

Rabindranath Tagore's Paintings in Germany

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Rabindranath Tagore felt a special relationship with Germany. This became manifest when he, on his first trip to Europe after the First World War, made a concerted effort to visit the country. This was in summer and autumn 1920. Tagore travelled in England, in France, Holland and Belgium, but when he wanted to cross the border to enter Germany, he realized that it would take at least a week for his visa application to be processed. So he had to postpone his visit to the next year. The poet's professed aim was to support and console the German people in the hour of their deep spiritual and cultural crisis. Germany had been vanquished during the war and had to accept humiliating conditions for reparation, forced on the nation by the Treaty of Versailles. This desire to support and console was inspired by a certain affinity between Tagore and German Romanticism.

Great Britain's interest in India was mostly dictated by colonial pursuit of commerce and political power. In contrast to this, Germany's desire to know and understand India never had a political or business angle. German Romantics had 'discovered' India in the early 19th century as an ideal land, onto which they could project their animosity against European civilization with its early industrialization and move towards an anonymous society. It was an ideal dream-land, they extolled, as none of them had visited India. The sparse information they garnered about India came from contemporary travelogues and from still inadequate translations of Hindu scripture. It would take another hundred years for German writers to visit India and supply eloquent, first-hand knowledge about the country.

It was in 1921 then that Rabindranath Tagore visited Germany for the first time. Tagore mesmerized his German audiences. Wherever he spoke, the halls were packed. Indeed, the newspapers reported scuffles and regular fights by people who were refused entry. The German press rose to the occasion by reporting Tagore's every movement. He was fêted as the Wise Man from the East, a Prophet, a Mystic, and a Messiah.

Tagore's poetry had a direct appeal to Germans of that generation because of its romantic flair and spiritual idealism—and yet, in all its strangeness it was easily accessible as a text. His poetry

embodied a religious imagery, essentially Vaishnava in character, which was innovative for Western ears. To them, this culture of feeling was unfamiliar in its directness, its religious eroticism and involvement with nature and the cosmos—and yet, the poetry was totally comprehensible. Tagore himself, attired in his long dark gown and with his white flowing beard and serene face, radiated a certain erotic energy.

Tagore revisited Germany in 1926 and 1930. Although the early biographies of Tagore characterize Tagore's three visits to Germany as unmitigated success stories, Tagore himself preferred to take a more detached view. In 1921, he wrote to a friend:

It has been a wonderful experience in this country for me! Such fame as I have got I cannot take at all seriously. It is too readily given, and too immediately. It has not had the perspective of time. And this is why I feel frightened and tired at it and even sad.¹

The German-speaking press was by no means unanimous in its praise. There were three major points around which the criticism of the press revolved: Tagore, a Hindu, wanted to influence Christians in their faith and ultimately convert them to Hinduism. Further, German writers deserved a slice of the Indian writer's enormous fame, as they were no less talented and relevant in their writing. Finally, Tagore's seeming 'oriental lethargy,' 'bloodlessness,' 'Indian mildness' was inimical to German or European 'dynamism,' to its 'action-oriented' mindset. It was felt that the 'dynamic' European mindset was desperately needed to support the reconstruction of the German nation after the First World War.

When Tagore visited Germany in 1930, his popularity had crossed its peak. In 1925, the last German translation of one of his books had appeared; it was the novel *Gora*. Like other publishers in Germany, Tagore's publisher, Kurt Wolff, had faced enormous difficulties on account of post-war inflation, which had caused the price of books to shoot up by a million times. By 1923, the effect of this inflation was severely felt and initiated the slow decline of Kurt Wolff's company, which had to liquidate in 1929. So, when Rabindranath arrived in Germany in 1930, he was without

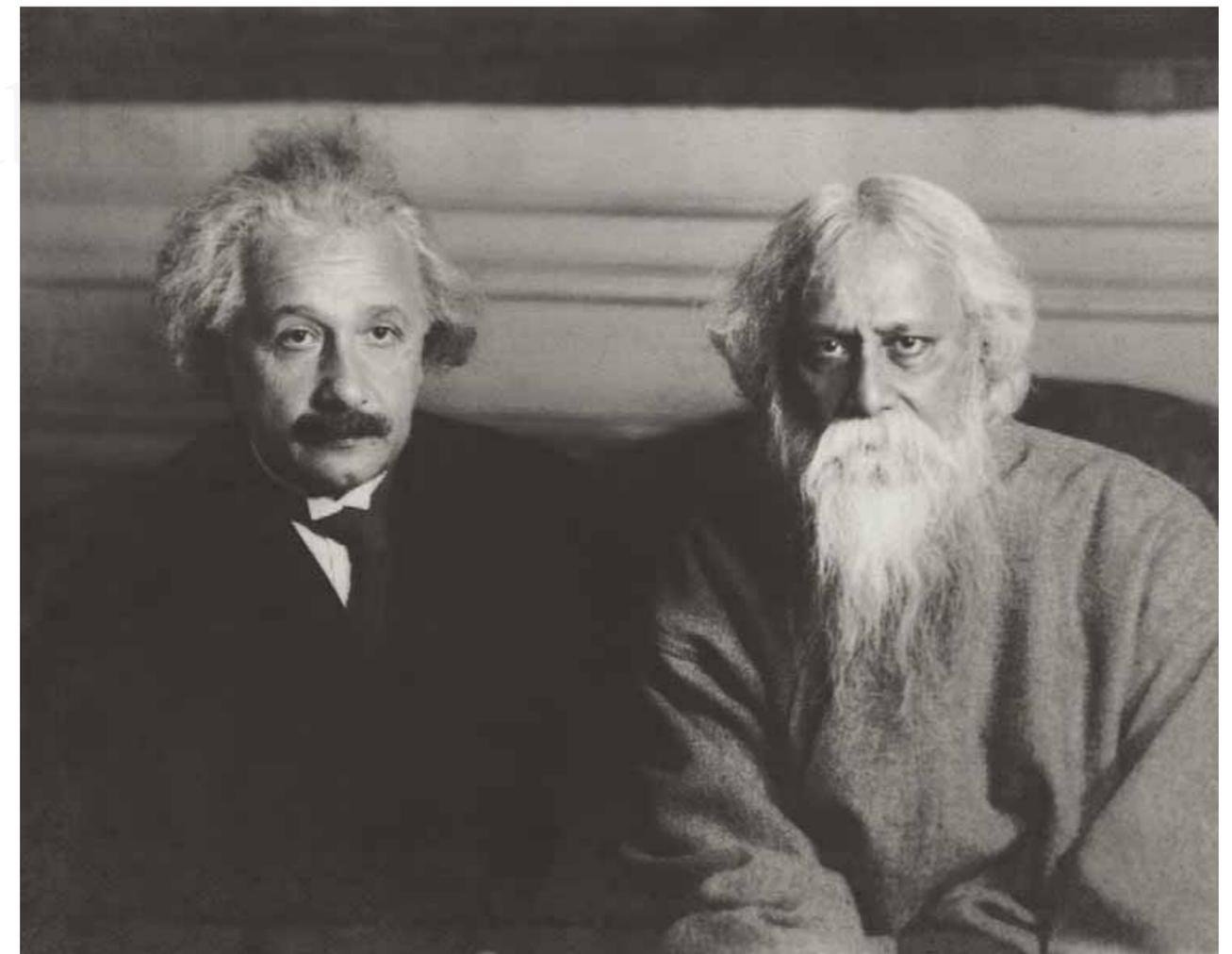
publisher and without a ready market for his books. In addition, the rise of fascism was already felt as a social force. Germany no longer needed a messiah from India to redeem its people from crisis; other 'messiahs' had emerged and began to get the ear of the people.

Given these circumstances, the reception Rabindranath received in Germany that year was still remarkable. His visit extended from July 11 until August 4—about three weeks. During this trip, he had two priorities: he wanted the German public to acquaint itself with his paintings; further, he wanted to interact with the German Youth Movement. Arriving in Berlin from England, he mounted an exhibition of his paintings at the Galerie Ferdinand Moeller in Berlin (opened on July 16). Thereafter, he also showed his paintings in Dresden at the Sachsische Kunstverein and in Munich at the Galerie Caspari.

From Munich, Tagore travelled on to Oberammergau, where he witnessed the famous Passion Plays, which prompted him to write his long English poem, 'The Child'. He went on to the Odenwaldschule near Heidelberg, an alternative private

school that still flourishes. Tagore's student at Santiniketan, Aurobindo Mohan Bose, had been associated with the school and succeeded in attracting his guru to the school. The two-day visit resulted in a decade-long friendship and correspondence between the Odenwaldschule's founder, the educator Paul Geheeb, and Tagore. The next stop was at the Waldeck Castle in the Hunsrueck Mountains, the centre of the Nerother Wandervoegel. A delegation of this exponent of the German Youth Movement had visited him at Santiniketan in January 1928, and then extended an invitation to the poet to visit them in Germany. Indeed, the poet did not forget his promise. To this day, the Youth Movement has enshrined this visit in its history. After this, Tagore returned to Berlin and immediately proceeded to Copenhagen.

Rabindranath Tagore has been singularly successful as a writer in Germany. Within the span of 11 years, between 1914 and 1925, Kurt Wolff published not less than 24 books in German translation, in addition to an eight-volume *Collected Works*, the first with which Tagore was honoured outside Bengal. Kurt Wolff reported that over one million copies of the poet's works had been in print.



Rabindranath and Einstein, 1930

Although, the images surfaced in an abundant flow from the time he was 67 years old, it was not as if Rabindranath was unaware of art and aesthetics. As a young boy, he received some drawing lessons from tutors at home. Scholars have recorded his interest in art practice, tracing it to the time he was a mature man. He had reservations about the way art was practiced by the students of Abanindranath, and in letters to his nephews Gaganendranath Tagore and Abanindranath Tagore, he pointed out the weaknesses of the art style that came to be known as the Bengal School.² When he established his art school, Kala Bhavana, at Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan, under the guidance of Nandalal Bose, he had clear ideas about the pedagogy of art. Nandalal was the architect who gave shape to his ideas.

So it is clear that Rabindranath nurtured within himself a strong vision that gushed out relentlessly onto paper. The inner vision encompassed memories and experience. There is little doubt that childhood memories were an important element in the construct of that vision.

In a perceptive essay on the poet-painter's art, Prof. K. G. Subramanyan speculated, "Are those goblin faces of the cooks in his kitchen and those sad, poker-faced, wide-eyed women the maids in his backyard?"³

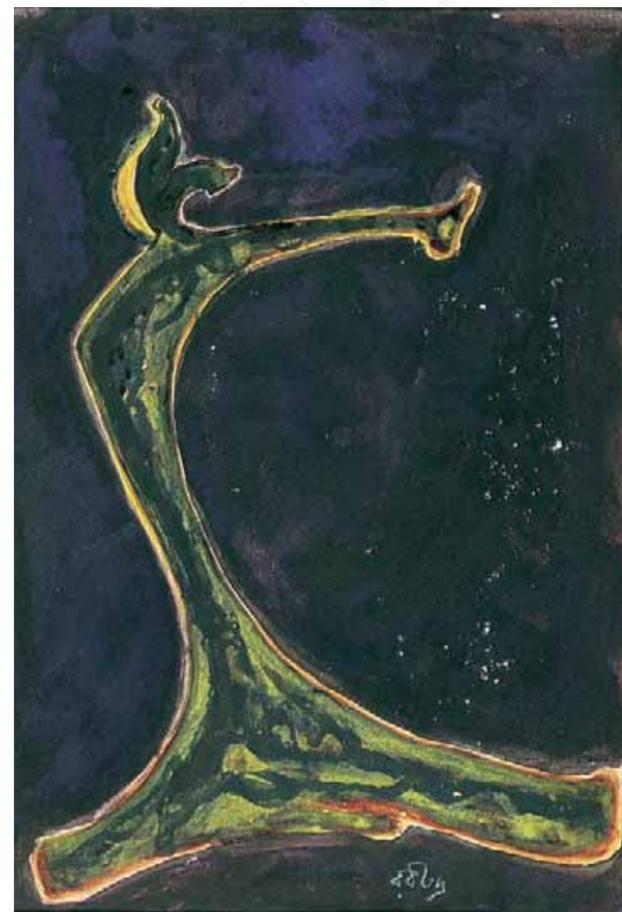


Dancing Woman, NGMA 1246

If memories seeped into his haunting images, so did his experience of other art traditions, garnered from his incessant travels abroad. Between 1912 and 1930, he travelled all over the world, almost 10 times. It was the time when many modern movements in art were washing over Europe. Most of these movements questioned the naturalistic representation of objective reality. In Russia, for instance, one observes, from the early years of the 20th century, a gradual progression towards non-objective art culminating in Suprematism and Constructivism. Even when figuration was used, it was executed in a semi-abstract fashion.

Then, there were the German Expressionists like Emil Nolde who, in the early years of the 20th century, consciously rejected naturalism and sought to discover forms and new use of colours that reflected their interior landscapes, their experiences unique to themselves. There were so many artists in Europe then, like Paul Klee, Vasily Kandinsky, Edvard Munch and Alfred Kubin, who had moved away from representing the reality of the phenomenal world and preferred to give expression to an interiority, to fantasy.

Rabindranath, who was extremely responsive to visual arts, must have absorbed the impressions left by a completely new visual culture unfolding before his eyes during his travels to foreign shores. Similarly, he ingested visual ideas from the bronzes of



Fantastic Figure, NGMA 1294



Figure, NGMA 1342

China, from the Primitive art of the Pacific Islands, and from the use of space and calligraphy in Far Eastern art. Windows to the arts of other cultures opened before him.

The experience of other visual cultures may have acted as a trigger to Rabindranath's own urgency to express his inner vision through an appropriate visual language. He did not feel any anxiety or doubt about recognizing these catalysts. He wrote in an essay, 'The Meaning of Art'

The sign of greatness in great geniuses is their enormous capacity for borrowing very often without their knowing it, they have unlimited credit in the world market of culture. Only mediocrities are ashamed of and afraid of borrowing for they do not know how to pay back the debt in their own coin.⁴

The startlingly abstract and semi-abstract paintings that he made offer a new encounter to the viewers, given that this was the late-'20s of the last century, when 'Indian abstract' was but a tentative idea. Rabindranath's doodling and erasures on the pages of his manuscripts gave birth to abstract forms on paper, fused with written texts, to form a complex design. These experiments began to gain momentum around 1924 when he was staying with Victoria Ocampo in Buenos Aires. During the voyage out to South America, Rabindranath had been very ill and was recovering from his debilitating illness at Ocampo's house. Ocampo also

played the role of a catalyst in Rabindranath's emergence as an artist. Seeing the fantastic forms that he created on the pages of his manuscript, she urged him to paint, thus unshackling his urge for visual expression.

When Rabindranath first started painting independent images, he did tend towards fantastic abstractions, which were a natural extension of his manuscript erasures. The NGMA has an ink drawing in its collection, called *Namaz*⁵. It is signed in Bengali 'Sri Rabindranath Thakur' and is dated 1928. With flowing calligraphic lines, Rabindranath creates a tentative triangular form with a small ovoid shape perched on the apex to suggest a kneeling human figure.

The beauty of this drawing lies in its strong rhythmic lines. The rhythmic lines are almost a signature of the poet-painter and there are many works of this nature in the NGMA collection. There is the ink-on-paper work, *Figure*, which shows a sweeping curvilinear form rendered in black against a red background. Similarly, *Dancing Figure*, another ink on paper work shows a lyrical, rhythmic form. There are the two ink-on-paper works, both titled *Fantastic Figure*, which also show vibrancy in the arcing lines.

Rhythm was an integral part of Rabindranath's creative expression. All his life, the poet-painter sought to give form to the inner rhythm of all existence. He searched for that rhythm in his poetry, his music, his dance and even his dramas. Finally, in his mature years, he experimented with a new medium to express the pulsating rhythm of life. Rabindranath wrote in 1921,

In perfect rhythm, the art-form becomes like the stars, which in their seeming stillness, are never still, like a motionless flame, that is nothing but movement. A great picture is always speaking...⁶

There was another kind of abstraction that Rabindranath had played with. This was an articulation of the forms through geometric planes. He painted heads and figures in profile, as well as avian forms, geometrically with angular contours. No doubt, there was an element of playfulness in these works. This is all the more patent when one realizes the role that fantasy plays in Rabindranath's imagination.

In an essay titled 'The Poet's Religion' Rabindranath had written, I remember, when I was a child, that a row of coconut palms by our garden wall, with their branches beckoning the rising sun on the horizon, gave me a companionship as living as I was myself. I know it was my imagination which transmuted the world around me into my own world—the imagination which seeks unity, which deals with it. But we have to consider that this companionship was true.⁷



Coloured ink on paper
35.4 x 25.2 cm
c. 1929–30
Kala Bhavana, 01-00039-001



Coloured ink on paper
55.3 x 37.5 cm
c. 1929–30
Rabindra Bhavana, 00-1893-16



Coloured ink and poster colour on paper
37.9 x 28.9 cm
c. 1929–30
Rabindra Bhavana, 00-2202-16