

'The Art of Nandalal Bose' is first U.S. showcase for an Indian icon

by Robert L. Pincus

During its days as a British colony, much of India's art history remained hidden. The rediscovery of historical work at archaeological sites beginning in the 1850s was a spur to surging pride in Indian culture.

INDIAN ICON - In Nandalal Bose's 'New Clouds,' (1937) the girls moving through a grove established a subtle visual rhythm. CNS Photo courtesy of National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. A young artist named Nandalal Bose was deeply affected by the time he spent at the remote site of Ajanta, copying murals made on the walls of Buddhist monastic dwellings. The year was 1909. He was 26 and was already part of a circle of artists and writers who sought to revive classical Indian culture. Those sorts of revivals of ancient learning and art can become a catalyst for new creativity. Of course, the Renaissance is the grand example in European history. Looking back in time generated a rebirth in early 20th century India, too, the Bengali Renaissance.

Bose, who lived from 1882 until 1966, was at the heart of this cultural ferment, and in India he has a kind of iconic status. But in the United States, he's obscure.

Derrick Cartwright, the director of the San Diego Museum of Art, was presented with an opportunity to present the first American museum exhibition. He didn't hesitate, and now, three years later, "Rhythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose (1882-1966)" has reached the walls of the museum. After leaving San Diego, the exhibit will move to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, June 28-Aug. 31; Art Institute of Chicago, May 31-Aug. 31, 2009; and the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, dates to be announced.

The SDMA also has a curator with the right expertise, Sonya Rhie Quintanilla, to give the show the intellectual cogency needed to introduce Bose to its audience. And one of her mentors, Pramod Chandra, a professor emeritus at Harvard University, deserves credit for initially proposing the idea of this show.

Bose, it turns out, is an artist who felt that style shifted and changed to fit vision. He saw art as an expression of a larger spiritual search, a sensibility he shared with his painting mentor, Abanindranath Tagore, as well as other thinkers in Calcutta (now Kolkata), such as art historian A.K. Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita.

Like Tagore, he practiced a Japanese approach to the wash technique in his early work - They advocated a Pan-Asian mindset in art. "Sati" is a rendering of the wife of the Hindi god Siva that is so elegantly executed you can almost ignore the turbulent nature of the image. She has used her yogic powers to set herself ablaze to get rid of her physical form.

The original was lost. Bose repainted this and other early works in the 1940s. Clearly, they must have been important to him.

These and other works in the wash style may look conservative by Western standards. In these same years, the first two decades of the 20th century, Matisse and others were revolutionizing color with their fauvist canvases, and Picasso and Braque were overhauling pictorial space in their cubist paintings.

But every revolution has its own context. The atmospheric images by Tagore and Bose were a declaration of independence from the tight realism of artists like Raja Ravi Varma, which was based on British academic conventions.

Just as central to Bose's career as Abanindranath Tagore was his uncle, Rabindranath Tagore, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. In 1919, he asked Bose to head the art school, called Kala Bhavan, at the experimental academy he founded, Visva-Bharati (World University). The artist taught there until 1951.

Rabindranath believed in Bose. He declared, "Let us bring all our power of imagination and create a world. Nandalal is there ready for his task."

Bose returned the belief. Tagore inspired strong pictures like "Arjuna" (1938), based on a scene from a dance drama by the writer. Arjuna, hero of the famed epic "Mahabharata," is waking in a forest, his body spanning

the length of the picture's silk surface. It is beautifully drawn. Bose prided himself on his draftsmanship, which was impressive.

Many of the best works in the exhibition are drawings or ink paintings. "Benodebehari" (1924), a portrait of one of Bose's first students at Kala Bhavan, is a dazzling synthesis of unusual perspective and precisely placed line. (His subject went on to become one of the most prominent artists in India.) Bose's flowers, done in an East Asian mode (both dated 1952), are just as lovely, if not as original.

Aside from bringing Bose to the art school in Santiniketan, Tagore was pivotal to the artist's life in another way. He introduced him to Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi. Bose became the only artist that the spiritual and political leader patronized, according to the exhibition catalog.

They shared the belief that India's identity was intimately tied to its rural villages, populated by those who were less tied to the British colonizers. Bose celebrated (and idealized) rural folk, as in "New Clouds" (1937), a work on paper that pictures village girls walking among palms, creating a sort of visual harmony among them that implies a oneness with nature. His watercolor of "Village Huts" (1928) makes seductive use of humble architecture.

To mark the 1930 occasion of Gandhi's arrest for protesting the British tax on salt, Bose created a black on white linocut print of Gandhi walking with a staff. It became the iconic image for the nonviolent movement.

For Bose, it seems, politics was rooted in personal bonds. None of the works he created for Gandhi are terribly didactic.

When he retired from teaching, his art became even more inward-looking, more mystical - guided by what he called "that life rhythm (pranachhanda) of the reality whose vitality has generated the whole world."

Visual patterns are pronounced, whether he is drawing water, mountains or trees. They seem to distill the knowledge of a lifetime into works in which each mark matters.

The family's holdings of his art, some 6,800 works, entered the collection of the National Gallery of Art in New Delhi in 1982. Within a year, there was a centenary exhibition for the artist and its extensive touring schedule included Beijing, Tokyo and Jakarta.

It seems odd that it took another 25 years for an artist this engaging to gain significant exposure in the United States. Better late than never.

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