



Fig. 2.9 A cat with a prawn, cat. no. 37

There is no unanimity among the scholars on the art form—especially on the assertion that the Kalighat artists were greatly influenced by the eighteenth-century British paintings of natural history. The scholars argue that these artworks were created in their own style of *pat* painting. Jyotindra Jain, for example, when commenting on an identical painting of *Prawn and Fish*, in the Herwitz Collection, observed that

“far from the conventions of British natural history drawings, the prawn and fish depicted here appear to be pictorial counterparts of three-dimensional painted clay figures of the creatures sold at *melas* and in the bazaars around the Kalighat Temple during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries”.⁸

The V&A holds a similar painting showing a cat with a fish instead of a prawn (fig. 5.4, p. 69). The notable difference between the two is that in the VMH painting, the cat bears the holy *Vaishnava tilaka* (sacred mark) on its forehead. The painting is greatly influenced by the popular Bengali proverb, '*Biral bole maachh khabo na aansh chhonbo na kashi jabo*' ('A cat takes the resolution that it will not have fish, it will not even touch the non-vegetarian food and it will go to Kashi'). The painting shows that in spite of all its efforts, the cat cannot control its craving.

Both the paintings—*Prawn and fish* (cat. no. 40) and *Cat with fishes* (fig. 2.9)—carry Tamil inscriptions on the canvas. This probably indicates that Tamilians visited the Kalighat temple and purchased these prints as souvenir items.

The VMH holds only one lithographic print, undated, titled *A Woman seated on the floor dressing the Betel* (fig. 2.10; cat. no. 83). It is a colour lithograph based on earlier Kalighat

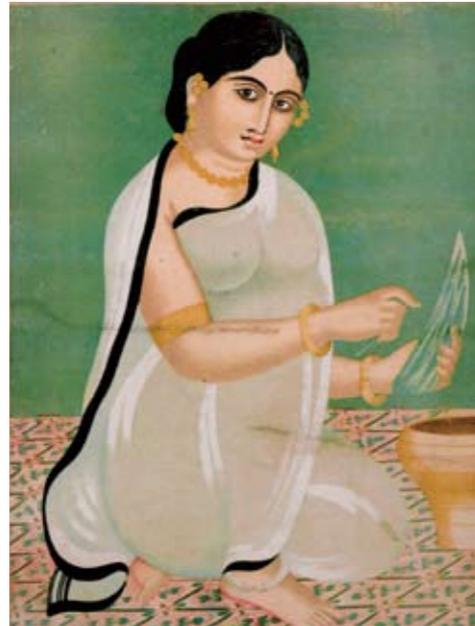


Fig. 2.10 A woman seated on the floor preparing Betel leaf, cat. no. 83



Fig. 2.11 A Courtesan with a violin, printed at Kansaripara Art Studio, lithograph on paper, c.1930 (V&A, IS.50–1968)

painting compositions. In the painting, a courtesan is seen dressing a betel leaf (*paan*). She is seen wearing a white sari, with deep black border. The print shows the lady wearing necklaces, ear-ornaments, bangles and anklets. A similar painting, *Courtesan playing a violin*, is in the V&A collection (fig. 2.11). Such lithographic prints, W.G. Archer (Keeper of the V&A's Indian Section, 1949–1959) observed, signified the gradual decline of the Kalighat art. The period of decline started in the late nineteenth century, when much cheaper lithographic prints produced commercially became available. Archer concluded that the final phase of Kalighat paintings ceased to exist after about 1930.

Conclusion

Kalighat *pats* were not just the product of a particular era, but they held up a mirror to the times. The satirical representation of the socio-cultural set up of nineteenth-century Bengal makes an acute visual statement. The most appealing aspects of the style of Kalighat painting are the wonderful gestures, flawless rhythmic strokes and quality of brushwork. The technique is quite simple, but the final outcome is bold and extremely attractive. Kalighat paintings were appreciated and remained popular because of their strong social content. In many cases, they reflected the sentiments of the lower socio-economic classes of the times.

From the early years of the twentieth century, the art of Kalighat painting was regarded as an inventive aesthetic movement in the Bengal region and it received tremendous international attention. Today, a few *patuas* of the old Kalighat school can be found mostly in the village of Naya, in the Medinipur district of West Bengal. The present-day artists depict both religious and social themes.

The paintings in the VMH collection depict a representative sample of the styles, subject matter and type of medium that the *patuas* used in the nineteenth century. In terms of comparison with other, larger collections, the VMH collection highlights important parallels. Subjects and compositions that appear in the V&A's collection of Kalighat paintings in coloured form, also occur in the VMH collection as distilled and elegant line drawings. Similarities and contrasts can also be seen amongst the natural history subjects depicted, where the VMH paintings of cockatoos and fish show differences in their colour palette with the V&A's paintings of parrots and prawns (which can be seen in this catalogue). Many similar links can be made through seeing the VMH collection alongside other collections of Kalighat paintings.

NOTES

- 1 A similar painting is titled as 'A woman selling fish', in Archer, W.G. 1971, p. 45.
- 2 This drawing is very similar to a line drawing in the V&A collection (IS.24–1952) by Nibaran Chandra Ghosh, and dated to 1880.
- 3 Archer, W.G. 1962, pl. 8
- 4 Sarkar and Mackay 2000
- 5 Jain 1999, p. 191
- 6 Knizkova 1975, pp. 67, 68
- 7 Jain 1999, p. 102, fig. 97
- 8 Jain 1999, p. 43, fig. 37



1

Religious Subjects

GODS AND GODDESSES

1. Kali

c.1860s
Watercolour on paper over lithographed outline, with tin detail
V&A, IS.3–1955

2. Kali trampling on her husband Shiva

c.1860s
Watercolour on paper over lithographed outline, with tin detail
V&A, IS.78–1959

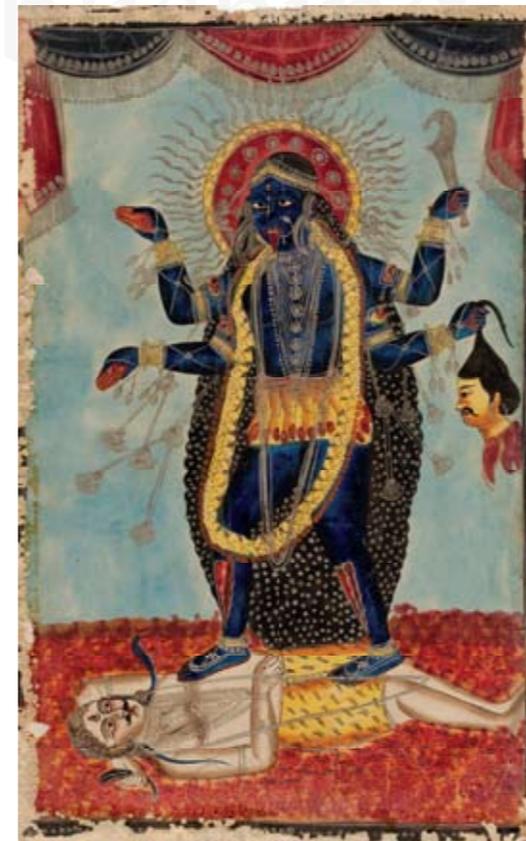
The image of Kali was the main type of *pat* (painting) that was sold as a pilgrim souvenir at the stalls around the temple at Kalighat. This composition of the Kali image (cat. no. 1) reflects the appearance of the main deity that is actually worshipped inside the temple. Her necklace of severed heads has been printed in lithographic outline and then hand painted. The image encapsulates the main characteristics of the Kalighat genre: bright colours, bold outlines, and a simple and striking visual image.

A contrasting depiction, again with a lithographed outline, shows Kali standing on her husband Shiva (cat. no. 2). Lithographic outlines were sometimes used in the mid 1800s to speed up the production of the most popular subject themes. The *patuas* used the printed outline as a rough guide, elaborating the composition with their own detail.

3. Ganesha

c.1830–1850
Watercolour on paper, with tin detail
V&A, IS.208–1950

Seated on a triangular stool, with his rat, his *vahana* (vehicle), below, this became the classic Kalighat image of Ganesha throughout the 19th century and was copied many times. The early *patuas* (painters) experimented with variations of light and dark, to show volume and shadow on different parts of the body, as can be seen on his folded legs and outstretched arms. Furniture in Kalighat paintings was always shown in a minimal way; the third leg of the stool has not been shown here, but is assumed to be in place.



2



3

45. A woman selling fish

c.1830–1850

Watercolour on paper, with tin detail
V&A, IS.215–1950

The *patuas* depicted everyday life that they saw around them, often in the form of scenes composed of one or two characters usually engaged in street activity. Women who were not courtesans would often be depicted



husking rice, or selling fish. As well as showing a market-stall fish seller, this *pat* may also be illustrating the Bengali folk tale 'The Fish Supper'.¹⁶ The story tells of a husband and wife who bought three fish at market, then argued about how many they should eat as each thought they were entitled to the larger share. The story was translated into English in the book *Bengali Household Tales* by W. McCulloch in 1912.¹⁷

Fig. 5.6 A woman selling fish

c.1800–1830

Watercolour on paper with tin detail
VMH, R9618

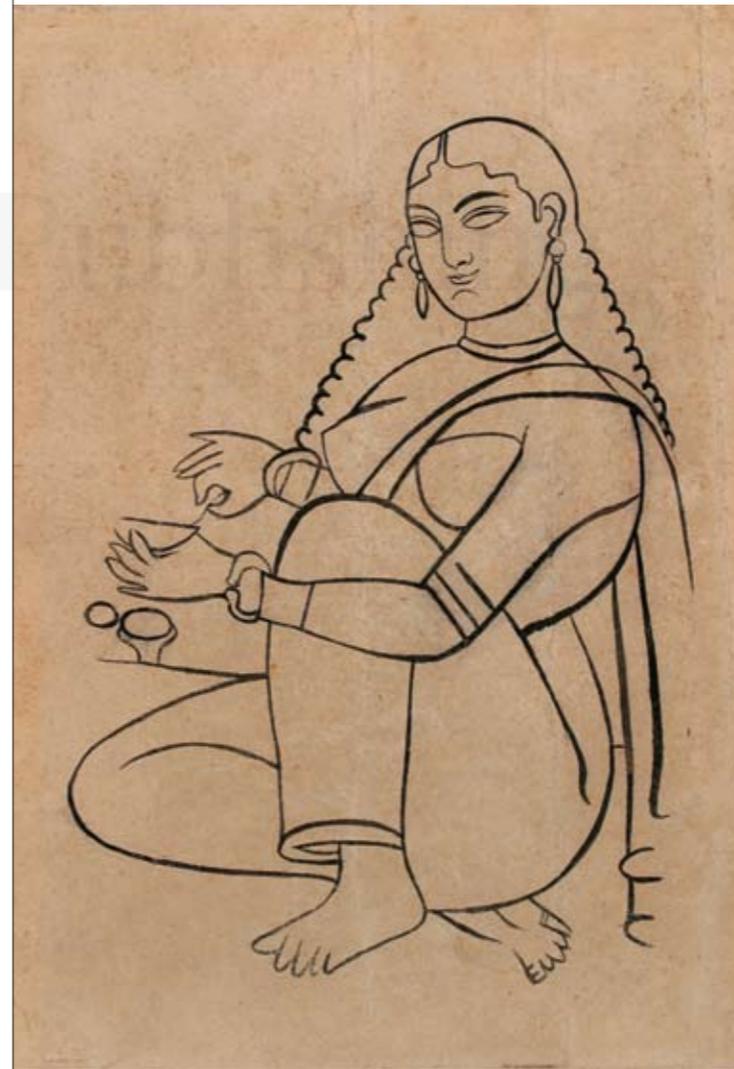


Fig. 5.6

46. A woman preparing for the night

c.1850–1890

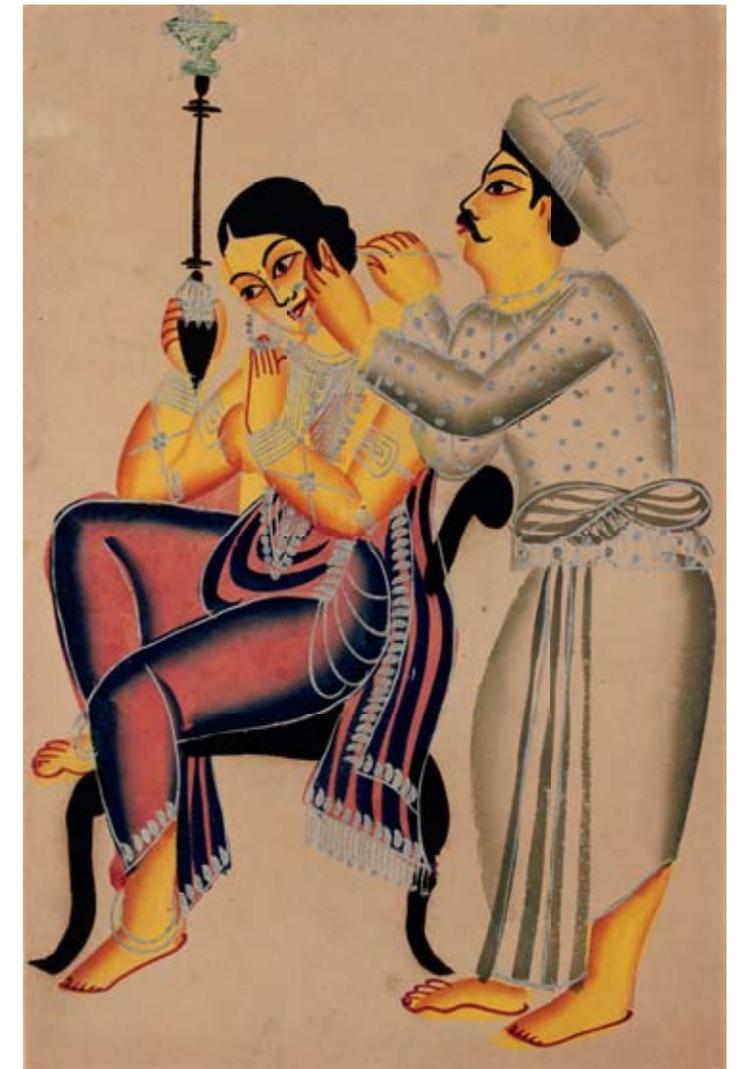
Black paint on paper, line drawing
VMH, R4500



47. A barber cleaning a woman's ear

c.1870s

Watercolour on paper, with tin detail
V&A, IS.12–1954



Many wealthy households had a barber attached to their service, to attend to all the household members' personal grooming needs. In this scene, the lady holds a hookah in her right hand suggesting she is a *bibi* (wealthy courtesan or mistress of a *babu*). The *patuas* had found a rich source-material in portraying these ladies in a variety of ways, sometimes satirising them along with their male counterparts.