



TREASURES OF
National Gallery
of
Modern Art

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Introduction by
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Artists unknown

Wedding Ceremony, Company Painting, Patna School, Watercolour on mica, 20 x 15 cm, n.d., AN 14792

Basket Weavers, Company Painting, possibly from Tanjore, Watercolour on paper, 16 x 19 cm, n.d., AN 14739



Artist unknown *Saraswati*, Kalighat painting, Watercolour on paper, 27 x 39.5 cm, n.d., AN 14732

the intuitive eye



rabindranath tagore

Among its many treasures, the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, lists a cache of remarkable works on paper, drawings and watercolours by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

Considered a phenomenon in the genealogy of Indian art, Tagore, an educationist and a thinker, was held in high regard as a visionary writer, poet, dramatist, lyricist and composer.

Tagore's interest in art is traceable to his childhood; his sensibilities were nourished by the creative ferment that marked his youth in Calcutta. Later, he was exposed to art and nature during his travels to Europe, the Far East and Southeast Asia. In the first decades of the 20th century, Tagore supported Bichitra, a society for practising artists, led by Abanindranath Tagore, his nephew. Tagore's views on art education were given concrete form by Nandalal Bose when he took over the running of Kala Bhavana in 1921. Kala Bhavana was established in 1919 but received its distinctive direction from Bose. Kala Bhavana was a part of the school founded by Tagore in 1901 where the poet experimented with Upanishadic ideals of education and which eventually became Visva-Bharati university.

A self-taught artist, who took to art when he was well into his 60s, Tagore began painting spontaneously: the flow of images, like a bubbling stream bursting forth from the parched earth, was a marvellous occurrence. The artist is said to have begun doodling in mid 1920s, while revising his manuscripts. Eventually, these calligraphic cross-hatchings and erasures joined to form fantastic arabesques. Next, these abstract but elaborate designs gave way, quite logically, to representational forms. Images emerged from the depths of his unconscious, like a volcanic eruption. Haunting landscapes, bizarre and whimsical animal forms, melancholy, mysterious faces and figures manifested in great profusion.

Tagore restricted his choice of medium to ink, water-colour and crayon, which served also to highlight the androgynous aspects of his images. His imagery consisted of elongated faces and figures, evocative of mysterious beings from fantastic encounters. The whimsical, the bizarre and the macabre occupied a central place in his imagination. The classic darkened face with its enticing smile appears as though from an archetypal dream.

As a painter, Tagore rejected both colonial academicism as well as the aesthetic values of the Bengal School. He drew from his subconscious and was also inspired by primitive Pre-Columbian and Australasian art. In an essay written in *The Meaning of Art* in 1921, Tagore stated: "Everywhere in this earth the spirit of Paradise is awake and sending forth

its voice. It reaches our inner ear without our knowing it. It tunes our harp of life which sends our aspiration in music beyond the finite not only in prayers and hopes, but also in temples which are flames of fire in stone, in pictures which are dreams made everlasting ..."¹

From the works within the NGMA collection, Tagore's *Head Studies* are noteworthy for their fine rendering and haunting chiaroscuro. The *Head Study* done with pen and ink on paper is a veritable delight. In this painting, the smiling face of a woman is painted with daubs of ink dark as night. The only light patches are the whites of the eyes, lips, teeth and highlights on hair.

The second *Head Study*, a crayon drawing, shows a beautiful woman with a soft, self-absorbed smile playing on her lips. The wonderful use of blue and the rhythmic lines give a dream-like quality to the work. A third *Head Study*, done in ink on paper, shows a strange gnome-like face. It is a curious combination of the comic and the scary. Unlike the enchanting faces that haunt his subconscious, this bizarre face harks to a strange and palpable anxiety.

One of the most compelling works is the oval *Woman's Face*. This large-eyed pensive face with her head covered and the shadow behind her echoing the flowing lines of her head grips the imagination with its sheer poetry and power. The use of sepia and light brown creates a sense of nostalgic distance.

In distinct contrast to this lyricism, *Head Study (Geometric)* beguiles the viewer with its unabashed whimsicality. The head becomes an abstraction with fanciful architectonic elements worked into the odd angles of the skull. The black and white work is a bridge between the abstract patterns made by the calligraphic erasures and the figurative works.

The poet-painter was always engrossed in the idea of perfect rhythm. What he could not distil in his poetry, he sought to capture in his paintings. *Dancing Woman*, done with ink on paper, is one such work. Its rhythmic lines capture the intensity of the movement with a touch of ecstasy. The woman, rapturously involved with the pulsating beauty of her movements, is transported to a trance-like mystical level.

A certain evocation of mystery and poetry is manifest in the works of Tagore. The elongated *Face*, ink on paper, looks out with deep, soulful eyes. The pile of dark hair on the head contrasts with the light on the forehead, the nose and the lips. An all-pervasive melancholy harks to an essential loneliness.

In the watercolour on paper, *Lady with Flower*, and in the ink on paper, *Two Figures*, the umbral mystery deepens.

The profile of the half-smiling woman holding a red flower speaks of a passionate encounter in the dark journey of life. Is the flower a treasure offered as a gift? It is certainly more than a romantic accessory of a beautiful woman.

Two Figures captures palpably a ripe moment throbbing with endless possibilities. Is it a chance encounter or a tryst? It remains a moment whose beauty is articulated only through silence. The unspoken ardour is implicit in the bent heads, the lowered eyes. The meeting, fecund with potential, is akin to a wistful shadowy evening holding in its heart the promise of a glittering night.

While the faces, figures and whimsical creatures are mesmerizing enough, Tagore reaches greater levels of romanticism and drama in his brooding landscapes of which two stellar examples can be viewed at the NGMA. The trees caught in silhouette, the glowing sunset sky saturated with umber or ochre, the gleaming water reflecting the trees and sky and the open vista often carrying the hint of impending storm have an ageless appeal. Interestingly, these works do not represent the reality of the physical world but mirror, instead, the passionate turmoil and the melancholy calm that follows in the wake of spent passions, within our own emotional landscape.

Whether or not Tagore's paintings rose from his unconscious is a question that continues to plague scholars as much as his lack of academic training. That his creative philosophy sought to unleash an inner force, some submerged ideal, is clear from Tagore's words. During the course of a lecture in China entitled *The Religion of an Artist*, the poet-philosopher-painter stated: "There was a great chapter in the history of life on this earth when some irresistible inner force in man found its way out into the scheme of things, and sent forth its triumphant, mutinous voice, with the cry that it was not going to be overwhelmed from outside ..."²

That Tagore, as is widely believed, was completely untutored and unselfconscious in his expressions, remains disputable. R Siva Kumar, for instance, believes that Tagore's "desire to paint goes back at least to 1893, and he tried his hand at painting intermittently..."³ He also suggests that during his tours of Europe, Tagore acquainted himself with modern and primitive art. "Thus the echoes of modern and primitive art we find in his work were not merely fortuitous."⁴

In 1930, on a tour to France, he was advised to hold an exhibition in Paris. He held his first public and international exhibition in Paris in May 1930, at the Galerie Pigalle, following which several exhibitions were held in England, Denmark, Sweden, Rome, Germany and Russia.