TRANSCULTURAL VISUALITY IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY COLONIAL INDIA: ART, AESTHETICS AND VISUAL SATIRE

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Alhadini Conder

Thesis Committee Members:

Ned Bertz, Chairperson
Peter Hoffenberg
Karen Kosasa
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Eschewing conventional narratives of Indian art history, which adhere to overdetermined groupings like “fine art” and “nationalist art,” this thesis offers a transcultural framework to examine key historical, theoretical and aesthetic issues that have informed visual art practices during the first half of the twentieth century in India. Challenged during this time with new ideas about visual culture—both national and transnational—the art world underwent radical transformations. The research presented here suggests that the physical mobility of artists, critics and scholars—in India, Europe and Japan—is crucial to understanding the shifting cultural landscape as India moved from being a colony to an independent nation. Hence this thesis aims to explore the intellectual and cultural flows between Europe and Asia which occurred during, and in part were formative of, the political and social changes during this transitional time. In the art world, the variegated approaches to Indian art—universalist, revivalist and individualist—accentuated the socio-political fluctuations taking place in India. By foregrounding the transcultural character of visuality during the last few decades of British colonialism, we gain insight into the formation of a new/reformulated civil society in India.

Examining artwork, popular images and scholarly discourses through a transcultural lens, this research furthers one’s understanding of visual culture in India as constitutive of broader social and political changes. The political shifts from colonial India to independent India involved the promotion of cultural unity, premised on the reconstruction of Indian history—one that encompassed the fundamental cultural heritage of all Indians, regardless of caste, class or ethnicity. Part of this process entailed the development of a nationally recognized art form. The first half of the twentieth century marked both the development and decline of an “authentic”
nationalist art and the emergence of modern art in India. In the next chapter, we shall see that, despite the use of processes that can be labeled transcultural, the supporters of nationalist art remained preoccupied with the idea of an “authentic” and distinctly “Indian” essence demarcating and reinforcing cultural boundaries. This served to mobilize citizens-in-the-making around a conceptually unified culture. Residing within these vibrant emerging cultural fields of “national” art and “modern” art was visual satire in the form of cartoons and caricatures. Both “high” and “low” art forms are placed side-by-side in this thesis, not to demarcate boundaries, but to illustrate overlapping and intersecting cultural fields.

In the development of new art genres, we see the consolidation of a nationalist center dedicated to challenging colonial hegemonic tendencies. Cultural hegemony was attempted, in part, through training and education based on European techniques and aesthetic principles. The new national art form imposed its own form of cultural dominance, founded to some extent on revivalist ideology—ideas first promoted by late nineteenth-century British Orientalists. Hence this thesis explores changing conceptions of art and art history in India as nationalist artists and scholars challenged colonial rule in the realm of the visual. Within this context, the study of visuality broadens political and aesthetic fields to encompass a transnational account of intersecting histories. Characteristically unstable, visuality is necessarily a historically contingent phenomenon, shifting according to the political, social and economic reality of the time. By implication, transcultural visuality interacted in the broader reconfiguration of established modes of power, including in the years before India gained independence in 1947.

The following introduction defines transcultural visuality as a theoretical concept and object of research. After a brief survey of the ‘visual turn’ in art history, the introductory chapter moves to more recent interdisciplinary interactions within South Asian historiography to show

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how a transcultural framework enhances the study of visual culture. The chapter concludes in the late nineteenth century with an overview of Orientalist scholarship—the foundation for the academic disciplines of art, architecture, archeology, anthropology, religion, linguistics, and epigraphy. Attention is also given to the overlapping impact of colonialism and nationalism in the creation of a new art-historical canon, which provides useful background material for the subsequent chapters.

Visuality and the Study of Visual Culture

How does the study of visual culture differ from traditional art historical methodology? Visuality is the link between art, aesthetics and visual culture. Human visuality is a social, political and historical phenomenon; it is not specifically modern or western, but rather a “complex mediation of the world through sight, sign, thought and interpretation.” Visuality encompasses a broad field involving both political and aesthetic matters. Visual culture works, according to Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, towards a “social theory of visuality, focusing on questions [such as:] what is made visible, who sees what, [and] how seeing, knowing and power are interrelated. It examines the act of seeing as a product of the tensions between external images or objects, and internal thought process.”

In the study of visuality, one does not see the world, but rather, as art historian Whitney Davis writes, “One sees an image of the world.” This socially constructed image of the world (visual culture) is “deeply involved [in] human societies, with the ethics and politics, [and] aesthetics and epistemology of seeing and being seen.” The transcultural nature of visual culture

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in early twentieth century India provides a rich arena to explore social and political transformations, offering an alternative approach to understanding how artists and scholars both challenged colonial systems and sought new, modern art formations. As W.J.T. Mitchell writes, visuality “is less concerned with the meaning of images than with their lives and loves.” The study of visual culture attempts to view all artifacts from around the world as having aesthetic and ideological complexity. Thus, visual culture does not limit itself to the study of images, but inspires contemplation on the differences between art and non-art. Although the complexities and contradictions of the term visuality appear to spark robust discussions, the general scholarly consensus favors the enhancement visuality brings within its interdisciplinary reach.

Transcultural Visuality: A Methodological Approach to Visuality

Examining transcultural influences in the visual realm challenges standard historical accounts of “Indian” fine art and social histories of visual culture in India. Conventional accounts generally emphasize a local (dominant) social group within a particular society, whereas, in contrast, transcultural approaches recognize the contribution of both local and transnational practices in shaping new forms of cultural expression. Transcultural assimilations and creative accommodations forged in the subcontinent have a long history. Since ancient times, a succession of new arrivals—Aryans, Greeks, Scythians, Parthians, Shakas, Huns, Arabs, Persians, Turks, Afghans and Mongols—interacted with the established inhabitants of India. The movement of ideas, scholars and artists between India, Europe and Japan during the first half of the twentieth century formed a new transcultural visual realm. In acknowledging transcultural exchanges between artists and scholars through their respective productions (art works and

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6 Ibid., 170.
written works), cultural histories of India participate in a cosmopolitan narrative. This thesis offers one narrative of cultural interaction, adaptation and resistance.

By also focusing on the transcultural nature of the vernacular press, this thesis brings attention to comic-satiric publications—an understudied form of journalism useful for rethinking the role of visual media in Indian history. From the late nineteenth century, British-inspired Punch caricatures participated in transformations taking place in India’s public sphere—all mediated through the revolutionized print medium, a medium indispensable to both literary society and a wider non-literate public. Through transcultural practices, anti-colonial nationalists challenged colonial authority and intervened in colonial procedures. In Nicholas Mirzoeff’s elaborations the resonance of ‘visuality’ within visual culture resides in its contradictory usage both as a “mode of representing imperial culture and a means of resisting it by means of reverse appropriation.” Indeed, caricature in late colonial India articulated anti-colonial maneuvers through the appropriation and reversal of visual practices. The story of how publishers tackled freedom of speech restrictions and sought alternative forms of communication under the radar of more stringent legislative measures is an important part of Indian visual history. In other words, caricature provided an alternative public forum for engaging in multiple platforms, from anti-colonial resistance to wider transformations in political, social and cultural arenas.

In addition, transcultural practices contributed to the transformation of Indian identity and culture through artistic exchange among Japanese and Indian artists. These artists sought imaginative cultural adaptations in the formation of modern aesthetic languages that contributed to their respective national aesthetic principles through shared stylistic inventions and iconography. As Maya Jasanoff points out, imperial socio-political influence cannot be viewed

solely as emanating from the West; rather, this mutually transformative cultural encounter
enhances our understanding of the social and political upheavals of the first half of the twentieth
century. In the formation of a civil society in India transcultural visuality was a critical element
in debates concerning the development of a national identity.

Collaborative Disciplines in South Asian Historiography: Art, History, Visual Studies, and
Anthropology

This thesis, while framed by the concept of visuality, is informed by the combined
historiographical contributions of cultural history and art history. The study of visual culture is
interdisciplinary, integrating art history, sociology, psychoanalysis, economics and political
science, among other disciplines. During the last twenty years, while the role of painting,
photography, exhibitions, dioramas, and architectural imagery have received wide critical
scholarly attention, there are few cosmopolitan narrative accounts. Partha Mitter, Tapati Guha-
Thakurta, Saloni Mathur, and Christopher Pinney have focused on the visual in conjunction with
the textual, helping to shape understandings of South Asia’s past and present. In Pinney’s Photos

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10 For interdisciplinary scholarship in the realm of the visual see: Saloni Mathur, *India by Design: Colonial History
and Cultural Display* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007); Timothy Barringer and Tom Flynn, eds.,
*Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture, and the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998); Jill Beaulieu
and Mary Roberts, eds., *Orientalism’s Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography* (Durham, NC: Duke
University Press, 2002); Deborah Cherry, *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850-1900*
(London: Routledge, 2001); Annie Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture, and Popular
Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Richard Davis, *The Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton,
NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Vidya Dehejia, ed., *India through the Lens: Photography, 1840-1911*
(Washington, DC: Freer and Sackler Galleries, Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000); Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral
Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions, and World Fairs 1851-1939* (Manchester: Manchester
University, 1998); Peter Hoffenber, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the
Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Thomas Metcalf, *An Imperial
Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain’s Raj* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989); Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned
Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Maria
(Montreal and New Haven, CT: Canadian Centre for Architecture and the Yale Center for British Art, 2003);
Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997); and
of the Gods, visual culture is seen “as a key arena for thinking out politics and religion in South India.”

Departing from the dominant strategy of taking visual evidence as a sign of some underlying force or illustrating an argument that has already been established by other means, this thesis considers the visual as constitutive of “history in the making.”

Guha-Thakurta’s groundbreaking work helped to reposition art and aesthetics in colonial Bengal from a position of marginality to one which closely interacts with both conventional histories of Indian art and new social histories of thought and culture. The new social history of art draws from multiple perspectives to explain “the connecting links between artistic form, available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes and more general historical structures and processes.”

Both Mitter and Guha-Thakurta focus on the years between 1850 and 1920 to show the emergence of the modern artist in India as a middle-class, Western-educated subject, dependent first upon the colonial and then the nationalist public sphere to support his art works and make them meaningful. Guha-Thakurta’s approach differs from Mitter’s, however. Rather than emphasizing historically defined periods of rupture, her nuanced research examines historical processes which led to the development of a single, unified expression of “Indianness” in painting, known as the Bengal School. Debates focused on the Bengal School aesthetics were suggestive of wider social and nationalist aspirations. Art objects produced in the early twentieth century by “nationalist” artists drew from

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the imagined vision of a timeless and mythic Indian civilization. In search of their own form of recognition and legitimation, artists tapped into these “essentializing” tendencies along with the contemporary social, political and cultural context in their creative efforts to develop a nationally recognized art form.

Donald Preziozi suggests these imaginative fictions can be seen as instrumental components in the formation of national and ethnic identities. Art history, Preziozi argues, cannot be understood outside these cultural fictions which sustained the imaginary of the nation-state. This thesis posits that the function of transcultural elements is also critical to understanding the development of “national” and “modern art” in the early decades of the twentieth century. Preziozi’s key argument focuses on colonial intrusions in the twentieth century: “Art, in short, came to be fielded as central to the very machinery of historicism and essentialism; the very esperanto of European hegemony.”\(^\text{14}\) Both imperial and national hegemony was sought through the interpretation of art and aesthetics. The British promoted their view of art and aesthetics as a moral imperative in their quest to civilize the colonies. Observing that almost all artifacts, regardless of their original functions, have been categorized as “art” in modern times, he further noted,

\[\text{for every people and ethnicity...there may be projected a legitimate ‘art’ with its own unique spirit and soul; its own history and prehistory... The brilliance of this colonization is quite breathtaking: there is no ‘artistic tradition’ anywhere in the world today which is not fabricated through the historicisms and essentialisms of European museology and museography, and (of course) in the very hands of the colonized themselves.}^{15}\]

In Preziozi’s view, the development of the “aesthetic” in the nineteenth century was an attempt to develop a universal standard so that “art” from all times could be placed on the same


\(^{15}\) Ibid.
hierarchal scale of “aesthetic progress and ethical and cognitive advancement.” In this way, a visual object was made legible as art, a cultural artifact that can be placed within an unfolding narrative of history. Art objects were placed on an “evolutionary ladder on whose apex is the aesthetic art of Europe and on whose nadir is the fetish-charm of primitive peoples.” The Orientalist canon of Indian art was based on the same universal standard that attached “aesthetic progress” to “cognitive advancement.”

In the Orientalist Indian art canon there were three distinct periods—Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim. This periodization was based on a theory of decay and degeneration in which the pinnacle of artistic achievement was linked with Greek influences, followed by a progressive downward decline in the Hindu and Muslim periods. The colonial project of commensurability with Europe meant that heterogeneous traditions and practices were rendered variations on the same universal theme of art. In the 1920s, with the growth of nationalist efforts to reformulate art history and artistic production, the project of refuting these “scientific” claims was given significant attention.

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 494.
18 Scholars trained in Indian history, philology, linguistics and Indian art history referred to themselves as “Orientalists.” The term “canon” is used to denote “the assumption that there exists a coherent, authoritative mode of understanding South Asia’s visual past.” See Gary Michael Tartakov, “Changing Views of India’s Art History,” in Asher and Metcalf, eds., Perceptions of South Asia’s Visual Past, 15.
Given Preziozi’s insights, it would seem that Indian artists were active participants in molding a distinctly “national” art history based in part on colonial narratives. On the other hand, Preziozi’s observation allows few opportunities for historical agency on the part of non-Westerners. Preziozi maintains the dominance of colonial intrusions in the transformation of the art world. In contrast, Partha Chatterjee credits anti-colonial nationalism with creating its own domain of sovereignty in the cultural arena. Transformations in art production, according to Chatterjee, were indicative of nationalist efforts to consolidate their influence in the cultural arena. Following a distinctly Western model of nationalism, standard historical accounts of Indian nationalism open with the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885. Chatterjee has sought to establish an alternative framework for Indian nationalism, one not subordinated to the universal history of the modern world. Instead, he seeks to reclaim an Indian form of nationalism, one based on the creativity and strength of Asian nationalism which he locates in an earlier phase of cultural contestation and identity formation.20

Chatterjee’s critical approach on nationalism oscillates between two different conceptual frameworks: one that provides little agency to indigenous cultural production, if viewed mainly (and even creatively) as a derivative discourse,21 and the other linked to claims of cultural exclusivity. He has argued that “anti-colonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before its political battle with imperial power.”22 Based on a notion of two domains—the material (state, politics, technology) and the spiritual (inner domain of cultural identity)—in Chatterjee’s account the former succumbed to the superiority of the West while the latter was supposedly “unchanged” and associated with the emergence of Indian

21 Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World, A Derivative Discourse (New Delhi: 1986).
22 Chatterjee, The Nation and Its Fragments, 6. For further discussion see Manu Goswami, Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago, 2004).
nationalism. This approach tends to reify the notion of an “authentic” indigenous sphere untouched by colonialism and capitalist transformations. To be fair, the new nationalist project was predicated on the sovereignty of the inner cultural domain, albeit a contested field in which language, religion, caste and class collapsed within the hegemonic framework of nationalism. However, this thesis will demonstrate that the transcultural nature of social, political and cultural domains accentuated the transformational processes underway in India during the later period of British colonization. As Gayatri Spivak underscores, the task at hand is to deconstruct all forms of representation and narrative in order to expose and undermine the intersections of power and ideological underpinnings at work.23

**Background: Orientalist Constructions of Indian Art History in the Nineteenth Century**

In India the foundations for the disciplines of art and art history were established through extensive surveys in archeology and architecture conducted during British rule. The Orientalist canon of South Asian art history was a product of British colonialism. To the British Raj, India was a place that needed to be organized, ordered, and assigned a history.24 Before the middle of the eighteenth century, little was known of Indian art outside the subcontinent, and the earliest traveler accounts described it as either full of “irrational monsters” and “horrific demon[s]” or expressed vague appreciation for temple architectural form, but only in terms of validating its classical origins.25 Early European encounters with Hindu art reflected “the clash of two antithetical norms, as Hindu art became a foil for testing Western rationality.”26 In this

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26 Ibid., xv. Discussions on European views on Indian art during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are available in Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*. 
perspective, India was a place that was static and deeply religious, a timeless land of castes, tribes and communities.  

By the nineteenth century, James Mill’s *History of British India* referred to India as one of the “rude nations [that] seem to derive a peculiar gratification from pretensions to a remote antiquity,” which he claimed was devoid of any historical records. The influence of Mill’s history was through its use as a required textbook for an entire generation of British administrators in India. Mill’s ideological stance facilitated the justification for colonial conquest and rule. More importantly for the concern of this thesis, James Fergusson (1808-1886) relied on Mill’s historical account of India in his creation of the first visual and textual archive of Indian art and architecture. In the 1830s Fergusson went to India as an indigo planter and quickly became interested in Indian antiquities. He traveled extensively between 1835 and 1842 to archeological sites to study their extant remains. He published the results of these research trips, which, in turn, consolidated Fergusson’s reputation as one of the foremost authorities on Indian architectural history. Fergusson claimed to offer value-free scholarship in the production of knowledge on behalf of colonial claims of control and custody.

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29 Fergusson’s work includes: *Illustrations of the Rock-Cut Temples of India* (consisting of 18 lithographs from his sketches 1845); *Picturesque Illustrations of Ancient Architecture in Hindostan* (1848); An *Historical Inquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art, More Especially with Reference to Architecture* (1849); The *Illustrated Handbook of Architecture* (1855); *A History of Architecture in All Countries from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, 4 vols. (London: John Murray, 1862-67). The third volume is titled *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*. This series is a revised, expanded, and rearranged version of *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture: Being a Concise and Popular Account of the Different Styles of Architecture Prevailing in All Ages and All Countries* (London: John Murray, 1855); *One Hundred Stereoscopic Illustrations of Architecture and Nature History in Western India* (1864); *The Rock-Cut Temples of India* (1864); *Architecture at Bejapoor* (1866); *Architecture in Dharwar and Mysore* (1866); *The Architecture at Ahmedabad* (1866); *Tree and Serpent Worship: Or Illustrations of Mythology and Art in India* (1868); *Archeological Survey of India: Report on the Illustration of the Archaic Architecture of India c.* (1869); *Illustrations of Various Styles of Indian Architecture* (1869); *A Series of Photographs, to Illustrate the Ancient Architecture of Southern India* (1870); *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (1876); *Archeology in India* (1880); and *Archeology in India with Special Reference to the Works of Babu Rajendralala Mitra* (1884).
Fergusson’s *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* provided the first historical account of Indian architectural forms and styles. His account called upon architectural evidence to propound a system of religious and racial classification founded on a theory of decay and degeneration based on the creation of distinct historical periods—Buddhist (linked with the racial purity of the Aryans and the high point in artistic achievements) followed by Hindu and Muslim. This classification illuminated his grand theory of the rise and fall of Indian architecture through broader notions of civilizational decay:

I know of no one characteristic that can be predicated with perfect certainty of all the styles of architecture in Hindostan except the melancholy one that their history is written in decay; for whenever we meet with…two specimens of art of any sort in the whole country between Cape Comorin and the Himalayas, if one is more perfect…than the other, we may at once feel certain that it is also the more ancient of the two: and it only requires sufficient familiarity with the rate of downward progress to be enabled to use it as a graduated scale by which to measure the time that must have elapsed before the more perfect could have sunk into the more debased specimen. And I fear the characteristic is not less applicable to all the institutions, both moral and political, of the people than to their arts; though in them it is more easily traced and measured, as they remain as erected, authentic contemporary records of ages whose literature and history have been almost irretrievably lost.

Fergusson created an aesthetic hierarchy, representing Indian architecture as the significant “other” of the modern West and viewing India as a “living” repository of purity and antiquity that the West had sacrificed through industrialization. For Fergusson, the notion of civilizational decline was merely symptomatic of wider “moral and political” degeneration. For this reason, Fergusson placed greater emphasis on the custodial role of the British to preserve a pre-industrial history that was “almost irretrievably lost.” The underlining premise of these late nineteenth-century approaches to Indian art eventually weakened due to increased pressure from national

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and international supporters of Indian art. Theories of decay and decline were no longer tenable once subjected to the rigors of anti-colonial rhetoric focused on the revitalization of Indian arts.

**The Art Journal *Rupam (Forms-Beauty)*, 1920-1930**

The art journal *Rupam* (1920-1930) promoted the reinterpretation of Indian art history and offered a forum for expressing nascent views of modern art. Placing a strong emphasis on both the development of modern Indian art and the role of Oriental art in the international cultural arena, *Rupam* sought to remake India as an active agent in defining its own distinct artistic tradition. This new indigenous art history promoted the cultural unity of the nation and its people, and was a project premised on the reconstruction of Indian history—one that encompassed the shared cultural heritage of all Indians. During the 1920s art historians and critics in *Rupam* vigorously challenged pivotal arguments of decay and decline. As nationalists staked their claims to ancient Indian art, they insisted on its organic “spiritual” essence in shaping an indigenous art history. In refuting the conception of a lost golden age revered by Orientalist scholars, writers in the art journal promoted direct links between ancient Indian art and contemporary productions. Indian art objects were discussed as fine art rather than as “archeology,” making them more immediately comparable to the fine art of the West.

In establishing an art history and aesthetic appreciation for Indian art, *Rupam* was transcultural both in concept and production. Contributors to *Rupam* worked and traveled extensively in India, North America, Japan, Europe and Southeast Asia. Influential scholars such as Ernest Binifield Havell (1861-1934), Stella Kramrisch (1896-1993) and Ananda Kentish

34 Ernest Binifield Havell published under the name E.B. Havell and was an influential art critic, art administrator and art historian. He wrote several books on Indian art and architecture.
35 In 1919, Nobel prize-winning writer, Rabindranath Tagore invited Kramrisch to become a faculty member at his newly established school in Santiniketan. Kramrisch’s scholarship of Indian art includes extensive writing on popular art forms as well. Her two-volume book *The Hindu Temple* (1946) remains the definitive study of the
Coomaraswamy (1877-1947)\textsuperscript{36} influenced conceptions about Indian art in India and Europe. While some scholars appealed to international aesthetics or revivalist ideology, others valued an individualistic approach to the arts. Through their writings and travels, these scholars participated in an international field of artistic production. In this shifting cosmopolitan arena transcultural visuality was a critical element in developments within the art world.

**Structure of Thesis**

The chronological scope of this thesis begins with late nineteenth-century developments in art history and ends with the inauguration of the national museum, New Delhi in 1948. As this thesis examines the transcultural nature of the visual realm in colonial India it will explore the following aspects of the modern history of Indian art (including both fine and popular art forms):

- formation of a national art genre; prominent debates about art history; competing ideas about art criticism and interpretation; nascent views of modern art; interactions between fine art and popular art forms; anti-colonial engagements within the art world; and how transcultural relationships contributed to transformations within the art world in India and abroad. This introductory chapter provided the theoretical and methodological framework for the remainder of the thesis. Chapter two explores how early debates and dialogues in the art journal *Rupam* focused on three competing approaches to art criticism: internationalist, revivalist and individualist. These approaches coalesced around the new national genre associated with

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\textsuperscript{36} A.K. Coomaraswamy was a pioneering historian and art history theoretician. As an early interpreter of Indian art history he wrote numerous foundational books on Indian art. He was also the first Keeper of Indian fine art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston—the first place in North America to hold an extensive collection of Indian art.
revivalism and the Bengal School during the beginning of the twentieth century. This period is
notable for the shift from European painting traditions to an allegedly Indian style of painting.
Despite efforts to formulate a distinctly “Indian” national art form, this chapter argues that
Bengal School artists embraced a cacophony of influences from pan-Asian aesthetics to Rajput
and Mughal miniature traditions, along with Chinese scrolls, Ajanta frescoes, and lessons learned
from their own colonial art education. These artists turned to Japan for inspiration in their
journey to distinguish their art from European influences. In addition, transcultural innovations
such as pan-Asian aesthetics illustrate how Indian and Japanese artistic formations were mutually
transformed by the interactions between artists and scholars from India and Japan.

While chapter two focuses on the development of new national art forms, chapter three
focuses on indigenist modern art developments in India. This chapter considers the work of
Jamini Roy (1887-1972), known as the father of indigenist modernism. Indigenist modernism
reflected a shift in form and content from the Bengal School genre. Roy’s work during the 1920s
challenged both the historicisms of the Bengal School artists and the very foundations and values
of Western art. Well known for his rejection of the elite art world in Calcutta, Roy formulated a
new trajectory for modern art in India based on indigenous pictorial idioms.\footnote{For Jamini Roy indigenous pictorial idioms were culturally and historically distinct from the prevailing art paradigm promoted by the British and the anti-colonial nationalist movement. In his search for a new modern visual language he turned to pre-colonial village folk arts.} Ironically, the
success of Roy’s art was dependent on the rise of modern abstract art in Europe. In this way the
reception of Roy’s paintings can be seen as an example of the unintended consequences of
transcultural relations.

The fourth chapter examines British Punch-inspired caricature in India, from the late
nineteenth century to the 1930s, to see how the proliferation of Punch (1841-1992) was adapted,
customized, and re-contextualized in different cultural contexts. While chapters two and three
focus on new developments in the art world, this chapter examines a visual genre typically associated with popular culture. Traditional accounts of Indian art history generally exclude popular art forms. Transcultural visuality, on the other hand, is an approach that encompasses a broader visual field and interprets all visual forms as having aesthetic and ideological value. Caricature in India offers an example of how a popular visual medium appealed to both the literate and non-literate public in addressing issues of anti-colonial nationalism within broader social and political reconfigurations.

Finally, the epilogue briefly looks at the formative years of the national museum in New Delhi, established in 1948, to understand how this institution governed the dissemination and legitimation of artistic production. The purpose of the epilogue is to study how transformations in visual discourse were translated within the newly formed national institution. Given that the museum functioned as the official custodian of national art and the center of Indian art historical scholarship, an exploration of its early exhibits helps us to understand the implications of a nationally conceived Indian art narrative. While the museum produced an Indian art history, it selectively defined and compiled a historical tradition of “great art,” highlighting certain periods and collapsing others into its interpretative framework. However, we find that the museum was forced to negotiate between two seemingly oppositional approaches found in the pages of *Rupam*—Orientalist and nationalist. Taken collectively, the chapters to follow seek to undermine the rigidity of these bounded categories and expose their ideological underpinnings at work. In so doing, this thesis suggests the importance of writing transcultural histories which capture the multifarious ways in which colonial, national and international perspectives have informed visual practices in India.
CHAPTER 2
TRANSCULTURAL AESTHETICS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF
NATIONAL AND MODERN ART

This chapter explores how the transcultural nature of visual culture contributed to the formation of national and modern art in India during the first half of the twentieth century. The transnational artists, critics and scholars we first encountered in the Indian art journal *Rupam* (1920-1930) engaged in a vibrant cosmopolitan world—spanning India, North America, Europe and Japan—that facilitated the production of transcultural aesthetics. The evidence of transcultural interactions means that the development of modern art in India and elsewhere was not geographically or ideologically contained within India. Rather, artists and scholars from around the world contributed to new developments in art discourse focused on both the reinterpretation of ancient Indian art and setting a course for modern art in India. Also, this study suggests that modernism (in the arts) was not solely a Western hemisphere innovation. On the contrary, the formation of modernism in the early twentieth century was a cosmopolitan phenomenon, a mutually transformative encounter.

The introductory chapter provided historical context from the late nineteenth century, a theoretical framework and discussed the ideological context of colonialism and nationalism that contributed to the formation of a national art form in India. While the first section of this chapter considers how revivalist, internationalist and individualist approaches to art interacted with the demands of anti-colonial nationalism, the second section covers how these approaches took shape in the work of Bengal School artists. The School spanned a short period, beginning when founder Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) painted *Bharat Mata* (Mother India, 1905) and ended in the 1920s. Nonetheless, the influence of the Bengal School extended far beyond the
1920s—for example, Tagore’s celebrated student Nandalal Bose later became principal of Rabindranath Tagore’s art school, Santiniketan. The final section discusses how pan-Asianism was a mutually transformative aesthetic approach to art both in India and Japan. Through studying the interchange of artistic ideas across Asia, we gain a deeper understanding of the rise of cultural icons such as *Bharat Mata*. This chapter shows how an understanding of the transcultural element in the art world provides an alternative approach to examine the myriad ways artists and scholars both challenged colonial authority and practices and sought new modern art forms for an aspiring nation.

**Critical methodological debates about Indian Art: Universalism, Revivalism and Individualism**

Debates and dialogues in the 1920s art journal *Rupam* provide historical material for new ways of thinking about social and political transformations in colonial India. These discussions focused on different methodological approaches to Indian art—internationalist, revivalist, and individualist. In sketching an overview of these debates, this section traces the polemics of Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1887-1949), Stella Kramrisch (1896-1993) and *Rupam* editor and art critic O.C. Gangoly (Ordhendra Coomar, 1881-1974). Historian Kramrisch produced reviews and articles in *Rupam* and served, with Abanindranath Tagore, as an editor of the *Journal of*.

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38 Sarkar, commonly known as the founder of “Indian Sociology,” was a former student activist of the *Swadeshi* movement (1904-08). The *Swadeshi* movement emerged after the first partition of Bengal in 1905, precipitating a series of changes in political formations. *Swadeshi* combined the boycott of British goods with public demonstrations calling for a reversal of partition, which was achieved partially in 1912. *Swadeshi* also linked political agitation to Hindu revivalist movements; see Guha-Thakurta (1992) and Sarkar (2001). For further discussion on Sarkar’s internationalism see: Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2004), 215.

39 Historian Stella Kramrisch traveled to America in 1922 and, after the assassination of her husband in Pakistan in 1950, she moved to the United States permanently where she taught at the Institute of Fine Art, New York University, the University of Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
Indian Society of Oriental Art (formerly Rupam). These prolific scholars contributed regularly to Rupam, and their articles illustrate a broad range of perspectives on Indian art. This chapter situates these artists and scholars within a transcultural visual framework to show how the contributions of both local and transnational practices shaped new forms of cultural expression in the 1920s. An examination of visual discourse not only informs us about the social and political realities of the 1920s but also how the visual lens helped shape these realities.

Sarkar advocated for the formalist school of aesthetic thought in discussions on Indian art. Formalism as a theoretical concept is mainly identified with modernity itself and appeared in many countries simultaneously in the first decades of the twentieth century. In this perspective, content, historical context, and the artist’s intention are irrelevant; only the compositional elements of color, line, shape and texture give the artwork aesthetic merit. Sarkar appealed to a universal ethos: a departure from cultural nationalism and revivalist ideology, and the erasure of cultural and religious differences.

Sarkar deplored the isolationist mentality of other Indians, arguing that for India to “appreciate and assimilate the new achievements of mankind in aesthetics as in the utilitarian

40 Although art organizations existed prior to The Indian Society of Oriental Art (1907), it was the first long-standing art society to integrate the study of ancient and contemporary Indian art by holding exhibitions, promoting art collecting and arranging lecture sessions. For background information see Dwijendra Moitra, ed., Academy of Fine Arts Golden Jubilee: A Comemoration 1933-1983 (Calcutta: The Academy of Fine Arts, no date). The first known art organization in Calcutta was the Brush Club in 1831. Both British and Indian artists and patrons participated in these organizations, with the exception of The Indian Association for the Promotion of Fine Arts and National Gallery (1892) and Bangiya Kala Samad (1905), whose members were solely Bengali. The organizations consisted of connoisseurs, art collectors, and high-ranking European officials. Prominent members of the organization included Governor Ronaldshay, Sister Nivedita, Ramananda Chatterjee, Ananda Coomaraswamy, James H. Cousins, Ordhendra Coomar Gangoly (future editor of Rupam), Stella Kramrisch, Justice Sir Robert Fulton Rampini, and Earl Kitchener, the Commander-in-Chief. Early exhibitions displayed European, Indian, Japanese and Chinese paintings and other art objects alongside the work of contemporary artists. However, the society’s overall focus was the Indian style of painting promoted by the Bengal School. The society produced the journal Rupam (1920), later renamed Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art (1933). Abanindranath Tagore and Stella Kramrisch served as joint editors of this journal. Close connections between elite Bengal circles and the government are evident in the financial support granted for the publication of Rupam. See also: O.C. Gangoly, Rupa-Ikshana: Development of Indian Art and Culture (Autobiography of O.C. Gangoly) (New Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan, 1991).

sciences and arts is not tantamount to inviting an alleged denationalisation.”

From his Paris abode, Sarkar wrote that to follow the current mode of art appreciation “we should not have to dictate that Indians must by all means avoid the contact of Lavoisier and his disciples, of Humboldt, Pasteur, Agassiz, Maxwell and Einstein, because in order to be true to Hindu ‘heritage,’ it is necessary to boycott everything that has appeared in the world, since Leibnitz, Descartes and Newton!” In dismantling any notion of a distinctive Indian spirit, Sarkar asked, “Where are to be discovered the specifically Indian—traditions… in the enlightened despotism…of the Mauryas, Guptas, Palas, Cholas, Moghuls and Marathas?”

Instead, he embraced the modern language of formalism—a universal international language that subsumes cultural and religious differences for shared aesthetic principles applicable to all art forms.

During the inter-war era, Sarkar departed from both nationalist and imperial frameworks to think in international terms. In a lecture delivered at Colombia University in 1917 and later published in *Young India* by the India Home Rule League of America, Sarkar argued that internationalism was not a new phenomenon to India. In contrast to Sarkar’s internationalism, *Rupam* editor Gangoly sought distinctly Indian cultural affinities—the regional, local and

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43 Ibid., 10.
44 Ibid., 12.
45 He provided extensive examples of mutually transformative cultural interactions in fine art, literature, music, mathematics, medicine, alchemy and philosophy, including from the Pharaohs in Egypt, Semitic empires of Mesopotamia, Zoroastrians of Persia, Hellenistic Kingdoms, the Roman Empire, the Chinese, and the Europeans. In fact, he argued that “the only dark age of India” in the last six thousand years was the last century in which India was a passive agent in terms of allowing access to vast quantities of raw materials and extensive markets for the industrial powers of the Western world. Benoy Kumar Sarkar, “International India,” *Young India* 1, no. 2 (February 1918): 12-17. The American version was modeled on Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s weekly Bombay edition of *Young India* (1919-1932). In America, the journal *Young India* published by supporters of the freedom movement in India featured ancient and modern Indian art prominently, albeit mainly Hindu art. Scholars residing in America, such as Ananda Coomaraswamy, the first keeper of Indian art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, served as the art editor of *Young India*. Significant attention was given to “educating” the readership on Indian art history, aesthetic value, art criticism and modern Indian art developments. In this international cultural milieu contributors to the journal drew comparisons between the history of America and the Indian struggle for independence. Connections were drawn between Abraham Lincoln’s thoughts on slavery and the “slavery” of British colonialism, Walt Whitman’s ideas of freedom and Indian nationalism, and Irish nationalists and Indian nationalists.
national characteristics that he thought provided flavor to Sarkar’s formalism. Gangoly, in the art world debates examined below, based his argument on the desire to prove commensurability with the West, and of the need to maintain difference and independence from it. Kramrisch, on the other hand, advanced a contextualist approach to art. She dismissed Western supremacy in the production of new art forms, instead insisting on the dominance of the individual artist. The artist, according to Kramrisch, was the most important decision maker regarding form, content, and historical significance, as opposed to tradition or popular opinion. A study of these scholars’ intellectual discussions highlights both the promise and the limits of their approaches—internationalist, revivalist, and individualist—in the struggle to gain independence and set a course for modern art in India.

Sarkar’s controversial essay, “Aesthetics of Young India,” was published by Rupam in January 1922, and provoked a series of resounding rebuttals.46 Sarkar challenged prevalent methodologies of art appreciation, including the “Orientalist” preoccupation with the “Indianness” or “spirituality” of Indian art and the obsession with subject matter in the form of “story, legend or literature.”47 Sarkar campaigned for a purity of art that is emancipated from “the despotism of literary criticism, historical and philosophical analysis, ethical or religious studies, and democratic, Bolshevistic or nationalistic propaganda…”48 Rather, he called for a universal language of international aesthetics to encompass a fundamental notion of “art-geometry of rupam (i.e. of form and colour)…the foundations of beauty… [of] both the East and the West.”49 He insisted on the fundamental universal principles that operated in both India and the West by placing the language of form in an objective analytical sphere that would apply to all

48 Ibid., 16.
49 Ibid., 24.
art forms. Hence, composition, color harmony, and spatial integrity, he contended, “are the universal laws of ... aesthetics.”

Kramrisch’s response to Sarkar’s “Aesthetics of Young India,” attacked his formalist perspective as deeply flawed because of his “one-sided” approach. Kramrisch argued that significant form, compositional elements, historical features, subject matter and wider cultural values comprised each artistic canon. Art without context becomes “sterile dogmatism,” wrote Kramrisch.

In contrast to Sarkar’s approach, Rupam’s editor Gangoly, under his pseudonym Agastya, insisted that a specifically Indian character was required for the revitalization of the arts in India. He wrote, “it is the racial flavor, the provincial accent, the regional and national twang, …[which] constitute the peculiar contribution of the artist…” Gangoly refuted Sarkar’s internationalist approach to art because it lacked racial, national, local and regional attributes, when he argued that:

The Arc de Triomphe of Napoleon, the stambhas of Samudra Gupta, the toranas of Vijayanagar and the torii of the Japanese temples, do offer, to the artists and the critics, in very unmistakable terms, individual and racial traits which are obliterated in one dull red through the neutral spectacles of M. Sarkar’s cheap internationalism. [Rather,] each claims to be judged by its own standard, its own values, its own idiosyncrasy and its own peculiar contribution.

Gangoly disagreed with Sarkar’s claim that India suffered from an aesthetic stagnation in which the only remedy was seeking international appeal. Instead, Gangoly insisted that not every Indian artist sought the “protective walls of Natarâjas, Ajantant Frescoes and Rajput painting” nor did “young India...constrain... herself to an eternal ruminating on worn-out aesthetic creeds and formulas...[which] only the dynamics of Impressionists, Expressionists and Futurists of Europe

50 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
can deliver…” Then again, with a hint of humor, Gangoly assured Sarkar that he was not boycotting European aesthetics:

My old eyes dim with age…[I] can make some guesses at the Corregiosiy of Correggio. Many of my young friends are occupied with the Rodinesquerie of Rodin. I am a wee bit familiar, and I dare say many of my young representatives are busy, with the aesthetic valuations of the Italian Primitives in relation to the Râginîs of the earliest Pahari Painter. Some of my friends have a nodding acquaintance with Masaccio and probably some of them are at the present moment balancing El Greco and Cèzanne, Holbein and Anupchatar, and Chinese grotesque sculptures with the daring creations of Boccioni and Brancusi… [Furthermore] will Monsieur Sarkar believe it,—we find [a] secret sympathy with the latest Parisian craze over Negro sculpture…I can therefore sympathise with Picasso, Matisse and Derain in their first thrills with the Tami masks from New Guinea and share their new joys with the Kilamantan charms from Borneo.56

To Gangoly, the task of the modern Indian artist was not simply to depart from the history of Europe, but to claim the possibility of an Indian historical subject. Eschewing British Orientalist narratives that propounded a system of religious and racial classification based on a theory of decay and degeneration, he sought creative agency and freedom to define and interpret Indian art and art history. Gangoly along with other contributors to *Rupam* promoted the historical continuity of progress in Indian art from ancient to contemporary times.

For this reason, Gangoly fervently believed that the work of the Bengal School, led by Abanindranath Tagore, was important to the aspiring nation. Tagore’s work embodied nationalist principles of progress, regeneration and recovery of tradition in a distinctly “Indian” aesthetic, one associated with revivalist ideology. In response to critics, such as Sarkar, Gangoly wrote,

The national cry to rally round the posts of our inherited culture was only a logical reaction to the orgy of foreignism which threatened at one time to deluge our local and racial inheritance. And the tariff wall of nationalism temporarily built to isolate and intensify our appropriation of our own inherited culture is being misconstrued as a boycott of international ideas.57

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55 Ibid., 24-25.
56 Ibid., 25.
57 Ibid.
Notwithstanding Gangoly’s acquaintance with Western art movements and artists, he still felt that “before the lesson can be imported…the racial and the national heritage have to be claimed, possessed, appropriated and used as our own.”\textsuperscript{58} In other words, India needed to gain political and cultural independence first before it could assess what is “Indian” modern art. Arguably, his attempt at cultural isolation was rather half-hearted as he acknowledged that in “these days of quick intercourse and consequent interchange of ideas, complete isolation for the purpose of an intensive and consequent interchange of ideas, is almost impossible.”\textsuperscript{59} Although Gangoly acknowledged transcultural influences, it was the demands of anti-colonial nationalism that forced revivalist art to serve a greater political purpose. In the grand discourse of nationalism, the emerging nation was made visible through art, specifically revivalist art. Hence, the image of the nation was formed as much visually as it was politically.

For Gangoly, the importance of the Bengal School paintings was less about the technical and artist merit of the artists but more about what the work represented. The paintings stood for an Indian modernity equal to but different from the Western world. They featured an aesthetic visual language that did not mimic the British but claimed aesthetic freedom independent from the West. Nonetheless, at the same time that the Bengal School was being heralded as the new, modern “national” art, alternative artistic movements entered the cultural arena. Gaganendranath Tagore’s (1867-1938) paintings offered one example of the type of visual experimentations that arose during the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{60} In 1922, \textit{Rupam} published some of his Cubist-like paintings similar to the \textit{Call to Prayer (fig.1)}. His creative experimentations drew from transcultural influences in European modern art and Indian subject matter. Gaganendranath Tagore’s artistic oeuvre also included striking visual interpretations utilizing the new comic-

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 27.  
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 26.
satiric genre, a subject examined in chapter four. Given the demands of anti-colonial nationalism to develop a national art form, Bengal School representations dominated the Indian art world, while Gaganendranath Tagore’s creative explorations remained on the periphery. Bengal School paintings firmly cemented nationalist principles of progress, artistic integrity, recovery of tradition and the restoration of India’s allegedly lost identity—all vital elements in national discourse.

Figure 1. The Call to Prayer, Gaganendranath Tagore, ca. 1922.
A departure from the dominant revivalist genre associated with the Bengal School and his brother Abanindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore’s paintings held the promise of a new direction for modern Indian art. Tagore’s *The Call to Prayer* reveals the complexity of a modern Indian identity. By overturning established painting conventions he stepped out of time and created a new sense of reality. He was no longer tied to Victorian naturalism or the aesthetic conventions of the Bengal School. Although not strictly surreal in appearance, *The Call to Prayer* is situated within an ambiguous state of time—both day and night. The figure stands on the precipice of change, elevated above colonialism and although the subject matter has religious connotations it appears to be an allegory to the universal call to prayer. The doorway with the ominous features represents a shift from dark to light or perhaps symbolic of political freedom. Tagore’s representational and narrative strategy was unique to him despite the fact that he employed compositional elements associated with European Cubism. Both the visual characteristics of the painting and the historical context reveal both the artist and his work contained complex and layered influences from both India and abroad.

Although Sarkar and Kramrisch disagreed on their methodological approaches to art, they concurred that Gaganendranath Tagore’s incursions into cubism marked a turning point in the Indian modern art movement. Nonetheless, Sarkar and Kramrisch viewed the significance of his work in different ways. While Sarkar valued the promise of objectivity as a “purely” aesthetic experience, Kramrisch admired Tagore’s innovative ability to create semi-abstract representations that were distinctly Indian, despite his use of a so-called Western technique. When Kramrisch wrote that the West may have “discovered” cubism but “the roots lie in the East,”61 she was referring to the similarity between ancient representations in Ajanta, Barhut and

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Sanchi and avant-garde cubist paintings from Europe. More importantly, Gaganendranath Tagore’s experimentations deserved to be recognized on their own merits and not as a derivative of a Western technique, posited Kramrisch. In the hands of Tagore, cubism as a principle of composition was transformed “from a static order into an expressive motive,” thereby distinguishing his cubist-like paintings from European versions, while also rendering his works uniquely Indian. In rejecting the primacy of Western art innovations, Kramrisch sought to create a level playing field on which artistic merit was based on individual artistic initiatives.

Meanwhile, Sarkar’s decontextualized viewpoint praised Gaganendranath Tagore’s paintings for their lack of “historical or racial context,” when Sarkar wrote:

> I believe that a lover of art will find in these formless forms of absolutely no historical or racial context some of the most vitalizing colour-compositions and architectonic expressions… [it] is in such compositions, thoroughly futuristic as they are, that we begin to appreciate without the scaffolding of legends, stories, messages and moralizing, the foundations of genuine artistic sense.

In contrast to revivalist propaganda rooted in the past, Sarkar pleaded for an alternate framework, a political theory applicable to not just art, but to all aspects of society. However, Sarkar privileged internationalism over other pluralities and thus proclaimed all other subjectivities as inadequate and subordinate. In art, this approach reified European cultural hegemonic tendencies and erased class, caste and ethnic diversity. This section posits that because Sarkar’s formalist approach was based on the search for universally significant forms it implicitly established a hierarchical set of assumptions that viewed those art forms not considered universally significant as valueless and marginalized, attributes that were given to non-European art forms. Therefore, despite formalism’s utopian promise of universal accessibility it demands a cultivated and educated observer to evaluate fine art. Such value judgments rendered his approach political in

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62 Ibid., 109.
63 Sarkar, “Tendencies of Modern Indian Art” Rupam 26 (April 1926): 58. Italics are mine.
nature and reveal the relationship between who sees what and how seeing and power are interrelated. From the standpoint of ethnicity, class and gender a universal set of standards for art does not exist given that the dominant art discourse privileges the educated and the elite in society while oppressing and excluding other populations.

Examining the art journal *Rupam* from the 1920s to 1930s shows how these different approaches to Indian art—internationalist, revivalist, and individualist—contributed to modern and national art discourses both in India and abroad. Transcultural interactions between Kramrisch, Gangoly and Sarkar along with other artists and scholars in *Rupam* suggests that the visual arts was a crucial area of cultural expression to understand how they negotiated and contested their social and political realities in late colonial India. While some nationalists sought close international affinities in art, history, literature and politics, others reinforced cultural boundaries around a newly conceived national art form “untainted” by colonial influences. The art journal *Rupam* offered one example of how the visual arts coalesced around ideas of identity, subjectivity and socio-political freedom. In the end, the revivalist paintings of the Bengal School attained the status of “national” art because of their close association with nationalist aspirations.
Revivalism and reinterpretations of ancient Indian art were particularly evident in the work of the Bengal School of art in the early part of the twentieth century. Revivalist art was given a new political valence as nationalist sentiments rose—the rebirth of Indian art traditions pitted against the colonial occupation of India. This genre claimed for itself an aesthetic theory applicable to all Indian arts, characterized by its preoccupation with progress, national revitalization and the recovery of tradition. In early twentieth century the anti-colonial nationalist movement aligned itself with the Bengal School of art because the paintings were deemed aesthetically pleasing by European standards, yet distinctly Indian in sentiment and spirituality.
The artistic revival movement led by Abanindranath Tagore was established under the tutelage of E.B. Havell, head of the Calcutta School of Art. Havell developed an art curriculum based on Indian conventions rather than Western models. This new educational model led to the foundations of the Bengal School of art. Setting aside his oil paints, Abanindranath Tagore’s quest for a new art form led him to work mainly in miniature format using transparent and opaque watercolor paints. As a later section will demonstrate, Abanindranath Tagore re-energized traditional Indian painting techniques with the application of a pan-Asian aesthetic language combined with traditional Indian iconography and motifs. In the spirit of experimentation, the Bengal School artists combined Japanese techniques with Indian subject matter to create a visual language distinct from their predecessors.

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Before proceeding to discuss the developments of the Bengal School, the work of Ravi Varma (1848-1906), a precursor to the Bengal School, will be briefly reviewed. The intent here is to situate Ravi Varma’s work as the impetus for the development of a new genre of painting. An eclectic figure, Varma synthesized elements from the Tanjore tradition, the Company School, Victorian salon painting, theater traditions, the performative Kathakali tradition and neoclassical Malayalam poetry. While early twentieth-century art critics dismissed Varma’s realist paintings because of their Western origin by the end of the century scholars recognized his

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67 This south Indian painting tradition from Tamil Nadu mainly depicts Hindu mythological figures.
valuable contribution to modernism in India. Some critics assert that Varma, “the indisputable father-figure of modern Indian art,” was both inventive and resourceful in his ability to adapt European equipment and techniques to suit his vision. Varma’s mythological paintings enabled the “re-introduction of Indian subjects, not as exotic curiosities seen by foreigners, but as sacred national ideals and visions, at a time when the Indian upperclass aped the West to the point of having themselves portrayed even in Scottish kilts.” Despite the popularity of Varma’s paintings in the form of cheap reproductions, by the 1920s Varma’s work was excluded from new developments within modern art in India because his work lacked ideological and stylistic attributes that anti-colonial nationalists prized. In other words, Varma’s work was too closely aligned with Western art conventions and ideology to achieve national status.

The Bengal School’s rise to national standing was the result of both transnational and anti-colonial nationalist support. In international circles, the Bengal School received critical acclaim following exhibitions in Paris, London, Berlin and New York. The School’s attempt to create a modern art form was bolstered by the rhetoric of international scholars. For example, Hermann Goetz (1898-1978) recognized the contribution of international critics and artists to the success of the Bengal School when he wrote,

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68 Kapur, “Representational Dilemmas,” 147. In discussing Varma’s appropriation of the realist genre, Kapur observes that the application of oil and pigment is related to “bourgeois desire,” “bourgeois ideology,” and “bourgeois ethics.” Oil painting writes Kapur is “conducive to simulating substances (flesh, cloth, jewels, gold, masonry, marble) and capturing atmospheric sensations (the glossiness of light, the translucent depth of shadows… And even given the misapprehension, the somewhat false aura and some distressing consequences of appropriating ‘alien’ conventions/ideologies, this surrogate realism achieves definite ends. It fulfills the mission of the Indian elite to adopt European means to Indian needs, to become historically viable through the use of the realist genre.”


71 G. Venkatachala, Contemporary Indian Painters (Bombay: Nalanda Publications, no date), xiv.

72 Hermann Goetz (1898-1978) was a major luminary among the German scholars of Indian culture. He went to India on a travel grant from the Kern Institute in the University of Leiden, Holland, in 1936. He became the curator of the Baroda Museum, and later Director (1941-53). He was the first curator of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, 1954-56. He wrote profusely on traditional and contemporary Indian art, including Five Thousand Years of Indian Art, Rajput Art and Architecture, and numerous papers. He was instrumental in establishing the
[the] average public, whether Indian or European, [is] utterly indifferent or hostile, dismissing [the Bengal School] as mere oddities. Havell, who encouraged them, was, for a long time, a crier in the wilderness. Only when startling artists and connoisseurs in Europe, Auguste Rodin, William Rothenstein, etc., became interested, this attitude began to change. Its strongest support, however, became the national movement.

Even Margaret E. Noble’s (also known as Sister Nivedita, 1867-1911) reviews of Abanindranath Tagore’s work “did more than Tagore’s [paintings]…to establish the patriotic and revivist message.” Likewise, Coomaraswamy’s lectures “Art and Swadeshi” delivered in 1910 at the National College in Calcutta served as influential material for the new revivist strand of nationalism associated with the Bengal School. Together with James Cousins of the Theosophical Society, who traveled the world lecturing and writing about the revitalization of art in India, these discourses marked the recasting of a national art with a growing interest in style, symbolism and inner significance. These scholars focused on the revitalization of Indian arts and promoted the historical continuity of progress in art. Through the visual realm India’s historical identity could be restored to strengthen anti-colonial nationalist aspirations. In the first comprehensive coverage of the Bengal School in *Rupam*, Gangoly compared Varma’s “utter want of…imagination and a total lack of Indian feeling” to Abanindranath Tagore’s revelatory artistic expression of the true “Indian spirit.” Or, as nationalist and contributor to *Rupam* Aurobindo Ghose wrote, “the preposterous Ravi Varma[‘s art work] was doomed to sterility by

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73 Ibid., 41-42.
its absurdly barren incompetence…”77 These critics point to the Bengal School’s production of “a new spirit and… fresh ideals—ideals which were in perfect harmony with national aspirations.”78 Thus, the increased visibility of Bengal School representations of Indian identity coincided with the rise of anti-colonial nationalism in the 1920s. The Bengali middle-class played an important role in cementing nationalist ideologies not only through politics but also by setting new aesthetic conventions.

Abanindranath Tagore’s most popular Bengal School painting associated with anti-colonial nationalism was Bharat Mata (fig. 2). This visual representation encapsulates the discursive complexity of Tagore’s painting genre. Originally intended as a representation of the Swadeshi agitation movement in Bengal in the form of Banga-mata (Mother Bengal), it later came to stand for Bharat-mata (Motherland), symbolizing the whole nation. During the early Swadeshi movement Bharat Mata was enlarged onto a silk banner and carried in processions. As a visual performance of national identity, Bharat Mata participated in the production of national affectivity. This iconic mother figure wore orange or saffron (the color of renunciation), carried sheaves of rice (food), white cloth (clothing), a book (learning), and mala (flower garlands, representing spiritual salvation)—the necessities for nation building. For some this painting exemplified how “the abstract ideal of nationalism could be metamorphosed into form, and cast into an image that was both human and divine.”79 As Guha-Thakurta points out, the image combines the “divine transcendence” and the “intimate familiarity” necessary for nationalism.80 Anti-colonial nationalists mobilized Bharat Mata as a political tool—a unified statement representative of a whole community, a free Hindu community, thereby effectively

78 Ibid., 22.
80 Ibid.
marginalizing the non-Hindu population. Visually, the nation was formed within the confines of anti-colonial nationalist discourse.

Figure 4. *Satee*, Nandalal Bose, 1907.

Just as *Bharat Mata* embodied one abstract ideal of nationalism, Tagore’s acclaimed student Nandalal Bose’s watercolor *Satee* (1907) was elevated to a higher spiritual domain. *Satee* is the practice of “voluntary” self-immolation, in which the widow places herself on her dead husband’s funeral pyre. Bose’s painting depicts the goddess Sati who burned herself to prove her devotion to her husband, Shiva, perhaps illustrating a form of self-sacrificial Indian nationalism. In Bose’s image the corporeal specificity of violence is removed and replaced with the self-sacrificial female body. This symbolizes freedom from *maya* (illusion) and, metaphorically, liberty from colonial rule. In one review of Bose’s *Satee*, the author wrote:

> The subject is gruesome—the self-sought cremation of Satee. The Satee willfully offers herself to death to join her husband on the other side of death. She conquers death by dying. She has plunged into the fire clad in her best in quest of her
beloved one. Rank materialism does not mar the composition. Her dead husband is not shown, neither is she shown burning. The fire that consumes everything does not touch the Satee, for a greater fire of selfless love burns within her. All around her is the fire which brings her nearer to her husband… We are not treated to a mere illustration of the subject but are led to realize the feeling with which the subject has inspired the artist. ⁸¹

Artists such as Tagore and Bose changed the character of artistic expression by capturing the affectivity of nationalism in visual form. In other words, these artists created the visual embodiment of the nation, a national identity and national community, albeit within the limited framework of anti-colonial nationalism. In an early review of *Passing of Shah Jahan* (c. 1900-1902), the author described the emotive capacity of this new genre:

> In the last fleeting moments of his life, the emperor casts the last lingering look to the Taj, which sheltered the mortal remains of his beloved one—Mamtaz. The remarkable simplicity of the treatment is in perfect harmony with the poetry and pathos of the subject. Here we have the intention of the artist, rather than his achievement. The picture does not portray a mere death scene or relate an incident of life, but takes us at once to a higher level than that touched by the outward reality of things. We do not see the definition of external forms but feel the emotional perception of the artist, his sense of romantic beauty… ⁸²

These iconic forms when detached from their context became malleable representations that came to represent something entirely different in their nationalist form. National visual imagery reinforced cultural chauvinisms and fortified demarcations for a greater political gain—inde独立 from the British. Thus, attention to the visual realm provides new ways of thinking about nationalism and national art in Indian history.

This section showed how both nationalists and a cosmopolitan community of scholars and artists contributed to the Bengal School’s national standing. In the early twentieth century anti-colonial nationalists appropriated the Bengal School aesthetic because this “national” genre reflected nationalist aspirations balancing progress with national revitalization and the recovery

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⁸² Ibid.
of traditions. In the spirit of artistic experimentation, Abanindranath Tagore and his Bengal School associates sought new forms of cultural expression by combining traditional Indian iconography and subject matter with non-Western innovations, such as new Japanese painting techniques, as discussed below. Modern art developments tend to be understood as evolving from West to East, where they are then imitated. However, the contribution of pan-Asian aesthetics to early modernism in India contradicts traditional historical accounts of international modernism.

Pan–Asian Aesthetics and The Bengal School

This section shows how the transcultural nature of pan-Asian aesthetics contributed to the development of a “national” genre of painting in India associated with the Bengal School. Anti-colonial nationalists challenged colonial cultural hegemony through the creation of a modern aesthetic language premised on the invented vision of a timeless, spiritual and mythic Indian civilization, but modern in execution. To formulate a legitimate national art form Indian artists turned to Japan for inspiration in the form of pan-Asian aesthetics. Comparable to Sarkar’s formalist approach to art, the pan-Asian aesthetic, as an ideological concept, was putatively devoid of the burdens of history, religion, and national and linguistic boundaries. During the interwar period, pan-Asian ideology was principally focused on uniting Asia against Western imperialism. Proponents of Asian unity coalesced around ideas of cultural and religious affinities.

Okakura Kakuzō (1862-1913) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) were strong advocates of pan-Asian solidarity, a concept that gained significant momentum in India following the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). Their interest in pan-Asian opposition to European hegemony developed during their exchange of multiple visits between India and
Japan. While not necessarily the founders of pan-Asianism, these figures were instrumental in promoting a "purely spiritual concept of Eastern civilizations." For Rabindranath Tagore, an affiliation with Japan (a country not subjected by a European power) held the potential to contribute to the spread of a national consciousness in India, one premised on a shared ‘spiritual’ heritage. Similar to the Bengal School’s critical success, Okakura’s vision of an idealized Japan only saw fruition when it was articulated to a Western audience. All three of Okakura’s book-length publications, The Ideals of the East (1903), The Awakening of Japan (1904), and The Book of Tea (1906), were originally written in English and first saw publication either in London or New York.

The underlining premise of a unified Asia was the idealized concept of a spiritual civilization united in its opposition to the West and free from colonial rule. Although there were many varieties of pan-Asianism as an ideological concept and movement, they held in common the idea of “one Asia” unified geographically (Asia, East Asia and the Orient), culturally, historically, spiritually and in their opposition to Western imperialism. During Okakura’s stay in India he completed The Ideals of the East, which opens with a vivid image of Asia united by its common appreciation for spirituality and moral order:

Asia is one. The Himalayas divide, only to accentuate two mighty civilizations, the Chinese with its communism of Confucius, and the Indian with its individualism of the Vedas. But not even the snowy barriers can interrupt for one moment that broad expanse of love for the Ultimate and Universal, which is the common thought-inheritance of every Asiatic race, enabling them to produce all the great religions of the world, and distinguishing them from those maritime peoples of the Mediterranean and the Baltic, who love to dwell on the Particular, and to search out the means, not the end, of life.

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84 Ibid., 114.
85 It wasn’t until the 1930s that Okakura’s books were translated into Japanese.
In the preface to *The Ideals of the East* Nivedita wrote, “it is of supreme value to show Asia, as Mr. Okakura does, not as the congeries of geographical fragments that we imagined, but as a united living organism, each part dependent on all the others, the whole breathing a single complete life.” Such concepts in part can be attributed to the creation of pan-Asian aesthetics—the artistic expression dedicated to the preservation and modernization of Asian culture in contrast to the perceived and very real threat of Western dominance.

![Figure 5](image1.jpg) On the left. *Kartikeya*, Surendranath Ganguly, ca. 1906. **Figure 6.** In the middle. *Kaikeyee-o-Manthara*, Nandalal Bose, ca. 1907. **Figure 7.** On the right. *Feast of Lamps*, Abanindranath Tagore, ca. 1907.

The relationship between Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Kakuzo was mentioned earlier, and it was their respective students who were responsible for the spread of ideas and collaborative artistic exchanges. Painter-engraver Mukul Dey (1895-1989), Principal of the Government School of Art, Calcutta (1928-1943) and student of Rabindranath Tagore’s accompanied Tagore on his 1916 trip to Japan. In Japan, Dey received a five-year scholarship

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87 Ibid.
to study Japanese art and techniques at Nippon Bijutsu under the tutelage of Yokoyama Taikan (1868-1958). Later, while serving as principal, Dey developed several important exhibitions in Calcutta: two by Japanese artists in 1931 and 1936 and Jamini Roy’s first solo exhibition in 1929 (the topic of chapter three). After his India trip in 1902, Okakura sent artists Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunsō (1874-1911) to India to develop the artistic link between Japan and India. While in Japan, the monthly art journal *Kokka* (national essence) reproduced many Bengal School paintings with high-quality Japanese woodblock printing techniques. For example, *Kokka* featured (figs. 5-7) Nandalal Bose’s *Kaikeyee-o-Manthara* (c. 1907), Surendranath Ganguly’s *Karttikeya* (c. 1906) and Abanindranath Tagore’s *Feast of Lamps* (c. 1907) alongside Japanese paintings by Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunsō. These relationships highlight the cross-pollination of ideas and creative techniques between India and Japan.

Through their artistic exchanges, Japanese and Indian artists shared stylistic inventions and iconographic principles to formulate their respective nationalist aesthetic principles and set a course for the unification of Asian culture through pan-Asian aesthetics. In painting, Bengali artists introduced Japanese painters to Hindu iconography and Mughal painting techniques, while Japanese artists shared their new painting techniques with a concentration on soft lines and muted colors. For example, Abanindranath Tagore’s appropriation of the Japanese atmospheric

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89 In 1898, a few years before Okakura Kakuzo’s visit to India he established the Nippon Bijutsuin (Japan Academy of Fine Arts). His foremost students Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso were instrumental in setting up the academy. Taikan is also credited with organizing the first exhibition of Bengal School paintings at the academy in Japan.


91 Satyasri Ukil, “Kokka Woodblock Reproduction of Early Neo-Bengal Paintings.”


93 Japanese culture inspired not only Indian artists but also European impressionist and post-impressionist painters such as Vincent Van Gogh, Mary Cassatt, Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin and Claude Monet. Helen Burnham, *Looking East Western Artists and the Allure of Japan* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2014).
style of mōrō in his mystical, melancholic paintings led to the development of his signature style. Even though Japanese critics considered the “hazy” style to be experimental, Westernized and anti-traditional, Bengali painters thought it exemplified Japanese painting tradition. The Japanese mōrō style aesthetically rejected traditional Japanese painting style with its strong linear emphasis—a technique with origins in China. In Indian painting, the adoption of Japanese techniques alongside traditional Mughal painting methods embodied this new pan-Asian aesthetic (see Satee, fig. 4 and Bharat Mata, fig. 2). It was, then, the creative exchanges between Japanese and Indian artists that enabled the design of a transcultural pan-Asian aesthetic.

Figure 8. Ryūtō (Floating lanterns), Yokoyama Taikan, 1909.

In Taikan’s *Ryūtō (Floating lanterns*, 1909) we see how a Japanese artist depicts a Hindu ritual of sending lanterns into the Ganges. The floating lanterns are similar to the Japanese Buddhist practice of *shōryō nagashi*, which involves floating lanterns down a river in honor of one’s ancestors. In one interpretation, Taikan’s rendition of three young women evokes a Buddhist triad, and the minimal, abstracted background adds to the timeless quality of the image instead of situating the scene in a contemporary twentieth-century setting. Infusing a sense of ambiguity, Taikan created the illusion that India and Japan shared a common ritual practice of sending lanterns off into the water. Similar to Okakura’s evocative declaration “Asia is one,” *Ryūtō* symbolizes the shared cultural and religious heritage of Asia. It could be argued that Taikan’s image, representing an invocation of unity, reconciled perceived dichotomies of East and West by appealing to supposedly universal characteristics shared by all civilizations. However, a closer reading of the painting reveals a cacophony of transcultural influences—Western ornamental details, non-Western placement of the figures, Japanese elements of *mōrō*, and an Indian subject matter. This interpretation challenges national dogmatisms that construct national identity through forms of violence and identity erasure. A transcultural visual lens informs us that processes of identity formation are not formulaic, rather subjectivities are continually negotiated. This analysis has shown that Indian and Japanese artists depended on transcultural relationships to develop new forms of modern artistic expression.

**Conclusion**

Eschewing the rigidity of the conventional narratives of Indian art history, which tend to situate modern art formations within a larger triumphant narrative of anti-colonial nationalism, this chapter has shown that transcultural relations were critical in the development of national and modern art in India during the first decades of the twentieth century. While this chapter
addressed some of the major historical and aesthetic issues that have informed visual art practices in India, it has also shown that art is inseparable from the social and political realms, despite what nationalists and to some extent formalist critics would like us to believe, either in the “timeless” character of Indian art or in the universalisms of a formalist approach. During the first half of the twentieth century critical debates focusing on several aesthetic approaches—formalism, internationalism, individualism—featured compelling but always embattled discourses in India and elsewhere. Likewise, the theories attending to these approaches were, in several interesting respects, less a complete rejection of Western approaches than an extension of competing formulations within the anti-colonial movement. The reviviser ideology associated with the Bengal School, although strongly identified with nationalism, was constitutive of broader political and social struggles. On the one hand, reviviserism participated in the anti-colonial nationalist project, serving to bolster the freedom movement and replace European academic conventions and technique. On the other hand, reviviser ideology was inadequate to meet the demands of modern artistic expression and innovation. Thus, despite the consolidation of power in a national art primarily identified with the Hindu political community, by the 1930s artists sought alternative aesthetic possibilities outside the Bengal School such as indigenist modernism. Hence, modernism in the early twentieth century, in Indian art as elsewhere, can be seen as a mutually transformative encounter involving a dynamic constellation of cosmopolitan connections. Departing from national art and academic realism, the next chapter explores Jamini Roy’s quest for a new visual idiom based on Bengali folk art traditions and the international modernist movement. By looking at Roy’s creative journey as an individual artist, we gain a new perspective on the formation of modern art independent from reviviser rhetoric associated with the Bengal School.
CHAPTER 3
JAMINI ROY (1887-1972): TRANSCULTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO EARLY MODERN ART IN INDIA

Figure 9. Three Pujaris, Jamini Roy, ca. 1920.

This chapter explores the work and life of Jamini Roy (1887-1972), the father of Indian modernism, to show how transcultural visuality contributed to modern art in 1920s India.\(^{96}\) While Chapter two focused on the contribution of transcultural aesthetics to the development of a “national” art associated with the Bengal School, this chapter traces Roy’s departure from academic realism and reviver painting to create a new visual idiom that combined influences from the international modernist art movement and Bengal folk art. The study explores one

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\(^{96}\) Sona Datta, *Urban Patua and The Art of Jamini Roy* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2010). The consensus amongst scholars and artists is that Jamini Roy was the father of Indian modern art. Literature about Jamini Roy is relatively scarce, therefore this chapter relies on personal observations of the largest collection of his drawings, sketches, paintings held in a public arena at National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi in 2010 and 2013.
artist’s quest to legitimize indigenist modernism in the twentieth century as a valid means of cultural expression that was both Indian and modern. In doing so, Roy introduced exciting new possibilities within the Indian visual landscape and set the stage for Indian modern art. This chapter suggests the birth of modern art in India was a transformative encounter between international modernist aesthetics and indigenist pictorial traditions. Indeed, Roy’s critical success was dependent on the rise of modern abstract art in Europe. In this way, the reception of Roy’s paintings can be seen as an example of the unintended consequences of transcultural relations. Most importantly, the formation of modernism in the early twentieth century was an international phenomenon, simultaneously occurring in multiple locations.

While Roy’s images extended folk pictorial traditions into a new period of modern art in India, his images also created a new visual reality. Through his work, Roy questioned the upper-class aesthetic formulations of Bengali elite and protested their version of the modern Indian identity. The upper echelons of society supported the idea of an “authentic” and distinctly Indian essence in national art associated with revivalism and the Bengal School. Roy located both his “authenticity” and “Indianness” in the village, in a spiritualized pre-industrial India, similar to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s (1869-1948) political ideology. At the same time, Roy challenged colonial rule by redefining the emerging cultural field of modern art. He introduced a new visual paradigm comparable to international modernism that replaced colonial art with the indigenous folk idiom. In doing so, Roy united India’s past and present and provided a direct link between ancient Indian art and modern Indian art. In the art journal Rupam his paintings were discussed as fine art rather than folk art or archeology, making them more immediately comparable to European art. He challenged both the historicism of the Bengal School artists and the very foundations and values of Western art. Through his support of the collaborative

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indigenous labor model he defied Western art paradigms. Roy’s art collective served to “disavow artistic individualism and what philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) calls the ‘aura’ of a work of art, the hallmarks of colonial art” in which individual artistic expression was commoditized for secular contemplation. Simply put, Roy was seeking a different way of being modern. Thus, his freedom of expression symbolized freedom from colonial rule on all fronts, including the freedom to redefine the visual realm.

**Background: Folk Art Traditions (Kalighat Paintings) and their influence on Jamini Roy**

![Figure 10](image1.png) **Figure 10. After the Murder**, Kalighat painting, ca. 1875 (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

![Figure 11](image2.png) **Figure 11. Cat or Fish (Biral Tapasvi)**, Jamini Roy, ca. 1920 (Collection of Nirmalya Kumar).

For Jamini Roy, the Kalighat aesthetic represented a pre-industrial and pre-colonial India, an “uncorrupted” time in India’s history. Kalighat paintings were created in the Kali temple in south Calcutta from as early as the 1830s and continued to be made until the 1930s. During the

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late nineteenth century, Bengal underwent radical transformations expressed through an engagement with social, religious, economic, and political issues—all mediated through the revolutionized print medium. Visual transformations participated in a broader socio-political landscape and offered an efficient form of communication, accessible through popular culture.

When Kalighat artists relocated from their villages to their new urban environment in Bengal their painting traditions were transformed through the cross-pollination of ideas, techniques, materials, iconography and subject matter. They adapted their artistic medium to reach a new audience (pilgrims and tourists). The Kalighat painters were dependent on a transcultural marketplace that included travelers, British diplomats and missionaries. The Kalighat style offered Roy the simplification of abstract formal qualities and the dynamic use of line and color. Collector and art critic Ajit Ghose described the Kalighat method as follows:

The drawing is made with one long bold sweep of the brush in which not the faintest suspicion of even a momentary indecision, not the slightest tremor, can be detected. Often the line taken in the whole figure in such a way that it defies you to say where the artist’s brush first touched the paper or where it finished its work.

These pictorial qualities together with the village ethos inspired Roy to depart from naturalism and experiment with the formal characteristics of Kalighat painting. Roy later rejected the urbanized Kalighat paintings and returned to the village folk painters to obtain a more “authentic” source of inspiration. It was, then, traditional folk arts that held the promise of


102 Mitter, The Triumph of Modernism, 104.
artistic integrity and a renewed sense of vitality for an innovative and modern form of expression.

Jamini Roy’s use of the folk art tradition strategically incorporates the folk art’s implicit challenge of societal power structures through a reliance on visual transmission rather than the written word. While Roy’s art was not a direct assault against colonial rule, Roy’s artistic evolution joined a long continuum of “revolt” when his art was compared to the political struggles of “pre-Aryan customs in orthodox Hindu worship.” Politically symbolic, Roy’s artistic journey involved the search for a new cultural identity, independent from both the British (represented by colonial high art) and nationalism as narrowly interpreted by the Bengal School.

Scholars suggest Roy’s early environment, rich in folk traditions, was “evidence of the way in which [the] folk-imagination triumphs insidiously over the orthodox mind.” The orthodox mind was present in social circles in Calcutta which included Indian elites and the British colonialists. Jamini Roy’s satirical images give some indication of his politics. A prevalent theme for Roy and the Kalighat painters was the *Cat and Fish* (fig. 11), extracted from a traditional Bengali motif for use in the new urban environment. The depiction of enormous elongated cats eating a fish was a satirical rendering of the vegetarian Bengali priest who secretly indulges in fish. Other satirical paintings show “the clash of social forces: money-lenders and landlords, with the heads of beast of prey, were symbolic of emerging peasant struggles...” By adopting the folk idiom of the villages into the new urban environment Roy united India’s

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105 Ibid., 5.
disparate urban and rural populations within a modernist framework. Roy created his distinct version of modern art through a cross-pollination of ideas, cultural traditions and art practices—intermingled with the demands of anti-colonial nationalism. At the same time that he was experimenting with the Kalighat painting method these folk art traditions were elevated to the status of “art” in Western art circles.

![Widow, Jamini Roy, ca. 1920 (Collection of Nirmalya Kumar).](image)

**Figure 12.** *Widow*, Jamini Roy, ca. 1920 (Collection of Nirmalya Kumar).

**International Modernism: East to West Phenomenon?**

In the 1920s, when the Western art world was already enthralled with the new modern art movement, Roy “discovered” the folk idiom and reverberations could be felt across the Indian Ocean. In India transcultural interactions influenced artists like Roy both directly and indirectly via international traveling excursions, educational institutions and modern art exhibitions in India, and through contact with artists and scholars from all over the world. These artists,
academics and critics participated in a cosmopolitan field of artistic production that crossed national boundaries. The previous chapter discussed some of these cross-cultural relationships and how they impacted the development of national and modern art in India and Japan.

Figure 13. Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, Pablo Picasso, 1907 (The Museum of Modern Art, New York).

Following the revolutionary developments of cubism and abstract art in Europe, new formulations began to develop around the art of other cultures, such as those in Africa, the Americas and Oceania. These abstract art forms departed significantly from naturalism, the art paradigm that had defined Western art since the Renaissance. Modernism not only rejected the ideology of realism but also sought new forms of expression through architecture, literature, philosophy and the arts.¹⁰⁸ When European artists Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Henri Matisse (1869-1954) were searching for a new modern aesthetic they drew inspiration from non-Western art traditions in the first decades of the twentieth century. Picasso’s exposure to traditional African art transformed his painting style into a new abstract form of representation. Picasso’s

well-known cubist-like painting *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (fig. 13) is one example of transcultural aesthetics influencing a European artist. In his search for a new visual idiom that departed from naturalism, African art (traditional African sculpture) offered Picasso a new modern aesthetic when combined with post-impressionism. For artists like Picasso, living in Paris gave them access to museums, markets and expositions to view art forms from around the world—artifacts likely accumulated from French imperial expansion in Africa.

In India the first modern art exhibition included European artists Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Lyonel Feininger and Indian artists Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose and Gaganendranath Tagore, and was curated by Stella Kramrisch in 1922. A few years later in 1929 Jamini Roy held his first art show at the Government School of Art in Calcutta with the support of the first Indian principal Mukul Dey (1895-1989). In his opening speech at Roy’s exhibit, the editor of *The Statesman*, Alfred H. Watson, drew attention to Roy’s departure from Western academic painting to develop his new personal style—the merits of which, at least to Watson’s mind, were yet to be determined. Watson declared “whatever direction Indian art may take in the future it cannot, if it is to have value, go wholly back to the past any more than it can become merely imitative of the Western outlook.”

The exhibition catalog praised Jamini Roy for his success in developing an indigenous line of art that preserved Bengali identity.

Some scholars in *Rupam* argued that Indian artists “anticipated much of the latest in modern art... by a century or more [before] cubism and impressionism [in Europe].” Stella Kramrisch compared Indian “bazaar” paintings (also known as Kalighat paintings) with significant modernist painters when she wrote,

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110 Ibid.
Kalighat...brush drawings are monumental in their presentation on an otherwise mostly blank page. Preceding the work of Matisse, some of the brush drawings prefigure it. Out of Indian tradition and impressions of Western painting, the “bazaar” painters, descendants of low-caste and hereditary craftsmen created forms as valid as, and akin to, some of the later work by leading artists in the West.\textsuperscript{112}

Kramrisch elevated ancient Indian pictorial traditions to European standards of high art. The obvious implication of her statement was a claim that not only were Indian artists capable of producing works of arts comparable to the great masters of the early twentieth century, but these village craftsmen have been doing so for generations. In this way Kramrisch dismissed some nineteenth-century British Orientalist views that Indian art traditions were stagnant and merely reflected artistic and moral degeneration.

Additionally, by comparing ancient Indian painting manuals alongside European artifacts, scholars like Ajit Ghose elevated the status of Indian folk art to the category of fine art. Similar to other \textit{Rupam} contributors Ghose drew a continuous line from Pala Buddhist manuscripts to contemporary Kalighat renditions:

The earliest form of art, the illuminated palm-leaf Buddhist manuscripts of the Pāl dynasty, which so far has been traced back to the eleventh century, reproduce in miniature the forms of Ajantā art and this artistic tradition is continued through the playing cards and the painted manuscript covers of the fifteenth and succeeding centuries, in which the reflex of the national life of Bengal becomes increasingly more evident, to the Rāmāyana rolls and other paintings on paper till it culminates in the art of the cartoonist in the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{113}

By reimagining the framework of interpretation to include the contributions of indigenous pictorial traditions, Kramrisch and Ghose were attempting to create a level playing field in discussions about international modernism. Similarly, the transcultural visuality approach to

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\textsuperscript{112} Kramrisch, \textit{Unknown India}, 70.
\textsuperscript{113} Ghose, “Old Bengal Paintings,” 104. In one of the first accounts of folk art scholarship, Ghose described the oldest \textit{patuas} (painters) as a “product of an art practice[d] through long ages.” Ghose, \textit{Rupam} 27 & 28 (July-October, 1926): 98. He referred to elaborate Sanskrit painting manuals such as the \textit{Visnudharmottaram} and \textit{Silparatnam} and old Rāmāyana rolls used by minstrel painters. Although he did not provide a genealogy for the rolls he associated them with “Cretan frescoes...Corinthian vase paintings of the seventh century...[and] Etruscan tomb painting [of] the sixth century.” Ibid., 102.
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understanding the history of India and Indian art recognizes the contributions of both Western and non-Western art forms in the story of international modernism without elevating one above the other.

Jamini Roy’s ability to navigate both Western and Eastern art traditions enabled him to create a new visual art paradigm. Similar to East Asian calligraphy Roy used dynamic lines to create simplified forms suggestive of a single brush stroke. For example, in the *Mother* (fig. 16) he created a strong statement about this recognizable and iconic figure through gesture, form, robust lines and the removal of all non-essential details. This modern visual idiom while influenced by both transcultural and local artistic innovations was nonetheless recognizably Indian. As one folk arts advocate wrote, Roy’s art “[was] true art [because he] avoided inessential embellishments, relying on pure, robust lines and colours… a spontaneous harmonizing of abstract and naturalistic expression…”\(^{114}\) Hence, his search for a modern pictorial language included elements from the international art community and traditional folk art—familiar in content and modern in form.

Back to the Village: Academic Realism to Indigenist Modernism

Jamini Roy’s modernist approach to painting was born out of criticism of the elite Bengal social order and its worldview. Before he rejected naturalism he experimented with the Bengal School’s aesthetic and worked as a successful portrait painter of European methods. Roy’s early painting techniques included oil and watercolor color compositions similar to *Santhal Girl* (fig. 19). This early work reflects his academic training at the Government School of Art in Calcutta under the tutelage of Abanindranath Tagore.\(^\text{115}\) However, by the 1920s he broke from representing elite Bengal culture and experimented with a more modernist and indigenous based visual idiom seen in the *Three Pujaris* (fig. 9) and the *Widow* (fig. 12). In all likelihood, anti-colonial fervor strengthened Roy’s resolve to depart from both revivalism and naturalism in the visual realm.

\(^{115}\) Datta, *Urban Patua*, 20.
The rural traditions of Bengal offered Jamini Roy a modern visual language, independent from the Bengal School’s revivalist discourse, yet culturally familiar and full of exciting possibilities for the emerging modern Indian nation. In the socio-political context of the 1920s “going back to the village” became a current Gandhian political slogan. Rural folk revitalization was an important political strategic maneuver for anti-colonial nationalists. In Jamini Roy’s case the “discovery” of an indigenist modern style united India’s past and present to show the vitality of visual arts in India—indeed from the British. In his search for the ideal aesthetic language that distinguished his indigenist modern style of painting Jamini Roy turned to the traditions of the village narrative scroll painters. While he was experimenting with traditional folk painting he traveled throughout rural Bengal collecting paintings from the villages of Bankura (his home village), Medinipur and Jhargram. The creation of his famous signature style was drawn from these Bengal folk traditions. Their recognizable icons and motifs offered Roy a formal structure to experiment with that departed from naturalism. In this way folk traditions in Bengal offered the artist a new “site for locating cultural identity.”

116 Dutt, Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal: The Collected Papers.
117 Datta, Urban Patua, 81.
Blacksmith-I and Blue Boy with Bird illustrate Jamini Roy’s commitment to the village life ethos. Departing from Roy’s more sentimentalized representations of village life, seen in Santhal Girl (fig. 19), this new depiction of village life expressed the dignified strength of manual labor. The Blacksmith fills the entire frame with his tools in the foreground illustrating the moral fortitude of village life. Drawn from the soil he used natural vegetable pigments of earth-toned colors to depict the blacksmith. In contrast to Western notions of progress and cultural superiority Roy elevated pre-industrial community life through his bold and unpretentious paintings. His images contained the moral characteristics associated with village life and the values that anti-colonial nationalists connected to their “back to the village” creed. These paintings reached national status because they had “a moral value which irritates his detractors, eludes his imitators and makes his work the standard against which contemporary...
Indian painting is to be measured.” Nonetheless, the “authentic” voice of the village painter was dependent on the idealization of a pre-colonial period and the timeless character of rural India. Similarly, earlier scholarship relied on older Orientalist notions of timeless and unchanging traditions in their critical analysis of folk revival. For example, nineteenth-century Orientalist James Fergusson promoted his aesthetic hierarchal theory in which the purity of India’s antiquity was compared with the rapid industrialization of the West, a topic discussed in chapter one.

Roy’s work was critically acclaimed because it was associated with European abstract art, but remained indigenous through choice of materials and techniques. His artistic journey was marked not only by his rejection of colonial institutions and academic realism, but also his choice of materials and his reconceptualization of conventional forms of representations. Homegrown materials radically defined his artistic ethos and symbolized the idealization of rural India—the authentic India, untainted by colonialism. Not only did the work define the artist, but also the techniques and materials defined the painting. Roy used lamp black for the outline drawing, earth, vegetable and mineral pigments, homespun canvas and a limited color palette of Indian red, vermilion, yellow ochre, indigo, grey from riverbed clay, and green and white mineral colors (see figs. 17-18).

In the production of Roy’s artwork, both indigenous materials and the restoration of a collaborative indigenous labor model were equally important. For Roy, art was a communal act in which his whole studio participated. His workshop produced a range of stock motifs that his apprentices copied and signed Jamini Roy. By communally creating art and making his paintings economically accessible he rejected the myth of the individual genius artist. Ironically, in the

twenty-first century when his paintings sell on the international market for hundreds of thousands of dollars the lack of verifiable authenticity has proven problematic. Nonetheless, Jamini Roy’s paintings and his artistic journey reflect the fluctuating 1920s—an exciting period of creative possibilities.

Conclusion

This chapter situated Jamini Roy within a transcultural visual framework to show how the contributions of both local and transnational practices shaped new forms of cultural expression in the 1920s. Roy’s artistic metamorphosis from his academic training in naturalism to his indigenist modernism was fundamentally a transcultural phenomenon. As a self-determined independent modern artist, his stance was uniquely complex combining various aesthetic strategies influenced by the socio-political situation of his time. His paintings comprised elements from his academic training in European techniques, influences from Bengali folk traditions, East Asian calligraphy, and later in the 1950s pre-Renaissance and Byzantine icons. These transcultural interactions demonstrate the permeability of cultural boundaries. He also benefitted from a diverse and international circle of friends, artists and critics. For Roy, aesthetic freedom was accomplished through folk revitalization along with the success of international modernism. The formulation of a modern aesthetic seen in Jamini Roy’s paintings became a potent symbol for the future nation and marked the birth of the modern art movement in India. Nonetheless, indigenist modernism was inadequate to meet the demands of modern artistic expression and innovation that required freedom from the confines of the folk idiom. The folk pictorial language limited freedom of expression in terms of form, content and technique. In

later years Roy became symbolic for a new generation of painters seeking a modern Indian
aesthetic, one up to the challenges of an emerging modern nation.

This chapter has argued that aspects of identity formation and subjectivity are central to
art practice, whether explicitly acknowledged by the artist or not. That is, Jamini Roy’s quest to
redefine Indian cultural identity—indeed, independent from the Bengal School’s revivalist rhetoric and
British colonialism—was marked by artistic innovation. He dismissed the notion that the West
was synonymous with progress and cultural superiority, and his indigenist-inspired modernist
paintings redefined the visual landscape. The work of Jamini Roy offers one example of how the
visual arts coalesced around ideas of identity, subjectivity and socio-political freedom in late
colonial India. While Roy was not overtly political, his work embraced an alternative vision of a
modern Indian identity, albeit a vision that included the “timeless” character of Indian culture
also promoted by nineteenth-century British Orientalists and nationalists. By looking at the
individual artist and his works we gain a different perspective from the nationalist perspective
seen in chapter two. The next chapter turns to another form of popular culture—caricature.
Inspired to some degree by Kalighat artistic renditions, cartoons and caricatures merged
European stylistic conventions with village painting traditions to produce “a systematic weapon”
of social criticism.122

Figure 19. *Santhal Girl*, Jamini Roy, ca. 1915 (National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, India).
CHAPTER 4
CARICATURES, CARTOONS AND THE VERNACULAR PRESS IN
COLONIAL INDIA (1878-1920)

By focusing on the transcultural nature of comic-satiric publications, this chapter brings attention to an understudied form of illustrated journalism useful for rethinking the role of visual media in Indian history. The study of caricatures and cartoons in the vernacular press is useful for examining social and political developments in British India. This chapter suggests that Indian publishers and editors articulated anti-colonial tactics through the appropriation and reversal of European visual practices. Caricatures and cartoons in vernacular publications were vital for public communication for both the literate and non-literate public. Pictorial journalism was part of a newly democratized form of press that allowed wide accessibility. At the same time, this medium offered social and political commentary on colonial oppressions and changes in traditional society. The native population understood and made meaning from the visual language of comic illustrations with its symbolic and religious imagery, mythology and other recognizable iconographic motifs. This chapter examines the use of comic-satiric forms of illustrative journalism to see how British Punch-inspired caricatures were adapted, customized,

and re-contextualized in India. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the Indian version of *Punch* primarily promoted imperial ideologies. Once the anti-colonial movement gained momentum in the first decades of the twentieth century, comic-satiric journals like *Hindi Punch* gave burgeoning nationalism a new powerful medium to mobilize disparate groups in the task of national emancipation.

When freedom of speech was strictly limited by censorship laws anti-colonialists sought alternative forms of communication. *Hindi Punch* offered a visual form of communication that was less likely to draw the attention of British administrators. At the same time, increasingly stringent legislative measures meant that many publishers and editors were imprisoned, prosecuted, deported, bankrupted with heavy fines, or “last heard from” in Tehran, Paris, London, America or a “lunatic asylum.” Others survived by sheer ingenuity. For example, founder and editor Shishir Kumar Ghose converted his family-run vernacular newspaper *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (1868-1986) overnight to an English weekly and later a daily paper, to circumvent severe restrictions on the vernacular press. Ghose also introduced cartoons and skits in Indian journalism.

While chapters two and three focused on new developments in the art world, this chapter examines a new visual genre traditionally associated with popular culture. A transcultural approach loosens disciplinary boundaries to encompass broader visual fields that include both traditionally distinct categories of “popular art” and “fine art.” This framework interprets all visual forms as having aesthetic and ideological value. The first section of this chapter provides historical context for comic-satiric publications (caricatures and cartoons in journals and newspapers) in India. The next section focuses on the content and artistic style in illustrative

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126 “Political Agitators in India, A Confidential Report,” (Simla: G.M.Press, ca. 1910, 
journalism. Examples are drawn from the journal *Hindi Punch* (1878-1930), and two compilations, beginning with Harishchandra Talcherkar’s 1903 volume of *Lord Curzon in Indian Caricature*. Then, the chapter turns to *The Realm of the Absurd*, Gaganendranath Tagore’s satirical depictions targeting the inequalities of the British Raj, the elite pretensions of upper-class Bengalis and the hypocrisies of the caste system. A talented artist and social commentator, Tagore’s work contributed striking visual interpretations utilizing the comic-satiric genre.

This introductory study of comic-satire in British India concludes that censorship and freedom of the press often changed with the political climate in colonial India. Thus, colonial fears about the power of graphic journalism to undermine the social order resulted in stringent legislative measures and these regulations significantly determined the shape of Indian caricature. Nonetheless, newspaper proprietors, editors and cartoonists adopted the new transcultural medium to challenge colonial authority and imperial policies. Ultimately, the struggle to gain freedom from British rule is reflected in the struggle for liberty of the press.

**Background**

In England, comic-satiric publications such as *Punch* (1841-1992) became a powerful medium of dissent and a tool in the democratization of society. Following the well-known formula of *Punch* in England, a series of journals proliferated across India featuring the new

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128 Bombay’s *Hindi Punch* (1878-1930) was one of the longest running English-language comic magazines published by Barjorji Naorosji.

129 The East India Company administration made the first attempt to control freedom of the press with the establishment of press regulations in 1799. The first act of 1799 was followed by the Discerning Ordinance of the Press, 1823, the 1835 Press Act, the 1857 Gagging Act, The Indian Penal Code (IRC) of 1860, the Vernacular Press Act of 1878, Criminal Procedure Code of 1898, the 1908 Newspapers (Incitement to Offences) Act, the Press Act of 1910, and finally the Indian Press Ordinance of 1930. Additional Acts passed in the 1930s increased fines and securities and forced the closure of many presses and publications. These legislative measures had severe consequences for many publishers and editors across India.

130 Rita Khanduri, “Vernacular Punches: Cartoons and Politics in Colonial India,” *History and Anthropology* 20, no. 3 (2009): 459-486. “In *Punch, (or the London Charivari)* the hunch-backed and hooknosed Mr. Punch articulated the public perception and came to be the spokesman of the times. Encompassing topics that ranged from politics, review, arts and social fashions, the magazine was a digest of happenings in imperial Britain, and offered a platform to several cartoonists who have come to occupy an important place in the annals of British cartooning.” In the Indian version the comic character was Bamboo Hurry Bangsho Jabberjee.
comic-satiric form: The Delhi Punch, The Punjabi Punch, The Indian Punch, Urdu Punch, Gujarati Punch, Hindi Punch, Parsi Punch, and Purnea Punch, to name a few. Although Delhi Sketchbook (1850-58), an English-owned publication, was the first to emulate the comic-satiric genre in India, the first Indian-owned vernacular-language newspaper Amrita Bazar Patrika (1868-1986, Amrita Bazar Newspaper) was the first to use cartoons. The most successful illustrated comic-satiric publications in India were Bombay’s Anglo-Gujarati Hindi Punch (1889-1931) and Lucknow’s weekly Urdu-language Avadh Punch (1877-1936).131

From the very beginning, these new media publications contended with more severe press restrictions. Visual representations such as seditious cartoons are credited with provoking the enactment of stricter legislative measures.132 For example, the Bengali newspaper Sulvar Samachar created outrage when it published a cartoon in the 1870s depicting the inequalities of the justice system in which Indians are pitted against Europeans in a court of law. A few years later, the Vernacular Press Act of 1878 was passed to control and suppress the Indian press and severely impacted comic-satiric publications like Amrita Bazar Patrika.133 Vernacular publications were now required to submit proof sheets to the authorities before publication and risked the forfeiture of their compulsory deposit if they printed objectionable material.134 Nonetheless, newspaper proprietors continued to publish comic-satiric illustrations, accompanied by textual cues for distribution countrywide.

The British monitored all forms of press, including comic-satiric publications. For example, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the Native Newspaper Reports, prepared

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133 In 1878, the Vernacular Press Act was enacted to control publications of Indian-owned language press through punishment and suppression. For the first time it empowered the government to issue search warrants and enter the premises of any press, without a court order.
134 Ghose, Pictures of Indian Life.
by the Criminal Intelligence Department, provided extensive summaries of cartoons. In addition, the Political Agitators of India featured political dissidents across India; the majority were newspaper and journal publishers, writers and editors. For example, Amrita Bazar Patrika’s publisher Surendranath Banerjea and his editors Moti Lal Ghose and Shishir Kumar Ghose headlined the Bengal section. Shishir Ghose reaffirmed the power of satirical expression to incite political action when the British accused his newspaper of adopting “a tone of biting satire and undisguised abuse, which...gradually [gave Indians] a new courage.” In short, the power of caricature is reflected in this conversation between Shishir Ghose and Lieutenant Governor Sir Ashley:

  But can your Honour point out any expression which is abusive, scurrilous, or even impertinent? [Sir Ashley responded] Oh! You mean that you don’t use abusive terms. I know that you are very “chalak” (clever) in that respect. You don’t call us robbers, thieves, cheats and murderers, or as many other words. But one can see...that you mean nothing else.

And when vernacular publications lampooned one another, editor Shishir Ghose was depicted as a snake-charmer in Parsee Punch, with The Pioneer and The Times of India represented by two big hooded snakes, docile under the spell of the charmer’s flute (referring to the colonial government). Nonetheless, Ghose’s infamous wit could not save him from being blacklisted, at the same time that his newspaper Amrita gained national status.

Despite extensive press control laws, political cartoons published in vernacular newspapers developed new genres of illustrated journalism to voice opposition to injustices of colonial rule. A combination of factors points to the appeal of cartoons at the beginning of the

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135 Å. Irā Vēṅkaṭācalpati, “Caricaturing the Political: The Cartoon in Pre-Independence Tamil Journalism,” in In Those days When There was no Coffee: Writing in Cultural History (Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006).
137 Ghose, Pictures of Indian Life, 11.
138 Ghose, Pictures of Indian Life, 18.
twentieth century: the sheer numbers in publication, the close monitoring of cartoons by
government officials and positive responses voiced by public opinion. In the fourth annual
publication of *Cartoons from the Hindi Punch* in 1903 numerous congratulatory comments from
India and abroad were published. The original *Punch* in London was “delighted to find his
family so well represented and so highly popular in India…and what useful service, wherever
reform is needed, our Indian cousin is always ready and willing to render.”140 The *Madras Mail*
praised the efforts of *Hindi Punch* to “describe pictorially…the progress made by the country in
the political and social history during the past year.”141 *The Englishman* in Calcutta further
attributed “Western freedom of thought and treatment” for the journal’s ability to depict Lord
Curzon as a “bhistie, coal miner, mahout, tom-tom player, elephant, ryot, weight-lifter, and last
but not least, as a juggler pulling yards of tape labeled ‘speeches’ out of his mouth.”142 In fact,
*The Indian Mirror*, Calcutta; *The Bombay Gazette*; *The Maharatta*, Poona; *Indu Prakash,
Bombay*; *The Native States*, Madras and *The Madras Standard* all gave favorable reviews for
both the context of the cartoons and their “grotesque, but always amusing and instructive”
illustrations and message.143

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141 Ibid.
142 Ibid.
143 Ibid.
In the late nineteenth century, increasingly stringent legislative measures transformed the kinds of subject matter addressed in illustrative journalism. When the comic-satiric genre was first introduced in India the main focus was on social reform issues such as child marriage, child labor and sati. This subject matter was closely aligned with the colonial government’s ideological civilizing mission, an undertaking equally important to Indian social reformers. However, once the nationalist movement gained momentum, it too, enlisted comic-satiric publications to mobilize the population. The nature of comic-satiric publications changed in the first decades of the twentieth century as the political crisis in India deepened. The degree of censorship impacted not only the content but also the style of comic-satire in India. Proof of sedition was often elusive because Indian cartoonists used a kind of veiled language that their

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readership understood because of their shared knowledge about myths, folktales, symbolic metaphors and iconographic motifs.

Figure 22. “Filling Full the Mouth of Famine,” Gadgadat (May, 1900). Figure 23. “The Angel and the Evil Spirit,” Hindi Punch (August, 1900).

**Transcultural media arrives in British India: Lord Curzon and his multitude of characterizations**

The first graphic illustrations of Lord Curzon (1859-1925), Viceroy and Governor of India, a post he held between 1899-1905, demonstrate the re-contextualization of a transcultural medium in British India. These early illustrations of Curzon reveal how the role of the press transformed from a tool promoting imperialist ideology to an instrument critical of the inequalities and contradictions of British rule. Even before Curzon arrived in India, Hindi Punch declared him the “New Mahut” (fig. 21) and presented him with the “ankush or goad” of “sympathy” to guide India, the “domicile animal.” Curzon’s moral superiority was depicted in his “righteous” rule while “he takes up the white man’s burden” to secure the happiness and

146 Ibid., 29.
prosperity of the helpless millions." These characterizations of Curzon reflect the ideology of British colonialism.

Political caricature depicted imperialism in the anthropomorphic form of Curzon. When words were inadequate Curzon was “Lady Hind’s Elephant of State,” both female and a sacred animal—the elephant. The distorted and exaggerated images blurred the lines between mythology and reality. In other words, the image of the Governor of India represented the divine and therefore was worthy of worship. The caricatures suggest Curzon, the representative of Great Britain, warranted devotion, similar to the worship of a deity. Curzon entered the mythological realm capable of rescuing India from the calamities of famine, bankruptcy, plague and poverty. He offered India economic abundance gained from opium, salt, excise, customs, telegraphs, railway, irrigation and the military. Likewise in “Crushing Kalia,” (fig. 20) Curzon was the mythological god Kali defeating evil and saving the Presidency of Bombay from financial ruin. Furthermore, when Curzon loosened the governments’ severe anti-plague policies, he was Archangel Curzon (fig. 23), fleeing the horrors of railway inspection, compulsory examination, disinfection of railway passengers and segregation. Also, Gadgadat, or The Thunder, Gujarati’s illustrated weekly, published “Filling Full the Mouth of Famine,” (fig. 22) in which the colossal Curzon is feeding the emaciated native population. Metaphorically, colonialism provided sustenance necessary to elevate and civilize the masses. According to Curzon, Indian journalists should:

…not employ words or phrases…that you do not understand; avoid ambitious metaphors; do not attack in covert allegories or calumniate in disguise; above all

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147 Ibid., 33.
148 Ibid., 4.
149 The Gadgadat, Bhimsen and Hindi Punch contain depictions of Curzon related to the famine and the plague. In “The Boar Incarnation,” Bhimsen (September, 1899), Curzon is the Hindu incarnation of Varaha, a boar seen rescuing Bombay from these calamities.
150 Curzon’s economic prowess is demonstrated in his role as a fisherman in “The Haul,” Hindi Punch (April, 1901) in which British India’s economic abundance is on display.
never forget that the press has a mission, that mission is not to influence the passions or to cater to the lower instincts of your fellow-man, but to elevate the national character, to educate the national mind and to purify the national taste.\textsuperscript{151}

Arguably, without colonial guardianship India would remain uncivilized and incapable of self-governance. That is, these visual depictions of Curzon reflected the “mission” of the colonial government in India.

Drawn from Indian mythology, allegories and symbolic imagery, Curzon metamorphosized into various incarnations: coal miner, weight lifter, gardener, savior, rescuer, animal, grand wizard, physician, watchmaker and often Hindu mythological gods and goddesses. When Curzon, the watchmaker, was unable to regulate the time, the fault lies with the “clocks that would not keep proper time,” instead of British government failures.\textsuperscript{152} These illustrations did not explicitly criticize governmental policies but instead suggested that Indians were simply inherently incapable of civilization. In order to reach a wider audience, cartoonists intentionally used metaphor, mythology, folk symbolism and allegory to communicate. In this way, the new transcultural genre adapted to the socio-political climate in India. Within the visual grammar of cartoons and caricature, pictorial journalism offered a provocative and volatile form of critique, one which eventually began to be turned against the state.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 41-42.
By the end of Curzon’s tenure, pictorial journalism started to depict the ironies that became clear when the content of his speeches was contextualized against the realities of colonialism. Visual representations of famine, plague and depleting resources were juxtaposed against his promise of “hope, courage and generous sympathy” for India. Curzon’s “Prosperity in State” (fig. 24) speech highlighted the benefits of colonialism while the image depicted the contradictions. While railways, agriculture, industries, education, military, police and

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153 Ibid., 24-25. In “A Colossus of Word,” Hindi Punch (December, 1899) Curzon is wrapped in a union jack skirt holding the light of “hope, courage and generous sympathy” while he straddled the stormy seas with India under his skirt.

154 Ibid., 45-46. “Prosperity in State,” Hindi Punch (April, 1904): The caption reads: “The Government of India in my time had been involved in many controversies and has had to bear the brunt of much attack. Perhaps when the smoke of battle has blown aside it may be found that from this period of stress and labour has emerged an India better equipped to face the many problems which confront her,—stronger and better guarded on her frontiers, with her agriculture, her commerce, her education, her irrigation, her railways, her army and her police brought up to a higher state of efficiency, with every section of her administrative machinery in better repair, with her credit established, her currency restored, the material prosperity of her people enhanced and their loyalty strengthened. We shall not deserve the main credit because we have profited by the efforts of those who have preceded us. But perhaps we may be allowed our share and may feel that we have not toiled and sometimes endured in vain.”
civilization forged ahead, trailing behind was death, the plague and famine. Similarly, in “Nothing for you,” (fig. 25) an English bulldog receives the surplus while the emaciated Indian cow or ‘the Indian taxpayer’ receives the crumbs, which referred to Curzon’s proposed tax remissions. In the final cartoons of Curzon’s rule, we glimpse the rise of anti-colonial sentiment in pictorial journalism.

Figure 25. “Nothing for You,” Hindi Punch (April, 1904).

The content of comic-satiric journals varied according to broader social, cultural and political upheavals. It was, however, in the context of anti-colonial nationalism that pictorial journalism gained greater exposure, and the cartoonists’ repertoire expanded to include Indian nationalist symbolism. Abstract forms such as nationalism took the shape of metaphors involving animals, symbolic motifs and traditional iconography. The reader was able to decipher the

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155 The sacred Indian cow is starving from colonial depletion despite the huge financial surplus. After five years of no tax remissions, the government allocated a minimal tax remission with no further in the foreseeable future, according to Curzon’s speech.
cartoon through the use of shared mythological and symbolic imagery. For example, Tamil cartoon pioneer and poet C. Subramania Bharati (1882-1921) employed iconographic elements such as traditional lore, animals, proverbs and Hindu mythology in his cartoons during the *Swadeshi* period (1906-11).”

A transcultural media, comic-satire—once aligned with colonial ambitions—was reconfigured under the nationalist agenda. In the nationalist imagination, the figure of Gandhi was another potent nationalist symbol and his trademarked iconography was depicted in cartoons. His spectacles, walking stick, cap, sandals, timepiece he carried in his *dhobi*, spinning wheel and simple attire were all distinctive iconic symbols for the cartoonist. These Indian nationalist symbols, then, became cornerstones for pictorial journalism and crucial to India’s political self-perception. However, little is known about the early cartoonists who employed the visual grammar of caricature because prior to independence the majority of cartoonists did not sign their work, with one exception—Gaganendranath Tagore.

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Figure 26. “Imperishable Sacredness of a Brahman,” The Realm of the Absurd (1917).

Gaganendranath Tagore and The Realm of the Absurd

Gaganendranath Tagore (1867-1938), nephew of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and brother of Abanindranath Tagore, was one of the earliest political cartoonists in India. The consummate innovator, Tagore experimented with several visual art forms from Bengal School revivalism to cubism and finally to caricature. Earlier chapters discussed how critics in the art journal Rupam debated as to whether his modern cubist technique was derivative of European styles or was uniquely Indian because the artist and subject matter were Indian. When Tagore abandoned the ideological revivalism embraced by the Bengal School he turned to comic satire to express the political and social climate of the times. He satirized the westernized middle class
of urban Bengal, the hypocrisies of the caste system and colonial injustices.  

In caricature, Tagore integrated a transcultural media along with traditional stylistic conventions making his work visually arresting and critically powerful. Through Tagore’s exposure to international ideas and artists he created visual representations that transgressed the formal boundaries between fine and popular art forms.

His work articulated anti-colonial sentiment through the appropriation and reversal of European visual practices. He exposed pretentiousness and duplicity “with the irreverent power of wit, [and] providing] a counterbalance to the arrogance of power.”  

The inflated figure of Sir (Joseph) Bampfylde Fuller (1854–1935) in “Terribly Sympathetic” (fig. 27) referred to his violent involvement against the rebels when Bengal was partitioned. Sir Fuller was the officiating chief commissioner of Assam when Lord Curzon partitioned western Bengal from eastern Bengal and Assam. Fuller attempted to suppress the anti-partition swadeshi movement and when agitation shifted towards terrorism, he became a target for the revolutionaries, although assassination attempts failed.  

In Tagore’s rendering, Fuller’s well-manicured monster figure stomps out the native agitators with a single step. The British politician represented everything Tagore despised about colonialism: pomposity, hypocrisy and violence.

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157 Hypocrisy of the priesthood was a popular subject for Tagore as shown in Imperishable Sacredness of a Brahman (1917), Purification by Cow-Dung (1917), Millstone of the Caste System (1917), and Purification by Muddy Water (1917). Other works by Gaganendranath Tagore include Virup Vajra (Play of Opposites) 1917, Adhut Lok (Realm of the Absurd) 1915 and Naha Hullod (Reform Screams) 1921.

158 Leonard Freedman, The Offensive Art: Political Satire and Its Censorship Around the World from Beerbohm to Borat (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009), 166.

Following a long line of self-parody in Bengali cultural traditions, Tagore’s socio-political cartoons also examined the complexities of Bengali society, particularly the dynamics between different cultural identities, traditional versus modern, and Western versus Eastern. He used brevity of line to illustrate more complex and abstract issues. Examples of Tagore’s self-parody can be seen in his Babu genre series that satirized Westernized middle-class Bengalis.  

Ridiculed by the British and Bengalis alike, the Bengali babu’s adoption of British dress, manners and attitudes provided a wealth of visual material for cartoonists. The stereotypical representation of the “effeminate Bengali babu” in contrast to the “manly Englishman” was a popular caricature theme in Britain and India.  

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160 The term ‘Babu’ was originally one of respect, but became a derogatory term in the early twentieth century and referred to Indians who attempted to become more modern and westernized by imitating British dress, manners and attitudes.  

In 1917, the *Modern Review* published many of Tagore’s cartoons, elevating the status of caricature to fine art. Critics compared Tagore to European illustrators and cartoonists Phil May and Max Beerbohm. Continually experimenting with different media he integrated European and Indian stylistic conventions to create his unique vision whether in painting or comic satire. Artistically innovative, Tagore derived inspiration from colonial, national and international sources to make his approach uniquely transcultural. It was, then his ability to navigate both Western and Eastern art traditions that enabled him to develop new visual art paradigms befitting the changing times.

**Conclusion**

“Cartooning, like cricket, came to India with the British,” and both outlasted the British Raj. Although the Indian version of British *Punch* originated in Europe, it was the vernacular press in late colonial India that adopted and reconfigured the new comic-satiric genre to the task of nation building. Graphic journalism accomplished this task through integrating traditional stylistic conventions, mythology and symbolic motifs within the comic-satiric guise. The cartoons examined in this chapter combined political intent, emotional impact and artistic style. Within a transcultural framework, aesthetic, social and political criteria in caricature shifted according to the political landscape. While the subject matter cartoonists tackled changed the accepted visual conventions of brevity of line, metaphoric language with textual cues remained constant. This chapter has shown that satirical cartoons played a prominent part in public culture in India during the later part of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century.

Under the nationalist banner, the visual acumen of political cartoons served both a social and political function in the transmission of ideas and political propaganda against the British. If

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163 Ibid., xv.
freedom of the press is a “bellwether of the extent of openness in a society,” then censorship of graphic journalism under British rule reflects the nature of the political climate of that time. In response to the colonial government’s attempts to manage and control the press, cartoonists adapted, customized and reconfigured the new visual medium. Although the Indian press suffered increasingly stringent government censorship, cartoonists attempted to circumvent these restrictions through comic-satire comprised of allegory and mythology. While the study of graphic journalism is useful for examining social and political developments in British India, it also provides a glimpse of how the struggle against colonial dominance was a battle fought with both words and images.

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND EPILOGUE

By foregrounding the transcultural character of visuality, this thesis sought to understand how political and ideological processes such as colonialism and nationalism function through visual culture. The transcultural nature of visual discourse implies the global interconnectedness of the visual, political and social history in late colonial India. In this transnational narrative account, visual primary sources were given prominence, rather than relying solely on textual evidence or utilizing images for illustrative purposes. The preceding chapters have shown how transcultural visuality played a key role in how artists and scholars both challenged colonial systems and sought new, modern art formations. Cross-cultural interactions enriched the visual realm from national to modern art to the use of caricature in the vernacular press. This analysis of the transcultural nature of visual discourse not only offered new ways of thinking about the social and political realities of late colonial India but also showed how the visual lens helped shape these realities.

While Chapter one provided the theoretical framework and background material to frame the overall thesis, Chapter two focused on the development of a nationally recognized art form associated with the Bengal School artists. This chapter traveled the early contours of modernism and national art in colonial Bengal to show how transcultural innovations helped visually shape the emerging nation before India gained independence. The Bengal School’s critical acclaim was the result of both anti-colonial nationalist and transnational support. According to Preziosi’s “imaginative fictions,” national identity combines both colonial and national fictions, however, this thesis argued that transcultural interactions were equally important at a time when the Bengal School valued revivalism in the arts. By focusing on the revitalization of ancient Indian
arts India’s art historical identity could be restored to strengthen anti-colonial nationalism and demonstrate the continuous lineage between ancient and contemporary arts. Despite the emancipatory aspects of nationalism, the mobilization of predominately Hindu iconography in the arts principally silenced the non-Hindu population in these visual representations. While Indian artists redefined the visual realm as modern, vibrant and distinctly Indian, they drew inspiration from the Japan.

Bengal School artists experimented with Japanese techniques and Indian subject matter to create a distinct visual language defined narrowly as pan-Asian aesthetics. The preservation and modernization of Asian culture in contrast to the very real threat of Western dominance was vital to pan-Asian ideology. The unification of Asian culture through pan-Asian aesthetics allowed Bengali and Japanese painters to share supposedly universal characteristics while developing their respective nationalist aesthetic principles. Inspired by their shared artistic, cultural and spiritual heritage Indian and Japanese artists developed new styles and themes. However, the construction of a national visual identity as defined within the universal pan-Asian framework excluded other forms of religious and linguistic subjectivities. While pan-Asianism served a useful political tool for unifying and homogenizing the masses against colonial rule, it also eliminated the burdens of history, religion, national and linguistic distinctions. Nonetheless, creative exchanges between Indian and Japanese artists facilitated the evolution of early modernism—a transcultural artistic journey. Likewise, Jamini Roy navigated the transcultural realms of East and West in pursuit of his artistic vision.

Departing from national art and academic realism, Chapter three explored Jamini Roy’s indigenist modernism—a new visual vocabulary based on indigenous pictorial traditions that countered the assumptions of the Bengal School. His artistic journey was marked not only by his
rejection of colonial institutions and academic realism, but also his choice of materials and his reconceptualization of conventional forms of representations. His use of indigenous materials from homespun canvas to mineral pigments symbolized his idealization of rural India. His pictorial language was a synergy of transcultural elements from his academic training in European techniques, influences from Bengali folk traditions, international modernist aesthetics, East Asian calligraphy, and later in the 1950s pre-Renaissance and Byzantine icons. As a self-defined modern artist, his artistic vision was unique and complex, combining various aesthetic strategies influenced by the socio-political situation in late colonial India.

Dismissing the notion that the West was synonymous with progress and cultural superiority, the emergence of Roy’s new pictorial representations formed a counter-discourse to colonial modernity. His critique was evident in his choice of subject matter and materials along with his collaborative indigenous labor model. While he questioned elite aesthetic pretensions and their version of modern Indian identity that favored revivalism in national art, his work held the promise of a new modern era—innovative, progressive and yet indigenous in spirit. Rather than focusing on the “timeless” aestheticism of pre-industrial, pre-colonial India, Roy’s work symbolized the visual unification of an independent and modern India. By examining Roy’s work through a transcultural framework, we can see how transcultural visuality works whether explicitly acknowledged by the artist or not. Roy’s transformation artistically and personally redefined the notion of a modern Indian artist while simultaneously forging a path for a new generation of Indian artists.

In chapter four, graphic journalism in the vernacular press provided a useful arena for rethinking the political and social impact of visual media in Indian history. This chapter also argued that the adaptability of comic-satiric publications not only revealed asymmetrical
relationships in the colonial domain, but, ironically, this transcultural genre that once supported imperial propaganda became a tool for anti-colonial nationalism. The widespread adoption and re-contextualization of British-\textit{Punch} inspired comic-satire was a popular form of graphic journalism in colonial India. Comic-satiric journals offered pointed criticism arguably more succinctly than the written word through metaphoric language that connected with both the literate and non-literate populations. Arguably, caricature played a vital role in political and public discourse because this visual form of communication could speak more pointedly than the written word. We see how cartoonists told the story of Lord Curzon, Viceroy, and Governor of India, through their knowledge of the symbolic language. Pictorial journalism depicted the realities of colonial rule by juxtaposing Curzon’s professed moral superiority with visual representations of famine, plague and depletion of natural resources. Political cartoons effectively discredited the entire justification for colonial rule and undermined the moral sovereignty of colonial enlightenment. The power of the image weakened public political figures like Lord Curzon, thus demanding constant vigilance by the British administrators and provoking stricter censorship laws.

In the Indian context, the most successful caricatures to survive in the early twentieth century aligned themselves with nationalist and anti-colonial efforts. Visual representations expressing the inequalities of colonial rule were deemed seditious. In turn, publishers, writers, editors and cartoonists sought alternative forms of communication, in reality shaping and reinventing the comic-satiric genre in India. Rather than promoting imperial ideologies, anti-colonial nationalists used a kind of coded language that their readership understood because of their shared knowledge about myths, folktales, symbolic metaphors and iconographic motifs.

Comic-satiric publications provided an alternative public forum for social and political commentary, from anti-colonial resistance to transformations in traditional society. As the political weapon of choice, the visual language of caricature was a powerful tool in the fight for freedom of speech. Given that visual grammar is a distinct language from verbal grammar it can engage, transform, provoke and entertain. Pictorial journalism not only captured political discourse but also helped to shape the political landscape.

And finally, this chapter considered Gaganendranath Tagore’s departure from the revivalist ideology of the Bengal School of Art for a more direct form of political commentary—caricature. His work highlighted the rapidly changing economic, cultural and political climate in early twentieth century Bengal. In his lithograph series, The Realm of the Absurd, Tagore demonstrated his ability to integrate the transcultural medium of caricature with traditional iconography and motifs to critique the hypocrisies of the caste system and colonial inequalities. Tagore distilled complex abstract issues in a visual language—the idiom of ridicule—and its distinct substance delivered powerful social and political criticism. Because caricatures thrive on exaggerated stereotypes, Tagore’s Babu genre was particularly incendiary subject matter. In the Imperishable Sacredness of a Brahman, the hypocrisies of the caste system are illustrated in the bloated priest drinking wine and discarding pages of the scriptures out the window. These visually arresting images are iconic symbols of many of the legislative controversies tackled in British India, such as the Ilbert Bill. Graphic journalism helped to define political and public culture through integrating traditional stylistic conventions, mythology, and symbolic motifs to

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166 Ibid., 50.
167 The original intent of the Ilbert Bill was to empower highly placed Indian civil servants with criminal jurisdiction over Europeans in rural stations. In the face of severe opposition, the bill underwent significant revision, which dissipated its original intent. The most vocal opponents of the bill were British tea and indigo plantation owners in Bengal, who feared that, unlike British judges, Indian judges would not overlook their mistreatment of workers. But the most persistent allegations concerned the humiliation that English females would experience when appearing before Indian judges in the case of rape. Mrinalini Sinha, Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century (New York: Manchester University Press).
mobilize the population in the struggle for independence. This thesis shows how transcultural visuality captures the numerous ways in which colonial, national and international perspectives have informed visual culture in India, from fine art and popular art to graphic journalism. Images were equally as important as words in the fight for freedom.

**Epilogue: The Symbolic Role of the National Museum, New Delhi**

Imbricated in the visual is a whole series of structures – the museum, the academy, the art world and the nation-state. The epilogue briefly examines the role of the museum in the dissemination and legitimation of artistic production. The politically driven narrative of the museum conceals the transcultural element in Indian arts. Rather, the national museum’s framework of two contending narratives—Orientalist and Nationalist—demonstrates that the construction of a “great art” tradition resulted from the museum’s accommodation of two divergent art historical narratives that remain extant. These negotiations show how the museum was the site of struggle between nationalist aspirations and lingering colonialist art history narratives. The museum’s invented art historical narrative produced an Indian art history, which selectively defined and compiled a history of “great art” traditions covering nearly 5,000 years, highlighting certain periods and collapsing others into its framework. In the late 1940s it was important to construct a homogenous secular national identity in a profoundly diverse country still recovering from the violence of partition.

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168 Tracy Buck, “Confronting the Other in the Nationalist Art History Narratives and National Museum of India” (paper presented at NaMu conference, Korrkoping, Sweden, February 19-21, 2007). Buck’s paper examines the connection between imperial and national art historical narratives within the museum.


The founding collection of the national museum raises questions about the historical processes involved in the construction of a state-mandated art historical narrative. Earlier this thesis explored how nationally conceived art historical narratives or “imaginative fictions” in Perziozi’s words were a combination of both colonial and national narratives, both essential to the formation of a national identity. However, the museum’s attempt to build a national image was undermined by the use of colonial art historical narratives formulated in the nineteenth century by British Orientalists. Chapter one discussed how the Orientalists’ theory of decay and degeneration emphasized the importance of ancient Indian arts and the “golden age” of artistic production, the same narrative adopted by the national museum. The objects that formed the basis of the national museum’s original collection exhibited first at the Government House (or the Viceroy’s Lodge, later renamed Rashtrapati Bhavan), New Delhi. \(^{172}\) The exhibition contained predominantly stone sculptures from the fourth century BCE to the thirteenth century CE alongside bronze sculptures and Mughal paintings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. British administrators formulated plans for the 1947-1948 exhibition before India’s independence. \(^{173}\)

The Government House display marked the inauguration of the ‘national collection,’ conditioning the exhibition for its important future role. The earliest exhibition catalogs adopted art historical narratives first fashioned in the journal *Rupam*. Both *Rupam* and the national

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\(^{172}\) *Exhibition of Indian Art* (New Delhi: Department of Archeology, 1948). According to the exhibition catalog, the collections were a collaborative effort between the government of India, regional museum authorities, private collectors, provincial governments and various rulers of states. The exhibition travelled from Burlington House in England to the Government House in New Delhi. See also: Grace Morley, *Brief Guide to the National Museum* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1962), 1. The first prime minister selected Grace Morley, previous head of the Museums Division at UNESCO, and the former director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, to serve as the director of India’s new national museum.

\(^{173}\) Imperial administrators conceived of a museum in 1912 and plans were prepared based on the legitimacy of imperial power. For an in depth discussion on the national museum’s role in nation building symbolically and architecturally, see Kristy Phillips, “A Museum for the Nation: Publics and Politics at the National Museum of India” (PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2006).
museum acknowledged and celebrated a past “golden age,” but they extended this period to encompass Indian history in its entirety. Rupam published articles about Jamini Roy’s successful modern art incursions, illustrating how the present represented the potential for continued artistic triumphs. Later publications affiliated with the national museum’s collections, such as Indian Art through the Ages, first published in 1948, strengthened the connection to modern times by introducing an extensive collection of contemporary Indian artists. Published by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting—effectively sanctioned by the government as “art through the ages”—the introduction offers text nearly verbatim from Agrawala’s introduction in the 1948 exhibition guide. Nonetheless, the actual collections displayed at the Museum promoted solely ancient Indian arts similar to the British Orientalists. Although modern art was an important focus of Rupam it was essentially neglected in the national museum; rather it was later housed in the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi in 1954.

According to V.S. Agrawala, the visual arts are inextricably linked to the development of a national identity.

There is no argument that carries greater persuasion with it in favor of a country’s ideals and way of life than its art, and Indian art, richly documenting the past culture of India, has a unique position in this respect, as revealing the mind of the Indian people.

V.S. Agrawala’s introduction to the Exhibition of Indian Art depicted Indian history as one long historical continuum of artistic successes from the Harappan civilization to the present. It did not recast the Gupta period as a “golden” age of culture and art; rather, it “ushered in the Golden Age of Indian art” that extends to the present. By placing all times and genres in a single

174 Buck, “Confronting the Other,” 107.
175 India, Indian Art Through the Ages (Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1951).
176 Preface to Exhibition of Indian Art, Held at the Government House, New Delhi, November 6-December 31, 1948 (New Delhi: Ministry of Education, Dept. of Archaeology, 1948), v.
177 Ibid.
178 Ibid., xi.
continuum, Agrawala effectively linked the past artistic greatness to the present. Accompanying the exhibition was a series of lectures given by preeminent art scholars, many of whom contributed to Rupam: O.C. Gangoly, Stella Kramrisch, V.S. Agrawala, and Karl Khandalawal. Thus, art history interpretations first promoted in Rupam were legitimized in the newly formed national museum.

As the location of the first republic day parade, the national museum held a critical symbolic role in nation building. The museum avoided discussions of religious iconography by choosing aesthetic qualities over their specific religious context. Instead, the art historical narrative promoted by the museum referred to a homogenous Indian experience. Similar to the art journal Rupam, the national museum endorsed the supposedly universal qualities of spirituality rather than specifying the actual differences in religious beliefs. Hence, the political implications involved the construction of identity and difference, regarding whose voices are heard and whose voices remain silent.179 Issues of national and community identity were inevitably entwined within the museum’s representation of art objects, effectively erasing difference and establishing a new set of exclusions.

By choosing to obscure histories of the art object, those who participated in the museum’s orchestrated rituals of citizenship were offered subjecthood under a new Indian identity and citizenship based on the heritage of the museum’s objects.180 As Hooper-Greenhill points out, the “persistent fallacy that objects speak for themselves” infers that objects have a “unified, stable, and unchanging meaning and natural positions which are self-evident.”181 The

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181 Hooper-Greenhill, In Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture, 49.
museum engaged colonial museological practices that transformed previously sacred objects to objects without contextual information and valued solely for their aesthetic appeal. Instead of acknowledging the foreign provenance of their art objects the museum promoted the indigenous lineage of the object. In the twenty-first century, the museum continues to organize collections by object type (sculpture, painting, textiles and bronzes), rather than by chronology or region similar to the 1948 exhibition.

As a social phenomenon, human visuality touches all aspects of life from political to aesthetic matters. This thesis suggests the importance of accounting for transcultural histories that capture the multifarious ways in which colonial, national and international perspectives have informed visual practices in India. We see how a multitude of visual discourses can occupy the same historical terrain allowing for contradictory interpretations. Transcultural visuality reminds us of the many nuanced and porous exchanges that have historically proliferated the visual realm as in our political and social lives.
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