

Foreword

Rabindranath Tagore took to painting at a late stage in his life. Some manuscripts dating back to his youth show doodles in the margin which suggest a natural flair for drawing. After that there is nothing to show that he had any interest in visual expression until, when he was well over sixty, fantastic forms began to appear in his manuscripts. Where one would normally cross out a word or a sentence, Rabindranath turned them into grotesque creatures. These emendations were strung together until the whole page took on the appearance of a tapestry of words and images.

In time paintings and calligraphic drawings began to appear as independent efforts, unrelated to manuscripts. Blue-black ink gave way to transparent colours, and the subjects became more and more varied. The output clearly suggests that Rabindranath was absorbed in his new pursuit and enjoying the experience. The lack of formal training was compensated by an instinctive feel for rhythm, texture and spacing. There was also the calligraphic virtuosity when he used the pen. (His unique and beautiful Bengali handwriting – which came to be known as the ‘Rabindrik’ script – has been widely imitated.) But the brush, too, was frequently used. Some of the efforts were purely abstract, while others dealt with subjects which covered a wide field.

Except where human figures were concerned, Rabindranath’s work remained rooted in fantasy. He painted flora and fauna which belonged to no known species. The landscapes often have a mood which suggests dusk in rural Bengal, but here too the trees cannot be identified. Flowers, birds, fish and animals in his paintings inhabit a world which belonged uniquely to Rabindranath. Sometimes painting and a poem are combined, the former making a frame for the latter. Examples of this are to be found both in colour and black and white. Sometimes the sheet is filled with a frenzy of convoluted forms painted in iridescent colours. The mood evoked here is of a joyous freedom.

But Rabindranath's special field remained the study of women. These women are recognisably Bengali, portrayed in an infinity of moods and expressions. The lack of anatomical accuracy does not matter since, in the best examples, the total effect is haunting.

Rabindranath's paintings and drawings number well over two thousand. Considering the late start, this makes for an astonishing output of great fecundity. 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.

