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978-0-521-05273-3 - The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920

Tapati Guha-Thakurta

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This book offers a path-breaking analysis of the transformations that occurred in the art and aesthetic values of Bengal during the colonial and nationalist periods. Tapati Guha-Thakurta moves beyond most existing assumptions and narratives to explore the complexities and diversities of the changes generated by Western contacts and nationalist preoccupations in art. She examines the shifts both in the forms and practices of painting as well as in the ideas and opinions about Indian art during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The author investigates the complex processes of westernisation of Calcutta's art world: the shifting status of artisans and artists, the emergence of new professional and commercial opportunities and the permeation of Western standards and techniques that both created a new Indian 'high art' and transformed popular commercial art. Against this background, she analyses the role and nature of nationalist ideology in art, tracing its changing priorities over the period and the multiplicity of attitudes and convictions about 'Indian' art. The study deals particularly with the ways in which a dominant nationalist discourse evolved in the Swadeshi period and was mobilised to the cause of a new movement. Led by the reformist art teacher, E. B. Havell, and the pioneer artist, Abanindranath Tagore, it staked its exclusive claim to artistic regeneration, the recovery of tradition and the creation of a new 'national art'. The author shows how the flourishing of an alternative 'Indian-style' painting was tied to the reconstruction of an Indian aesthetic, to a new vocabulary of art criticism and a new language of aesthetic discourse. These orientalist and nationalist formulations of Indian art, she argues, operated within a wider milieu of aesthetic self-awareness and a thriving middle-class art culture in Bengal.

The making of a new 'Indian' art will be widely read by students and specialists of South Asian studies and art history as well as by Orientalists.

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Abanindranath Tagore, 'Bharat Mata' (water-colour, 1905).

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Fellow in History, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta



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To Ma and Baba

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Abbreviations

AGRPI	Annual General Report on Public Instruction, Bengal
BGP/E	Bengal Government General Department, Education Proceedings
IOLR	India Office Library and Records, London
IM	Indian Museum, Calcutta
ISOA	Indian Society of Oriental Art
JISOA	Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art
JIAA	Journal of the Indian Academy of Art
JIAI	Journal of Indian Art and Industry
NGMA	National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi
RBM	Rabindra Bharati University Museum, Calcutta
RBS	Rabindra Bharati Society, Calcutta
V & A	Victoria & Albert Museum, London
VBQ	Visva Bharati Quarterly
VM	Victoria Memorial, Calcutta

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A comment is necessary on my transliteration of Bengali and, occasionally, Sanskrit words. For the sake of convenience, I have avoided the use of diacritical marks and have tried to stick, as far as possible, to the phonetic spelling of words. The difference between the palatal and dental s, though pronounced the same way in Bengali, is indicated through the respective uses of sh and s. There has been an exception, however, regarding proper nouns like Silpa-sastra, Sukracharya or Santiniketan, where I have retained the spellings which were used in the writings of the time or which are in general usage.

<i>adarsha</i>	ideal
<i>alpana</i>	patterns drawn on the floor by women during festivals or rituals
<i>andarmahal</i>	inner rooms of a mansion, inhabited by women-folk
<i>antarmahal</i>	inner, private space
<i>atikrama</i>	transgression
<i>babu</i>	a title (usually respectful) affixed to the name of a Bengali gentleman
<i>baithak-khana</i>	drawing rooms, or special house for parties and entertaining guests
<i>baul</i>	itinerant folk singers of Bengal
<i>bawarchi</i>	cook
<i>bhadralok</i>	Bengali middle-class gentlemen
<i>bhakti</i>	devotion
<i>bhanga/bhangi</i>	inflections, posture
<i>bhava</i>	emotion, feeling, sentiment
<i>bhavatmaka</i>	centred around <i>bhava</i>
<i>bhava-vyanjana</i>	the evocation and intricate play of sentiment
<i>bidi</i>	country-made cigarettes

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Glossary

<i>chalchitra</i>	paintings decorating the outer frame in the images of goddess Durga
<i>chaprasi</i>	attendant
<i>chitra</i>	picture, painting
<i>chitrakar</i>	folk painter
<i>dakshiner</i>	southern
<i>devi</i>	goddess
<i>dhyana</i>	meditation
<i>dhyana-yoga</i>	profound meditation
<i>ek-chala</i>	images of goddess Durga and her family under a single semi-circular frame
<i>guru</i>	teacher, mentor, spiritual leader
<i>kala</i>	art, skill, any mechanical or fine art
<i>kamar, kumor</i>	potters and claymodellers
<i>karigar</i>	artisan, craftsman
<i>karigari</i>	workmanship
<i>kulin</i>	Brahmin of high lineage
<i>mahanta</i>	head priest of the temple
<i>mantra</i>	religious incantations or magical formula
<i>maya</i>	illusion
<i>naksha</i>	design
<i>nayak</i>	hero
<i>nayika</i>	heroine
<i>padavali</i>	Vaishnava poetry
<i>pat</i>	folk paintings (narrative scrolls or single-frame images)
<i>pata-chitra</i>	as above
<i>patua</i>	folk painter
<i>pauranic</i>	pertaining to epics, mythology or the Puranas
<i>prabasi</i>	person or community residing outside their homeland
<i>qalam</i>	traditional 'school' of painters
<i>raga</i>	musical mode
<i>rakhi-bandan</i>	festive occasion, when <i>rakhis</i> (decorative wrist bands) are exchanged between friends or brothers and sisters
<i>rasa</i>	aesthetic tenor, aesthetics
<i>rishi</i>	sage, seer
<i>rupa</i>	form, beauty
<i>rupatmaka</i>	centred around <i>rupa</i>

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<i>sadhana</i>	penance, dedication
<i>santan</i>	children
<i>saundarya</i>	beauty
<i>shankhari</i>	conchshell worker
<i>shastrachar</i>	conformity to the prescriptions of the Shastras
<i>shastric</i>	pertaining to the Shastras
<i>shakh</i>	fancy
<i>shikar</i>	hunting session
<i>shiksha</i>	training, education
<i>shilpa</i>	art, craft
<i>sutradhar</i>	carpenters or masons
<i>swabhavikata</i>	naturalism
<i>swarnakar</i>	goldsmith
<i>swechchhachar</i>	licence to do as one pleases
<i>thakur-dalan</i>	an altar, situated in the courtyard of large mansions, where images are worshipped and <i>pujas</i> performed.
<i>uchcha shilpa</i>	high art
<i>vyatikram</i>	deviation, distortion
<i>yaksha</i>	tree-god, a class of semi-divine being
<i>yogi</i>	ascetic, devotee
<i>zamindar</i>	member of landowning gentry

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Preface

The research for this work was begun in Calcutta in the early 1980s and concentrated between 1984 and 1988, when it was written up as a D.Phil. thesis at the University of Oxford. The many years that went into the writing of the dissertation and its conversion into the book have left a long trail of debts. What I write here remains, inevitably, an inadequate record of all the help that has made possible this end product.

A Junior Research Fellowship at the Department of History, Calcutta University and, later, the West Bengal State Scholarship in History provided the main funds for this work in Calcutta and Oxford. In Oxford, the Frere Award and grants from the Bryce and Read funds and the Radhakrishnan Memorial Trust helped bear the additional expenses of field work and photographing of pictures. The Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, gave me the much-needed opportunity to continue full-time research; St Antony's College, Oxford and the Charles Wallace India Trust in London also helped with facilities and funds in the last stage of preparing the book.

The attempts of this study to move between the disciplines of history and art history has had its pitfalls, particularly in the collection and presentation of visual material. The lack of proper documentation of the pictures of this period and the frequent absence of photographic facilities are reflected in the unevenness of the quality and range of illustrations in this book. In a situation where the restoration of oil paintings is almost non-existent and such pictures are neither systematically collected or catalogued, the gaps are specially evident with regard to Academic oil paintings and art-school work in Calcutta of the late nineteenth century. Access to the paintings of Abanindranath Tagore and the Bengal School has been easier. However, rather than always following up the original works of various artists in scattered holdings, my study has made use of the

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rich material that presented itself in the extensive reproductions of paintings in contemporary journals and books. This has helped often to place paintings within a particular date. In any case, the painting of these pictures has been as important to me as the way in which they were propagated and popularised. Wherever known, the locations of the original pictures are cited, even if the photograph is from a reproduction; where the reproduction of a painting in a journal has been my sole referent to the work, only that source is mentioned.

All the museums and private collections that have contributed to my research are listed in the photographic acknowledgements and the bibliography. But I wish especially to acknowledge here the generous help I have received from Betty Tyers and Robert Skelton at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London; from Andrew Topsfield at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; in Calcutta, from the staff of the Rabindra Bharati Society, the Rabindra Bharati University Museum, the Victoria Memorial, the Birla Academy of Art and Culture, and from Sumitendranath and Shyamasree Tagore. I am also very grateful, for the assistance that was always forthcoming from the staff of the National Library in Calcutta, the Rabindra Bhavan archives in Santiniketan, the Indian Institute Library in Oxford, and the India Office Library and Records in London. A special thank you is due to the friends in Calcutta – Dilip Banerjee, Arup Sengupta and Ruchir Joshi – who did much of the photographing of pictures, devoting a lot of time and effort and often working under very difficult conditions. My thanks also to Chitrabani, Calcutta, for the quick processing and printing of many of the illustrations, and to Cambridge University Press, for the care with which the pictures have been reproduced.

For the interest and encouragement that launched me on this work and sustained me through its difficulties, I remember with gratitude my teacher, Rajat Ray of Presidency College, Calcutta, and the many stimulating discussions with Ratnabali Chatterjee. The supervision of Tapan Raychaudhuri both streamlined the work and opened up new dimensions. What meant even more was the warmth and hospitality which Tapanda and Hashidi lavished on me, providing me with a home in Oxford. Opportunities to discuss my work, at various stages, with the late Jaya Appasamy in Delhi, B. N. Goswamy in Chandigarh, Ronald Robinson, Ranajit Guha, Mildred Archer and Robert Skelton in England were very rewarding. I am also indebted to Dipesh Chakravarty, Sumit Sarkar, Barun De

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and, particularly, to Partha Chatterjee for their critical comments and suggestions on my thesis. On the side of more technical help, Hari Vasudevan deserves foremost credit for his speedy typing of large sections of the voluminous manuscript, and his competent editing. I must also thank Arun Ghosh of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences for assistance with preparing the index.

Throughout, the support of my parents, family and close friends has been vital for my morale and confidence. My parents, though often far away, were always there – to them, I dedicate this book. In Calcutta, Tapti, Joya and Kumkum, and in Oxford, Amrita, Parul and Tanvir kept me going through all the ups and downs of thesis writing. Mrinalini arrived between the thesis and the book, and made all the difference. Leaving her behind was one of the most difficult aspects of finishing this book. As always, the most crucial acknowledgement trails at the end. Hari has given unsparingly of his time and attention at every stage of this work, but for which it could never have been completed. For him, no public words of gratitude can ever suffice.