

# MODERN ART EXCHANGES IN ASIA – AN UNLIKELY BEGINNING?

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The first self-conscious art exchange of the modern era where Asian cultures joined in mutually respectful engagement took place in Calcutta in the early 1900s. It is a place unlikely today to be associated with a challenge to long-accepted ideas of art and its role in society, but that is what happened. The challenge arose at the heart of the British Empire, with Calcutta being then the capital of the British Raj.<sup>1</sup> It was enabled by the institutions of Empire concentrated in that city, and by the financial support flourishing at the heart of this rich mercantile society. Maybe that is all less surprising.

This Pan-Asian idealism was the equally gratifying meeting of Bengali and Japanese artists, followed by others from China and today's Southeast Asia. In contemporary parlance, what occurred was an exchange between artists genuinely interested in each other's culture and what it could offer in practical terms and in different ideas, based in *shared* respect. (Or, perhaps yesterday's parlance in these COVID-ridden times, pressing down on any thought of outward engagement, but we live in hope of better days.)

The exchange in Bengal occurred for specific reasons: the rise in Japan of a nationalist agenda focused on traditional Japanese aesthetic ideas in the face of encroaching western influence, spurring one of the leaders of Japanese culture, Kakuzo (Tenshin) Okakura, to travel to the heart of 'Asian' culture, India, the birthplace of the Buddha, and within that to head for the capital Calcutta. There Okakura finished his most important book *The Ideals of the East* (1903), about Japanese art, that begins with the cri de coeur:

Asia is one. The Himalayas divide, only to accentuate, two mighty civilisations, the Chinese and its communism of Confucius, and the Indian with its individualism of the Vedas.<sup>2</sup>

There too he associated with Rabindranath Tagore, the leading Bengali writer and supporter, in his turn,

of traditional Indian culture, also facing the onslaught of European innovation. The cultures that both men challenged were in the ascendant, and through their own activities they sought to at least hold back the tide. The Indians were quite successful in this, the Japanese less so. Indian artists wanted to use traditional cultural modes to support the independence *swadeshi* movement against the British. The Japanese were keen to just keep western culture at bay, in opposition to the progressives leading that country towards 'modernity'.

What can we learn from this today? Certainly that it happened and should be remembered as an important reality of Asian art's recent history, though few outside Bengal and some in Japan know of these artists today. That is salient. Perhaps more generally relevant is that it had a trajectory when the exchange was meaningful, but then died as events moved on. It happened *within* the power structures of both places. Even more crucially, I would argue, the success it had was because the artists believed in it and their art had merit.

So what happened? It is a tale of contradictions, as the best stories are. The protagonists, challenging the powers that be, came from the elites of their societies. They protested the colonial role yet communicated in English, with the British very consciously part of their audience: Okakura's *The Ideals of the East* was written in English and published in London; Rabindranath became world famous because he won the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature with work admired by Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats. Bengali artists had access to the Mughal artworks which so influenced their imagery via the importing efforts of Englishman E. B. Havell, head of the Government School of Art in Calcutta, as well as access to Ajanta cave paintings through newly released reproductions (in 1896–97 by John Griffiths). They were supported by the Irish nun Sister Nivedita, and the Ceylonese-English historian Ananda Coomaraswamy who came to Calcutta in 1909.

Yokoyama Taikan, *Floating Lamps*, 1909, colour on silk, 143 x 51cm, Museum of Modern Art, Ibaraki



The artists discussed here were traditionalists in terms of looking back to their own visual histories, with the Indians turning especially to Mughal antecedents, and the Japanese to *nihonga* (brush painting), both often using landscapes beloved of ancient scholars, uncluttered by industry or urban life. Rabindranath saw it in terms of the ancient spiritual ideals of Asia in battle against the 'knights-errant of the West ... [with their] arms and armour'.<sup>3</sup> The Indians knew European academic oil painting, notably through English artists visiting Calcutta, and the Japanese knew it through their training in Paris as well as through reproduction, and both groups were aware of the Pre-Raphaelites, the arts and crafts movement and art nouveau. But they also saw each other's work, or rather the Bengalis saw the Japanese, and the Japanese in turn acknowledged a fellow Asian culture of long historical impact.

Okakura came to India in 1901 to meet religious leader Swami Vivekananda and travelled to sites of the Buddha's life, befriended the Tagore family and stayed at their home. He was followed by his pupils, nihonga artists Taikan Yokoyama and Shunso Hishida in 1903. The artists stayed for six months to work and teach Japanese brushwork and flower painting, staging an exhibition of some 40 works. Yoshio Katsuta, also known as Katsuta Shokin, came in 1905 from recent studies at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts and taught Japanese techniques at the Government School of Art. An exhibition of a large collection of Japanese art was held at the Oriental Society in 1910. Okakura's Tokyo art magazine *Kokka* published impressive, highly technical prints of Japanese art and he sent copies to Calcutta. Laurence Binyon's *Painting in the Far East*, published in London and New York in 1908, was known by the Bengalis.

Okakura returned to India in 1912 just before his death. Artist Shiko Imamura came in 1914, and Kampo Arai, a student of Taikan, arrived in 1916 to teach. It was the same year Rabindranath travelled to Japan, accompanied by Mukul Dey who drew their hosts (including Taikan) while there. Younger leading Bengali artists followed: Nandalal Bose in 1924; and B. B. Mukherjee travelled to China and Japan in the 1930s. Others followed to India, including Kosetsu Nosu around 1918, who later returned in 1932, and Tomimaro Higuchi, who travelled there in 1931 with an exhibition of Japanese art.

Their impact was both practical and conceptual. Taikan and Hishida's new way of reducing line to wash had special impact in early twentieth-century India. They notably taught the Japanese brush practice of *morotai*, using wet paper to create a sfumato

or hazy effect with layers of colour finished with delicate lines. The Japanese also encouraged the use of the reed pen, later taken up in one of the most effective outcomes of Japanese intervention, by Zainul Abedin and his emotive images of the Bengal famine made in 1943. Most importantly, they encouraged the idea of less is more, eschewing the details so loved by Mughal artists, to search for the 'infinite'. It was a true seeking for an essentially Buddhist core of culture.

*Bharat Mata* is always seen as the exceptional outcome of this exchange. Painted by Abanindranath Tagore (Rabindranath's nephew) around 1905, it avoided the decorative and narrative elements of his earlier works based on (literal) Mughal paintings, particularly *The Death of Shah Jahan* (1902), in favour of a simple composition of 'Mother India' placed within an unlocatable time and place. It creates a space for contemplation, lit from within. Moments hang poised, a single gesture is meaningful, emotion (called *bhava*) is evoked subtly. Sister Nivedita responded by hailing 'a new age in Indian art'.<sup>4</sup> The artist's older brother Gaganendranath also painted in this new way, though he led a more private life than Abanindranath, who remained head at the Government School of Art after Havell returned to England in 1926.

This official side saw further connection through the experimental school set up near Calcutta by Rabindranath at Santiniketan. Its coda was a generalised utopian Pan-Asian vision with all traditions encouraged. Many artists from the region visited, including Harry Pieris from Ceylon, Fua Haribhitak from Thailand, Aung Soe from Burma, and Affandi from Java. The most important Chinese artists to visit Bengal were Gao Jianfu, in 1930, and Xu Beihong, in 1940:

the first being curious and the second raising funds (mainly in Singapore) for the ongoing war in China. In 1906 Gao had studied in Tokyo with Okakura.

Like Rabindranath and Okakura, Xu was larger than life in his own culture, crossing the world to explore connections and ideas. Rabindranath had welcomed him to Bengal saying: 'With great joy I look forward to an era of warm kinship between our neighbouring lands and to the assertion of historical forces in the east that will save us from encroaching darkness.'<sup>5</sup> And Xu's regard is clear in the various portraits he made of the writer during this visit.

In India, followers of Abanindranath spread out across the country, taking these ideas with them to centres such as Allahabad, Benares (Varanasi), Lucknow and Mysore, helped by the development of lithography to spread imagery widely. There is argument about the debt of Lahore-based A. R. Chughtai



Opposite:

Abanindranath Tagore, *Bharat Mata (Mother India)*, c. 1905, watercolour on paper, 26 x 15cm, Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata

Rabindranath Tagore (seated) on his 1916 visit to Japan, possibly taken at Tomitaro Hara's Sankei-en in Yokohama; Arai Kampo is standing adjacent to a young Mukul Dey (second from right); photo: Mukul Dey Archives, Santiniketan



# Rabindranath saw it in terms of the ancient spiritual ideals of Asia in battle against the 'knights-errant of the West ... [with their] arms and armour'.

to the Bengalis: suffice to say their works show great affinity. The period from 1900 to the mid-1940s in India was dominated by this Bengal school, so closely linked with the Japanese nihonga masters. And while there was, finally, a rejection of the nostalgic romantic element of the school, its capacity to add light to essentially Mughal narratives has resonated with artists today such as Nalini Malani, Surendran Nair and Nilima Sheikh.

By contrast, the effect of the Indians on the Japanese was superficial, primarily known through the Bengali imagery reproduced in *Kokka*, and lingering most in the idea of Pan-Asia. This was to become problematic later through its elision with the ideas of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere propagated by Japan during the Second World War.

The energy and openness of the movement in Bengal is significant. At the beginning the Bengalis saw themselves as part of a wider realm, exemplified by Abanindranath writing how they needed to discuss:

Asian art. In other words, it is essential to conduct a comparative study of the traditions stretching from Turkey to Japan, from the northern limits of the Tartar kingdoms of China at one end to the southern ocean at the other. Then we must turn our attention to the manner in which Buddhist art had left its mark in a glorious unity of Asiatic art.<sup>6</sup>

Yet the movement ebbed; focus turned inward. Specific circumstances took their toll at the end, with the Japanese protagonists too closely associated with their country's growing militaristic nationalism, and Delhi taking over the role of India's capital, in 1931, followed by the eventual retreat of the British. Both the Bengal and nihonga schools were viewed as retrograde, associated with out-of-date positions in the rapidly evolving political lives of each country. Today Kolkata (as Calcutta is now officially known) has little international artistic presence, and India (particularly official India) remains remarkably passive about international engagement.

What has happened since in Asia to use culture to further political ends as a form of soft power? It took many decades for any similar events to evolve and then they were driven not by artists but by politics. From the 1970s, ASEAN (the Association of

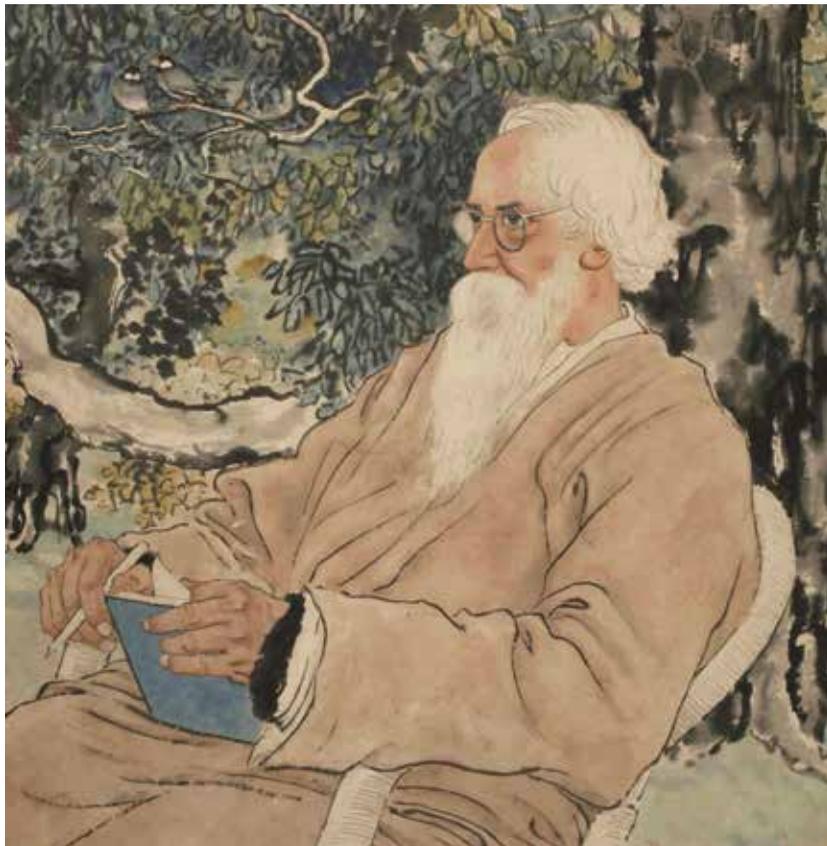
Southeast Asian Nations) organised a touring exhibition schedule in an effort to link their cultural communities. With little else on offer, artists did become involved, but the political role of art overwhelmed the integrity of these shows. The more recent activities of the Singapore Government in supporting regional arts engagement certainly have been politically minded, but the curators and artists involved have created projects of both genuine interest and depth – it is not all window-dressing. In the 1990s there was a move for the 'Confucian' countries of North Asia – China, Japan and (South) Korea – to join in ventures, but they only creaked along with politics looming, and the discordances with the Chinese Communist system draining energy from the others. The Japan Foundation, an arm of the Japanese Government, has taken the intelligent position in the last few years (again pre-COVID), of being proactive in regional programs of artistic interest, not shying away from engagement with the smaller countries, 'investing' (as they say) in young curators travelling and creating innovative projects.

I also like to think Asialink had a similar (but much less generously funded) remit.<sup>7</sup> Certainly where these ventures worked best, the artists and the arts communities were strongly behind them. Politically driven support can be given, but if the project has no artistic merit, it will wither and die. Of the Asian biennales today, certainly children of the Calcutta exchange, the ones that work best are again artist-focused and usually region-focused. The Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane is an obvious example, never losing its heart or soul. It is the personal engagement and enthusiasm for this that is political.

1. Since 2001 the city has become known as Kolkata.
2. Kakuzo (Tenshin) Okakura, *The Ideals of the East*, John Murray, London, 1903, p. 1.
3. From 'East and West' (1922), in *Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology*, Picador, London, 1997, pp. 206–7.
4. Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850–1922*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 295.
5. See Yvonne Tan, 'Xu Beihong in Nanyang', *Asian Art Newspaper*, June 2009, p. 6.
6. Mitter, op. cit., p. 266.
7. The author was director of Asialink Arts from 1990 until 2010.

Top:  
Mukul Dey, *Yokoyama Taikan*, 1916, pen on paper; photo: Mukul Dey Archives, Santiniketan

Bottom:  
Xu Beihong, *Portrait of Rabindranath Tagore*, 1940, colour on paper, 51 x 50cm,  
Xu Beihong Museum, Beijing; reproduced with the permission of the Xu family



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