Paintings by Rabindranath Tagore and the narrative tradition in Bengal are at the centre of the BM this autumn. T. Richard Blurton explains

Living stories

'When I go from hence let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable. I have tasted of the hidden honey of this lotus that expands on the ocean of light, and thus am I blessed – let this be my parting word. In this playhouse of infinite forms I have had my play and here have I caught sight of him that is formless. My whole body and my limbs have thrilled with his touch who is beyond touch; and if the end comes here, let it come – let this be my parting word.' This song, number 96 of *Gitanjali* ('Song Offerings') by the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, was written out by the poet Wilfred Owen and kept in his pocketbook while he served in the trenches of the First World War. The scrap of paper was returned to his mother following his death in November 1918. This poignant story provides an insight into the status of Tagore's poetry in the early 20th century, a popularity that resulted in him being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913; he was the first Asian to be thus honoured.

Tagore (1861–1941) is today less well known in Europe, although new translations and a new biography have begun a process of reappraisal. What is almost completely forgotten in Europe nowadays, however, is that Tagore in his later years, while still continuing to write, also began to paint. This late flowering is astonishing, particularly as he had no formal training as an artist. As a painter, he had neither predecessor nor successor; his voice was unique.

Above: *Fantasy animal*, by Rabindranath Tagore, late 1920s; above right: One of a group of Tagore's fantasy animal paintings displayed in the exhibition, late 1920s; right: Photograph of Rabindranath Tagore, late 1920s

His paintings are for the most part executed in coloured ink and this provides the clue to the origin of his first works – they grew out of pictures sketched onto his manuscript pages. Several of these, along with a now significant group of other paintings, have been acquired by the British Museum over the last twelve years and a selection will be shown as part of the *Voices of Bengal* season. The Museum's collection of his paintings probably represents the most important group outside the subcontinent, a fact that reflects Tagore's visits to Britain in his later years. All the works in the BM collection he originally gave or sold to his admirers in this country.

People who know Tagore as a poet of poignant longing may be surprised by the imagery in his paintings. Tagore was diffident in saying anything about them, but he seemed to want to present an internal view and one that is at times disturbing. There is an element of the nightmarish in these works, particularly in the group of zoomorphic images on view. Some of these 'animals' seem to have strayed out of a dream, suggesting an awareness of the ideas of the surrealist movement in Europe at that time.

The influence of Tagore's œuvre has been enormous, especially in South Asia. It is some indication of his status that, since his death, his poems have been used as the national anthems of two countries – India and Bangladesh. The written word is not the only area of his continuing influence, as the œuvre of his fellow Bengali, the film-maker Satyajit Ray, demonstrates. During the run of the exhibition there will be a public programme that will explore the links between Tagore and film, music, poetry and song (for details, please consult the website). Finally, we have benefited from the enthusiasm and knowledge of Bengalis from both West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh. We are especially indebted to the Tagore Centre in Alexandra Park, here in London; they have generously made loans, as has Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

This prominent but small exhibition is, however, only one of several displays in the *Voices of Bengal* season. *Myths of Bengal*, the major exhibition in Room 91, uses the idea of

narrative, storytelling and myth to show paintings and prints, textiles and sculpture, from undivided Bengal. The long tradition in India, and specifically Bengal, of orally transmitted narratives forms the focus of this exhibition and provides an opportunity to view the Museum's rarely-seen storytelling scrolls. These were used by itinerant bards who travelled throughout Bengal, telling their stories and illustrating them by unrolling their brightly painted scrolls. Such scrolls are, in a sense, the precursors of Bollywood, the distinctive film culture of modern India, as they are long, very colourful, divided into registers (like a piece of film) and filled with heroic achievements, romance and danger. Examples illustrate the epic story of Rama (the Ramayana), the stories of Krishna (the Krishnalila), as well as the stories of two Muslim saints, Gazi and Manik. It is the latter scroll, which at 13 m is the longest, the most beautifully painted, and the least understood. Its very size has meant that only a part of it can be displayed, but a digitised version of the entire piece is on view in the special section given to this work of art. It tells the stories of the Muslim settlement of the delta country of Bengal.

The exhibition is divided into six sections and opens with an image of the goddess Durga, a visual link to the large temporary image of the goddess which was constructed and on view in the Great Court in August and September. This first part of the exhibition is devoted to her story, followed by a section on the legend of the fierce goddess Kali who is so closely connected to the city of Calcutta. A series of paintings, produced for pilgrims to her shrine at Kalighat, are also displayed. The next focus is Rama – a gift to any storyteller on account of the epic Ramayana, especially in its elaborated Bengali translation. The god Krishna in the Bengali version is sweetly erotic in nature (unlike the martial character of Durga, the terrifying mien of Kali or the epic quality of Rama). The devotion to Krishna is a constant among Hindus in Bengal, dating back to the 16th century. His exploits are illustrated in woven silk in the Museum's most important Indian textile. The final narrative is that of the snake goddess Manasa. Her presence in Bengal dates back to at least the 9th century, although the scroll-painting made in 2005 by Gurupada Chitrakar, displayed in this section, shows that the tradition is alive and well.

The final part of the exhibition has a different character and is a collaboration between the Museum and the Camden Bangladeshi Mela Committee. Here two embroidered textiles, *kantha*, are displayed along with a wealth of fascinating information provided by the Committee, whose knowledge has greatly helped to deepen our understanding of these fascinating objects.

Top: 17th-century painted wooden book cover, showing the penitent Krishna approaching Radha; below: Detail from the Gazi scroll, *c.*1800.

With these exhibitions, two quite different aspects of Bengali life are demonstrated, forming a core around which the rest of the *Voices of Bengal* season is built. By these many activities, the Museum is able both to demonstrate the richness of its collections and show its relevance to our many audiences from South Asia.

'Myths of Bengal' is on view in Room 91 to 7 January; 'The art of peace: Paintings by the poet Tagore' is exhibited in Room 3 to 12 November. For a full listing of the many events of the 'Voices of Bengal' season, including lectures and films, see the special 'Voices of Bengal' leaflet as well as the Museum's website, www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk