

Master of the Line: Art and Aesthetics of Rabindranath Tagore

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Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore emerged as an artist quite late in his life—in the late 1920s—but once he began to seriously pursue his new passion, he produced an astounding number of drawings, paintings and etchings that testify to his greatness as an artist, and his standing as a precursor of modern Indian art. Yet, Tagore did not offer any theory of art, neither did he write extensively on his own art beyond making occasional comments on his style and his satisfying pursuit of art. Still, a careful study of his writings on art does reveal a theoretical underpinning that appears predominantly romantic – with its emphasis on sublimity, beauty, truth, simplicity and universality. His vision of art however, accommodates his constantly evolving perceptions of art, and allows him, at times, to deviate from an earlier view or search for separate nuances within art practices of his time. A close look at Tagore’s art reveals that many of its defining characteristics lie outside the ideas that he propagates in his writings and lectures on art. The paper will examine these differences and try to understand how his art and aesthetics make a fine balance between tradition and innovation, while being sensitive to romantic aspirations and modernistic sensibilities.

Rabindranath Tagore’s views on art and aesthetics, which lie scattered in his various essays, lectures, monographs and letters evolved in stages that roughly coincide with the intellectual, literary and historical developments of his time, but maintain a studied distance from their leading energies and agitations. Tagore himself avoided specific disciplinary boundaries while talking about art, and showed his aversion to definitional and theoretical categorization. He made no claims that he had a theory of art to offer, but only insights derived from contemplations on the meaning, reasons and manifestations of art. He also made no attempt to compile or anthologize - his discourses on art or promote any of his ideas even to students of *Kala Bhavan* – the art school of Visva-Bharati that he set up in 1919. But a careful study of his writings and lectures on art does reveal a theoretical underpinning that appears predominantly romantic – with its emphasis on sublimity, beauty, truth, simplicity and universality. He continually maintains that “art is the principle of unity” (*On Art and Aesthetics*, 19), that the function of art is to build “the living world of truth and beauty” (21); or that “[I]n Art the person in us is sending its answers to the Supreme Person, who reveals

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Himself to us in a world of endless beauty across the lightless world of facts” (28). Even when he was beginning to recognize the power of contemporary art trends in Europe, particularly German Expressionism, Tagore continued with his mystical and transcendental view of art, reminding his audience that “we touch the infinite reality immediately within us only when we perceive the pure truth of love or goodness” (38). In a lecture titled “The Religion of an Artist” which he delivered in China and Dhaka during 1924-26 and revised in 1936, Tagore writes: “It is for the artist to remind the world that with the truth of our expression we grow in truth” (49). Like the English Romantics, Tagore maintains that “Art is a solitary pedestrian, who walks alone among the multitude, continually assimilating various experiences, unclassifiable and uncatalogued” (54). Kenneth R. Stunkel, writing on Tagore and the aesthetics of postmodernism, draws a comparison between Tagore and Wordsworth and Coleridge in regard to their views of the world of experience “as a relationship of human consciousness with its objects” and suggests that “Tagore resided midway between philosophical realism and idealism” (Stunkel, 250).

However, Tagore’s predominantly romantic vision also accommodates his changing perceptions of art, and allows him, at times, to deviate from an earlier view or search for separate nuances within art practices of his time. And, despite his stated stand against setting “the standard of value in Art by something which is not inherent in it” (*On Art and Aesthetics*, 13) he at times stretches his aesthetic field to include everyday experiences. He believed that “A great picture is always speaking” (43). This admission of the communicative possibility of art is in keeping with his desire to convey the “delightful sense of reality” that informs his poetic and artistic vision (43).

Despite these deviations however, Tagore’s view on art and aesthetics displays a consistency of perception, approach and engagement. He distrusted analytical methods, but his ideas on art centralize certain key principles and contents by applying an inner logic and a dialogic frame. This is also noticeable in his writings on literature and society, which often accommodate and stabilize differences and pluralistic views. Thus his writings and lectures on art show an inner discipline that may loosely be categorized as theory, but such a description may only be applied if we consider theory as a site where an artistic vision or idea enters into a creative engagement with the world within the continuum of cultural and historical time. Such a specific conceptualization, instead of limiting the range and scope of an idea expands on its meaning and its signification for realizing its uniqueness and value.

Tagore believed that science and art, the practical life and the life of imagination, attachment and indifference, beauty and ugliness are not exclusive categories located at polar distances from each other, but that their boundaries frequently overlap. It is only through sifting them, contrasting and contesting their

differences, and understanding each instance of their separateness as well as their relational values that an artist fine-tunes his vision. The concern of the artist in “the world of today,” writes Tagore, “embraces the big and the small, the near and the distinct” (*On Art and Aesthetics*, 61).

Such a synthetic approach helped Tagore’s aesthetics to pursue a path away from the larger socio-political and intellectual movements of his time. While he acknowledged the importance of some of the imperatives of these movements, he did not allow the heat and passion of their discourse to colour his thought. Tagore was drawn into Hindu nationalism of his youth and also appreciated the liberal humanist values that Brahmaism espoused. When the *swadeshi* movement started, he lent it his qualified support. He also sympathized with those who opposed the 1905 partition of Bengal. However, he was against all forms of violence, and showed his distaste for narrow patriotism – which, when unchecked, mutates into a monster called Nationalism. His writings on society, history and politics of the time were coloured by the concerns of and the contradictions inherent in these social and political movements. But his writings and lectures on art are surprisingly free from any references to contemporary political or social events. This was the case even as Indian art took a modernistic turn, a move that had its political and social implications.

Tagore’s early exposure to European art made him an admirer of Impressionist painters, but at home, he developed a likeness for realist art. The Tagore family had a collection of oil paintings and oleographs of Raja Ravi Verma (1848-1906), who was perhaps the most famous practitioner of the genre at the time. Eventually however, Tagore found realism limiting for its strict adherence to objective signification and its refusal to entertain any critique of truthful representation. When his nephew Abanindranath Tagore (1871- 1951), with the help of E. B. Havell (1861-1934) launched the movement known as Bengal School, which aimed at restoring Indianness in Indian art, Tagore appreciated the School’s philosophy, and even defended its project against its detractors. But after his visit to the 1913 Chicago Armory Art Institute exhibition of contemporary western art, and his exposure to German Expressionism, his view of art began to change. He developed an international perspective, and realized the need to cultivate a form of modernism that would eschew Eurocentric biases while addressing specific aesthetic needs of the artists. Critics have commented on the “influence on Tagore of the total phenomenon of Expressionism, including writing, graphics, painting, and sculpture” (Dyson and Adhikari) and on the nearness of Tagore to the German Expressionist Emil Nolde. By the time he began to paint in earnest Tagore believed that Indian artists should move away from practicing narrow nationalistic art and take up a pursuit of cosmopolitan art. In *On Art and Tradition*, he wrote:

When in the name of Indian art we cultivate with deliberate aggressiveness a certain bigotry born of the habit of a past generation, we smother our soul under idiosyncrasies that fail to respond to the ever-changing play of life. (54)

In his own practices, Tagore reflects his ideals of syncretism and his modernist sensibilities, which have prompted art historians to consider him, along with Gaganendranath Tagore (1867-1938), a precursor of modern art in India. Tapati Guha-Thakurta has described “modernism” in the context of Indian art as tending “to focus on the issue of cosmopolitan, revolutionary innovations and openness to contemporary European developments” (Guha-Thakurta, 316). In pursuing this modernity, Tagore however, did not forsake his Indian perspective. Although, in a letter to William Rothenstein (1872-1945) he admitted that he had been “playing havoc in the complacent and stagnant world of Indian art.” he was not following any particular western art trend, but creating forms and images that grew out of his own experiences. These were considered shocking because of their non-conformity to either the art practices of the Bengal School adherents or of the followers of western academic realism; or the dominant western styles such as cubism that flouted traditional representational ethics.

A close look at Tagore’s art reveals that many of its defining characteristics lie outside the ideas that he propagates in his writings and lectures on art. There is indeed a gap between what his aesthetics proposes and what his art pursues. In other words his art and theory (to use the word in the sense defined above) did not always go the same way. Indeed, at certain points the divergences are quite pronounced. An examination of these divergences is therefore important for a better understanding of

- the historical context of Tagore’s art and aesthetics;
- his commitment on the one hand to romanticist view of art which he also pursues in his literature in general and in his poetry in particular; and on the other, his acceptance of modernistic sensibility that is a hall mark of the turn of the century art in the west;
- his growing internationalism and his rejection of narrow nationalistic binds, as well as his bid to construct an aesthetic for an imaginary India, which is both situated in time and outside of time; and
- his pursuance of a classical discipline in aesthetic thought and his exultation in breaking free from tradition.

Tagore had an enlightened and idealistic view of art. He believed that art is a means of expressing and cultivating beauty, which can be done by harnessing the power of harmony and the principle of unity. Art, he writes, should aim to cull the essence of truth from all our mundane experiences, and align itself with a greater truth so that man can feel “his infinity, where he is divine, and the divine

is the creator in him” (*On Art and Aesthetics*: 25). The realization of truth, in turn, leads us to joy. Tagore believed in the Keatsian equation of truth and joy with a conviction that his grounding in classical and *Puranic* traditions reinforced. “Where the true is indubitably true to me, it is like love, it is like joy,” he writes in “The Sense of Beauty” (7). But beauty and joy need to be appreciated through “an initial cultivation of discipline” which he describes as restraint. This restraint is not the same as austerity, which can “effectively squeeze out the aesthetic sense to a last drop,” but is something that balances the “capriciousness of an artist or his falseness of passion” (24). Such a restraint helps an artist discard all superfluity in search of beauty. Tagore believed that the finite man has an infinite side that reveals itself in symbols of immortality. That is where man seeks perfection, and in that search he discards “all that is flimsy and feeble and incongruous,” in other words, what is superfluous (25). But if superfluity is seen to be an obstacle in achieving perfection in the sphere of the ideal, it is considered essential in creating art on the level of our lived experience. Tagore consistently maintains that “where there is an element of the superfluous in our heart’s relationship with the world, Art has its birth” (*On Art and Aesthetics*: 24). The principle of superfluity or surplus finds an expression in a Wordsworthian overflow of powerful feelings that creates poetry.

Linked with the idea of superfluity or surplus is the idea of personality, the expression of which Tagore considers the “principal object of art” (*On Art and Aesthetics*: 18). Personality, which Tagore defines as “an organic complex of matter and manner, thoughts and things” (19), finds its resonance in T. S. Eliot’s concept of personality, which a poet strives to express. In both cases, personality is seen to be the bridge between the individual and the world. It is something that does not only apply to a sentient being, but to an object as well, “[Art] only proves that every object, which fully asserts its existence to us because of its inherent finality is beautiful,” writes Tagore. This “inherent finality” is another name of personality. Personality can also be considered autonomy, a condition Tagore deems essential in relating art to the experiences of the fullness of life. It is this concern with the lived experience that pushes Tagore towards acknowledging that “the one effort of man’s personality is to transform everything with which he has any concern into the human” (24).

Tagore also wrote on the debate between the “Art for Art’s Sake” ideal that aesthetes like Clive Bell promoted, and the opposed utilitarian view that considers art’s function in terms of its relevance to life. He believed that art is not entirely without purpose, rather, it aspires for Good and Truth, since, “whenever we see Good and the True in perfect accord, the Beautiful stands revealed” (5). Art has an underlying pull towards goodness, which is just one remove from Godliness. “The beauty of goodness,” he writes, “is a thing of much wider and deeper significance – it endows man with Godliness” (5).

But to Tagore, goodness is not an exclusive concept, complete in itself and foreclosing any possibility of critique. He believed that an artist should put nature and the world of the living under careful scrutiny, so that he may be able to “select things from his surroundings in order to make them his own” (15). Similarly, an uncritical acceptance of good – or for that matter beauty – is bound to cloud our perception of the real. Tagore feels that goodness juxtaposes “the two conflicting notions of the good and the bad” (7) for a fuller understanding of the purpose of life. An awareness of the good-bad duality also helps artists to take stock of other binaries forming the shifting terrains of art and reality. Thus, the movement between the universal and the local, the ideal and the practical, utility and self-expression, and jubilation and sorrow is a profoundly theoretical one, where such concepts as truth, harmony and beauty are seen to be a given. “Reality as object” is validated by the artist’s “active relationship with attentive, creative subjects” (27). The exemplifying aspects of the good and the bad thus essentially reflect an ideological desire for the abolition of binaries in favour of a mutually dependent state of contrariness in human discourse. But Tagore was also aware that binaries are a part of the elaborate structure of our universe. Thus ugliness is not entirely different from beauty; it is rather a part of the process that leads to a realization of good and the beautiful. Ugliness results from a faulty conception of truth and beauty – it is not a limitation of the world of nature, but an indulgence in its capacity to confuse and tire one out. “There is ugliness in the distorted expression of beauty in our life and in our art” writes Tagore, “which comes from our imperfect realization of truth” (“The Realisation of Beauty,” *Sadhana*: 140-41). In his art Tagore frequently used exaggerated and grotesque forms and images that evoke feelings of unease and disquiet. Tagore considered these an essential part of our total experience in life.

Tagore also wrote on the transcendental aspect of art – on its capacity to lift itself over and above temporal and spatial circumstances towards a superior ideal. He frequently mentions “the ideal of completeness” and “abiding values.” He believed that art should aspire towards its own magnificence, which can be best attained when the eternal and the infinite manifest in the finite space of an artist’s canvas.

However, when it comes to writing about his own art, Tagore is less concerned with the reasons and ideals of art, and focuses more on the techniques and features which distinguish it, and how it evolved over the years, starting with his childhood and ending with the most fruitful years of the late 1920s. He also carefully marks out his differences with others, even going to the extent of saying that Indian viewers cannot appreciate his art because it does not conform to the tradition of *Bhabh* (emotional idea) or western academic realism. He is unequivocal in maintaining that his art is of line and colour rather than *bhabh*. In his lectures in later years and in many of his letters, he moves away from the generalized, romantic notions of art to a more specific discussion of its applied

aspects. In “Art and Tradition,” Tagore is quite outspoken about breaking the rigid rules of convention. “So let us take heart and make daring experiments, venture out into the open road in the face of all risks” he says, and exhorts the artists “vehemently to deny their obligation to produce something that can be labeled as Indian Art, according to some old world mannerism” (*On Art and Aesthetics*, 53). At the same time, Tagore strongly criticizes the “modern young men” for believing that “originality lay not in the discovery of the rhythm of the essential in the heart of reality but in the full lips, tinted cheeks and bare breasts of imported pictures” (31). Elsewhere Tagore denounces naturalistic trends that highlight shocking realistic details – such as those of disease and rot. Tagore considers these trends as “a jerky shriek, something like the convulsive advertisement of the modern market” (45).

Tagore thus maintains his distance from both those “bare-nothing” artists, and the traditionalist ones, painting modernistic pictures that have certain resemblances with the impressionistic and expressionist styles pursued in Europe, but keep their formal uniqueness. He believes that he is a maker of forms, someone who notices “a lot of things happening around him” and registering “their impressions” (61). In describing the process he adopts in painting, he says, “First, there is the hint of a line, then the line becomes a form. The more pronounced the form becomes the clearer becomes the picture to my conception. The creation of form is a source of endless wonder” (79). He writes exultantly about “the world of form where lines crowd upon lines,” “this visible world is a vast procession of forms,” the world of “pure visible form” his “intoxication with the game of inventing forms” the “universe of forms” where “there is a perpetual activity of natural selection in lines” (90-94). Sometimes he writes about how some form emerges accidentally “whose genealogy” he was “totally unaware of” (95). And, in a letter written in 1931, he candidly said: “My work is done with the creation of *rupa* (form); it is for the others to usher in the deluge of *nama* (name)” (96).

Tagore’s lines also have an accidental history: these evolved through a vast amount of doodles that he did on the manuscripts of his poems. Gradually, the fascination of the evolving line engaged his attention. He began to value “the surprise element which gradually evolves into an understandable shape” (80). When these lines became obsessive, he noticed their different manifestations of feelings and emotions. “Some lines showed anger, some placid benevolence, through some lines ran an essential laughter,” he writes (91). He admits that his pictures “did not have their origin in trained discipline, in tradition and deliberate attempt at illustration, but in my instinct for rhythm” (92). In a poem whose title in English is “My Mistress of the Line,” he is more specific –

Fondly indulgent is my Mistress of the line to the errant in the poet

... ..

Leaving it free to follow its path

Free as is the Spring with his paint-box . . . (78)

Thus his art is essentially based on lines, forms and colours; it is about wonder, surprise and fascination for the unknown; it is about ways of seeing and perceiving; it is about surplus; it is his attempt at versification in lines; it is about “establishing an intimate relationship between our inner being and the universe at large” (76).

It is indeed difficult to trace reflections of Tagore’s romanticist and idealist aesthetics in his art. The collection of paintings, drawings and etchings that he has left behind – the number of which ranges from 2500 to 3000 according to various estimates – do not appear as a doorway to the “world of endless beauty” or show the artist sending his answers to the Supreme Person, or meditating on the universal soul. These are abstract formulations of an aesthetic agenda, which are not always realizable in tangible terms, but these remain behind his art as points of reference, and as “theoretical” points of departure. As he began to practice his art in earnest, he knew that he had to find his own style, which would tread the path of modernity while not entirely discarding tradition. When Abanindranath Tagore was pushing the agenda of Bengal School, Tagore urged him to take a fresh look at folk art, particularly its vibrant and fluid forms and its repetitive but enlivening techniques. The interface of the folk and the modern in Tagore’s own art is indicative of his desire for a rooted modernity, which would address local aspirations without compromising its international character. When Tagore applied Impressionistic techniques, particularly in his landscape paintings and in some of his self-portraits, he used the interplay of light and shade not for a shimmering luminosity but for accentuating a dark and contemplative mood. The landscapes are studies in different manifestations of darkness, which reveal various psychological moments in different degrees of intensity. His Impressionism is not a flitting and evanescent impression of reality that the eye receives, but a moment vested with a meditative nuance. Likewise, his Expressionistic work, showing the quality of subjectivity and incoherence alongside an emphasis on strong colours, is often a dark and sombre exercise, made more brooding and haunting by the application of a limited number of dark hues, thanks to a colour disorder in his field of vision called protanopia. This disorder limited his tonal variations, created confusions between brown and green, and made him choose brown quite often. A look at Tagore’s Expressionistic work would confirm its local moorings while showing its indebtedness to European sources. Tagore’s paintings show the same distortion of form, the same exploration of shifting states of mind and repressed emotions, as well as a fascination for primitive art that characterize European Expressionism. Tagore was attracted to mask painting, from which he took the element of distortion and aberrant use of colour.

Tagore’s paintings are often considered at a remove from his poetry, but they also carry out his romanticist search for enduring forms, reassuring values, “a ceaseless longing of the human heart” (*On Art and Aesthetics*: 26) and a pursuit

of pure joy, beauty, harmony and truth. Even in his poems that deal with everyday reality, his representation of pain and suffering has a sophistication that lifts them above the level of the shocking and the grotesque. His paintings, some of which are considered quite unsettling for their emphasis on darkness and grotesque forms, certainly inhabit the other end of this romanticist spectrum. But a close look reveals their celebration of nature, and wild and untamed life. Under scrutiny, the psychic energy and the primordial forms of his paintings express his search for vitality and life principles at a time when India was increasingly embracing a formula-driven nationalism that found violence as an answer to the ills of imperialism. Tagore's modernism—indeed his avant-gardism—answered a distinct historical need. Thierry de Duve has quoted Clement Greenberg as saying, “The true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to ‘experiment’, but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence” (*Theory Rules*: 45-6). Tagore performed both functions with an eye on the future. It was perhaps this need in him to “keep culture moving” that helped him graduate from the doodling in the *Purabi* manuscripts (1924) to full fledged Expressionistic work in the course of only a few years.

Tagore also uses a great deal of geometry. His angular forms, ovoid and stern looking faces, particularly of women, overlapping spiral forms and upward-swinging lines, linear bodies, lean triangles, zoomorphic patterns in monochrome, dramatized contours and pointed foreheads – all record his incessant search for pure forms. The interacting lines and vibrant forms express the essence rather than the appearance of an object or person. His search expands ever inward, leading him through Freudian regions of the mind to a contemplation of the primordial self of man that lives in harmony with the Eternal Person. Obviously, that innermost region lies quite outside of ordinary perception, but it is possible to bridge the distance if one explores Tagore's muted colour scheme, his fascination for darkness and shades and his penchant for distortion. These are aspects of his style that reveal an inner rhythm, which is another name of harmony.

Tagore's search for personality in his art similarly explores different facets of personality. His self-portraits are revealing in their brooding and contemplative force, although his face appears to suggest a range of moods – from reflective to questioning; from probing to revealing. His comic and grotesque figures – both of men and women, show a carnivalesque state of affairs. Indeed, Tagore's paintings have a suggestive narrative content, in keeping with their “speaking” role as he mentioned in one of his writings. The narrative is a convergence of many voices, many questionings and many wonderments mediated by what Tagore called “the language of undoubted reality” (94). But Tagore's search for personality does not end with himself, or with the artist at a remove in time and space, but extends to the world of objects, and animals, known and unknown. His

canvas is full of nameless exotic animals and birds and haunting figures which seem to inhabit a surrealistic world of no reason but only possibilities.

For Tagore, modernism is a privileged insight into humanity's capacity to reaffirm its commitment to progress in the face of newer challenges. It is a way of articulating the universal while claiming with renewed energy what is local. His art reflects these positions and confirms his view that an artist must have a locus but, at the same time, should "attain a certain degree of aloofness" (*A & E*: 48). He accepted the formal challenges of modern art and applied its techniques to arrive at a style that "awakens a sense of the real by establishing an intimate relationship between our inner being and the universe at large" (76).

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