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The Santiniketan School

Santiniketan is a small university town located 100 miles north of Calcutta. The Santiniketan School refers to a small group of artists who were active here from 1921 to the 1950s. The most prominent among them 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, and to the historical moment in which the artists lived. While Rabaindranath provided the framework, Nandalal fashioned its pedagogic programme which was more broad-based than that of colonial art schools and more modern in outlook. Although the school began with anti-colonial and pan-Asian interests, with its stress on freedom, and individual pursuit of elective affinities and eclectic assimilations the school 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-independent India. Defined more loosely, the Santiniketan School represents a larger circle of artists trained at Santiniketan, encompassing a wider geographical and temporal boundary and includes Satyajit Ray and K. G. Subramanyan among its later luminaries.

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 can be countered only by a comprehensive social transformation achieved through education. Towards this in 1901 he began an experimental school. By locating it at Santiniketan, then a faraway desolate village, he hoped to free children from the bane of classrooms, and to bring joy and freedom into learning. He also wanted them 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. In order to realize this, in conjunction with his school, in 1919 he founded Kala Bhavana, the art school at Santiniketan. He wanted it to be a creative hub committed to bringing nature and lived experience into art and art into the life of people; and invited Nandalal, who was responsive to nature and his ideas, to head the art school.

Nandalal began with a broad sense of objectives but without predesigned syllabus. The art school like Rabindranath’s educational programme became an experiment and grew around Nandalal’s evolving insights into the nature and social functions of art. To bring art into the community, as Rabindranath 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. He stressed on creative work rather than on learning specific skills and thus allowed each student to discover one’s space within a spectrum that ran from self expression to functional design and visual communication and become a multi-professional as much as possible. One of the high points in his own career was the decorations of the Haripura Congress of 1937. But his lasting contribution remains the finding of a visual language, through an eclectic distillation of Eastern arts, for the articulation of local experiences.

As a writer and educationist Rabindranath began with an effort to write India and the East into the modern, but later witnessing the inhumanities of the First 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. And he now wanted to locate the local within the human and the universal.

And 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 Nandalal’s students to evolve as individual artists. Among them Benodebehari and Ramkinkar, who later became his colleagues, are the most successful. Benodebehari 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 Nandalal’s interest in visual conventions he gives it a personal eclectic twist. And 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.

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

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