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Writing a Transcultural Modern: Calcutta, 1922

In a format not so far removed from the 2013 exhibition *Bauhaus in Calcutta* in Dessau, the Indian Society of Oriental Art in Calcutta produced a catalogue in 1922 to accompany their exhibition of Indian and Bauhaus works. In the catalogue, Stella Kramrisch, the Austrian art historian in Shantiniketan, wrote: “Whichever nation and whatever artistic mentality these artists may represent, one feature is common to them and this is their training. All of them were brought up in art academies, so well known all the world over. But every one of them was driven by sheer inner necessity to abandon their lifeless scheme. And they struggled each in his own way through decoration and symbolism, through impressionism and post-impressionism and all the various artistic currents which have agitated the surface of European art during the last twenty years.”¹

In this essay, I focus on the 1922 Bauhaus show in Calcutta to illustrate a moment of what, in my view, is not the beginning or middle of a linear history of Indian modernism but rather a “modernism-in-process.” I view the artistic exchange between the Bauhaus and Shantiniketan schools neither as artistic transmission, an influence and imitation of the West, nor as a straightforward cultural dialogue with the other. I look instead for a subtext of this modernism-in-process, siting the real event of exchange in an instance of colliding perceptions of the other, in an attempt to define individual notions of modernisms in Germany and India. I further argue that both Germany and India in themselves were loci of multiple encounter and debate. To this end, I propose to lay out a network of object, interaction, and event to explore this moment of a modernism-in-process. Through the processes of the 1922 show, the artists and artworks exhibited, correspondence and debate around the show, it is useful to explore Stella Kramrisch’s writings toward a new Indian modern at the cross-section of these collisions, whereby Kramrisch and her contemporaries are flagged up as art-historiographic markers in the understanding of this modernism-in-process.

Destabilizing the notion of Europe as a single, unified entity, I argue that modernism did not come to India from Europe with a time lag as a complete and well-established aesthetic movement. Instead, modernism in 1922 was being negotiated differently in different spaces (such as India and Germany); it took definition in both real and perceived encounters of

multiple sources across the world. The 2013 show by the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation also illustrates a critical moment in contemporary curating and cultural theory in that it presents a reconstructed history, not simply of a historic moment but of a moment in the process of being defined as an aesthetic movement.

A leading local newspaper, *The Statesman*, wrote on December 15, 1922 about the forthcoming exhibition: “The third section represents the most novel features of this year’s show, namely, the original works of a number of Russian, Swiss and other continental artists who are contributing to the very latest phase to the movements in modern European painting.”²

For the Indians, a turn to the European avant-garde both stylistically and politically was very much embedded in the anticolonial stance of the intellectual and artistic circles of the Tagore family and the groups that evolved around them. Seen as a break from academic British art, the nonrepresentational avant-garde coincided with a pursuit for shaping an Indian modern. What complicates the issue at hand is that there was no unifying consensus regarding any of these issues, even amongst the Indian intellectuals. Rabindranath Tagore’s essay “Nationalism in India” claims: “India has never had a real sense of nationalism. Even though from childhood I had been taught that the idolatry of Nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will gain truly their India by fighting against that education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity.”³ Breaking away from the British academic tradition, Rabindranath turned not specifically toward a nationalist but rather a more universal, unfettered alternative, which spoke for the liberation of the people just as much as Abanindranath Tagore’s nationalist art, yet it transcended notions of nationalist boundaries to embrace the human.

- [1] Stella Kramrisch, “The Fourteenth Annual Exhibition of the Indian Society of Oriental Art,” in *RUPAM: An Illustrated Quarterly Journal of Oriental Art* 13–14 (January–June 1923), p. 18.
- [2] *The Statesman*, Dezember 1922.
- [3] Rabindranath Tagore, “Nationalism in India,” in *Nationalism* (London, 1917), p. 127.

Captions

- 1 Benoy Kumar Sarkar, “The Aesthetics of Young India,” *RUPAM: An Illustrated Quarterly Journal of Oriental Art* 9, ed. Ordhendra C. Gangoly (January 1922), p. 8
- 2 Stella Kramrisch, “The Aesthetics of Young India: A Rejoinder,” *RUPAM: An Illustrated Quarterly Journal of Oriental Art* 10, ed. Ordhendra C. Gangoly (April 1922), p. 66

ago the Faculty of Arts accepted a scheme proposed by myself for giving art an equal position to Science in its "arts" curriculum. The daring scheme was promptly suppressed by the higher powers.

Tempora mutantur and the new Professor of

Fine Art, I am glad to think, is not likely to meet with the same difficulty.

I am yours obediently,

E. B. HAVELL.

16th January 1922.

VII.—THE AESTHETICS OF YOUNG INDIA : A REJOINDER.

By STELLA KRAMRISCH.

TO all the definitions of art one may add another one, equally true and relevant, namely, that art is a substance subject to discussions *ad infinitum* with impunity. Works of art are taciturn and do not take revenge for they are merged into the eloquent silence of perfection.

The statement, that "what the fishing canoe is to the submarine, that is all classic and Christian art to the art of the last two hundred years, and that is, all the Hindu art to European art since the Renaissance" is the underlying idea of Mr. Sarkar's essay on the *Aesthetics of Young India*. ("Rupam," No. 9).

The assertion that any period of art surpasses all others by its artistic merit is not only obviously against all insight into the nature of art, but it also proves a rhetoric presumption gained by an acquaintance with the current art-terminology of Western critics. Surveying from this high pedestal the art of the world, Byzantine art for instance, appears to have influenced Asia Minor, although the "historical" relation is exactly the opposite, etc.

Mr. Sarkar on the other hand is right in repeating the dogma of modern aesthetics that only the "how" of artistic realisation is essential and Agastya who pleads for the Indianness of Indian art is right too.

However justified these claims may be, they do not help to secure an objective standard of aesthetics which ought to lie at the root of the Indian point of view. Undoubtedly the art and the outlook of the European middle ages have many features in common with the Indian thought and creation in so far as both are spiritualistic. But why did Europe never invent a work of art corresponding to the sitting Buddha, or quite apart from its subject-matter—why did a scheme of composition like that of the sitting Buddha, never find an interpreter in the West? Why although subject-matter and composition are very intimately connected in the representation of any Japanese and any Indian Buddha, why is it impossible to mistake even the back view of either the one or the other? Why, for example the Buddha from Sarnath needs must be Indian. What is so unmistakably Indian about this sculpture? May be that if we become aware of it we will find out the degree of its inner relation with the temple of Kandarya, for instance,

or the perforated stone-window of Sidi-Sayyid's mosque. How does the creative instinct of India work, and through what combination of visual elements does it manifest itself?

The aesthetics of us, the young generation, whether in India or anywhere else, have to be scientific and are therefore of international validity. Their structure might be pointed out in a few words.

Every art is possible only through some kind of material. What belongs to the material of art? Stone, bronze, paper, colour, brushes and so on; (for instance, to what natural conditions and aesthetic necessity does the use of earth colours in Indian painting correspond; what is the significance of the rock-cut caves and temples of India; why are Egyptian monumental statues made of the hardest, the most permanent stones; why were stained glass windows introduced together with Romanesque and Gothic architecture and how is it possible that wood-cut did not develop into an independent branch of Western art before the fourteenth century although wood-cut blocks were used for printing cloth long ago).

In this way the selection of material and technique is not merely of a technical interest. But besides the few materials mentioned many others have to be put under consideration, which belong to different categories. Subject matter with regard to creation is such a material. As subject matter, however, have to be classified not only the episodes of the Ramayana or "Ganesa with elephant-head, three eyes, pot-belly and dwarfish form, holding in his four hands a lotus, his own tusk, a battle-axe and a ball of rice-cake"; landscape or portrait-painting, but also the general ideas and conceptions of the age and nation to which the artist belongs, nature, men and things which surround him and the experiences and knowledge he possesses whether grown in his own country or imported from somewhere else. All these are given facts in a chaotic mixture. They constitute the raw material which awaits creation. Ultimately all art results from the union of intuition and personality. The first universal, unlimited and unchangeable consists in intensity and tends towards expression, the latter confined in temporal, national and individual limits enables

The Indian Society of Oriental Art was founded in Calcutta by Abanindranath and his brother Gaganendranath Tagore in 1907. The Society as an institution emerged within an organic discourse around a specific “nationalist” ideology that grew out of the prevailing trends of aesthetic discourse in Bengal, linking itself closely with Orientalist knowledge.⁴ Setting in some ways the scene for Kramrisch’s arrival in India, the period between 1905 to the early twenties saw an oscillation between and negotiation with notions of the national, the Indianness of the Indian, and, in an anticolonial stance, a complicated approach to the West. The constructive Swadeshi movement, in which the Tagores were keenly involved in 1905–06, propelled the notions of “self-development” and “self-expression.” When the impetus for nationalist claims waned into a more active preoccupation with universalist notions, the same concepts of the “lyricism” and “sentiment” of Indian art and the Indianness of its subject matter looked to slightly different motivations. From 1906–07 onward, a number of other artists who came to form the “New School” or the Bengal School around Abanindranath Tagore enrolled as students of the Government School of Art. Among them were Asit Kumar Haldar, Kshitindra Nath Mazumdar, Sailendranath Dey, Samarendranath Gupta, Surendranath Kar—all of these names recognizable from the Calcutta Bauhaus show. Through this first inner circle of students, the semblance of new art emerged, with works that broadly conformed to the master’s formula of an “Indian style.”⁵ By the nineteen-twenties, Abanindranath, however, claimed to move away from art as direct propaganda, retreating into his private sphere of images. His students in the later years, each following their individual artistic trajectories, moved back and forth in terms of style and subject matter from the early tenets of the Bengal School to an interest in the Pan-Asian and the European avant-garde, as we see so variously and richly illustrated in the Indian works on display in 1922. Still concerned with the dream of an independent India, the languages of the national and the universal overlapped and underwrote each other—competing claims, in a polyphonic arena of debate in Bengal, toward much the same end: a notion of the modern.

[4] Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New “Indian” Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920*, vol. 52: *South Asian Studies* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 185.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Stella Kramrisch, “The Aesthetics of a Young India: A Rejoinder,” in *RUPAM: An Quarterly Journal of Oriental Art* 10 (April 1922), pp. 66–67.

[7] Kramrisch 1923 (see note 1).

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Kramrisch 1922 (see note 6).

This variance of artistic production within the same networks of aesthetic debate and discourse opened up another realm—that of criticism. The sociologist Benoy Kumar Sarkar in his attack on orientalist parochialism (in revivalist, stylistic groupings such as of the Bengal School) came out with an unabashed celebration of modern art in his essay “Futurism of Young Asia.” He also published his essay “The Aesthetics of Young India” in the art journal *RUPAM* in January 1922. Writing from Paris after the Swadeshi movement, and with a clear understanding of contemporary European culture, Sarkar aims for a methodology of art appreciation that was concerned purely with the internal form and structure of a “work of art.” Criticizing the search for the Indian in Indian art, he claims that “Young India” in rejecting the West had shut itself out from the aesthetic revolution in modern Europe. The “internationalism” that Sarkar proposed was not quite the same as what Stella Kramrisch had in mind. In her article “The Aesthetics of a Young India: A Rejoinder,” published in April 1922, she took up Sarkar’s formalistic approach to argue that all art grew out of the dual forces of intuition and personality—while the first is universal, unlimited, and unchangeable, the latter is confined in temporal, national, and individual limits,⁶ enabling the variety of visualizations and the breeding peculiarities of design and composition. Regardless of an opening up to the West, the Indianness of Indian art, for Kramrisch, could not be compromised.

Intellectual thought and artistic activity in Bengal were therefore clearly caught up, on the one hand, in this constant negotiation of ideals, hashings, and rehashings of India’s relationship to its past, its present, and to colonial Britain and, on the other, in the new, rebellious Western avant-garde. The modernism-in-process of 1922 is well illustrated not only in the artworks shown in the Bauhaus exhibition but also in the forces and motivations for the exhibition, as well as in the literature of negotiation that grew around it. For instance, the anonymous review of the 1922 show in the art journal *RUPAM* claims: “That the ideas of the West are destined to bring about a new renaissance in India, and in fact are sowing seeds for such a consummation under our very eyes, will be readily admitted. But that should not discount the value of the contribution of Indian thought itself to the synthesis of the coming era.”⁷ Stella Kramrisch’s note in the catalogue is less convinced about any dubious rebirth. She writes: “Kandinsky is the first to paint pictures without any subject matter . . . The Indian public should study this exhibition, for then they may learn that European art does not mean naturalism and that the transformation of the forms of nature in the work of an artist is common to ancient and modern India.”⁸

Further, Kramrisch claims in her rejoinder to Sarkar that “to know her own necessity of significant form should be the first endeavour of artistic young India.”⁹ She identifies the “significant form” of the European avant-garde in their move toward abstract expression, while at the same

time suggesting that it is the spirit or personality of the artist on which this significant form is contingent.

Placing the moment of the 1922 exhibition in what I have identified as modernism-in-process, I suggest that the literature of negotiation traps this modernism-in-process in both a constructed past and a constructed future, existing in empty time. For people like Benoy Kumar Sarkar, the West had arrived at a future that India should follow. Dissidents to Sarkar's view, such as authors like Agastya, claimed that young India should return to its roots, much like the revivalist notion of the artist Abanindranath Tagore and the art historian Ernest Binfield Havell in the early Bengal School phase. Stella Kramrisch, on the other hand, believed that it was the personality of the individual that held the key to a historical and cultural consciousness, and it was this personality of the artists that made an artwork local or national. In seeking the creative spirit of the individual embedded in the past and looking to the future, her interaction with the Bauhaus artists becomes most significant. Whilst she finds common ground and seeks a future for Indian art in the European avant-garde, her basis of dialogue with the Bauhaus School is very different from Sarkar's push toward adopting the forms of the modern West.

Various members of the Bauhaus group had turned to theosophy as a Western adaptation of Eastern tenets and to an engagement with the Vedas and ancient Indian texts. Whilst artists such as Johannes Itten and Wassily Kandinsky strove toward a "spiritualism in art," India for them became a locus that was perceived as the pinnacle of the spiritual ideal. The decision to exhibit in India had just as much to do with the show taking place in real time in India as it did with the perception of the ancient East. Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Kasimir Malevich, and others invested in what has been termed the "primitive"—a spiritual dimension of human culture absent in urban modernity.¹⁰ They attributed, I suggest, an otherworldliness to what they viewed as natural human impulse, drawing a rather stark and sometimes undiscerning distinction between the primitive and the modern, similar to the distinction between the spiritual and the material dimensions of human existence. In an odd clash of perceptions, both the Bauhaus avant-garde artists and the Bengal School artists strove toward an integration of abstract thought and abstract form, looking to the other for

[10] Rolf Bothe, ed., *Das frühe Bauhaus und Johannes Itten* (Ostfildern, 1994).

inspiration but in very different ways and to very different ends. The European avant-garde, who saw primitivism as a universal phenomenon, sought it as a critique of rationality, whilst Rabindranath Tagore juggled his universalism and search for the spiritual with the German Romantic discovery of India as an ideal land. It is only against the background of this conflictual situation that the euphoric responses may be understood which Rabindranath's visits elicited from the German public. Gaganendranath, Rabindranath's nephew—though one of the driving forces of the nationalist Bengal School—in the early twentieth-century took up caricature to satirize the Westernized middle class of urban Bengal. He used a curious mix in style of the popular Kalighat and Japanese prints. The 1922 exhibition was positioned in this context of negotiation of the modern, where a perception of India as the eternal land of the spirit further served to collapse the temporal spaces within the moment of a modernism-in-process in Bengal.