Writer: Siva Kumar

The Santiniketan School

The Santiniketan School refers to a small group of artists who were active in Santiniketan, a small university town north of Calcutta, from 1921 to the 1950s. The most prominent among these artists are Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Nandalal Bose (1882-1966), Benodebehari Mukherjee (1904-1980) and Ramkinkar Baij (1906-1980). Their work marks a departure from the historicist moorings of the earlier nationalist movement in Indian art and the development of a contextual modernism sensitive to the physical and cultural environment, as well as to the historical moment in which the artists lived. While Rabindrath Tagore provided the framework, Nandalal Bose fashioned its pedagogic programme, which was more broad-based than that of colonial art schools and more modern in outlook. Although it began with anti-colonial and pan-Asian interests, the school’s stress on freedom, and the individual pursuit of elective affinities and eclectic assimilations, meant that it became more cosmopolitan and modernist over the years. Bound by shared concerns rather than a common style, the school represents the most fruitful modernist movement in pre-independence India. Defined more loosely, the Santiniketan School represents a larger circle of artists trained at Santiniketan, encompassing a wider geographical and temporal boundary, and thus includes Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) and K. G. Subramanyan (1924-) among its later luminaries.

**Educational and Artistic Programme**

Art in Santiniketan evolved as an integral part of Tagore’s larger educational, social and cultural concerns. As a nationalist activist, Tagore realized that colonialism could be countered only by a comprehensive social transformation achieved through education. Towards this end, he began an experimental school in 1901. By locating it at Santiniketan, then a desolate village 100 miles from Calcutta, he hoped to free children from the bane of classrooms, and to bring joy and freedom into learning. He also wanted children to respond to and learn from nature, and become sensitive to life and people beyond the urban bourgeois world. To bring this about and to allow the students to express themselves creatively, he made the arts a part of his educational programme.

Around the same time, he noticed that the new nationalist movement in art was becoming historicist and disassociated from contemporary experience. Contrary to this, his experience as a writer suggested that literary modernism responsive to lived experience was congruent with the building a new India. To realize this, In 1919 he founded Kala Bhavana, the art school at Santiniketan, in conjunction with his school. He wanted the art school to be a creative hub committed to bringing nature and lived experience into art and art into the life of people. He invited Bose, who was responsive to nature and his ideas, to head the art school.

Bose began with a broad sense of objectives, but without a predesigned syllabus. The art school, like Tagore’s educational programme, became an experiment. It grew around Bose’s evolving insights into the nature and social functions of art. To bring art into the community, as Tagore wished, he erased the division between art and craft. In a nationalist spirit of self-reliance, he tried to employ local materials, and revive traditional genres, techniques, and skills. Expanding on the prevailing idea of pan-Asianism, he explored the linguistic rationale of different Eastern traditions and made a vast repertoire of visual languages accessible to the students. He used drawing from environment, rather than posed models, to encourage his students to connect with the world and life around them. He stressed creative work rather than learning specific skills, and thus allowed each student to discover an individual space within a spectrum that ran from self-expression to functional design and visual communication. A student would, as much as possible, become a multi-professional. One of the high points in his own career was the invitation to create the decorations of the Haripura Congress of 1937. However, his lasting contribution remains the finding of a visual language, through an eclectic distillation of Eastern arts, for the articulation of local experiences.

**Evolution of the School**

As a writer and educator, Tagore began with an effort to write India and the East into the modern; later, witnessing the inhumanities of the developed world, he wanted to move beyond and bring about a dialogue between cultures. With this aim, in 1921 he transformed Santiniketan into a world university. He now wanted to locate the local within the human and the universal.

Among the first Western scholars he invited to the new university was the Vienna-trained art historian Stella Kramrisch. She familiarized the Santiniketan artists with modern Western art and Viennese art historical methods. The wide exposure to art traditions and visual languages combined with creative freedom encouraged Bose’s students to evolve as individual artists. Among them, Mukherjee and Baij, who later became his colleagues, were the most successful.

**Individual Artists**

Mukherjee had a deep interest in nature and in the Far Eastern tradition of landscape and calligraphic painting. Reticent in temperament and analytical in his approach, his early work has a brooding quality. Expanding on Bose’s interest in visual conventions, he gives this a personal, eclectic twist. In his later work, he assumes a more impersonal modernist position, Eastern in feeling but quietly informed by modern Western art. His large mural on the lives of the medieval saints in Santiniketan, with its amalgamation of several visual conventions into a singular idiom, and its epic vision, is a landmark in modern Indian art.

For Baij and Tagore, the local is expressed in languages sourced from more distant cultures. Baij is known for his monumental sculptures valorising the subaltern Santal tribe, and for the leftist thrust of his later paintings and sculptures, which are worked in a post-cubist expressionist manner. Baij, unlike Benodebehari Mukherjee, is overtly more western and modernist in style, although his work carries an underpinning of exposure to Eastern traditions. Self-taught and beginning to paint only in his late sixties, Tagore’s work is even more informed by his exposure to world art, especially primitive and modern art. However, like the work of his Santiniketan contemporaries – despite their resemblance to Western expressionist paintings – his works too are inspired by the people and nature around him, and by an empathy with the visible world that is alien to the expressionists.

References and further reading:

Subramanyan, K.G. (1987) *The Living Tradition*, Calcutta: Seagull Books.

Quintanila, S. R. (2008) *Rhythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose*, San Diego: San Diego Museum of Art.

Sheikh, G. M., Siva Kumar, R. (2007) *Benodebehari Mukherjee: A Centenary Retrospective*, Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art and Vadehra Art Gallery.

Siva Kumar, R. (1997) *Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism*, Delhi: The National Gallery of Modern Art.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (ed.), (2011) *The Last Harvest: Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Ahmadabad: Mapin.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (2012) *Ramkinkar Baij*, New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art and Delhi Art Gallery.