The Making of an 'Indian style' of Painting: Abanindranth Tagore

The beginnings of the formulation of an 'Indian style' of painting, independent of European influences, can be traced to the artist Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951) and Ernest Binfield Havell (1861–1934). Havell was the superintendent of the Government School of Art in Calcutta from 1896 to 1905 and a leading voice in calling for the reform of the art education system in India. Under his influence, Tagore rejected oil painting and realism, which were the predominant forms of painting taught at colonial art schools that trained students in European academic art. Instead, he began incorporating what could be considered more 'local' styles and themes into his work, which we can see for instance, in his series of *Krishna Lila paintings* (1895–1905), portraying narratives from the life of the Hindu god Krishna.

Interwoven Indigenism

Tagore's paintings from this series, such as the *Birth of Krishna, The Toll of Love* and *Krishna the Boatman* are reminiscent of Mughal miniature paintings. In these, he mimics manuscript pages by incorporating elements such as dense applications of colour, calligraphic text and the use of gold leaf. At the same time, we see how both the Hindu subject and the composition of the paintings were inspired by Rajput court paintings like these. By weaving together Rajput and Mughal traditions, Tagore created a new language of indigenism and gave rise to a form of art that integrated the region's diverse histories.

'In Krishna Lila, Abanindranath does revive the indigenous but does so within the contours of a new heterogeneity, a new cultural space, growing out of cultural cross-connections beginning to emerge from this eclectic conundrum.'
R Siva Kumar

This return to 'local' subject matter and traditions was in fact a direct result of the anticolonial agitations developing across the country through the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

Envisioning the Nation

Over the years, Tagore's works became bolder in their assertion of a new Indian aesthetic and identity, which we see prominently in his iconic painting, titled *Bharat Mata* (1905), which means Mother India. While the image of India as a maternal figure was already proliferating in popular culture during the late-19th century, Tagore's painting may have been the first artwork to illustrate this idea. As we can see here, he depicts a four-armed ascetic woman wearing a saffron sari and holding a rosary, piece of white cloth, manuscript and tufts of paddy. The objects she is carrying can be seen as 'attributes' or emblems of nationalist aspiration, namely food, clothing, learning and spiritual knowledge.

Tagore had originally conceived of his figure as *Bangamata* or *Mother Bengal* in 1905 in response to the partition of the province of Bengal as part of the British colonial policy of 'divide and rule'. The division, which separated the largely Muslim eastern areas from the Hindu western areas was met with great opposition and gave rise to a new tide of nationalist sentiment. This eventually led to calls for *swaraj* or self-rule and the Swadeshi movement during which Indians vowed to only use goods made in India. Tagore soon changed the title of his work to *Bharat*

Mata to symbolise what was now a nationwide struggle for freedom, and the work became an iconic image of this movement.

Interestingly, Tagore combines a subject that is resolutely Indian with a wash technique in the background that is inspired by Japanese ink painting. Along with visual sources from Indian history, Swadeshi art in fact also looked towards East Asia as a source of inspiration. This was part of a broader movement towards Pan-Asianism inspired by dialogues between key cultural figures, especially in India and Japan. While the Swadeshi movement condemned 'foreign art', including the Academic style of Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906) and colonial art schools, Pan-Asianism allowed them to share the ideals of anti-imperialism across the continent.

Tagore's pioneering practice set the tone for artists to not only search for new idioms but to also consider their own work as political tools in the fight for freedom. His works enabled robust reconsiderations of the Indian identity and notions of liberation as well as ways in which artistic traditions and institutions could be envisioned.

Understandings of nationalism have constantly shifted over the years. Referenced here in the context of 19th to early-20th centuries in India, the term refers to a more progressive sense of the concept in light of the country's freedom movement and differs from connotations of it in the present day.

The Partition of Bengal in 1905 was a territorial division implemented by the British Raj, in its erstwhile Bengal presidency. It created a schism between the Hindu and Muslim populations of the region, and exemplified the Raj's 'divide and rule' policy in an effort to gain and maintain more power of the people of the region, as well as all of India. This policy has had long-term consequences that include sectarian differences, which sparked numerous violent riots, agitations and disputes to this day. These have most significantly included the 1947 Partition of India into independent nations India and Pakistan – at this time, Bengal was partitioned for a second time, with East Bengal becoming known as East Pakistan. In 1971 East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh, as it is known today.

The representation of the Partition depicted in this video takes reference from an archival map and is used for illustrative purposes only.

Bibliography:

Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. *The Making of a New "Indian" Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Mitter, Partha. *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-garde, 1922-1947*. London: Reaktion Books, 2007.

Mitter, Partha. *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850–1922*: *Occidental Orientations.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Ramaswamy, Sumathi. 2010. "Formal Concerns," in *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India*. London and Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 13–72.

Parimoo, Ratan. *The Paintings of the Three Tagores, Abanindranath Gaganendranath and Rabindranath: Chronology and Comparative Study*. Vadodara: Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, 1973. https://archive.org/details/dli.ministry.26570

Siva Kumar, R. *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*. Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008.