



KALIGHAT PICTURES AND MODERN INDIAN ART

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The qualities of Indian art of painting, overshadowed by the magnificence of Indian sculpture, were revealed to our ages in a slow process of gradual discoveries. After the days of Ferguson and Griffith for a long span of time the Ajanta murals (1st — 7th cent. A. D.) were supposed to be the only indisputable evidence of the Indian ability for painting.¹ As to the Mughal painting, which was very well known, very well represented in European collections and intensively studied, it was not recognized as such an evidence. As stated recently by J. V. S. Wilkinson, it was deplorably misapprehended as a kind of provincial variety of Persian painting, or as a hybrid blend of East and West.² It was only between two wars that Indian mediaeval painting was disclosed, be it wall paintings from the South, Buddhist illustrations from the North-East or Jain illuminations from the West.³ The painting of miniatures which flourished from the 16th to the end of the 19th century at the local courts in Rājasthān and Panjāb hills was appreciated by Coomaraswamy already in the year 1916.⁴ Nevertheless, it is being amply studied, properly classified and generally applauded only after the World War II.⁵ In these two decades contemporary Indian painting, now a most healthy and flourishing art, entered also into the realm of interest all over the world.

Now, if we trace roughly the research of Indian painting, we dare say that the ancient painting reached our attention before 1900, the mediaeval painting in the second quarter of this

century, and the painting of approximately 1600 to 1800 after the World War II. The research today usually stops in the early nineteenth century and does not cover the period when the Indian feudal culture melted under the impact of the British Empire. It seems that this period will be the last involved into the slow process of gradual discovering of the Indian painting.

Of course, there are still many gaps in the history of Indian painting to be covered and many paintings to be discovered and explained, but this lacuna of over 100 years is most conspicuous. Did there exist any Indian art of painting at all in this period? Of course it did, and more than that. It was abundant and flourishing, though manifested in works which qualitatively differ from the earlier painting. Mostly, we find it under the label of popular art or folk art, treated as an ethnographical phenomenon. Sometimes, it is mentioned as an example of "bad taste" corruption of Indian art, caused by intervention of the European imperialism into the affairs of Eastern countries. Recently, it was covered under a cleverly invented heading of a "survival" of the Indian art of painting.⁶ All of these headings are more or less correct, but we shall not miss the opportunity to add our remarks to them.

First: It is true that Indian painting of the 19th and early 20th century is a survival, since some traits of older painting survive in it. But this is true of any other art as well. Not a long time ago, mediaeval Indian painting was regarded as a poor survival of the tradition of ancient painting, but today we are able to see already something more in it. Most probably it will be impossible to treat forever this late Indian painting only as a "survival".

Second: It is true that a marked decline of many arts appeared in many Eastern countries during the nineteenth century as a response to the above-mentioned intervention of the European powers and to the deep social and economic changes. At the same time a marked decline appeared in Europe too, in many arts and crafts, as a response to the industrialisation and to the social and economic changes. Not many years ago, we were inclined to classify all the works of these arts and crafts as examples of "bad taste" and corruption of art. Today, we are willing already to change our attitude and to recognize their special aesthetic

values. Tomorrow, we shall probably change our attitude towards the "bad-taste" nineteenth century's Eastern works too, and we shall duly try to recognize their specific aesthetic values.

Third: It is true that the late Indian painting can be classified as a popular art. It is also very coarse, primitive, rusticalised, unsophisticated and unelaborate. It was produced by craftsmen for the demand of common people. But among the products of historical arts of India we meet not seldom works which are not very elaborate, even primitive and coarse, produced by professional craftsmen for common people. Yet, to our experience, it played often a relevant rôle in the development of art, and therefore we do not refer to it exclusively as to a popular art. We know that its lack of the quality of elaborateness is not at all important, and that it is mostly due to a transitory lack of the rich official patronage. The same is true about this late Indian painting.

When speaking about the late Indian painting we have not in our mind the real folk painting, produced by the people of a closed community for the purposes of this small community, as for example by the Middle Indian tribesmen or by Bengali village women.⁷ Only partly related to them is the art of the professional painters, the craftsmen-artists, who worked in many parts of the country and who distributed their works mainly through the markets of big towns. This "late Indian painting", partly still existing, appeared in Delhi and Lahore as well as in Patna, Puri and Calcutta, in Mirzapur as well as in Tanjore. It produced illustrations for manuscripts, pictures on paper sheets, on canvas, on glass, on the round playing cards, even on small sheets of transparent mica, but also on large cotton wall hangings, on wooden covers and ceramic trays, to say nothing of the prints. It was made for the temples, for the visitors of the bazaars and even for the Europeans.⁸ Its topics ranged from Indian deities, legends and festival ceremonies, to the representations of Indian castes and costumes, and to the panoramatic views of Indian towns and holy places. In one group of this painting, some traits from the Mughal miniatures survived, in another group we can distinguish the reminiscences of the Rājput styles, of wall painting tradition, and not rarely of European traditions.

From this huge production of late Indian painting, we can pick out three or four groups or schools which attracted more

attention both of the collectors and of the authors, since they preserve best some qualities of earlier Indian painting. The pata of yamapata used by the professional story tellers in Bengal, the South Indian paintings on glass, the bazaar pictures on canvas from Puri and the bazaar pictures on paper sheets from Calcutta, the so called Kālīghāṭ pictures.⁹ The last named are represented in the collections of the Náprstek Museum by two old sets which gave us the opportunity to analyse the system of expression of this late Indian painting, and to estimate its position in the history of modern Indian art.

It is well known that they were produced by the families of craftsmen-painters in Calcutta and vicinity, and sold by these families mostly in the bazaars close to the temple of the goddess Kālī. The pilgrims and visitors of the temple bought them as an act of piety and as souvenirs, to hung them up in their homes. Since their price was very low, it was necessary to produce and sell them in huge numbers, to provide living for the family. As material the cheap thin sheets of paper were chosen, about 46 X 27,5 cm. Any special preparation of the paper, any priming, and mostly even any background was avoided, the often repeated motive was transferred to the paper by the help of tracing, and covered with colours. Transparent aquarels were used, purple red, orange and blue in two shades each, light green, acid yellow and deep black. Large areas were covered in careless washes, in bold strokes or in graded tones, the final touch of drawing with a small brush being reserved for some details only (e.g. eyes, fingers, toes) and for the silver lines which define ornaments, attributes and some outlines. By this technique, the whole picture was thrown on the paper at once, without hesitation and without delay, so that the first colour had no time to dry before the second was laid on it, and the brush had no time for stops and rests. The Kālīghāṭ pictures have mostly religious subjects and represent Hindu deities. But in a sharp contrast to the earlier miniatures animated by the spirit of Bhakti movement, or to the folk art reflecting the vitality of a primitive religious life, the Kālīghāṭ paintings have not much of religious content. From the iconographical point of view they are therefore unimportant and uninteresting. Just by accident they are pictures of gods, which very often look very ungodly. One of the exceptions is the often

repeated picture of Kālī. These pictures differ from the others also stylistically and technically. They go back to the tradition of Bengali folk art, especially to the group of wooden statuettes from Kālīghāṭ, which are cut in blocklike shapes and vividly coloured. Kālī of the Kālīghāṭ paintings has the same flat short undifferentiated body, no neck, big black face surrounded by red lolling tongue framed by a necklace of simplified shapes which substitute the original garland of human skulls. The attributes held in four hands degenerated partly too into red blots, only the freshly cut human head in the lower left hand is rendered with a contrasting naturalism.¹⁰

The other goddesses are depicted as crowned ladies in long sārīs. The Mother of Ganesha is sitting on a throne and she has ten hands, with two of them caressing the elephant-headed baby Ganesha. Durgā Jagaddhātṛī has four hands, and rides on a cat-like lion, who is biting the trunk of an elephant. Sarasvati stands on a lotos flower and plays a musical instrument.¹¹ Devī Gajalakṣmī has four arms, she sits on a lotos, and two elephants standing on her sides pour water on her head out a sprinkler. Pārvatī dwells with her consort, sitting either on a throne or on the bull Nandī.¹² Shiva himself is depicted on these pictures with light blue complexion, clad in a tiger skin, with a juvenile moustache under the nose and with three snakes in his red hair.

The other important God of the Hindu pantheon, Vishnu, appears in the Kālīghāṭ pictures too. He is of dark blue complexion and has four hands with due attributes. He wears long pants, but the upper part of his body is covered only with a loose cape. He rides his divine bird Garuda, but this bird, as it happens very often in all types of the late Indian painting, has a human body, evidently quite unable to rise into the air.

More often Vishnu appears in one of his many incarnations. As dark-bodied Krishna he is depicted embracing his beloved Rādhā, caressing her feet, or killing one of the many demons, transformed into the figure of a beast or monstre.¹²

His brother, hero Balarāma is often represented in similar rôles. From the other incarnations of Vishnu, the Narasimha incarnation was attractive for the popular painters. Narasimha is depicted as a creature with four hands and with a lion head, just in the moment when he is tearing out the intestines of the demon

Hiranyakashipu.¹³ Another popular subject was the monkey-god Hanuman, the hero of Rāmāyaṇa epos. He is there either fighting with the king of demons, Rāvaṇa, or as a vehicle for the small pictures of Rāma, Sītā and Lakshmaṇa. These Hanuman pictures, composed with utmost freedom, belong to the best of the series.¹⁴ The other deities of Hindu pantheon appear in the repertoire of Kālīghāṭ painters as well. Often it is not easy to distinguish the subject, since the images are not strictly in accord with the scripts and with the tradition. The number of the limbs and their positions are not respected very strictly, and the same is true about the attributes, which are often quite suppressed or rendered in an unreadable sketchy drawing. In the ornaments there does not exist any distinction at all. The images are uniformly decorated with the same type of armlets joining in a cross on the forearm, with big rings in the ears and in the left nostril, with simple ankle-rings and with a triangular necklace covering the chest like a bib. Only the types of garment, the marks on the foreheads and the hair ornaments substitute the distinction of sects.

The Kālīghāṭ painters did not miss the opportunity to render the deities in their terrible aspects and the animal-deities with all the ferocity, with a good deal of phantasy and monstrosity. But often, only the heads are involved into this play of phantasy. The bodies, limbs, as well as the faces of the "mild" deities are quite ungodly, as humanlike as possible. Their humanity is being deified only in that respect that they are represented with very stout bodies, as prosperous, wealthy, well-fed men and women. Such a "perfection" of physical forms and abundance of jewelry marked very often in Indian art the status of gods, and sometimes it is explained as a visual symbol for their spiritual qualities. Perhaps, this explanation is true in some cases. But when we look at the Kālīghāṭ pictures, we cannot suppress the suspicion that this perfection of physical forms represents the desired physical state of the meagre starving folk.

With the same physical forms are endowed the figures in the civil subjects, which are not rare in the Kālīghāṭ paintings. There the Hindu couples appear in different situations,¹⁵ sometimes the Europeans in hats and with umbrellas, and sometimes only the images of animals.

Besides the figures of the deities, men and animals, there is nearly nothing. There is no background in the Kālīghāṭ paintings, no setting, and as to the accessories, they consist sometimes of throne, of a lotus flower, of an extremely summarized tree or hanging. The figures do not enter into picture according to the laws of composition, they are pictures themselves, they are images in the proper sense of that word. So, they seem to come into existence with all the brutality of the existence, lonely actors of excited monologues or dialogues, built of nothing but heavy shapes and heavy colours. The shapes swell expansively and press one against the other. Often the shape contrasts also in colour with the neighbouring one, which heightens the crowded impression. The colours have a massiveness too, they are loud but they have not the clearness and brilliancy of the colours used in earlier miniatures. We can call them "killed" colours with the vocabulary of modern European painting. Their intensity is reduced also by the lavish use of a schematic modelling, which is imitated by broad lines of darker shades on the outlines of every shape.

The individual shapes coincide usually with individual parts of the figure and of the garments. They are constant elements which appear in different pictures, which are arranged, changed and rearranged for the purpose of the given image. The figures thus constructed of the constant shapes, appear in pantomimical movement. But with their exaggerated postures and gestures they do not express either facts of the narrative context, or any kind of subjective feelings, but only a visual diagram.

It could be perhaps possible to trace a line of development from the miniatures of the local Rājput ateliers to the Kālīghāṭ pictures. Especially the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries' works from Marvār, southern Rājasthān, eastern part of the Pahāri area and from the Sikh court can be considered as a starting point. Nevertheless, the utmost simplification and schematisation of the hurriedly produced bazaar pictures can be paired only with the mediaeval Western Indian illuminations. With their expressive power and vigour, they stand next to the early Rājput miniatures. With their techniques of building of the image to the Nepalese Buddhist illuminations and to the South Indian murals. And nearly always they differ from the earlier Indian painting with their antinarrative and antilyrical character.

With their heavy masses of plastical shapes as well as with their character of "images" they stand sometimes closer to the Indian sculptural tradition than to the tradition of painting.

More often than the traditional Indian art, the art of Fernand Léger is named as comparison for the Kālīghāṭ paintings. There is a similarity of the visual rather than thematic clarity, similarity of heaviness and plodding quality, even similarity in colours, shapes and modelling. One would nearly say that a Shiva from a Kālīghāṭ picture could enter the Léger's picture of the Constructors or the Parade, and that one of Léger's workers or clowns could enter a Kālīghāṭ picture. Probably, he would not be refused by the common Indian people, as he was by the workers of Renault factory to the disappointment of the artist: "These fellows will never be able to work with hands like this". Of course, the heroically rounded forms of perfect manhood can be explained as accidental similarity and not as a substantial quality which brings the work of modern European painter close to the Indian traditional perception, and the late Indian painting to the modern Western expression. Yet the aesthetic qualities of this kind are there, to our surprise, not only in the Kālīghāṭ painting but also in other related late Indian paintings. Probably, we are inclined to expect in the cheap late Indian paintings only the reduction of traditional qualities of Indian art, something hardly "surviving" and agonizing. But the loss of some qualities was counterbalanced by the growth of other qualities, which by chance or by necessity fit into the general schema of the development of modern art. The utmost spontaneity, the antinarrativeness and antilyricism, the drastic simplification and abstraction, the free and bold brush strokes, new use of colours in the definition of volumes, the construction of figures by arrangement of elementar voluminous shapes — this all is correlative both to the Kālīghāṭ pictures and to the trends in modern Western art.

The founders of modern Indian painting of the 20th century did not realize at once the possibilities of this heritage. Abanindranāth Thākur and his "Bengoli school", applauded by some Western critics, took by mistake as a starting point old miniatures and classical painting. And he accentuated spirituality as the main quality of Indian art, instead of sensibility and spontaneity. His revivalistic movement is today justly considered as abortive.

The real foundation for modern Indian art was laid only in the second quarter of our century by artists like Amrita Sher Gil, Rabīndranāth Thākur and Jāmini Roy. Only the last mentioned resorted programmatically to the late Indian painting as to the source of inspiration. He studied and imitated the style of the Kālīghāṭ painting, which in his early days was still a living art. It was said that the relation of Jāmini Roy to the bazaar painting was comparable to the relation of Picasso to the African sculpture.¹⁶ In fact Jāmini Roy was more dependent on his models of popular art, and his work is open to criticism that it went too far in the simplifications, schematisation and hard graphicism. On the other hand, Roy forgot to make the last step which would take the art from the formal achievements of the late Indian art to the program of the modern Indian art, to the personal expression of the deep sentiments related to the common contemporary problems.

This step was done by other classics of modern Indian art, by Rabīndranāth Thākur, Amrita Sher Gil, Sanyal and others. If we find in their works some reminiscences of the principles which were familiar to the popular late Indian painting, they are slight, and mostly, they were introduced instinctively. But what is important, in our opinion, they are strengthening enormously in the post-war production of contemporary Indian artists. As to the idioms invested by the late Indian popular paintings, we meet them in works of artists like Badri Narayan or Sushil Sarkar, who develop folklorism in the line of Jāmini Roy. And we find them in the works of artists who went a little further, like Sreenivasulu, Bendre, Gaitonde, Biswanāth Mukerji and others. But we find them also in the works of painters who want to be very international, like Gade, Paniker and Abani Sen. And we find them, of course, in the art of painters, who are at once very international and very Indian, like Husain and Hebbar.

If it is true that contemporary Indian painting is quite successful especially in figurative art, and that the relations go more on the late Indian painting than on earlier Indian art, we must admit that Kālīghāṭ pictures and related art is something more than "survival" and "bad taste" corrupted art. It is a logical link in the development, and it played its rôle in the history of Indian art with dignity and significance.

Notes

¹ These murals too had to wait not less than three quarters of a century for publicity. They were discovered in the year 1819 and the full account was published in 1896 by Griffith in two volumes: *The Paintings in the Buddhist Cave Temples of Ajanta*.

² *The Faber Gallery of Oriental Art, Mughal Painting*, with an introduction and notes by J. V. S. Wilkinson, London, 1948. It happens even today that Mughal miniatures are presented under the heading of Persian art as in the UNESCO World Art Series, *Persian Miniatures*, Imperial Library, published in the year 1957.

³ It was especially Stella Kramrisch who published with some Indian students many mediaeval wall paintings in the *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* and other periodicals. One of the most important groups of paintings from Tiruparuttikunram, published first by T. N. Ramachandran, Tirupattikunran and its Temples, *Bulletin of the Madras Government Museum*, Vol. I, 1929, p. 1—260, got a new monograph recently by P. Rambach and V. de Golish, *The Golden Age of Indian Art*, London, 1965. The rare Buddhist illuminated manuscripts from Nepal were studied by P. C. Bagchi in India and by A. K. Coomaraswamy in America, and the Western Indian illuminated manuscripts by W. N. Brown.

⁴ A. K. Coomaraswamy: *Rājput Painting*, London, 1916.

⁵ It is the merit of W. G. Archer that Europe got a better understanding of Indian miniatures. In the last 10 years, mostly in London, he published a series of excellent critical studies of Kangra miniatures (1952), Garhwal miniatures (1954), Malwa miniatures (1958), and other important books and articles. At the same time the problem of Rājasthāni and Pahāri painting was tackled by a team of Indian scholars, headed by K. J. Khandalawala and supported by the Lalit Kala Akademi. The result of their research is published in *MARG*, *Lalit Kala*, *Roopa-Lekha* and other periodicals as well as in a series of books: *On Kangra school* (by M. S. Randhawa, 1954), *on Basohli school* (1959), *on Mewar school* (by M. Ghandra, 1959), *in Kishangarh school* (by Dickinson and Khandalawala, 1959). The Deccani schools are studied too, in the last decade both in India and Europe, especially by Robert Skelton and Douglas Barret.

⁶ Ch. S. Rowson, *Indian Painting*, Universe Books, Paris — New York, 1961.

⁷ The first one was studied by V. Elwin, *The Tribal Art of Middle India*, Oxford, 1951. The folk art of Bengal was treated by many students, e.g. Ajitcoomar Mookerjee, *Folk Art of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1939. To the alpina paintings a study was dedicated also by Abanindranāth Tagore: *L'alpina*, Paris, 1921.

⁸ See: W. G. and M. Archer, *Indian Painting for the British*, Oxford, 1956.

⁹ See: A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Picture Showmen*, *The Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. V, p. 182 ff.; Ajit Ghose, *Old Bengal Paintings*, Rupam, 1926, pp. 98-104; S. G. Dutt, *The Tiger's God in Bengal Art*, *Modern Review*, July 1932; Abbe W. Branzelius, *Die Hinduistische Pantheonmalerei*, *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie*, Suppl. zu Bd. XXXIV, Leiden, 1937; M. Krása, *Lidové malůvky z Urísy*, *Nový Orient*, Vol. XVII, No. 4, Praha, 1962; W. G. Archer, *Bazaar Paintings of Calcutta*, London, 1953 etc.

¹⁰ See fig. No. 1.

¹¹ See fig. No. 2.

¹² See fig. Nos. 3 and 4.

¹³ See fig. No. 4 and 5. Krishna caressing the feet of Rādhā is apparently from the same tracing as the picture of The State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, reproduced in *Pamjatniki isskustva Indii v sobranijach muzeev SSSR*, Moskva, 1957. The extent of subjects of the Kālighāṭ paintings is very limited in fact, the same subjects are repeated very often with only slight differences in details and colours. Two pictures of Sarasvati from two different sets of the Náprstek Museum, for example, are nearly the same. Sometimes it seems more correct to classify these pictures as hand painted prints than paintings.

¹⁴ See fig. No. 6.

¹⁵ See fig. Nos. 7 and 8.

¹⁶ See fig. No. 9.

¹⁷ By W. G. Archer, *India and Modern Art*, London, 1959.