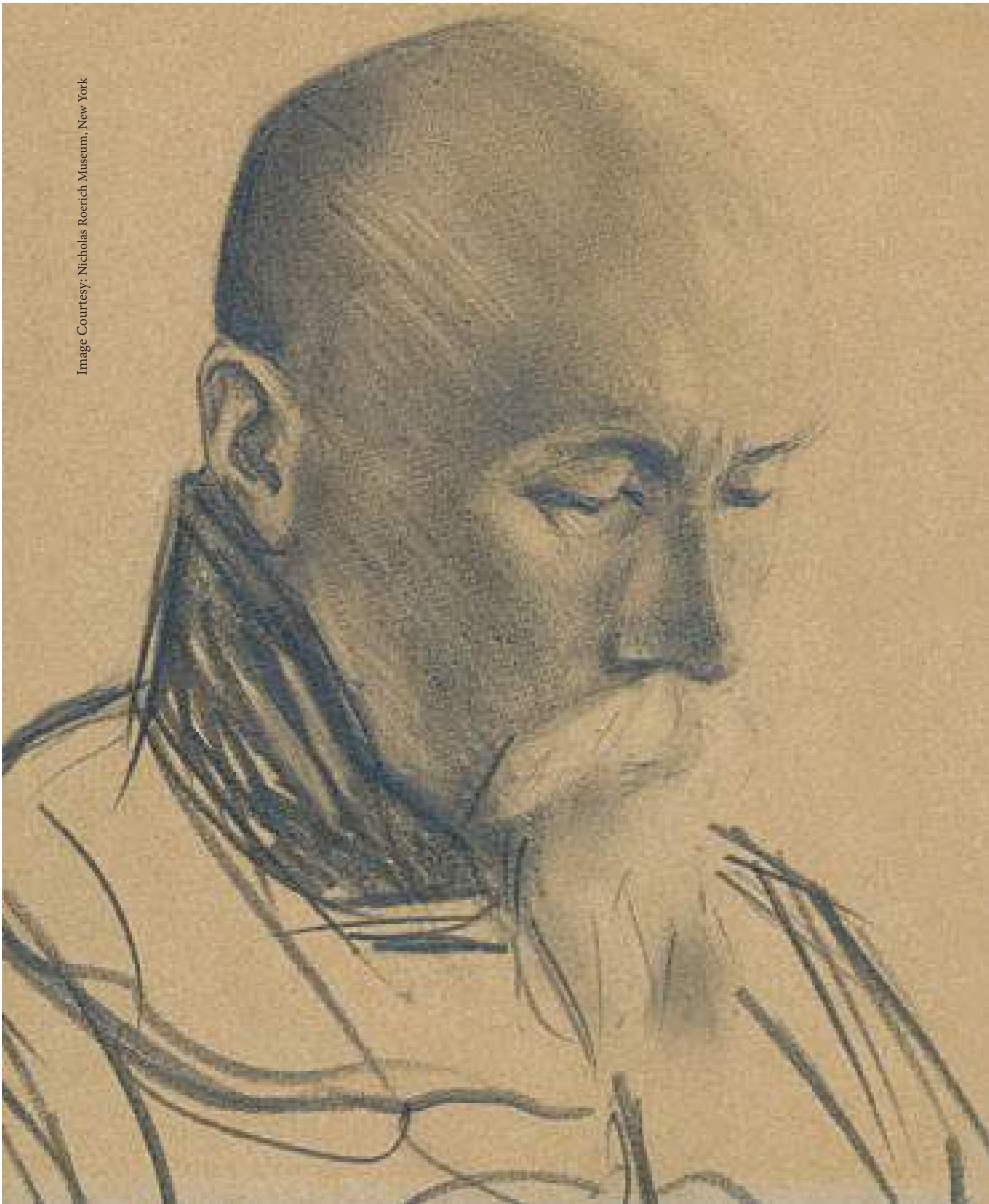


Nicholas Roerich And Guga Chohan2, Image Courtesy: Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York



Nicholas Roerich, *She who leads*,  
Image Courtesy: The International Centre of the Roerichs, Moscow





# NICHOLAS ROERICH'S ARTISTIC LEGACY IN INDIA



Dr. Vladimir Zaitsev

The name of Nicholas Roerich occupies a prominent place in the history of modern Indian art. His legacy is alive in his philosophical and humanitarian ideas, manifested through his Pax of Culture; the international artistic and cultural institutions he set up in the West and East; and in the numerous masterpieces he painted, now adorning the walls of museums around the world. Roerich's belief in the high mission and significance of art, the transforming and unifying power of Beauty and the cross-cultural synthesis he espoused left an indelible influence on generations of Indian artists and intellectuals. Dr Kalidas Nag characterized Roerich as "the first Russian ambassador of Beauty who brought to India the deathless message of Art..."

While in the West, Roerich's art is associated with archaeological discoveries from the Stone Age, his evocative images of ancient Russia and Slavs, and the famous stage design and costume work he did for S. Diaghilev's Ballet Russes in Paris and London, in India, the Russian artist is remembered as a Master of Mountains, 'a bard of the Himalayas'.

In 1923, in Sikkim, at the foothills of magnificent Kanchenjunga, a new period of Nicholas Roerich's art began—his visual repertoire transformed into a new formal

language, steeped in allegories and symbols which paved the way for his paintings of the sacred landscapes of the East. Irish poet and writer Barnett D. Conlan characterized this new phase in the artist's life thus:

"[He] has been drawn towards these mountains from within, rather than from without, and does not behold them merely with the bodily eye; so that when he paints the icy Thang-La range glittering at the gateways of Tibet, we get the impression of a range of spirit mountains whose ghostly white peaks and cupolas bar all ingress into the forbidden land. And again, when he paints the Mountain of Five Treasures, the vast Kinchen Junga, we seem to see a spiritual citadel towering high up above all thought, a magnificent expression, as it were of the Mahayana. This is because the artist himself is intensely aware of all the hidden mysteries in these high regions."

During the many years that the artist spent in India and Asia, the theme of the Himalayas turned into the main motif of his landscape painting, developing into a deep philosophical and aesthetic doctrine. On the one hand it reflected his spiritual quest and vision, on the other, his artistic and scientific discoveries were made during his expeditions in the dunes of Central Asia and the frozen plateaus of Tibet. At the same time, Roerich's Himalayan series immortalized the mythology of these remote regions,





Nicholas Roerich, **Painting (Himalayan Landscape)**, Tempera on Paper, 44x28.5 cm, Acc. No. 3283

history captured in the meditating saints and rishis, invoking the great migration of people over time, seen against the majestic panorama of snowy mountain peaks. As Roerich wrote in his 1928 article ‘Treasure of Snow’:

As you ascend the peaks of the Himalayas and look out over the cosmic ocean of clouds below, you see the ramparts of endless rocky chains and the pearly strings of cloudlets. Behind them march the gray elephants of heaven, the heavy monsoon clouds. Is this not a cosmic picture that fills you with the understanding of some great creative manifestation?...

Where can one have such joy as when the sun is upon the Himalayas when the blue is more intense than sapphires when from the far distance the glaciers glitter as incomparable gems. All religions, all teachings, are synthesized in the Himalayas.

Nicholas Roerich’s art and his personality made a deep impression on many of his contemporaries: poet

Rabindranath Tagore, after meeting the artist in London in 1920, wrote an article for Arts magazine, New York, published the following year, emphasizing the unique style and spiritual content of Roerich’s paintings.

In the exhibition’s catalog titled Roerich (1924) published by Corona Mundi the artist’s creative method was characterized as “determination of a defined style of expression. This style has a deep underlying significance, for it again reveals the characteristic greatness of the man who studies with the understanding not merely of his own time but of all time. Thus the image which he creates possesses the luster of spiritual sight. It is not merely terrestrial beauty concerned with detail; something has been added, something immortal.” With Tagore’s recommendation, the Russian artist’s poems appeared in English translation, in the journal Modern Review, in Calcutta in 1920.

Roerich’s new series of works ‘Banners of the East’, ‘His Country’, ‘Maitreya’, ‘Strongholds of Tibet’, ‘Himalayas’ and ‘Kuluta’ inspired by his long and trying expeditions to



Nicholas Roerich, **Painting (Himalayan Landscape)**, Tempera on Paper, 44x28.5 cm, Acc. No. 3280



Nicholas Roerich, **Chintamani**, Image Courtesy: The International Centre of the Roerichs, Moscow



Central Asia and the Himalayan regions were followed up by exhibitions across America, including New York, and later in Indian cities as well, attracting the attention of a wide audience.

At the end of the artist's major expedition, in 1928, the family settled in the Kullu Valley in Naggar, with a magnificent view of the valley and the surrounding mountains. Here they established their home and the headquarters of Urusvati, the Himalayan Research Institute, which was founded to study the results of their expeditions. The institute's activities included botanical, anthropological, and ethnological-linguistic studies, as well as the exploration of archaeological sites.

From the early 1930s, Nicholas Roerich's paintings appeared on permanent display in Indian museums and private collections. According to archival resources, one of the first paintings of the artist donated to the Museum in India was his painting *Messenger* (1924), executed for the Theosophical Society in Adyar. The museum was dedicated to the founder of the society—Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Roerich's painting became a central nucleus for the future art collection.

Many artists' paintings acquired for state museums during these years were occasionally patronized by the ruling families of the Maharajas of Indore, Trivandrum, Mysore, Baroda, and others. At the same time, municipal authorities, universities, and educational institutions set up the collections of N. Roerich's artworks; amongst them, the most prominent collections were formed at the Allahabad Municipal Museum, and Varanasi's Bharat Kala Bhavan. Most of these paintings were generously donated by the artist for the cause of the development of art in the country and the growth of museums.

The second group of paintings was gifted by N. Roerich in 1934 on the occasion of the foundation of the Roerich Center of Art and Culture under the auspice of the Allahabad Municipal Museum.

In 1932, Bharat Kala Bhavan published the first catalogue of Roerich's works from its collection. Art historian and adviser for the Maharaja of Trivandrum Dr. James H. Cousins initiated an exhibition and the purchase of Roerich's paintings for the first art gallery – Shri Chitralayam which opened in 1935.



Nicholas Roerich, *He who hastens*, Image Courtesy: Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York





Nicholas Roerich, **Warrior of light**, Image Courtesy: Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York





Nicholas Roerich, **Painting (Himalayan Landscape)**, Tempera on Paper, 44x28.5 cm, Acc. No. 3281

A sign of the deep appreciation and acknowledgment of Nicholas Roerich's art in India was the fact that all three museums instituted special halls, named after the Roerichs, that were exclusively dedicated to the works of the Russian master and his son, Svetoslav (1904-1993).

Between 1932 and 1947, the exhibition of Nicholas Roerich's paintings travelled across many Indian cities, including Lucknow (1936), Trivandrum (1937, 1941), Mysore (1939, 1942), Indore (1941), Benares (1932), Allahabad (1933), Hyderabad (1939, 1943-44), Ahmedabad (1939, 1941), Lahore (1940), Bombay (1940), Madras (1924, 1941), and Delhi (1947).

During this period collections of well-known institutions like the Asiatic Society in Calcutta, Maha-Bodhi Society in Sarnath, J.S. Bose Memorial Trust in Calcutta Theosophical Society in Adyar, Allahabad University, and Vishva-Bharati University in Shantiniketan were enriched by N. Roerich's masterpieces which were generously donated by the Russian master himself.

Despite the distant and isolated location of Kullu Valley, Roerich maintained a regular correspondence with prominent public figures, politicians, scientists, artists, poets, and writers of the time; amongst them was Rabindranath Tagore and members of his family, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, Swami Jagadishvarananda, James Henry Cousins, Anagarika Dharmapala, Ramananda Chatterjee, Jawaharlal Nehru, Ordhendra Coomar Ganguly, Bireswar Sen, Asit Kumar Haldar, and Rai Krishnadasa. A prolific writer, Roerich also contributed hundreds of articles to Indian journals and periodicals; for more than a decade, a series of his articles and essays known as Diary Leaves was published in English and local languages in Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and other states.

His books were published in India and abroad such as Altay-Himalaya, Shambhala, Flame in Chalice, Heart of Asia, Realm of Light, Himavat. Diary Leaves, Himalayas: The Abode of Light, and The Invincible.



Nicholas Roerich, **Painting (Himalayan Landscape)**, Tempera on Paper, 44x28.5 cm, Acc. No. 3282

Remembered as the 'Master of Mountains', Roerich as a Hindu or Buddhist, throughout his life held an almost religious reverence for the Himalayas—for, in his visionary universe, these great peaks represented the sacred symbol of spiritual ascent.

Using the methods and technique of the academic realist painting, typical of European art in the first half of the twentieth century, artist organically included elements of Asian art, religions, and beliefs, symbols, and signs into mountain scenery thus, expanding the role and meaning of 'landscape painting'.

Having seen works of N. Roerich, art historian and critic O. C. Gangoly, in an article in The Pioneer, called the artist 'the wizard of Eastern landscapes, who sublimates realistic senses to the dizzy heights of Divine dreamlands'.

A number of artists, particularly in the northern states of India, were influenced by Roerich's Himalayan landscapes and thus, formed a certain 'stream' in Indian art, a kind of school as it were, which specialized in the genre of

mountain scapes, portraying the rich natural and cultural diversity of the Himalayas. Amongst them are distinctive works by Bireshwar Sen, Mritinjoy Chakravorty, Badrinath Arya, Serbjeet Singh, B.C. Gue, M.Kaur, and many others.

After 1947, the major collections of Nicholas Roerich's paintings in India were formed in the Chandigarh Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, Birla Academy of Art and Culture in Kolkata, as well as N. Roerich Art Gallery in Naggar, Kullu, the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (PUSA), and the Chitrakala Parishad Gallery in Bangalore.

The first commemorative exhibition of Nicholas Roerich's work was held in January 1948 in Delhi on the initiative of M. S. Randhawa, the then Deputy Commissioner of Delhi and a known patron of the arts. The exhibition was inaugurated by the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru. As AIFACS where the exhibition was held did not have a permanent gallery of its own, many of Roerich's paintings were given on loan to the Indian Agricultural Research Institute and later, in 1968, six canvases were





Nicholas Roerich, **Devita**, Image Courtesy: Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York





Nicholas Roerich, **Painting (Himalayan Landscape)**, Tempera on Paper, 43.5x28.5 cm, Acc. No. 3284

purchased by the Union Territory Administration for the Chandigarh Art Gallery and Museum.

With the opening of NGMA in New Delhi six mountain studies from the PUSA were acquired for the Gallery’s collection. For decades several Himalayan series paintings were displayed in the Reading Room of the PUSA library while many large canvases remain concealed in storage and unknown to the general public.

There are several important private collections and galleries in India where N. Roerich’s works occupies a prominent place. Amongst them, a collection of H. K. Kejriwal from Bengaluru which also was exhibited several times in public galleries; a collection of Birla Academy of Art and Culture, as well as personal Birla family collection in Kolkata. There are several paintings in the collection of well-known art connoisseur Kiran Naddar and her private Museum in New Delhi.

There is a comparatively newer collection of Roerich’s works at the Delhi Art Gallery and its private Drishyakala

Museum set up inside the picturesque environs of the Red Fort. This collection comprises Roerich’s works from different periods, including works on paper, cardboard, board, and canvas.

Alongside museums and galleries, there are several memorial sites associated with Nicholas Roerich and his family like hill stations Darjeeling and Kalimpong in West Bengal, village Naggar in Kullu Valley, Leh in Ladakh, and Keylong in Lahaul where artist conducted summer research expeditions. At present in India, there are two museum complexes in the name of Roerichs, one of them is situated in Kullu Valley, in Naggar, and another one, in Tataguni Estate in Bangalore where Svetoslav and Devika Rani Roerich lived. These museums include a large territory of land, art gallery, studio, library, garden, and memorial house and run under auspices of the International Roerich Memorial Trusts which includes a team of art experts, historians, curators, and government officials.

According to the Archaeological Survey of India - in 1979 the works of N. Roerich were recognized by the



Nicholas Roerich, **Dwelling of the thakurs**, 1932, Tempera on Paper, 36.3x25.2 cm, Acc. No. 4007

Government as a part of the National art treasure, along with the works of eight Indian masters such as Nandalal Bose, Jamini Roy, Sailoz Mookherjea, and Tagores.

With the changing role of museums in modern society, and a growing number of challenges, new standards, and demands set for museum collections, the study and preservation of Nicholas Roerich’s artistic legacy in India

holds a special significance and is an inseparable part of the national cultural heritage.

Roerich’s highly idealistic concepts, experiments, and ideas, manifested by him through his artistic creations, continue to be important not only for their historical, aesthetical and ethical value but also their relevance to the issues faced by present-day society.







Krishen Khanna



Krishen Khanna, *Sitting Figure*, Pen and ink on paper, 22x33cm, Acc. No.2709





Krishen Khanna, **Drawing**, Ink on paper, 22.5x30.7 cm, Acc. No.2895

## ART DIALOGUE

### IN CONVERSATION WITH KRISHEN KHANNA

Vandana Kalra

*At 96, you still paint every day. You recently had a virtual exhibition from your Gurugram home. How would you describe your journey and aspirations as an artist?*

I am an artist and aspirations come from one painting to another. It's not like I think 'now I want to become the god of painting in this country and people must listen to me.' I am just a human being and am fulfilling my abilities. Hopefully, I will do that till the end of my days. I had artistic predilections and was encouraged by my parents to pursue it. I had no idea that I would become an artist. It's a good thing to be able to appreciate art, you don't necessarily have to be an artist. I followed the usual line of education that most people in my family did, it (art) developed as a thing within itself. My love for the image has grown over the years and it's for me to solve the problems that occur during the process of making my art. I can't look at others for answers.

*The first public display of your work was at the exhibition celebrating the diamond jubilee of Bombay Art Society in 1948. If you could recall the events that led to it?*

My wife (Renu) was on a ship when she met someone who knew SB Palsikar, who wrote a letter to him, asking him to see my work. One day, Palsikar arrived at my place and asked if he could take a small canvas that depicted crowds reading the newspaper after Gandhiji's assassination (News of Gandhiji's Death, 1948). He put it right at the centre of

the exhibition that also had works by Husain, Souza and Gaitonde. Everyone seemed to be wondering who the work belonged to. After a few days, Husain contacted me and suggested we meet. He came to my Churchgate home and we had a long chat. That was the beginning of our long friendship. It also led to my first Husain. During his visit, he saw a book I had, Clive Bell's Art and borrowed it, but he happened to leave it in a taxi. A few days later, he sent a parcel with a painting and a note in Urdu, apologizing for losing the book. It was a painting of a mother and child and I still have it. I have two or three very old paintings of his.

*If you could recall the camaraderie shared between the members of the Progressive Artists' Group.*

The group came together and I joined later, but we were all basically friends. Sab dost the. We discussed anything and everything. There was not a painting that happened among any one of us that wasn't discussed at that time. I was very fortunate that I had such wonderful people who also had wonderful insights into art. The discussions continued even after we all went to different cities, countries. We would write letters to each other, stayed in touch with each other. Husain often visited me and stayed with me in Chennai, Kanpur, Shimla and Delhi. I stayed with Raza when I travelled to Paris, and so on; several of our letters to each other have been published. I now miss the conversations we had because all my real old friends are dead.



*You were pursuing art alongside your career as a banker at Grindlays Bank for almost fifteen years before you left your job in 1961. Did you consider quitting earlier?*

I wasn't unhappy at the bank but gradually I began to find it difficult to pursue both professions, which is when I quit. On my last day at work, Husain, Bal Chhabda and Gaitonde were at the door waiting for me while I was attending my farewell party. Inside, they were making pronouncements that one day I will be Michelangelo, and I was gifted a ledger. Meanwhile, the three of them were outside, saying 'Nikal, nikal!'. As soon as I came out, Bal Chhabda took my tie off, saying I wouldn't need it anymore. We went out for dinner at a place called The Coronation Durbar. Raza threw a party in Paris to celebrate.

The following years were full of hard work. I had saved around Rs 25,000 and was confident I would do well, but we had to do much more. My first work was sold to (nuclear physicist) Homi Bhabha through Husain. I travelled to Europe, the US and international exhibitions followed. I was also working for Kumar Gallery in Delhi that used to hire artists on a monthly stipend of Rs 500, in return for a work of art. When Tyeb Mehta was moving to Delhi, I asked the gallery to hire him as well. Kumar said he'd give him Rs 250 a month for a painting. I told him it should be more. When he asked, 'Do you think he is as good as you?' I said, 'He is much better'. That's how all of us survived, by helping each other. There was love and friendship.



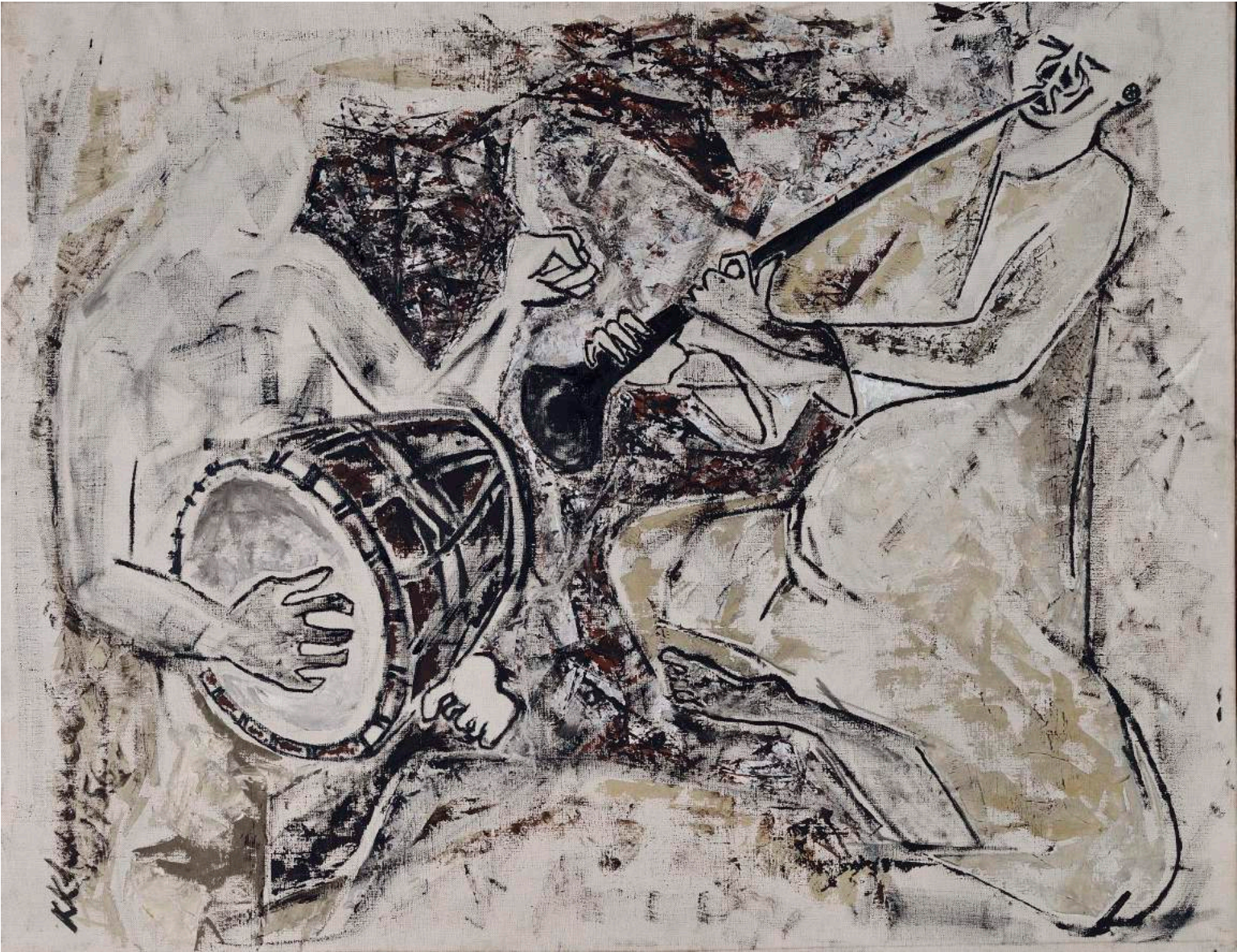
Krishan Khanna, **Untitled**, Oil on canvas 1, 90.5x91.5 cm, 1978, Acc. No.3944

*You drew Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper when you were just seven. You have painted it again in more recent years.*

My father was visiting Milan and returned with a small print of Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper. He tried to explain the work to us, discussing concepts like daghabaazi and betrayal. He also taught me the displacement of people in the frame through the work. I tried to copy it on paper and though I wasn't very successful, he was impressed. The theme stayed with me and has recurred in my work subsequently. In The Last Bite (2005), I drew all of us—Manjit Bawa, Akbar Padamsee, FN Souza—gathered around a Christ-like Husain at a dhaba. We inspired each other and also criticized each other. They were all good artists and great people.

*Born in Lyallpur (now Faisalabad, Pakistan), you spent your childhood in Lahore. After the Partition, you moved to Shimla with your family, but the trauma of the period has stayed with you and has reflected in your work over the years. If you could share your thoughts when you look back.*

When World War II broke out I was in England, studying at the Imperial Service College in Windsor. I was 17 and had been there for four-and-a-half years, but my parents asked me to return. I didn't want to but I did. I joined a college in Multan, and we later shifted to Lahore, where I started working at a printing press. When the



Krishen Khanna , **Nageswaram Player**, Oil on Canvas, 86.3x67.3 cm, Acc. No. 1673



Krishen Khanna, **AD-Continuum**, Sumi-e ink on paper, Acc. No.3256



Partition happened, I took a week off, hoping that things would become better but I soon realised that was not to be and we moved to Shimla. We took the things we could and the rest was left behind. I am grateful that our lives were saved. Both sides suffered, there was so much human loss. The trauma I saw has stayed with me and the memories surface periodically. It will continue to be part of my work.

*The bandwallahs have also continued to be your protagonists for a long time. I believe several of them crossed over to India at the same time as you.*



Krishen Khanna , **Captain dentist pesika awaits clients**,  
Oil on Canvas, 98x172 cm, Acc. No. 13986

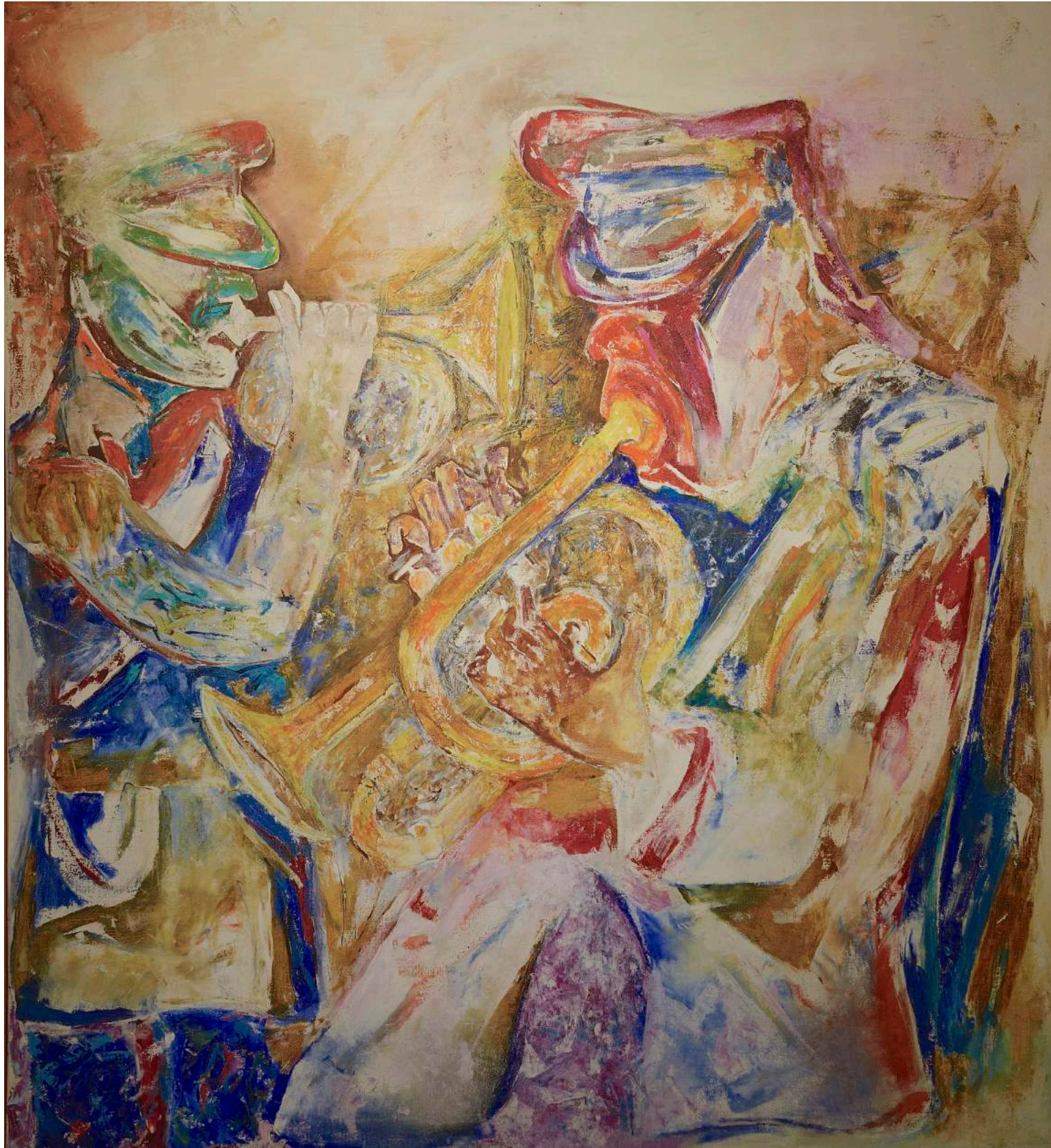
My father was visiting Milan and returned with a small print of Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper. He tried to explain the work to us, discussing concepts like daghabaazi and betrayal. He also taught me the displacement of people in the frame through the work. I tried to copy it on paper and though I wasn't very successful, he was impressed. The theme stayed with me and has recurred in my work subsequently.

In a way, bandwallahs are a relic of the past, a legacy of the British rule. I was in my school band when I was in England. I did the marchpast and so on, and hence have any affinity towards the bandwallahs. The uniform adds grandeur but also gives them a kind of anonymity. Now, of course, they have moved away from the British regimental marches to belting out film songs. When the Partition happened, they too had to get out, like the rest of us. They were in their semi tunics and so forth. I observed them over the years. In the 70s, when I was at Garhi studios (Delhi), there was a plot of land where they came and practiced. They dress up but are actually in tatters. It's grandiose and comic, but also tragic at the same time.



Krishen Khanna  
**Untitled**  
Conté on paper  
64x100 cm  
Acc. No. 13486





Krishan Khanna, **Practice Session**, Oil on Canvas, 134.5x147 cm, Acc. No.13107

My paintings are dependent to a great degree on a poetic image. If you paint something without poetry or music in it, then you are just throwing colours. A painting should have ideas, thoughts, words, poems... that's how poetry grows. That's also how paintings are—it doesn't live because it costs 50,000 pounds, nobody remembers that and the amount doesn't live forever either, but the painting does.

---



Krishan Khanna, **Drawing**, Ink on Paper, 19.7x31.8 cm, Acc. No. 2854

***In the 1950s and '60s, you also experimented with abstract art. Why didn't you continue with the genre?***

I intermittently do several things. I had some shows of abstract art and then moved on. It's a chance method of seeing. For instance, at a museum in Tokyo I had seen a screen with crows painted on it. Years later, I saw a slide of a photograph of the crows taken by me. When I projected it on a wide-angle projector, the whole image flooded my studio with crows. At first, I thought it would make a wonderful painting but then decided to photograph it. What a classic photograph it made. So god, who was watching me, was telling me, 'I am giving you an opening for another thing.' I pursued photography for two-and-a-half years and had exhibitions of that as well... If you keep on repeating something, you become stale. Even the bandwallahs I have

done, there are no two pictures that are alike. They are all different. I am probably painting my last bandwallah now.

***You also find inspiration in poetry and literature. You made four works based on Bertolt Brecht's The Drowned Girl.***

I did BA (Honours) in literature and have read a great deal, poetry too. It's at the back of my mind all the time. My paintings are dependent to a great degree on a poetic image. If you paint something without poetry or music in it, then you are just throwing colours. A painting should have ideas, thoughts, words, poems... that's how poetry grows. That's also how paintings are—it doesn't live because it costs 50,000 pounds, nobody remembers that and the amount doesn't live forever either, but the painting does.





Krishen Khanna, **Black Truck**, Oil on Canvas, 171x122 cm, Acc. No. 2884

I was extremely moved by Brecht's The Drowned Girl. I first read the poem in a book I borrowed from Ebrahim Alkazi and decided to paint it. I really admire Brecht and also visited his archive when I was in Germany.

***What are your thoughts about Indian art now? Also, do you think it is important for artists to respond to their surroundings?***

Artists are not reporters and it is not our job to report, but when you are living in a set of circumstances, the

import of the circumstances does percolate into whatever you are doing—that's what stays behind and becomes indicative of a certain period.

There have been some wonderful paintings that have been made and they are still there. Now, there are new people coming up. We have to see what happens, how they respond to their circumstances. It's a long haul. Good art is living, it's like human beings—they grow into something else than what they started from. The great things done in the past can become reference points in some cases.



Krishen Khanna, **Bandwala**, Oil on canvas, 178x125 cm, Acc. No.13108





NGMA's Art Journal launched on  
May 19 can be accessed on NGMA's website.



National Gallery of Modern Art  
Jaipur House, Sher Shah Road, India Gate  
New Delhi - 110003, India  
[www.ngmaindia.gov.in](http://www.ngmaindia.gov.in)