

Indian polymath

Satyajit Ray, Drawing made
for a title card for his film
Kanchenjunga
c.1962..

Andrew Robinson
pays tribute to
Satyajit Ray on the
centenary of his birth

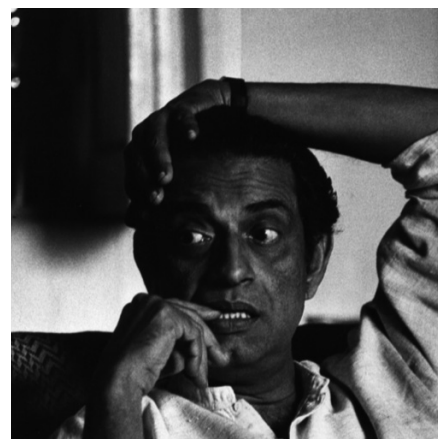
The British Museum's modern Indian collection includes twelve drawings painted and written by film director Satyajit Ray, acquired from his son (also a film director). These depict scenes and characters from the opening title cards of Ray's first colour film, *Kanchenjunga* (1962), set in contemporary Darjeeling in the shadow of the Himalayas, including Mount Kanchenjunga. The script in the drawings is Bengali (like the language of Ray's film script), but playfully Tibetanised by Ray – who loved calligraphy – to express the unique atmosphere of this famous hill station, with its historic mixture of Bengali and Tibetan culture mingled with the British Raj of Ray's youth. As he recalled to me, when I wrote his biography in the 1980s: 'On my first childhood visit to Darjeeling the bandstand was still there, and the band would perform in it.' His film's central character, a Bengali company director, is 'violently pro-British' – unlike his wife and children, with whom he unthinkingly clashes.

Not many leading film directors are also successful artists, writers and musicians. Perhaps only Ray, creator of the *Apu Trilogy* (1955–9) and other classics up to his death in 1992 – who began adult life as a book and magazine illustrator; wrote bestselling Bengali stories and detective novels known throughout India in English translation; and composed film songs much loved in his native Bengal. Actor Richard Attenborough called him a 'rare genius' after playing a British colonial general in Ray's *The Chess Players* (1977) – a film compared by writer V. S. Naipaul with a Shakespeare play. Cellist Mstislav Rostropovitch, fan of Ray's film music, offered 'My deep bow to this wonderful master.' According to fellow director Martin Scorsese speaking on Ray's birth



centenary in 2021, 'The films of Satyajit Ray are truly treasures of cinema, and everyone with an interest in film needs to see them.'

Was Ray a genius, comparable with great artists of earlier times? He himself reserved that honour for only Charles Chaplin and John Ford among film-directors. In the 1960s, he compared Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* to the 'distilled simplicity', 'purity of style' and 'impeccable craftsmanship' of Mozart's *Magic Flute*, 'the most enchanting, the most impudent and the most sublime of Mozart's operas'. Mozart's music certainly fascinated Ray from his teenage years, and undoubtedly influenced the ensemble performances in perhaps his finest film, *Charulata* (1964). Maybe Mozart's undoubted genius is the most appropriate comparison for Ray, despite the thoroughly Bengali ethos of both himself and most of his films: the Mozart of cinema.



Satyajit Ray
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Andrew Robinson's *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye* (third edition) is published by Bloomsbury.