
Review of Book

PAINTINGS OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE. VOLUMES 1–4. By RABINDRA CHITRAVALI and Edited by R. SIVA KUMAR. pp. 389, 383, 395, 383. New Delhi, Pratikshan (Kolkata), Ganymed Press, in association with Visva-Bharati (Santiniketan) and Ministry of Culture, Government of India, 2011. Also PAINTINGS OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE: CATALOGUE.

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On the birth centenary of Rabindranath Tagore in 1961, the Indian government—at the personal initiative of its prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who had known and revered Tagore in the 1930s—commissioned a portfolio of collotype reproductions of some of Tagore’s more than 2,000 paintings and drawings. They were printed by the renowned Ganymed Press in London. So fine was the quality that when the collotype reproductions were exhibited at the Commonwealth Institute in London, some visitors took them for the original works. In India, however, there was little awareness of Tagore’s painting at this time, and even less appreciation, except among a small group of cognoscenti, most of whom were art critics or painters, such as Prithwish Neogy and K. G. Subramanyan.

In 1986, on the 125th anniversary of Tagore’s birth, a selection of the original paintings was brought from India to Britain for an exhibition that began at the Barbican Gallery in London and then travelled to Manchester, Bradford and Oxford. I had a hand in the organising of this exhibition, and in 1989 I published the first book of really accurate reproductions of Tagore’s paintings, *The Art of Rabindranath Tagore*. It carried a foreword by the great film director Satyajit Ray, who in the early 1940s had been a fine art student at Tagore’s university in Santiniketan, Bengal, and had later enjoyed a parallel career as a book illustrator, along with film-making. Ray was a discerning admirer of Tagore’s paintings, but he felt constrained to warn the modern viewer: “It is important to stress that he was uninfluenced by any painter, eastern or western. His work does not stem from any tradition but is truly original. Whether one likes it or not, one has to admit its uniqueness. Personally, I feel it occupies a place of major importance beside his equally formidable output of novels, short stories, plays, essays, letters and songs”.

In writing this, Ray was aware of some harsh criticism of Tagore’s paintings over the years—both in Tagore’s native Bengal and in the West. In 1986, for example, the British art critic Brian Sewell, reviewing the Barbican exhibition of Tagore’s works, wrote: “Hash is the word for them. They are abysmal. Never were scribble, scratch, scrawl and blot used to less effect. He has as much idea of spatial judgement as an infant reaching for the breast; his chromatic freshness is the muddled palette of primary ignorance; and [its so-called] ‘textural subtleties’ is critic’s jargon for ‘this is such a mess that I can’t see what’s what’.”

Today, Tagore’s paintings are increasingly known and admired, and provide stimulation to significant contemporary painters. They also command high prices in the international art market, when they occasionally come up for auction—as happened recently when Dartington College auctioned its small

collection of Tagore's works gifted to it by the artist himself in the 1930s. Speaking for myself, after researching Tagore's life and world for more than a decade while writing his biography (*Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, 1995) and editing his letters (*Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, 1997), I find that it is his paintings, above all of Tagore's manifold literary and musical output, that exert the most enduring hold on my feelings and imagination. There is a freshness in his best art that never fails to surprise. Perhaps this is because the paintings, unlike the writings and songs, do not require much 'translation'—very few of them even have reliable titles known to have been given by Tagore himself. Moreover, they are entirely free of the trappings of Orientalism that ensnared Tagore's life and still obscure his poetry and the other writings that first made him famous in the West with the award of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913.

In 2011, with the 150th anniversary of Tagore's birth, the Indian government has again supported the publication of Tagore's paintings—this time in the form of four handsome, large-format volumes and a fifth, much thinner, thumbnail catalogue, devotedly edited by R. Siva Kumar, professor of art history at Santiniketan. Together, these four volumes are a *catalogue raisonné*—the first of its kind for Tagore—that cover almost all of his existing work (but not all of it—some of the former Dartington College works are missing, for example), including the early doodles on his manuscripts that he elaborated into arabesques and fantastical imagery, which became the genesis of his move into painting in the late 1920s without any formal training.

The unparalleled quality of the volumes' reproductions, made from new scans of the original works kept in Santiniketan, in New Delhi and elsewhere, and printed by India's leading art printer, Pragati Offset, based in Hyderabad, is thrillingly good. *Rabindra Chitravali: Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore* is surely one of the finest art books to have been produced in India, not excluding the works published by the Bombay-based art journal, *Marg*. It is a treasure house—an Aladdin's cave of strange and magical images—that demonstrates beyond any doubt both the originality and the uniqueness of Tagore's painting, mentioned by Ray in 1989.

Various explanations have been given as to why, at the age of about 67, Tagore took to a new, non-verbal medium of expression. There are those who have regarded his act as a hurt response to his declining reputation in the West, or alternatively to a declining reputation in Bengal, as a challenge to impending death, as a result of sexual repression, and as a retreat from conflicting ideologies both in India and abroad. With a man of Tagore's complexity, it seems hazardous to speculate. All of the above reasons seem plausible, but the last one seems to me the most significant; it agrees with the major concerns of Tagore's life expressed through his essays, up to his final message, *Crisis in Civilization*, delivered in 1941. In 1933, he expressed them again: "If modernism has any philosophy, and if that philosophy is to be called impersonal, then one must admit that this attitude of aggressive disbelief and calumny towards the universe, is also a personal mental aberration owing to a sudden revolution".

His pictures were first seen publicly in 1930, in modernist Europe, not in India. A British painter wrote of the exhibition that "Tagore's drawings constrain us to pause and ask ourselves anew, what is the purpose of drawing, of painting, of art generally?" It seems a large claim, but it carries weight even today. Tagore's sudden eruption into painting in his late sixties, which continued right up to the close of his life in 1941 (despite the difficulty of dating most of his works accurately) is, by any standards, remarkable. It appears to be without parallel in world art. A good proportion of his works are of permanent worth. Several hundred of them, in my view, merit being placed beside the works of major twentieth-century artists, as *Rabindra Chitravali* will undoubtedly help to demonstrate.

The best are united by a mysterious immediacy of impact that enchants and then haunts the viewer. Affinities have been found with paintings by Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Amedeo Modigliani, Emile Nolde and other artists, as well as with primitive art—and there is no doubt that Tagore had seen works by such painters and was interested in them—but his own paintings stand alone. They are not of Europe, despite the claims of some critics, both

European and Indian, nor are they Indian art from any category known in 1930 or now. European artists of the time were struggling to lose their self-consciousness and abandon accepted techniques in the service of truer expression of what they saw and felt by calling on the subconscious and the unconscious. The better Indian artists were struggling to adapt established western techniques to an Indian setting without compromising their art. Tagore, almost like a child, seems to have cut clean through all this; never having had any art-school training, he bypassed known techniques and relied on pure artistic instinct, at least to begin with.

One of his most intriguing works is a series of twelve coloured doodles on a beautiful photograph of himself, made in 1934, when Tagore was an old man—reproduced as plates 245–248 and 255–262 in *Rabindra Chitravali*. In one of these, he has transformed his bearded face into that of a kind of monster; in another, into a woman. No one can look at this series and not comprehend something of Tagore's mercurial complexity, his "myriad-mindedness". The self-portraits are about as far from the saintly, tedious image of him engendered by the many insipid translations of his poetry as one can get. Here, one feels, is a man who recognises the savage in himself and is grappling with it; here Tagore is as much Old Bluebeard (as George Bernard Shaw quipped about Tagore) as Wise Man from the East (Tagore was sometimes compared in the West to Jesus Christ in his manner and appearance). Other paintings and drawings cover a huge gamut of moods, subjects and styles, with a correspondingly bold but harmonious palette. *In toto* Tagore's paintings prove, if proof is still needed, that Rabindranath Tagore can speak to those with no particular interest in the Indian civilisation that created him.

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