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The reception of Modern European Art in Calcutta: A Complex Negotiation (1910s-1940s)

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Abstract

This article analyzes the reception of Modern European Art in Calcutta in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the initial years, the knowledge of the European avant-gardes was limited. It then got rejected as a legitimate source of influence by the Bengal School ideologues close to the nationalist movement. In the early 1930s, the painter Jamini Roy paved the way for a new aesthetics which rejected the Bengal School ideological project and turned to folk arts as models. The style he pioneered naturally appealed to the global modern sensibility. The 1940s are marked by a phase of enthusiasm for European avant-gardes and the departure of many Indian artists to Paris.

Résumé

Cet article se propose d'étudier la réception de l'art moderne européen à Calcutta au début du vingtième siècle. Au départ, la connaissance des avant-gardes européennes étaient limitées. Puis, elles subirent un rejet de nature idéologique par les partisans de la "Bengal School of Art" proche des mouvements nationalistes. Au début des années 1930, le peintre Jamini Roy décida de faire fi des injonctions de cette école et de se tourner vers les arts populaires comme source d'inspiration. Le style qu'il créa avait de nombreuses affinités avec les principes de simplification des avant-gardes tout en étant résolument indien. Les années 1940 et 1950 connurent une période d'enthousiasme pour l'art moderne européen, marquée par le départ de nombreux artistes indiens à Paris.

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Introduction

As a port city in the Bay of Bengal and as the capital of the British Raj between 1858 and 1911, Calcutta (now Kolkata) has long been at the crossroads of multiple influences and played a major role in the cultural history of India. The Bengal renaissance was such a movement which started in the 19th century as a social, cultural, and intellectual awakening, whose artistic offspring became known as the Bengal School of Art (or Bengal School).¹ Championing a version of Indian modernity rooted in Pan-Asian culture and tradition, this school of art was led by the members of the influential Tagore family and had a major influence on the story of early modernism in India.² While Calcutta is well-remembered for having been the bastion of this school which dominated the entire Indian art scene from around the 1900s to the 1930s, it is less if not remembered for being the first Indian city to have received an international exhibition of modern European art in 1922³, and for having been at the forefront of the modern art movement, well before Bombay (now Mumbai).

In this essay, I propose to analyze the changing ways in which European Modern Art had been perceived and interpreted in Calcutta in the early 20th century. The situation of the Indian subcontinent was marked by the Indian nationalist movement for Independence, and particularly the Swadeshi movement—movement to boycott British manufactured goods—which was especially strong in Bengal and changed the relationship of Indian people with not only Western products but with Western thoughts. In this essay, I wish to understand why the interest for European avant-gardes took off relatively late

in India as compared to the rest of the world, by studying its channels of diffusion and the nature of the resistances to it.⁴ We will see that from the 1920s onwards, there was an effective awareness of modern art movements among the élite, but a deliberate rejection of them as valid sources of inspiration by Indian artists and ideologues. This observation immediately calls into question the pertinence of the concept of influence, so widely used to describe the relationship of the centre to the peripheries, and which suggests that the mere contact with a new art form should result in a passive absorbance of its visual language, like a sponge imbibes water. For a long time however, the Indian public showed indifference to modern European art movements. This was partly due to the bad reputation given to the avant-gardes by the British settled in India, partly due to the limited access to reproductions in magazines.

Since reproductions of modern artworks were not easily available, well-travelled mediators played an important role in the shaping up of the meaning associated to European Modern Art. The members of the Tagore family—especially Gaganendranath and Rabindranath Tagore—, as well as the Austrian art historian Stella Kramrisch, played a pivotal role in the reception of Modern European Art in Calcutta in the early 1920s. The international travels of some Indian artists in the 1930s and their experiencing first-hand view of modern artworks contributed to generating a renewed interest for these movements during the War years, just before the widespread embrace of international modernism in India in the late 1940s and 1950s. In this dynamic, France came to play a particular role. The French avant-gardes became symbols of creative freedom and emancipation for Indian artists in search of renewal and French modern masters often assumed the position of role models. This was accompanied by a phenomenon of de-contextualization, with works being stripped out of their original contexts and reinvested with fresh meanings.

¹ The Bengal Renaissance is usually considered to have begun with Raja Rammohan Roy around 1815 and to have ended with the death of Rabindranath Tagore in 1941. The Bengal School of Art started in 1905 with the reforms initiated by the principal of the Governmental School of Art and lasted until the 1930s.

² The Tagores are a family of Bengali Brahmins settled in Calcutta whose Jorasanko branch of the family had a key role in the Bengal Renaissance. Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846) was the first Indian to have visited Europe for the sake of tourism in 1842. His son Debendranath Tagore founded the Brahma Samaj reform movement, and his grandson Rabindranath Tagore was the first non-European writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Other members Gaganendranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore and Sunayani Devi made important contributions to Indian art.

³ Regina Bitter and Kathrin Rhomberg ed, *The Bauhaus in Calcutta: An Encounter of the Cosmopolitan Avant-Garde* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, Bauhaus edition, 2013).

⁴ Whereas many Japanese and Chinese artists were present in Paris in the 1910s and 1920s, Indian artists came to Paris in large numbers only in the 1950s.

The Resistances to European Avant-Gardes

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, the definition of the Indian modern has been subject to constant reinterpretations, in an ever-renewed attempt to define its relation to the European modern, which had been the point of reference since the mid-19th century. Following the inception of the first Indian art schools by the British in the 1850s in order to train Indian craftsmen in the art of drawing, naturalism came to be accepted as the norm for good art, by both the artists and their patrons.⁵ From the 1900s onwards however, this taste came to be challenged and ultimately dismissed by a majority. The ferments of change were sown at the Government School of Art of Calcutta by the principal E.B. Havell who aimed at reviving Indian indigenous artistic traditions.⁶ His reforms resulted in the suppression of European style classes of painting (ban of shading, perspective, and the oil medium) and the coming back to Indian subject matters. What began as a series of reforms prompted by an Englishman for disputed reasons, was taken forward by Abanindranath Tagore, a member of the influential Tagore family, and came down to history as the Bengal School of Art. It was the artistic counterpart of the Swadeshi movement with this particularity that the battle was fought at a stylistic level: instead of producing political works denouncing the British rule, Indian artists produced timeless works that rooted their inspiration in Asian pictorial traditions.⁷ In developing the ideological tenets of the movement, Abanindranath responded to the call of Japanese ideologue Okakura Tenshin for a Pan-Asian cultural solidarity, construed as a cultural weapon to counter Western hegemony. The Bengal School came to dominate the entire Indian art scene well

into the 1920s and 1930s and the paintings produced under its ideologies shared easily recognizable attributes: of small format (slightly larger than the Indian miniature format), their subject matter was usually borrowed from Asian mythology and the medium was either watercolour, tempera or ink, with a Japanese style seal used in place of the signature. Because it aimed to revive the traditions of the past, the Bengal School was coined as “revivalist,” an adjective which came to bear negative connotations as it gradually imposed a rigid and almost fixed aesthetic. While the avant-gardes were sweeping away the traditions of the past all over Europe, Indian artists started feeling cramped in their own tradition.⁸

It is hard to determine the depth with which Indian artists were aware of Modern European art movements before the 1920s when the Bengal School was hegemonic. The few articles on art published in Indian journals such as the *Modern Review* were concerned with propagating the Bengal School ideology of reviving the traditions of the past through articles on ancient Asian Art. The very first mention of European Modern Art is likely to have appeared in the Bengali journal *Prabasi* in 1914, under the pen of Sukumar Ray, who describes the sculpture *Mlle Pogany* (1913) by Brancusi as “unacceptably bizarre”, testifying of the resistance to accept the aesthetics values of modern art.⁹ This is not surprising at a time when modern art was also accepted with difficulties in Europe. In 1917, a second article, on “automatic drawing and Freud’s impact on avant-garde art,” was published anonymously in the *Modern Review*.¹⁰ Yet, these articles were few and far apart and it was not until the 1920s that more references to modern European art started appearing in dedicated art journals like the newly-founded Calcutta-based *Rupam* or the Madras-

⁵ The Indian élites adhered to the Victorian taste of the British élite. The collection gathered by the Mullick Family in their Marble Palace in Calcutta in 1880 is a perfect example of this acquired taste. It comprises of copies and originals of Ancient Greek sculptors, 16th century Italian Renaissance painters, Italian and Flemish Baroque painters, neoclassical Italian sculptors, and 18th century English painters.

⁶ The complex reasons underlying E.B. Havell’s decision to reform the curriculum are analyzed in this excellent article: Osman Jamal, “E B Havell: The art and politics of Indianness,” *Third Text* 39 (1997), 3-19.

⁷ This, according to Osman Jamal, was part of the strategy designed by E.B. Havell to prevent artistic dissent.

⁸ Critiques of the Bengal School started appearing in the 1920s and are visible in newspaper articles from the period.

⁹ S. Roy, ‘Shilpe Atyukti,’ *Prabasi* 14:1-6 (1914), 94-101. Quoted in Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India’s artists and the avant-garde 1922-1947* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 15. The son of Upendrakishore Ray and the father of famous cineaste Satyajit Ray, Sukumar Ray had gone to England in 1911 to study photography and printing thanks to the Guruprassana Ghosh scholarship awarded to him by the Calcutta University.

¹⁰ “Gleanings: Automatic Drawings as a First Aid to the Artist,” *Modern Review* XXI/1 (January 1917), 63-5. Quoted in Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism*, 15.

based *Shama'a*.¹¹ These articles were often written by knowledgeable Englishmen and cannot therefore be taken as accurate representations of the knowledge that the Bengali élite had of modern European art. Interestingly, most of these articles exhibited a strong bias against modern art movements, and especially the French avant-gardes, fuelled by the conservatism of the British élite settled in India mixed with an anti-French sentiment.¹² In the January 1921 issue of *Rupam*, for example, Englishman C.R. Ashbee interprets the fast succeeding Parisian avant-garde movements existing before the War (Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Futurism) as warning signs of a moral degeneration which led to World War I.

When favourable to Modern Art, many articles re-enacted the idea of a fundamental divide between Eastern and Western cultures, whereby the principles sustaining Modern Art (dynamism, three-dimensionality) belonged to the West and should therefore be avoided by Eastern people. This stemmed from the ideology of a purity of cultures, a belief which had been implemented by the British to secure their conquest of India by treating Indian people as inferior. This ideology had been re-appropriated in reverse terms by Indian nationalists, in order to secure the preservation of their culture. In other terms, Indian ideologues endorsed the idea of an essential, therefore fixed Indian culture, in order to take its defence.¹³ When Englishman Charles Marriot interpreted the painting *Rose-Rhythm* by J.D. Fergusson in the 1920 issue of *Shama'a*, he explained that whereas Western art is dynamic and three-dimensional, Eastern art is passive and two-dimensional. Therefore, by emulating European modernism, Indian artists took the risk of losing their cultural identity. Artistic internationalism, which was encouraged by the

European avant-gardes, was construed as a serious threat to the singularity of each culture.¹⁴ This fear resonated especially strongly in a country which had been colonised for a century.

Since international travel was also rare in those early decades of the twentieth century, the knowledge of European art was mediated through an élite who could travel or received subscription of foreign magazines.¹⁵ It is to be noted that reproductions of modern artworks were a rare occurrence, and the public had often only access to the written interpretation of these artworks. Moreover, the few Indian artists who had the chance to visit Europe were usually sent to train in the academic fashion in England or Italy.¹⁶ Very few visited France or Germany and fewer embraced the aesthetic values of European Modernism.¹⁷ Fanindranath Bose was among the first Indian artists to be sent to Europe. Unable to secure admission in a school in Italy or England, he trained for several years as a sculptor in Scotland and eventually came to Paris in 1913 where the international reputation of Auguste Rodin attracted him. His student for two years, he developed an interest for the treatment of the human figure in bronze and was the closest to developing a modernist aesthetic. Because of that, he became the object of a controversy which testifies that the rejection of modern European art in India was ideological, linked with the strong nationalist ethos and the need to preserve Indian culture. The controversy erupted in the January 1922 issue of *Rupam* and opposed an Indian student writing from Paris, Benoy Kumar Sarkar

¹⁴ "At a time when there is some risk that our new sense of brotherhood in life and art may degenerate into a vague internationalism it seems to me a very good thing that there should be a painter who (...) should, nevertheless, give full play to the intellectual characteristics which distinguish the West from the East." *Shama'a* 1:2 July 1920.

¹⁵ "We have received Colour from June, 1919 to January, 1920, and print below the impressions of our art critic on some of the pictures (...) In the September number, Renoir – the French impressionist of the Monet School – gives us the play of light and colour in his 'Dreaming.' This work was done in his second manner." *Shama'a* 1:1, April 1920.

¹⁶ Many Parsi painters trained in England at the turn of the 19th century, such as Kundanlal Mishri, N.N. Writer, Navroji, Rustom Siodia, and Manchershaw Pithawalla. See Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, 64, 99, 100.

¹⁷ Shashi Kumar Hesh is probably the first one who went to Paris at the end of the 19th century. Yet, he deplored the "modern vogue for realism in France which threatened idealism" and continued to sculpt classical nudes and paint academic portraits. When he came back to Calcutta in the early 20th century, patronage had started drying up for academic artists, because of the widespread acceptance of the Bengal School ideology. Ultimately, Hesh chose to emigrate to the United States. See Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, 64. He dedicates a small section to this painter, titled "Bengali artist-pilgrims bound for Italy."

¹¹ Though published in Chennai, the journal *Shama'a* was edited by a Bengali woman, Mrinalini Chattopadhyay, testifying of the strong Bengali presence in the Indian art scene.

¹² At that time, the British used to give a bad reputation to the French in newspapers, due to their positions as colonial rivals. See Samuel Berthet, *Cultural Dynamics and Strategies of the Indian élite (1870-1947): Indo-French Relations during the Raj* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2006).

¹³ Tapati Guha Thakurta, "Orientalism, Nationalism, and the Reconstruction of 'Indian' Art in Calcutta," in *Perceptions of South Asia's Visual Past*, eds. Catherine Asher and Thomas Metcalf (New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies, 1994).

with the editor of *Rupam*, Ordhendra Coomar Gangoly, who wrote under the pen name “Agastya.” It started with an article published by the latter in the *Modern Review* in May 1921, in which he criticized the “un-Indianness” of the art of Fanindranath Bose.¹⁸ Sarkar responded in *Rupam* with an article titled “the Aesthetics of Young India,” which resembles a manifesto for modern art methodically crafted in eighteen points. The main point of disagreement between the two writers concerns the existence of an essential, irreducible difference between Eastern and Western cultures, and hence the possibility of a universal criteria to judge the quality of a work of art. Sarkar defends the possibility of such a criteria, based on the existence of an harmony of forms and colours, and the expression of the singular personality of the artist. Because the criterion is the same for all artists, they should be allowed to borrow freely from cultural traditions from all countries, and not only from Asia. In his reply published in the same issue, O.C. Gangoly expresses the opposite point of view, in accordance with the Bengal School ideology: according to him, artistic creations are the expression of a country/race and India runs the danger of losing its cultural specificity if Indian artists imitate European art. Using the lexical field of commerce and economy, he argues that India has been flooded with “foreign imports” and needs to erect “the tariff wall of nationalism” in order to protect its culture. The possibility for Indian artists to take inspiration from European modern art is not completely ruled out but is constructed as belonging to the future: the Bengal School is a historical moment, a necessary step for Indian artists to reconnect with their roots before they can internationalize their art. This analysis echoes Immanuel Kant’s popular 1784 essay “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” where he explains that to be Enlightened is to emerge from one’s self-incurred minority status to a mature ability to think for oneself. Here, it seems

¹⁸ “Though the subject is Indian there is nothing in it, which could not come from the chisel of a non-Indian sculptor. Indeed, our grievance is that in Mr. Bose’s (Fanindra Nath) works we search in vain for the revelation of the Indian mind of an Indian artist, the peculiarity of his point of view, and the traditions of a great heritage,” in “Art of a Bengali Sculptor,” *Modern Review*, May 1921.

that Indian people have been kept in a state of minority by the colonial power and need to access to their majority. Indian scholar Tapan Raychaudhuri on the other hand, defines this historical moment as “an extreme example of the psychological need felt by a colonial élite to assert its superiority in relation to the ruling race.”¹⁹

The ‘1921 Rupam controversy’ is interesting not only because it renders visible the confrontation between two ideologies—the revivalism and international modernism—but also because it highlights the awareness that O.C. Gangoly had of European art. Determined to prove that his indifference to Modern European Art does not stem from an ignorance of it, but from a deliberate rejection, he cites, in a jumble: 15th century Italian masters Masaccio, Correggio and Botticelli; Spanish and German 16th century master El Greco and Holbein; 19th century French sculptor Rodin; late 19th century French Nabis painters Maurice Denis and Pierre Bonnard; Fauve painters Matisse, Derain and Van Dongen, and the “the latest craze over Negro sculptures.” His impeccable spelling of all the artist’s names—which is a rare fact, even in Indian publications from a later period²⁰—proves his impeccable mastery of Western art history. This catalogue of names from all periods and all places of Western art history intended to show his in-depth command over the subject. There are reasons to think, as we will see, that his knowledge had been enabled by the recent arrival of Austrian art historian Stella Kramrisch in Calcutta in 1921, who had been invited to teach classes on European Art by Rabindranath Tagore.

The First Exhibition of Modern Art in Calcutta

The University of Visva Bharati, Santiniketan was started by Rabindranath Tagore in 1921, and became an important site for the redefinition of Indian modernity. Located in the rural site of

¹⁹ Tapan Raychaudhuri. *Europe reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in 19th century Bengal* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1989), xii, Preface.

²⁰ A quick look at the magazines *Usha* or *MARG* gives the reader an idea of the number of spelling mistakes when in spelling foreign names.

Santiniketan, about 160 km north of the capital of Calcutta, it literally meant “communion of India with the world” and had been envisioned as a haven for syncretism and internationalism, where Indian culture could grow in communion with the best minds of the world. The university welcomed prestigious foreign teachers staying for various amounts of time, such as Stella Kramrisch of course, the French painter Andrée Karpélès or the French Indologist Sylvain Lévi. Rabindranath Tagore had grown up in the artistic circles of the Tagore family, with his older nephews Abanindranath and Gaganendranath whose salons dominated the Calcutta art scene in the 1910s and 1920s. However, he gradually departed from their vision, in part as a result of his frequent trips overseas.²¹ It is during one of his visits to Oxford in 1919 that he had met Stella Kramrisch and had invited her to teach at the Kala Bhavan, the art department of the university. Kramrisch gave a series of lectures on modern European art which she interpreted as a search for cultural renewal that led European artists to break away from the weight of the naturalist tradition prevailing since the Renaissance. European artists had turned towards the expression of their emotions and inner feelings, a direction that eventually led them to abstraction. Kramrisch’s classes were illustrated with the support of lantern slides and for the first time, Bengali students were exposed to such a thorough analysis of the development of European modern art.²² Kramrisch took an active part in the cultural debates of the time and positioned herself on the side of the orientalist/revivalists, endorsing the idea that Indian artists should first get to know their own heritage before entering the modernist international arena. In the “Rupam controversy” mentioned above, she backed up O.C. Ganguly’s point of view when she wrote: “To know her own necessity of significant form should be the first endeavor of artistic Young India. Then there will be no danger or merit in accepting or rejecting French space-conception, Russian colorism and

Chinese line and the like, for imitation is impossible where personality is at work.”²³ According to Kramrisch in this quotation, Indian art has its own significant forms—a concept coined by Clive Bell in his book *Art* in 1914—and Indian artists have to find them before they can create truly original works.

In December 1922, Tagore and Kramrisch decided to organize an exhibition of works by Bauhaus artists at the Indian Society of Oriental Art in Calcutta.²⁴ It was going to be the first time original works of Modern European artists were shown in the capital of British India. A selection of two hundred and fifty graphic works by Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Lyonel Feininger, and Johannes Itten were chosen to be exhibited conjointly with the works of Bengal school artists such as Abanindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore, Abdur Rahman Chughtai, Kali Pada Ghoshal, Bireshwar Sen, Sunayani Devi, and Nandalal Bose. In the introduction to the catalogue, Kramrisch expresses her hopes that this exhibition will show people in Calcutta that Western art is not synonymous with academic art anymore. This reminds us that, outside limited intellectual circles, the prevalent conception of Western art in 1920s Calcutta was that of naturalist art. In contrast, the works of the Bauhaus artists were distorted, veering towards the abstract. Interestingly, the direct contact with works by European modernists did not have major repercussions in the artistic production of Bengal. The reception of Modern European art was not followed by an adoption. The only Indian “modernist” artworks—in the sense of non-representational—present in the exhibition were the Cubist paintings of Gaganendranath Tagore which had been produced before the show. The brother of Abanindranath, Gaganendranath was a curious and an indefatigable experimenter of medium and styles. From 1922 to 1929, he experimented with the cubist deconstruction of reality into many

²¹ In their Calcutta mansion, the family had their own club where they held literary and artistic gathering, their own printing press, as well as a library.

²² Kramrisch also took an active involvement in the Society of Oriental Art where she gave short lectures, like the one titled “The Tendencies of Modern European Art” given in April 1922. See *Rupam* 10 (April 1922).

²³ Stella Kramrisch, “The Aesthetics of Young India: A Rejoinder,” *Rupam* 10 (April 1922).

²⁴ Bitter and Rhomberg, *The Bauhaus in Calcutta*. The Indian Society of Oriental Art was founded in 1907 by Abanindranath Tagore and his brother Gaganendranath to promote ancient Indian arts.

different plans, while retaining the small format of the Bengal School paintings as well as the watercolour and ink medium. This, added to the fact that Gaganendranath's artworks express his inner experience led Kramrisch to argue that he is "an Indian Cubist" and that "Cubism therefore has its mission in Indian art, if it becomes absorbed by it."²⁵ However, according to art historian Partha Mitter, Gaganendranath "represents the decontextualizing tendency of our age—a tendency shared as much by artists in the center as in the peripheries, a tendency we come across again and again: styles past and present can be taken out of their original contexts for entirely new modernist projects."²⁶ In this sense, and because he was able to overcome the "anxiety of influence"²⁷ shared by so many artists of his time, Gaganendranath was a precursor and a singular figure in the history of early Indian modernism. He was not immediately emulated in his endeavor by other Indian artists, which led Mitter to qualify this episode of Indian art history as a "modernist prelude" to what happened in the 1940s and 1950s.²⁸

For Kramrisch, the goal of this exhibition was not to generate an interest for European modernism among Bengali artists but to make a case for the existence of an Indian modernity. According to Regina Bitter and Kathrin Rhomberg in their excellent study of this inaugural exhibition, Kramrisch's choice to exhibit the works of Indian artists alongside those of Bauhaus artists on two floors of the same building was part of a general strategy of legitimizing the Bengal School artists as the Moderns of India.²⁹ Towards the end of her essay, Kramrisch explains that both groups of artists—the Bauhaus and the Bengal School—have in common their opposition to academism/moving

away from naturalism, which make them both qualify as moderns. This will to affirm the existence of India's own version of modernism against the European modern is a defining trait of India of the 1920s and 1930s, largely informed by the nationalist movement. The role of Kramrisch was decisive in this endeavor: at a time when most orientalist saw the modern period as a period of artistic decline and were concerned solely with the arts of ancient India, she was among the first to take an active interest in the redefinition of Indian Modernism. Her interest prompted her to start a new series of lectures at the Kala Bhavan in July 1922, titled "The Expressiveness of Indian Art."³⁰ Whereas her previous lectures focused on an exegesis of European modernism, this series was dedicated to Indian modernism. Driven by her modernist sensibility, she encouraged Indian artists to take inspiration from indigenous folk traditions, an advice which was to yield amazing results in Santiniketan and Bengal more generally.³¹

The Work of Jamini Roy or the Synthesis between the Modern and the Traditional

Jamini Roy's radical departure from the aesthetics of the Bengal School was unique and innovative at a time when this ideology still assumed a hegemonic position. The art of Jamini Roy was a break-away from both the aesthetics of the Bengal School—in which style he had been educated at the Government School of Art from 1906—and European Academic Art. His inspiration initially came from the works of folk artists practicing around the Kalighat temple in Calcutta, so much so that his early works have been described as having been made "after" Kalighat paintings. The Kalighat painters practiced an ancestral art which had been adapted to cater to the demand of the increasing

²⁵ Stella Kramrisch, "An Indian Cubist," *Rupam* 11 (July 1922).

²⁶ Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism*, 27.

²⁷ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 1973. Quoted in Mitter, *The triumph of modernism*, 8. The scholar Michael Bloom has theorized the syndrome of what he calls the "anxiety of influence," in a different context: he argues that many American poets are paralyzed by the fear of producing works that are derivative or imitative of the poets they admire the most. It is the profound admiration for their elders that yield the negative effect of a hindrance to their creative process. In the case of Indian artists, this anxiety is located not in the individual artist but in the collective psyche of the nation.

²⁸ Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism*, 25.

²⁹ Regina Bitter and Kathrin Rhomberg, "The Bauhaus in Calcutta. World Art since 1922: On the Topicality of an Exhibition," in *The Bauhaus in Calcutta*.

³⁰ The draft for this lecture is part of the "Stella Kramrisch papers" kept at the Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives, where she served as curator of Indian art from 1954 until her death in 1993.

³¹ Kris Manjappa, *The Age of Entanglement: German and Indian intellectuals across Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 245.

number of pilgrims visiting the temple: they had reduced the original scroll format of their paintings to a rectangular piece of paper and simplified the background in order to produce works in greater quantities. Initially religious, their themes adopted the genre of social satire. Gradually, Jamini Roy decided to move away from the art of the Kaligath painters and embarked on a tour of rural Bengal to visit the *patua*, a community of traveling artists painting on scrolls and narrating stories from villages to villages. Jamini Roy retained some elements of their iconography but pushed the simplification process even further: using a plain background, he reduced the details to their bare minimum: shadow effects were removed, large swathes of primary colors were applied and the figures were outlined with bold black lines.

How the idea to take inspiration from folk painters came to him is subject to debate. Roy had grown up in rural Bengal, in the region of Bankura, which was known for its vibrant crafts traditions. It is possible that his interest for lowbrow art was further awakened by the colonial policies which tried to revive Indian folk arts.³² For the longest time, Indian folk traditions had been looked down by Indian fine artists who considered it the domain of lowbrow arts. The Bengal School of Art, for instance, encouraged artists to take inspiration from the noble art of Mughal and Rajput miniature painting, or from the ancient frescoes of Ajanta which came to symbolize the epitome of Indian classical art. Folk arts were not considered a legitimate source of inspiration. Roy was also inspired by the toys produced in rural Bengal and the carvings on the facades of temples such as the one in Bishnupur. Another source of inspiration was the byzantine mosaics and hieratic art which he had seen in pictures and which made him favor frontal depictions to three-quarter figures. His figures gradually acquired an ornamental quality, and were mass-produced in his community studio, one model leading to the production of many replicas. His early paintings were signed with a red

³² Sona Datta, *Urban Patua: the art of Jamini Roy* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2010).

stamp, in the continuation of the Bengal School tradition borrowed from Japan. With their bold and simplified lines, these neo-folk paintings naturally appealed to the global modernist sensibility (Fig. 1).

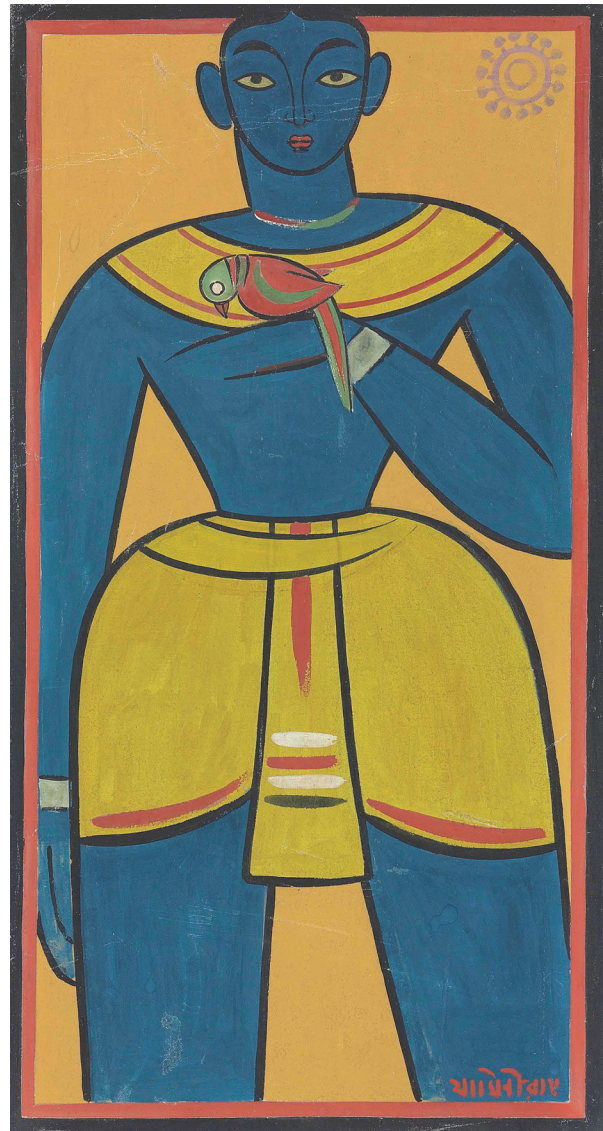


Figure 1. Jamini Roy, *Untitled (Krishna with Parrot)*. tempera on canvas, 96.5 x 51.3 cm. Image Courtesy: DAG Modern.

In his artistic endeavor, he was also inspired by the naïve art of Sunayani Devi—the sister of Abanindranath Tagore and one of the first Indian women artists—, which was getting a lot of publicity in Calcutta in those years. The style developed by Roy and Sunayani Devi shared similarities with the intellectual approach of

European modernists such as Picasso or Gauguin, yet, it is difficult to determine whether these international art movements influenced them in any way. Educated at the Government School of Art in Calcutta, Roy was aware of the debates around Indian artistic modernity and might have attended the conferences given by Kramrisch where she encouraged Indian artists to take inspiration from indigenous folk traditions. Yet, it is difficult to assess his understanding of these movements. According to art historian Partha Mitter, he was part of a global modern consciousness or “globally imagined community” to borrow Anderson’s concept,³³ enabled mainly by the print culture, and by international travel, which permitted a circulation of ideas, among which global primitivism. He writes:

To explain this community’s critical engagement with modern ideas, I propose here the concept of virtual cosmopolis. The hybrid city of the imagination engendered elective affinities between the elites of the centre and the periphery on the level of intellect and creativity (...) One of the products of such encounters was global primitivism and the common front made against urban industrial capitalism and the ideology of progress.³⁴

Yet, if Roy’s art had “structural affinities” with international modernism, it had a different meaning. While European artists were longing for the period preceding the industrial revolution and looked at other primitive societies as the site of a simple life, Roy’s position was a cultural rebellion against colonization, argues Mitter. It was also a departure from the belief in a pan-national identity promoted by the nationalists, and a reaffirmation of local identity as the marker for a national identity. This political reading of Roy’s art has been subject to debate, based on the ever-repeated formula used in his works, at a time when India was undergoing dramatic changes.³⁵ During World War II and while the biggest famine was devastating Bengal, Roy continued to paint the same icons to cater to the demands of patrons in

search of a nostalgic past. His popularity kept growing among a foreign clientele of American soldiers stationed in Calcutta during the War.³⁶ The growing demands of the international market possibly conditioned his choice to produce, *ad nauseum*, the same paintings. Stella Kramrisch “settled on Roy as the modernist she had been searching for,”³⁷ the first Indian artist who had managed to crack that ever-impossible formula of being both Indian and modern: his subject matter and sources of inspiration were Indian, yet his neo-folk idiom, with its bold lines and simplified colors, looked strikingly ‘modern.’ Is it possible that Roy consciously surfed on that wave of desire for the exotic, which was so present in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s? In 1931, he held an exhibition at Stella Kramrisch’s house in North Calcutta, for which he had recreated the atmosphere of a traditional Bengali home: low seats were displayed along with oil lamps and original *pat* paintings were presented alongside his works. Whereas Partha Mitter interprets this careful staging as a demonstration of his local identity, one is entitled to question to which extent it was a staging of his own exoticism.

In 1934, Roy participated in a massive show titled *Modern Indian Art*, organized at the New Burlington Galleries in London. With 500 Indian artworks on display, it was to be the biggest exhibition of Indian art held in Britain until 1982 but the wide range of styles indicated the absence of a unified definition of the Indian modern.³⁸ There were artworks ranging from naturalism to the sentimentalist atmosphere of the Bengal School to the neo-folk idiom of Roy. Interestingly, the debate about the definition of Indian modernity was not an opposition between artists claiming to defend traditional values and other claiming to be moderns. Rather, all artists claimed to be moderns, but disagreed on the very definition of modernity. The orientalist (like Sarada and Ranada Ukil, Asit Haldar, Mukul Dey, Abanindranath Tagore, Surendranath Ganguly,

³³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1996)

³⁴ Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism*, 11.

³⁵ Debmalya Das, “Jamini Roy’s Art: Modernity, Politics and Reception,” *Chitrolekha Magazine* 1:2, 2011.

³⁶ Aruna Sena, *Bishnu Dey* (Sahitya Akademi, Makers of Indian Literature series, 1993), 49.

³⁷ Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism*, 107.

³⁸ *The Times* (Monday, Dec 10, 1934): 8.

Venkatappa) exhibited next to academic artists (like Hemendranath Mazumdar, Atul Bose, Thakur Singh, Pestonji Bomanji, Manchershaw Pithawalla, A.X. Trindade, V.S. Adurkar) along with artists with a modernist sensibility (the Bengali Gaganendranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Sudhir Khastgir, Ramendranath Chakravarty, as well as N.S. Bendre, Bhanu Smart, and Roop Krishna). A few years before, poet and artist Rabindranath Tagore had exhibited his works in Paris at the Théâtre Pigalle at the invitation of the Association Française des Amis de l'Orient.³⁹ Between 1928 and his death in 1941, Rabindranath painted more than thousands works, in a highly personal style, characterized by simple forms and the inspiration from primitive art objects such as African masks. The exhibition was well received with eminent personalities such as Paul Valéry, André Gide, and Ezra Pound attending the opening. These early 1930s marked the awakening of a modern sensibility among Indian artists.

The Redefinition of the Modernist Project in the 1930s and 1940s

Intensified international travels played a role in the redefinition of the Indian modern before, during and after the Second World War. It operated in two directions: foreigners coming to Calcutta and Indians venturing more and more to Europe. In Calcutta itself, the Calcutta University counted many well-traveled men among its teachers such as the economist Benoy Kumar Sarkar who had traveled extensively in France and Germany and was appointed Lecturer of Economic in 1925, or Shahid Suhrawardy, the former art adviser for the League of Nations in Paris who replaced Abanindranath Tagore as the Bageshwari Fine Arts Professor in 1932.⁴⁰ Having lived in Paris for fifteen years, Suhrawardy had acquired

comprehensive knowledge of European modern art movements and “discussed pictures in terms used in Europe.”⁴¹ The cosmopolitan circle of Calcutta comprised of other important personalities like the British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, the Hungarian critic Charles Louis Fabri, the German artist Esther Rahmin,⁴² and the Indian writer Sarojini Naidu, who were all cognizant of the debates around international modernity.⁴³ At the Governmental School of Art—the former bastion of the Bengal School—the appointment of Atul Bose as a teacher in 1926 marked the beginning of an era of change.⁴⁴ Bose had just returned from England and encouraged his students who formed the “Art Rebel Centre” in 1933, one of the first organized attempts to counter the Bengal School ideology.⁴⁵ Among the founders of the group were the painters Abani Sen and Gobardhan Ash who were to found the Calcutta Group ten years later. The aesthetics of their works remained within the ambit of academism but they aspired to an art anti-sentimental and closer to the art movements of Europe.⁴⁶ Modernism was re-emerging from within the academic tradition which was regaining strength in Calcutta, as a rebellion against the diktats of the Bengal School. This highlights an important difference between the stories of Indian and European modernism: while Modern Art in Europe was born as a break-away from the academic genre, it emerged in India within this tradition, as a departure from the revivalist genre. In both cases nonetheless, it constituted an overthrowing of the weight of tradition.

While for the longest time, Indian artists sent to Europe confined themselves to the academic circles of London, several Indian artists who left for Europe in the 1930s came back with enlarged

³⁹ The Galerie Pigalle opened as a dependence of the Théâtre Pigalle founded in 1929 by Alfred de Rothschild. A month before Tagore's show opened (May 2- 19, 1930), the Théâtre Pigalle presented an exhibition of art from Africa and Oceania (February 28 - April 1, 1930).

⁴⁰ Christopher E.M. Pearson, *Designing UNESCO: Architecture and International Politics at Mid-Century* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 233.

⁴¹ Samaren Roy, *Calcutta: Society and Change 1690-1990* (iUniverse, 2005) 148.

⁴² Esther Rahim, also known as Esmet, had studied art in Düsseldorf and in Paris under the sculptor Bourdelle. She got married to J.A. Rahim in 1931 and they both moved to Calcutta.

⁴³ Sarojini Naidu's sister was Mrinalini Chattopadhyay, the founder of the Madras-based art magazine *Shama'a*.

⁴⁴ Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism*, 140.

⁴⁵ The name recalls that of the collective founded in 1914 in London by Vorticist Wyndham Lewis. Named the Rebel Art Centre, it had been set up in opposition to Roger Fry's collective Omega Workshops and pursued a form of futurism. Interestingly, one original artwork by Lewis had been shown in the 1922 Bauhaus exhibition. Coincidence or a deliberate citing?

⁴⁶ Atul Bose wrote the introduction for their catalogue. See “The modernist premises of the Calcutta Group (1943-1953),” author unknown.

perspectives about Modern European Art. This was the case of Sailoz Mookherjea who arrived in Europe in 1937 as part as the International Boy Scouts Movement to participate in the 5th World Jamboree taking place in the village of Vogelenzang. After the event, he visited museums in Holland, Italy, France, where he attended Cézanne’s centenary celebrations and even met with Matisse, whom he greatly admired.⁴⁷



Figure 2. Sailoz Mookherjea, *Bhiram Pitam*, undated (probably early 1930s), Image Courtesy: Dhoomimal Art Centre, New Delhi.

Early in his career, Sailoz had emulated the style of Jamini Roy (Fig. 2). After his visit to Paris, Henri Matisse became his constant point of reference. His still life with bottle and fruits from around 1939⁴⁸ exhibits bright colors and two-dimensionality, with the background becoming an integral part of the composition, a feature of Matisse’s paintings. His painting *Dream* from 1945 is a direct quotation of the odalisques painted by

the master in the 1920s.⁴⁹ In his 1950 painting *South Belle*, he re-appropriates the theme of the oriental woman. If Matisse acted as a role model for him, Sailoz also manifested some distance with the French master. According to painter Rajesh Mehra, who was one of his students in the 1950s, Sailoz sometimes stepped back from his canvas, and exclaimed with a content look: “Hamko Matisse Kya Sikhayaga?”⁵⁰ This sentence when translated as “What can Matisse teach me?” is symptomatic of the ambivalent relationship of Indian painters to Western art: while Matisse is the reference point, he is immediately dismissed and Sailoz ultimately assumes a position of independence/superior ability *vis à vis* the French master. The years following Sailoz’s return from Europe constituted a phase of experimentation where he created some highly stylized works veering towards the abstract, such as *Kiss* in 1945. His friend and critic A.S. Rahman describes it in these terms:

Kiss, for example, in spite of its stylistic affinities with the Ecole de Paris is actually based on the exquisite erotic sculpture at Konarak. *Kiss* is a very happy example of what happens when there is a living contact between a ‘modernist’ and his own heritage and here we have the key to an understanding of Sailoz, who is as much a product of his time as of his tradition.

Sailoz’s sources of inspiration were both with the French modernist painters, and the Indian miniature painters. This theme of a synthesis between the East and West was becoming the main artistic goal to achieve in the 1940s and 50s.⁵¹ Throughout his career, Sailoz repeatedly painted scenes from the Indian countryside: the peasants in the fields, the dhobi (washermen), the women at the well, the buffalo bathing in the pond, groups of musicians, in what Mitter would call a form of global primitivism shared by several artists such as Punjabi Amrita Sher-Gil and by Jamini Roy, in their own ways.

⁴⁹ It reminds particularly of the series painted by Matisse in 1937, and which correspond to the time when Mookherjea met him in Paris.

⁵⁰ Episode recalled during a meeting conducted by the author with Rajesh Mehra at the Dhoomimal Gallery in Delhi in May 2016.

⁵¹ As evidenced in the articles published in the journal *Marg* from 1947 onwards.

⁴⁷ Sailoz (with an introduction by A.S. Raman), Dhoomimal Dharam Das, ca. 1952.

⁴⁸ The work is undated.

By the late 1930s, Paris had started becoming an almost obligatory stop for Indian artists, and many Bengali artists visited the French capital: the sculptors Prodosh Das Gupta and Chintamani Kar,⁵² the engraver Ramendranath Chakravorty and the painter Sudhir Khastgir. In 1943, soon after Prodosh Das Gupta came back from his European trip, he founded the Calcutta Group with Kamala Das Gupta, Gopal Gosh, Paritosh Sen, Nirode Mazumdar, Subho Tagore, Rathin Maitra, Prankrishna Pal, who were later joined by Abani Sen, Zainul Abedin, Ramkinker Baij, and Govardhan Ash. It was the second collective endeavour after the Art Rebel Centre to renew the definition of the Indian modern in relation with the European Modern.⁵³ It is to be noted however that sculpture was taking an interesting turn at the Kala Bhavan in Santiniketan at the same time, under the impulsion of Ramkinker Baij who created his celebrated *Santal Family* in 1938. He and other artists pioneered an alternative form of modernism, which was later coined “contextual modernism”⁵⁴ to stress its difference from the international modernism whose ideology was propagated in Europe. The rallying cry of the Calcutta Group was different: their motto was “Art should be international and interdependent” and their belief was that Western European avant-gardes had pioneered entirely new pictorial styles whereas Indian artists have not produced any significant movements since the 17th century: “It is absolutely necessary for us to close this hiatus by taking advantage of these developments in the Western world” is written in their manifesto. The sentence sounds as if they were on a race to catch up with an international artistic modernity.

The birth of this group was enabled by the availability, at an unprecedented scale, of images from the European avant-gardes. Books on

European modern art had been imported to Calcutta to cater to the needs of American, British and French soldiers stationed in the city to prevent a Japanese invasion coming from Burma. In his autobiography, Paritosh Sen, a member of the Calcutta group, recalls this historical moment:

I remember the excitement when I discovered books on Monet, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin and other Impressionists and Post-Impressionists in some bookshops in Kolkata. Books on Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Paul Klee, Henry Moore followed a year or two later. The early 40s was a period of great turmoil in India.⁵⁵

Sen’s early works are full of references to the French modern masters. The painting *Tea Party in a Mango Grove* (1944) for example, appears to be a direct reference to *Café terrace at Night*, made by Van Gogh in 1888 and which represents people sitting at a terrace under the open sky. The color schemes, the way of applying colors by small touches immediately reminds of Van Gogh style. Yet, the aerial view and the particular way of depicting the trees reminds of the Indian miniature tradition, particularly the miniatures of the Indian deities, Radha and Krishna in the woods. There is also a lot of humor in the transplantation of Van Gogh’s painting into an Indian setting, where a tea party is happening in the middle of the forest. In his *Portrait of Prodosh Das Gupta* (1943), executed around the same time, Sen depicts the leading figure of the group resting on a deck chair, in a confident posture, with a moustache reminiscent of Dali. The palette and the treatment of the brush are again reminiscent of Van Gogh but around the central figure are two human figures whose traits—thick lips, prominent cheeks—remind of African features and could be construed as a reference to Picasso’s African masks.

⁵² Das Gupta had earned a scholarship from the Calcutta University to study at the Royal Academy of Arts and the LCC Central School of Arts and Crafts, and, upon completion of his London training, he enrolled at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière where Kar was also enrolled.

⁵³ Sanjoy Mallik, “The Calcutta Group,” *Art & Deal* 3, no. 16 (2004)

⁵⁴ The term was coined by art historian R. Shiva Kumar in the title of the exhibition *Shantiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism* organized in 1997 at the National Gallery of Modern Art. Siva Kumar argues that the Shantiniketan artists did not believe that to be indigenous one has to be historicist either in theme or in style, and similarly to be modern one has to adopt a particular trans-national formal language or technique.

⁵⁵ Manasij Majumdar et al., *Paritosh Sen: in retrospect* (Chennai: Mapin Pub. in association with Tulsyan Technologies Ltd., 2001).

Even Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings—Sher-Gil the famous Indo-Hungarian painter who studied in Paris in the early 1930s and hailed from Punjab—contained explicit references to French primitivist painter Gauguin, like in her *Self-Portrait as Thaitian* (1934) in which she represents herself as the exotic other but reclaims the power to represent herself as opposed to being represented.

The founding date of the Calcutta Group, in 1943, corresponded to the height of the nationalist movement with the Quit India campaign led by Gandhi, and the largest man-created famine which caused the death of three millions of people in rural Bengal. This prompted Communist affiliated painters like Chittaprosad Bhattacharya and Somnath Hore to wander around the countryside and record the atrocities of the famine in poignant drawings. Artists of the Calcutta Group also painted images of the famine. In fact, the creation of the group stemmed from the urge to create a new visual language to address the realities of their time and the suffering of the multitude. Their manifesto, published in 1953 and based on an article from 1949 does not quite convey the spirit of the origins and that is why, as a group, they got criticized for their lack of political direction: the reading of the manifesto make them appear solely concerned with aesthetic innovations, with a disregard for the internal logics that led to such developments in Europe.⁵⁶

My hypothesis is that the new visual languages they discovered provided them with infinite possibilities of expression, which they were eager to try. That does not mean that they did not re-appropriate these visual languages to their own end. Interestingly, for many Indian intellectuals, education in the West did not drive them away from Indian culture but made them realize the value of their national heritage.⁵⁷ Similarly, the artists of the Calcutta Group aimed at a synthesis between the art produced in the West and their own traditions, in much the same way modernism

was born in Europe with European artists taking inspiration in traditions from Asia. Moreover, French modern masters represented role models to whom Indian artists could look up to: the entire dedication of Picasso to his art immensely inspired Paritosh Sen for example. He had met him in Paris in 1953 at the Salon de Mai where Picasso was exhibiting a bronze sculpture of a pregnant goat and Picasso invited him to his studio.

This encounter and the generosity of Picasso left an indelible impression on him.⁵⁸ The “French master” represented the ideal of the progressive artist, because of his creative genius and his political engagement. Following his return to India, Sen kept referencing the works of Picasso, in a direct or oblique manner. In the 1950s, he painted a series of works depicting traditional occupations of Calcutta people—a sarangi player, a bird seller, a man with a hookah, a politician on a promenade—using a form of the cubist language veering towards expressionism. These depictions are infused by a sense of humor absent from Picasso's works and which takes its root in the social satires of the Babus—the rich, English-inclined population of Calcutta—by the Kalighat painters (Fig. 3). Beyond the formal language, the references to Picasso are sometimes direct: in the diptych *Artist and the Model* (1991) which borrows its title from a series by Picasso, Sen represents himself painting Picasso and vice versa: Picasso becomes both his muse and his master.

The war years in Calcutta constituted a period of crystallization for the adoption of a new visual language taking inspiration from international modernism. This movement accelerated with the departure of numerous Indian artists to Europe at the end of the War, fostered by a new French cultural policy towards India. Nirode Mazumdar—a founding member of the Calcutta Group—was awarded a scholarship by the French government to go to Paris in 1946, and was followed by

⁵⁶ Majumdar, *Paritosh Sen*, 118.

⁵⁷ This was for example the case for Amrita Sher-Gil. See Sonal Khullar, *Wordly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity and Modernism in India, 1930-1980* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 48.

⁵⁸ “This experience was all the more memorable, because the situation in our country is so very different. Constantly floating in a sea of mediocrity, we hardly ever come across real greatness.” Majumdar, *Paritosh Sen*, 101.



Figure 3. Paritosh Sen in his Calcutta studio, 11th October 2005 – Photograph by Pascal Monteil.

many others.⁵⁹ Probably enticed by the departure of his friend, Paritosh Sen also left for Paris in 1949 and enrolled in various academies until 1954. The sculptor Sankho Chaudhury also came in 1949 to “study all the questions related to French contemporary art.”⁶⁰ The three Bengali artists used to meet regularly and even visited the studio of Brancusi together.⁶¹ The reason why so many decided to stay in Paris was partly because there was no market for Indian modern art in India until the 1950s partly because Paris was full of artistic vitality.⁶²

⁵⁹ Julia Trouilloud, “Mapping Modernism’s Networks: Indian Artists in early 20th century Paris,” M.Phil thesis submitted in July 2016 at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

⁶⁰ AMAE/P - 82, Relations Culturelles, Oeuvres diverses/Echanges culturels, 1948-1955, 155, French Ministry for Foreign Affairs to French Ministry for Education, 26.09.1949.

⁶¹ Majumdar (eds), *Paritosh Sen: in retrospect*, 54.

⁶² Many of Sailoz’s early collectors were a foreign clientele of diplomats and expatriates, which indicates that there was still a very small market for international modernism among Indian collectors. The very first art gallery was opened in Delhi in 1946, in place of the Dhoomimal Stationary shop.

A large number of Indian artists who settled in Paris in the late 1940s went to acquire considerable fame as the modernists of India, such as S.H. Raza, Ram Kumar or Akbar Padamsee to name a few. Interestingly, they were part of the *Progressive Artists Group* founded in Bombay in 1947 and marked the durable shifting of the modern Indian art scene to the capital of Maharashtra.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, in Europe, there has been very little scholarly interest in the beginnings of modernism in India. The task is made complicated by the difficulty to trace the early works of this generation of artists, which often have not been preserved let alone catalogued. Until very recently,

the story of Indian modernism was construed as starting in 1947, with the founding of the *Progressive Artists Group* whose members became hailed as the first Modernists of India. This resulted in a relative amnesia of the artists and collectives that have existed before. Yet, the early decades of the 20th century constitute a fascinating period during which Western European Art got invested with various symbolic meanings. First rejected by the nationalists as a threat to the cultural purity of India's artistic identity, it came to be gradually accepted as a legitimate source of inspiration. For a category of Indian artists in the 1930s and 1940s, Western modernism acted as a leverage force to overthrow the weight of tradition, represented by the Bengal School of Art in one hand, and stiff British academism in the other. French modern art, especially, stood for a symbol of creative emancipation, a third path between adhering to a form of revivalism and giving up to British cultural domination. Paris became a dream place to achieve unbridled artistic expression, and French masters acted as role models for many Indian artists.

Regrettably, the interpretations of the Indian modern have been and still are over-determined by their comparison with Western modernisms, at the expense of a deeper look at their multiple sources of inspiration. This is how Gaganendranath Tagore was looked down by colonial art historians as a "Picasso manqué", Jamini Roy named the "Indian Matisse" and Husain became celebrated as the "Picasso of India."⁶³ Art history being written in the West for the longest time, the Western canon remained the point of comparison. One cannot deny the influence that Western modernism exerted on some Indian artists, especially at the early stages of their career: we often observe a phase of initial enthusiasm and experimentation with the modern formalist languages, followed by a period of maturation and synthesis. Understanding this complexity requires a careful reading of the work,

beyond the stylistic affinities that strike the eye, to apprehend the twists operated in terms of meaning and content. As was brilliantly phrased by art historian Sonal Khullar, Indian modernism has been "an art of calibration between the East and the West,"⁶⁴ a real struggle between an aspiration to be modern and the vital need to retain and protect a national identity threatened by colonialism.

⁶³ It is an interesting fact when we know that Henri Matisse and Fernand Léger had possibly seen Kalighat paintings and taken inspiration from them. See Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism*, 232, 12.

⁶⁴ Khullar, *Wordly Affiliations*, 12.