



AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER
BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE

DUŠAN ZBAVITEL, Praha

Among the new acquisitions of the Náprstek Museum, Prague, there is an unknown letter by the poet Rabindranath Tagore, addressed to the Czech painter Jaroslav Hněvkovský. The text of the letter, dated in Santiniketan, May 24, 1922, runs as follows:

Dear Artist,

I wish I were an artist to be able to follow the path you have discovered in the region of line and light. But I deal with words and thoughts and pass by the mysteries of visual appearance. About pictorial art I am an uninstructed amateur and I dare not trust my own opinion formed upon superficial impressions. I have listened to you when you talked to me about light and fourth dimension, and have tried to understand you but it is a difficult subject for me and therefore I feel that I have not the qualification to form judgment about the right and wrong of your views or the merit of your productions. In the same manner I cannot and do not judge the European composers of music simply because I have not had the time and opportunity to learn their special idiom of expression. Possibly for the same reason our artists here have failed to comprehend the meaning and method of your work. Traditions which they have followed so long stand against their willingness to accept lessons from you believing that they will not help them in their work. I am very sorry that such is the case,

that your theory and experience of arts have not been found acceptable by our students here—but over all this I have no control.

Yours sincerely

Rabindranath Tagore.

This letter, undoubtedly, is interesting as far as it contains certain ideas of the poet which need no commentary. It will be noted, too, what a strong stress Rabindranath Tagore lays on the fact that he is a mere amateur in the realm of fine arts, though we know that only a few years after he had written this letter, he himself started painting and became one of the greatest painters of modern India.

From between the lines of the letter, however, we can read a certain tone of regret, maybe even of disappointment which does not often occur in Tagore's correspondence. To understand it fully, we have to trace the story of the letter and its receiver, Jaroslav Hněvkovský. He certainly never belonged to the greatest Czech painters, but he had a virtual love for India which he visited twice and where he spent, in the whole, more than three years. He published his experiences from India in a book of two volumes, called "Malířovy listy z Indie" (Painter's Letters from India), published in 1927. (Published by "Sfinx" B. Janda, Prague.) The book is written as a series of letters from different places in India where Hněvkovský stayed, and in a very personal tone. It throws also some light on our letter, though unavoidably biased and subjective from the point of view of the painter.

Hněvkovský visited India for the first time in 1911—1913. After the end of the First Great War, he met in London, among others, the poet Rabindranath Tagore. This meeting seems to have given him the impulse for another trip to India, with Tagore's Santiniketan as its direct goal. It began on the 18th February, 1922, and ended on the 14th April, 1923, when the painter left India for home.

As we learn to know from Hněvkovský's book—and we have to stress that in this article, his book remains our only source of information—he was well accepted in Santiniketan not only by the poet himself, but also by his Indian colleagues, headed by the

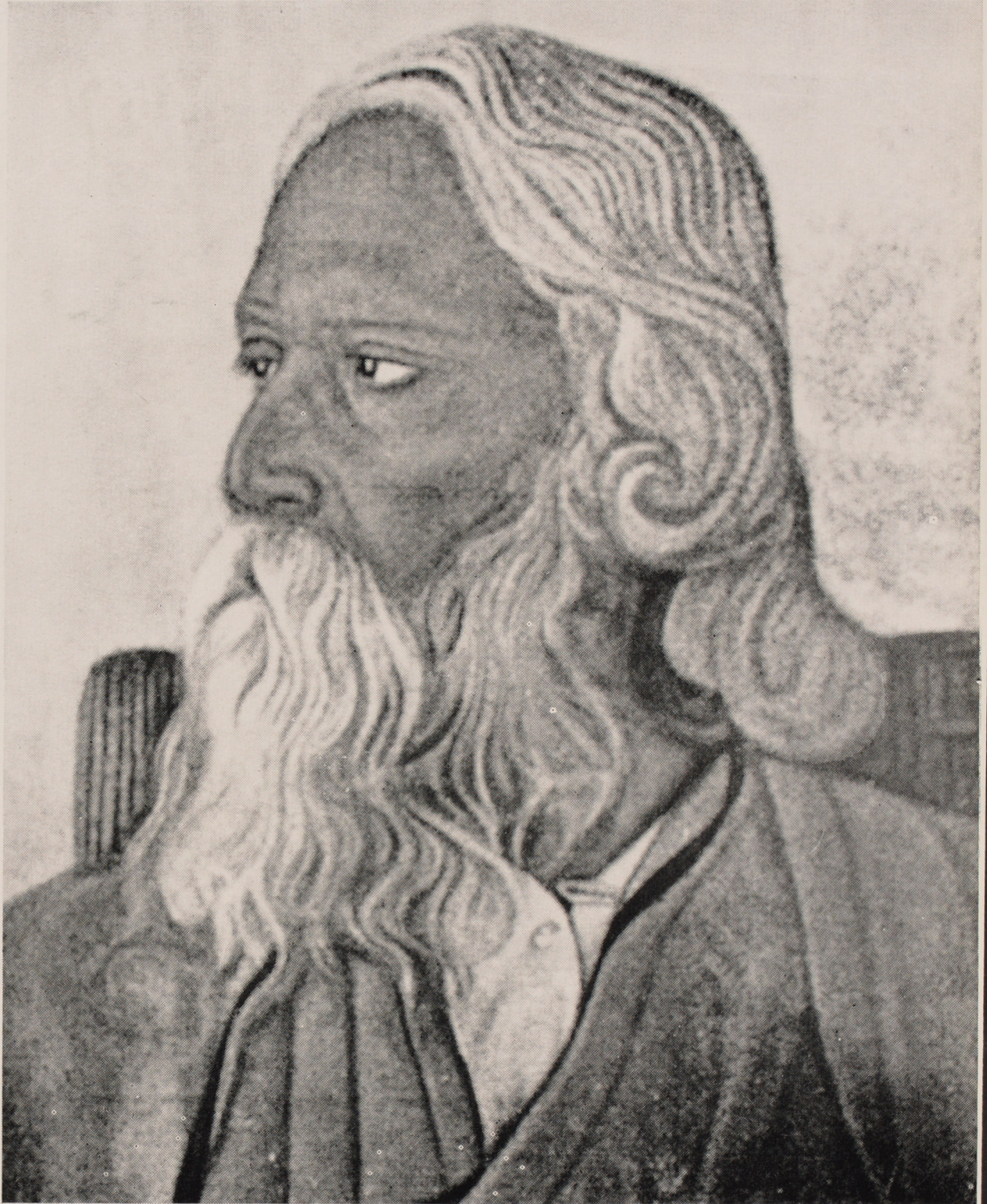
well-known painter Nandalal Bose, Principal of Kalabhavan, the Department of Fine Arts of the Visva-Bharati University. After a short time, however, there came a certain disharmony between Hněvkovský and the Indian artists which the Czech painter attributed to a feeling of rivalry and competition from the side of his Indian colleagues. But the reasons were certainly deeper. Hněvkovský, with his purely European artistic background and his own "theories on light", as he himself calls them, had no love and very little respect for the contemporary Indian fine arts and also, I am afraid, very little patience in his discussions on artistic problems which he frequently had in Santiniketan. All this, multiplied by enormous heats of Santiniketan, in April and May, resulted in the painter's decision to leave Bengal as soon as possible and to move to South India where he had stayed for a longer time, during his first visit of the country, and which never ceased to attract him. And he really left, on the beginning of June, 1922, after he had explained his reasons to Rabindranath Tagore in a long letter; and the poet's letter, the text of which is given above, is his reply to the painter's explanation.

Nevertheless, Hněvkovský was respected in Santiniketan for his hard work—he did not cease to paint even during the greatest heat—and for his paintings. He had a deep admiration for Rabindranath whom he portrayed three times. The poet attracted him for his wisdom and poetry as well as by his external appearance. Hněvkovský calls him, in his book, "Old Grey Father Universe", and comments on how strongly he was impressed by Rabindranath, in his letter dated March 27: "Since I have lived here, I have painted three pictures with Tagore's figure. When I wake in the night, I see Tagore's face with blue-grey hair and a long white beard—but it is the white mosquito-net. Another night, the verandah is flooded by the white moonlight, the door is open—I see the grey head of Tagore, go out on the verandah, I look on the quiet landscape in the white-green moonlight—and again, Tagore looks at me from it; I climb on the roof of the house, and looking up on the sky with its stars, I find there the Old Father Universe, the head of Tagore!

Tagore everywhere. I have a strange feeling when I see him walking, in his long robe, through the shadows of the mango-trees like a prophet from the Old Testament. When I tried to

decide what to paint—it was always the stars, the night and Tagore. Believe me, if I were to portray God as a man I would not find a more beautiful head than that of Tagore!" (Vol. 2, pp. 35—36.)

In spite of all his lack of enthusiasm for Santiniketan, Hněvkovský later often returned, in his reminiscences, to this place and did not conceal that his short stay there impressed him deeply, as an artist; and his paintings from Santiniketan undoubtedly belong to his best artistic achievements.



Jauntar Srinivasan

Santiniketan

May 24. 1922

Dear Artist,

I wish I were an artist to be able to follow the path you have discovered in the region of line and light. But I deal with words and thoughts and pass by the mysteries of visual appearance. About pictorial art I am an untrusting amateur and I dare not trust my own opinion formed upon superficial impressions. I have listened to you when you talked to me about light and fourth dimension, and have tried to understand you but it is a difficult subject for me and therefore I feel that I have not the qualification to form judgment about the right and wrong of your views or the merit of your productions. In the same manner I can not and do not judge the European composers of music simply because I have not had the time and opportunity to learn their special idiom of expression. Possibly ~~for~~ for the same reason our artists here have failed to comprehend the meaning and method of your work. Traditions which they have followed so long stand against their willingness to accept lessons from you believing that they will not help them in their work. I am very sorry that such is the case, that your theory and experience of arts have not been found acceptable by our students here — but over all this I have no control.

Yours sincerely

Abindranath Tagore

