

# THE BENGAL SCHOOL OF ART AND *NIHONGA* (1902-1928): ART TOWARD A MODERN ASIAN IDENTITY

by

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

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## ABSTRACT

At the turn of the twentieth century, both India and Japan increasingly sought to create new modern identities separate from Western influence. These ambitions are reflected in the philosophies of two corresponding art movements, the Bengal School of Art and *nihonga* which are both considered to be pivotal to the development of modern Indian and Japanese art respectively. India had been ruled and colonized by Great Britain for almost a century and a half with Britain establishing state-run art institutions that mandated the standards of Indian art as well as commodifying it for European consumption. Similarly, though Japan was never directly colonized by a European state in the same manner, it felt pressure to assert its growing power by adopting and emulating Western aesthetics.

In contrast, the Bengal School and *nihonga* both actively rejected Euro-American art techniques. Instead, the artists active in these movements were inspired by traditional Indian and Japanese forms. Initially, they developed their ideologies independently. However, in 1902, Okakura Kazuko, a Japanese art historian and vocal proponent of *nihonga*, visited Calcutta, India, staying with a prominent Bengali family, the Tagores, known for their contributions to Indian art, literature, music, and social reform. During this initial visit, as well as subsequent voyages to India and Japan by associated artists from the two groups, there was significant cross-pollination of ideologies, techniques, content, and aesthetics. For instance, the hazy 'wash' technique introduced by the *nihonga* artists, known as *morotai*, was adopted by the Bengal School of Art artists and became one of the movement's defining features. Another key theme these two groups of artists explored was the tension between nationalism and transnational Pan-Asianism, the idea that all of Asia should be united economically, culturally, and politically in opposition to European values. Overall, this thesis seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the nuances of artistic exchange between India and Japan during the early twentieth century and how these interactions sometimes transcended national boundaries to develop a broader sense of Pan-Asian identity.

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# INTRODUCTION

## INDIA, JAPAN, AND PAN-ASIANISM

There is consensus within the art history scholarly community on the impact of Asian art on Western art. This influence, however, usually carries the connotation of novelty rather than innovation. More importantly, it downplays or completely omits the significance of the art of non-Western entities. For instance, in the context of Modernism, amongst Western scholars, the entire movement is generally understood as “something that evolved in the West and was then exported to Asian cultures such as those of India and Japan, where it was basically imitated,”<sup>1</sup> undermining the role of Asian art’s impact during this period and perpetuating the ideology that only Western civilization can be the originator of new, exciting ideas.

Furthermore, amongst historians of Euro-American modern art, whenever Asian art is incorporated into the canon of modern art, it rarely stands by itself – often there exists some sort of exchange between the West and the East. Broadly, Asian art is either a source of inspiration, never the masterpiece itself, or it is appropriated without due credit by Western or European artists. In addition, this Eurocentric view occludes the possibility of inter-Asian artistic exchange and thus this area of study has been overlooked, not widely understood, or even marginalized by most. Inter-Asian artistic exchanges do exist, so without studying and understanding them, it is impossible to gather the full picture of Asian art, and to some extent, Western art as well.

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<sup>1</sup>Rupert Arrowsmith, “Cosmopolitanism and Modernism: How Asian Visual Culture Shaped Early Twentieth Century Art and Literature in London” (presentation, Director’s Seminar Series at London University’s School of Advanced Study, March 7, 2012).

However, the overlooking of Asian art's importance is not to discount the fact that Western actors did play large roles in shaping Asian art, especially during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Western imperial powers facilitated the trade of physical goods and ideas, including art artifacts as well as intangible elements of art, such as techniques, content, and philosophies. Furthermore, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, national movements emerged in Asia and gained momentum to resist Western imperialism, reclaim their cultures and incorporate traditional and foreign ideas in order to shape their own identity.<sup>2</sup>

Examples of such national movements in the early twentieth century can be found in India and Japan. In India, the self-sufficiency effort known as *swadeshi* gained traction and later grew into the wider independence movement. In Japan, simultaneous ideas of Japanese nationalism and Pan-Asianism, the idea that all of Asia should be united politically, economically, and culturally, especially against Western imperialism, coexisted. Though on the surface, these movements seem primarily political in nature, they were strongly linked to art. This thesis focuses on the Japanese art scholar and critic, Okakura Kazuko's (also known as Okakura Tenshin) visit in 1902 to the Tagore family, a prominent family from Bengal, known for their contributions to Indian literature, art, and social reform in Calcutta.<sup>3</sup> Okakura had a background in Western art but he was a strong proponent of *nihonga*, a movement that aimed to preserve and follow traditional Japanese art in opposition to Western art techniques. The Tagore family at that time included

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<sup>2</sup>Charlotte Ashby, *Art Nouveau: Art, Architecture and Design in Transformation* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 144.

<sup>3</sup> Note that Japanese artists' names will be denoted as 'family name, given name' as in accordance with Japanese naming systems; In this thesis, the city known today as Kolkata will be referred to as Calcutta, as it was prior to its renaming in 2001.

Abanindranath Tagore, the founder of the Bengal School of Art which similarly to *nihonga*, sought to redefine Indian art, and Rabindranath Tagore, who was the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. This thesis also will assess the subsequent relationships and dialogue between *nihonga* artists and Abanindranath's Bengal School of Art, focusing on the better-documented impact that *nihonga* had in developing the Bengal School's style.

At times, the exchange between these two groups was very literal, with Japanese artists traveling to India in order to become instructors of Japan's new 'modern' painting technique. However, more interestingly, it was not simply the physical manifestations of art that were shared and built upon. The legacy of these Indian and Japanese artists was ultimately larger in scope. Their interactions prompted artists, intellectuals, and governments to question how they wanted to present the Indian and the Japanese demonstrations of modernity in comparison to Western modernity. A key theme these artists explored was their nationalist identity versus a broader, transnational Pan-Asianism as they broke from Euro-American impositions of what modernism should be. The artists involved in this exchange also explored how they planned to use Western art techniques and aesthetics (either forced, as in India, by a colonial power or invited, as in Japan, through the form of government-employed foreigners) to build upon or contrast their own standards with. Finally, the exchange between the *nihonga* and the Bengal School artists also was the impetus for the individuals involved to contemplate if India and Japan were to be completely separated from the West or if these nations would try and equate themselves as world powers – all through art.

This thesis begins by examining the historical backgrounds and artistic contexts of both countries in the early twentieth century and how they negotiated Western art's

position as the 'blueprint for modernity' in their own distinct ways. This investigation will include a study of how artists, such as Abanindranath Tagore, one of the founders of the Bengal School of Art, and cultural entities, such as the Tokyo Industrial Art School, negotiated or rejected Western styles, and how this decision-making contributed to their artistic expression. While the primary focus of this thesis is on the artistic exchange between India and Japan, it is important to understand the West's role in shaping the art of these countries. Indian and Japanese artists frequently reacted to how Western players impacted Indian or Japanese art or were enabled by Western entities.

The thesis will then examine the case study of Okakura's visit to the Tagores in Calcutta, subsequent Japanese artists traveling to India, and Indian artists going to Japan respectively. This case study exemplifies the artistic exchange between India and Japan, and how the involved stakeholders grappled with fundamental questions of tradition and modernity, art as a tool for suppression or art as an instrument for freedom, and assertions of the spirituality of the East against the materialism of the West. During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Western powers and Western imperialism were often dominated by themes of industrialization and the necessity to make more things –modernity itself was characterized by material possession. Through a detailed analysis of how *nihonga* impacted the Bengal School of Art, this thesis aims to demonstrate how inter-Asian artistic exchange and dialogue led to the creation of new art forms and how this interchange and similar ones shaped the development of art and culture in both countries.

Overall, this thesis seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the nuances of artistic exchange between India and Japan during the early twentieth century and how

these interactions sometimes transcended national boundaries to develop a broader sense of Pan-Asian identity.



# ART EDUCATION IN BRITISH INDIA AND MEIJI JAPAN

## ART SCHOOLS UNDER THE BRITISH RAJ

Britain directly ruled the Indian subcontinent from 1858 until 1947, when the countries of India and Pakistan became independent. But it effectively had control of the region for almost two centuries, from 1757 up to 1947. Formal rule was known as the British Raj. Under the British Raj, just as in Britain's other colonies, the British sought to maintain and strengthen their authority over the colony through education. Colonizing countries establish their own education systems within their colonies to aid the centralization of their rule. Furthermore, the colonizer's educational institutions enforce their authority in politics and government in addition to stipulating cultural requirements that those living in the colonies must adhere to.<sup>4</sup> Art education was part of this colonizing process. The British made a clear distinction between the 'Academies of Fine Arts' and 'Schools of Design' they established. They prioritized the latter in order to develop the practical skills of the Indian population to create marketable goods for export, rather than promoting art for its own sake.

The British founded multiple art schools in India, modeled after British methods, often staffed with European instructors, but with different goals in place which shifted over time. Some of these aims included developing new skills amongst the native population, educating the upper classes in the Western tradition of fine arts, and preserving Indian arts and crafts traditions. These different objectives sometimes coexisted in the same

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<sup>4</sup>Ami Kantawala, "Art Education in Colonial India: Implementation and Imposition," *Studies in Art Education* 53, no. 3 (2012): 210.

institution or more broadly across India as a whole. Part of this concurrence of various priorities may be due to their founders which ranged from the British government itself to British private citizens using their personal funds. However, it is important to keep in mind that these educational systems were set up in a colonial context. Despite the nuances in their aims, ultimately, they all sought to benefit the British by perpetuating imperialist claims and ignoring or suppressing Indian identity through art regulation.

One of the earliest art schools in India, established in 1798 by a British resident, Sir Charles Malet, was meant to train local Indian artists so that they could assist visiting British artists. Therefore enforcing the British viewpoint that Western art was more refined, and the best Indian artists could do was to be an assistant, secondary to the main creator who they could never be.<sup>5</sup> More than fifty years later, four art and design schools were founded in the cities of Madras, Calcutta, Bombay, and Lahore within the span of 25 years (1850-1875) and the aim of British-established art schools started to shift. The school founded in Madras in 1850 was supported by the resident British surgeon, Dr. Alexander Hunter, with his own personal funds. Hunter sought to elevate the standards of the local population with regard to the visual appeal and overall refinement of the items they used in their daily lives.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the training artists received there was colored by the institution's view that Indian art and design was something that needed to be further honed with the help of established European art forms and techniques. Contrast this ambition with the ethos at the Calcutta School of Art, founded in 1854, where the school's

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<sup>5</sup> Kantawala, "Art Education in Colonial India," 211.

<sup>6</sup> Kantawala, "Art Education in Colonial India," 213.

objective was to create new industrial occupations for educated Indians and to preserve Indian handicrafts.<sup>7</sup>

These four cities were chosen strategically. Their locations corresponded with British trade, disregarding Indian spheres of art. For the British, these areas allowed them to conveniently establish the necessary skills in the local population to produce Indian objects conforming to British taste and quality. The British achieved this by combining Indian handicrafts and Western methods of art education, such as copying drawings from Renaissance texts or studying linear perspective drawing.<sup>8</sup> In Europe, Indian handiworks and artworks circulated widely and found great popularity amongst the public and artists. Journals, such as the *Journal of Indian Art and Industry*, published in London from 1886-1916, aimed to generate interest in Indian arts and crafts among British consumers.<sup>9</sup> In addition, British bureaucracy was also involved in the regulation of Indian art with entities such as the Department of Science and Art (DSA) established to “introduce superior design and artisanal sensibilities in industrial workers” in both Britain and abroad in colonies such as India.<sup>10</sup> Thus, demand was stimulated for Indian imports. These items, such as ceramics, textiles, and other decorative objects tended to be produced by Indians of artisan castes. The links between Indian craft and artisan castes caused Europeans to view artisan castes as the true and only purveyors of Indian art culture, creating orientalist expectations of talent stemming from hereditary lineages rather than education or hard work. For instance,

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<sup>7</sup> Kantawala, “Art Education in Colonial India,” 213; Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New ‘Indian Art:’ Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 147.

<sup>8</sup> Kantawala, “Art Education in Colonial India,” 212.

<sup>9</sup> Ashby, *Art Nouveau*, 150.

<sup>10</sup> Arindam Dutta, *The Bureaucracy of Beauty: Design in the Age of its Global Reproducibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 2.

the DSA presented itself as the savior of declining indigenous industries and craftsmanship in India that were being threatened by low-priced, mass-produced imports from Britain and Europe. However, by only emphasizing traditional crafts, Indian artisans were confined within local caste hierarchies and corresponding power structures, leaving them more vulnerable to direct exploitation by the British.<sup>11</sup>

However, some Britons, such as John Lockwood Kipling, the first director of the Mayo School of Art in Lahore (and the father of the famous writer, Rudyard Kipling), started to reframe Indian art as noteworthy and something to be elevated and classified as 'art' rather than as merely decorative. Kipling maintained the mindset of Indian artists needing to come from artistic or artisan castes. This belief is exemplified through the Mayo School of Art offering reduced tuition for students from those castes. Despite this, Kipling collaborated with Indian artists on large and important buildings.<sup>12</sup> For instance, he worked on multiple projects with Bhai Ram Singh, one of the first graduates of the Mayo School of Art. Together, they designed a number of public buildings in Lahore, and in 1885, they designed a room and its accompanying furniture in Bagshot Park, a royal estate in England.

Ernest Binfield Havell was another notable British proponent of Indian art. Again, his views contained tropes of identifying India as 'other' and mysterious and valuing it for the spirituality he assumed it could provide to Europe. Furthermore, Havell's career was characterized by conflicting priorities.<sup>13</sup> Toward the beginning of his tenure as an art instructor and bureaucrat, he was preoccupied with Indian craft and design versus Indian

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<sup>11</sup> Dutta, *Bureaucracy of Beauty*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ashby, *Art Nouveau*, 150.

<sup>13</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian Art'*, 149.

'fine arts.' He also changed his approach of championing British Imperialist art education policy to his later idealized defending of indigenous Indian art. Regardless, as the Superintendent of the Madras School of Art (1884-1892), and then later of the Calcutta School of Art (1896-1906), Havell aimed to instruct Indian artists and designers on the tenets of Indian rather than European art.<sup>14</sup> Even though Havell himself was a strong advocate and proponent of abolishing distinctions between 'applied' and 'fine' arts, in practice, these delineations were still drawn in the organizations he oversaw. For instance, while at the Calcutta School of Art, Havell called for "a better system...founded on that of the best European academies" in the 'fine arts' curriculum, thus implying 'fine arts' are still under the European domain.<sup>15</sup>

Gradually, however, Havell's interest in Indian art changed from an emphasis on Indian art education and Indian design and crafts to Indian fine arts. His shift in interest found its impetus in Mughal paintings. The value of Mughal paintings was still tied to their decorative nature, intrinsic to their intricacy. Havell prompted a large portion of European academic paintings in the Government Art Gallery to be sold, with the proceeds going toward the acquisition of Mughal art. Havell encouraged his Indian students to draw inspiration from Mughal paintings as both he and the Indian artist, Abanindranath Tagore, believed Mughal art exemplified spirituality in contrast to the materialism of Western art.<sup>16</sup> These views were shared more widely at the same time and were embedded in growing discussions of Indian nationalism and nationhood. The assistance provided by individuals

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<sup>14</sup> Ashby, *Art Nouveau*, 151.

<sup>15</sup> Bengal Government, Education Department, "Annual General Reports on Public Instruction, 1898," 98.

<sup>16</sup> Ashby, *Art Nouveau*, 151.

like Havell was instrumental in driving the progress of Indian artists such as Abanindranath Tagore, who are now regarded as essential figures in Indian Modernism.

## JAPAN AND THE WEST

Japan was never colonized by a European state in the same manner as India. Western imperial powers had a significant presence and impact on the country, but they never exercised complete possession or control over Japan.<sup>17</sup> However, in 1853, an American naval fleet led by Commodore Matthew Perry sailed into Tokyo Bay, thus forcing direct Japanese trade and discourse with the broader Western world for the first time in two centuries. As a result, there was immense interest in Japan and Japanese culture in Europe and America thereafter, with Japanese items being displayed at international exhibitions in major Western cosmopolitan cities such as London, Paris, Vienna, and Philadelphia. Many European artists, such as Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, James Tissot, and Edgar Degas, collected Japanese art and incorporated its visual aspects within their own artworks.<sup>18</sup> There were multiple exhibitions of Japanese art held throughout Europe, and Japanese art was sometimes showcased alongside contemporary European art. This fascination with Japanese art is known today as Japonisme. One of the most notable and influential dealers in Japanese arts at the time was Siegfried Bing. Bing owned the Oriental Art boutique in Paris, which served as an important meeting place for artists and art critics while also allowing them to access Japanese art imports. Bing also published the journal, *Le*

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<sup>17</sup> Anna Jackson, "Orient and Occident" in *Art Nouveau: 1890-1914*, ed. Paul Greenhalgh (New York: Henry N. James, 2000), 110.

<sup>18</sup> Jackson, "Orient and Occident," 105.

*Japon Artistique*, from 1888-1891, which featured examples of Japanese art and detailed information on its technical and stylistic aspects.<sup>19</sup>

Compared to other non-European entities, Euro-American artists and collectors viewed Japan in a more positive light. For instance, the West characterized China as a nation lacking morals and stuck in the past while its people were a “degenerate race, softened by luxury and by too great a facility for enjoyment.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the British believed Indians lacked self-discipline.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, the West considered the Japanese as being of “artistic talent and sensibility” and Japan was “likened to the ideal, ancient and primitive society of a mythical Golden Age,” but these more flattering views were still filtered through an imperialist lens.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the realization that the Western market had a strong desire for Japanese art at times compelled Japanese artists to adjust their creative output to be more accommodating for Western tastes for the purpose of financial gain. The Japanese government also catered to this mindset by opening the first Japanese governmental art school, the Industrial Art School in Tokyo, in 1876 with Italian artists such as Antonio Fontanesi as the instructors. At the Industrial Art School, Japanese students were taught the techniques of charcoal, crayon, and oil paints as well as the concepts of linear perspective, scientific anatomy, and sketching from life. Consequently, Euro-American art established itself as the new benchmark for fine arts in Japan, which compelled numerous traditional Japanese artists to settle for menial jobs like embellishing

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<sup>19</sup> Jackson, “Orient and Occident,” 110.

<sup>20</sup> Jackson, “Orient and Occident,” 110; Chaloner Alabaster, *Catalogue of Chinese Objects in the South Kensington Museum*, (London: Science and Art Department of the Committee of Council on Education, South Kensington Museum, 1872), 57.

<sup>21</sup> Kantawala, “Art Education in Colonial India,” 218.

<sup>22</sup> Jackson, “Orient and Occident,” 111; Louis Gonse, “The Japanese as Decorators,” *Le Japon Artistique* 1, no. 2 (1888): 10.

fabrics, fans, and ceramics meant for overseas export instead of pursuing their art, as it was their sole source of income.<sup>23</sup> Despite the more complimentary associations in the West, Japan was still not accepted to be as advanced, nor was it wielding the same levels of power or influence compared to the West on the rest of the world. This imbalance affected how Japan saw itself in relation to the West. However, Japan's standing started to change when it became militarily dominant over China and Russia, an Asian stronghold and a European power respectively.

In the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), Japan demonstrated naval prowess over Qing China, taking control of Korea as a vassal state as well as the additional territories of Taiwan and the southern portion of Liaoning province in Northern China. Japan also forced China to open its ports for international trade. This was a significant victory for Japan, although later, in 1895, during the Triple Intervention, Western powers, notably Russia, intervened and forced Japan to relinquish much of the territory gained through the war due to their own ambitions for power and influence in China.<sup>24</sup> As a result, the Japanese government felt spurned by European powers and encouraged the increased industrial development of Japan's military under the slogan of *gashin shotan*, translating to 'perseverance and determination for the sake of revenge.' This humiliation and subsequent desire for revenge ultimately led to the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), where the Japanese fleet nearly destroyed the Russian navy in a single battle, the Battle of Tsushima.

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<sup>23</sup> Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 262.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Q. Greve and Jack S. Levy, "Power Transitions, Status Dissatisfaction, and War: The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895," *Security Studies* 27, no. 1 (2018): 149.



With this victory, the Japanese cemented their place as a major military power and shifted the balance of power in Asia toward the Japanese archipelago.<sup>25</sup>

During this same time period, in the context of art and culture, Japan also struggled to solidify where it stood relatively with Europe and America. Both the Japanese government and Japanese artists themselves grappled with negotiating the emphasis placed on Western art versus traditional Japanese art, often going back and forth between the two. Originally, in order to modernize Japanese art and architecture, the Meiji government actively recruited and employed foreign scholars in Japan. These foreign artists and educators formally taught Japanese artists and architects Western art styles and techniques in government-sponsored art institutions. The promotion of Western art forms was in juxtaposition to the art style known as *bunjinga* (sometimes also used interchangeably with *nanga*), a Japanese Chinese-derived style of painting popular during the late Tokugawa and Meiji eras ranging from the mid-1600s to the 1800s.<sup>26</sup> *Bunjinga* originated from a time before Americans forced Japanese ports open, when Japan was largely cut off from the rest of the world, including China, and so it developed within Japan as its own unique form, focusing on “talent in poetry, painting, and calligraphy” through Chinese landscapes and other similar content.<sup>27</sup> *Bunjinga* idealized art as a form of civilization and cultivation for those of refinement (usually of the social elite) although one’s social standing was secondary to talent and character. However, in the 1880s, on the eve of the Sino-Japanese War, challenges to the aesthetics and philosophy of *bunjinga*

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<sup>25</sup> Greve and Levy, “Power Transitions, Status Dissatisfaction, and War,” 150.

<sup>26</sup> Christine M.E. Guth, “Meiji Response to Bunjinga” in *Challenging Past and Present: The Metamorphosis of Nineteenth-Century Japanese Art*, ed. Ellen P. Conant (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 177.

<sup>27</sup> Guth, “Meiji Response to Bunjinga,” 178.

became more pronounced. China was increasingly seen as irretrievably stuck to superannuated values and beliefs while Japan instead gradually turned to Europe for cultural inspiration and validation.<sup>28</sup> Artists and other individuals in artistic circles sought to redefine Japanese art in the context of modern Japan and its standing with the West – thus spurring the influx of Western artists and scholars mentioned previously. One of the arguments presented by Japanese art scholars against *bunjinga* was that it lacked realism. While *bunjinga* artists did not completely abstract their content, they prioritized their emotional response to the subject matter over strict adherence to realistic representation. Meanwhile, Western art techniques, such as perspective and scale had practical value such as accuracy in mapmaking or in depicting the likeness of an individual.<sup>29</sup>

Likewise, art in Western styles was soon deemed insufficient by itself as the value of Japanese traditional art was brought to the foreground. The Meiji government subsequently witnessed the popularity of traditional Japanese arts and crafts at three world expositions – in Vienna (1873), Philadelphia, (1876), and Paris (1878) and thus, realized the value of the traditional Japanese arts – albeit in economical rather than artistic terms. Japanese art dealers also realized that foreign buyers preferred Japanese-style nature patterns rather than the new Western-style paintings. For instance, in the Kyoto art show of 1893, leading Japanese oil painters failed to sell a single oil painting.<sup>30</sup> There were also growing movements calling for a return to traditional Japanese art forms and rejecting Western ideals of art. As in India, some of these sentiments were shared by Western

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<sup>28</sup> Guth, “Meiji Response to Bunjinga,” 187; Marius B. Jansen, “Cultural Change in Nineteenth-Century Japan” in *Challenging Past and Present: The Metamorphosis of Nineteenth-Century Japanese Art*, ed. Ellen P. Conant (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 34.

<sup>29</sup> Guth, “Meiji Response to Bunjinga,” 184.

<sup>30</sup> Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, 263.

individuals living in the region, such as Ernest Fenollosa, an American art historian. Fenollosa originally arrived in Japan in 1878 at the request of the Japanese Meiji government to teach philosophy, politics, and finance at the Imperial University.<sup>31</sup> He was initially interested in championing oil painting in Japan alongside Western-educated Japanese artists such as Takahashi Yuichi. However, Fenollosa later switched course and became a fervent advocate for *nihonga*, the movement that aimed to preserve and follow traditional Japanese art as well as use it as a vehicle to establish a new, modern Japan.

Prior to the Meiji era (1868-1912), there was no general expression for traditional Japanese painting. There were paintings in the Japanese (*yamatōe*), Western (*ranga*), or Chinese (*kanga*) style, but in the 1880s, the term *nihonga* started being used as an umbrella term for all these schools. *Nihonga* painters opposed the Western-style Japanese art movement known as *yōga*. However, even *nihonga* artists did not completely reject all Western art techniques and concepts. Okakura himself advocated for selective Westernization. The *nihonga* artist, Yokoyama Taikan, who traveled to Calcutta and will be discussed further in this thesis, drew from life, inspired by the Impressionists' practice of working *en plein air*, rather than adhering to copying ancient paintings.<sup>32</sup> Both *ranga* and *yōga* were influenced by Western art styles and techniques. However, *ranga* emerged earlier during the Edo period (1603-1868) whereas *yōga* started in the early twentieth century. *Ranga* was largely inspired by Dutch art and though artists such as Satake Yoshiatsu mimicked the appearance of oil paint in their paintings, oil paint itself was not

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<sup>31</sup> Martin Collcutt, "The Image of Kannon as Compassionate Mother in Meiji Art and Culture" in *Challenging Past and Present: The Metamorphosis of Nineteenth-Century Japanese Art*, ed. Ellen P. Conant (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 204.

<sup>32</sup> Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922*, 290.

used. Instead, *ranga* artists used oils, resins, and Japanese pigments. On the other hand, *yoga* was influenced by post-Impressionist movements such as fauvism, naturalism, and cubism with strong associations of being avant-garde and modern. Because of his opposition to *yoga*, alongside other Japanese artists such as Okakura Kazuko, Shiokawa Bunrin, Kono Bairei, and Tomioka Tessai, Fenollosa is recognized as a significant figure in the *nihonga* movement, which sought to uphold traditional Japanese art techniques and materiality. Though *nihonga's* principles and the valuing of traditional Japanese art had never truly disappeared – even when the Meiji government was actively bringing Western techniques to Japanese art institutions and schools – together, these individuals played a crucial role in bringing it to the national artistic forefront.

# THE BENGAL SCHOOL OF ART AND *NIHONGA*

## *SWADESHI* AND THE BENGAL SCHOOL OF ART

*Swadeshi* was a movement aimed at achieving Indian self-sufficiency. Around the turn of the twentieth century, it gained significance in India, especially with the British government's 1905 partition of Bengal in an attempt to quell growing discontent toward the British government and a desire for Indian autonomy. *Swadeshi* encompassed both economic and cultural aspects. Adherents boycotted foreign-made, especially British-made, goods, and advocated for the revival of Indian production for Indians. Later adopted and continued by Mohandas Gandhi (also known as Mahatma Gandhi), who is best known for leading the nonviolent campaign for self-reliant Indian rule from the British, *swadeshi* grew into the larger Indian independence movement.

The economic and cultural facets of *swadeshi* are fundamentally intertwined, especially in relation to the realm of art. In his 1913 book, *Art and Swadeshi*, Ananda Coomaraswamy, a Sri Lankan historian and philosopher of Indian art, laments "vulgarized" India's "loss of beauty," exemplified through Indian shops filled with "every kind of imitation of the productions of European commerce" rather than "the evidences of Indian invention" such as muslins or silks.<sup>33</sup> The loss of true traditional arts and crafts, those created for Indians rather than for European export, resulted in both economic and spiritual losses for all Indians, but especially those involved directly involved in creating them. For instance, by favoring English woven cottons instead of Indian-designed cloths, not only is "the weaver's livelihood" gone but "hand-made and individually designed

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<sup>33</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi* (Madras: Ganesh & Co Publishers, 1912), 2-4.

materials” have been replaced by inferior material made by “child-labor and long hours of work under mechanical and unhealthy conditions.”<sup>34</sup>

The Bengal School of Art, an art movement started and led by Abanindranath Tagore, was strongly associated with and influenced by *swadeshi*. It first arose as a reaction against the imported academic styles taught in British-run art schools but was also supported by Western actors such as Havell. Indian art historian R. Siva Kumar has raised doubts regarding whether the Bengal School of Art can be truly classified as a singular art movement. He argues that earlier art historians tended to categorize Indian artists based on genealogies of apprenticeship rather than focusing on their “individual styles, worldviews, and perspectives on art practices.”<sup>35</sup> However, for the purposes of this thesis, which centers on pioneering artists such as Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose, this perspective is not as relevant because they shared similar ideas about the essence of Indian art and are without a doubt, tied to the Bengal School of Art.

In its early days, the Bengal School artists focused Mughal art, as shown through Tagore’s *The Last Moments of Shah Jahan* (Figure 1). However, Mughal art ultimately was founding lacking and unable to be the basis of a new national Indian style due to its insufficient focus on human emotion. In *The Last Moments of Shah Jahan*, Tagore meticulously emulates the fine detailing characteristic of Mughal art as seen in the *pietra dura*, the decorative pattern stonework motifs, on the architecture in the composition. At the cusp of the twentieth century, Tagore and other *swadeshi* artists also depicted romantic episodes in Indian history. These scenes a sense of historical nostalgia to develop a new

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<sup>34</sup> Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, 5.

<sup>35</sup> R. Siva Kumar, “All the Shared Experiences of the Lived World II: Interview with R. Siva Kumar,” interview by Parvez Kabir, *Humanities Underground*, 2013.

national identity based on India without the West. Furthermore, in this piece and in other paintings from his Mughal period, Tagore also adheres to the miniature scale of Mughal art. *The Last Moments of Shah Jahan* was displayed in the Delhi Durbar, a British-organized Indian imperial-style assembly, in 1903, resulting in Tagore's first nationwide publicity. Tagore received critical praise for this painting, with British scholar and art historian, Percy Brown, writing that "the foreshortening of the head of the figure [of Shah Jahan] was one of the most striking parts of the picture" and "the delicate colouring and soft effect of the whole composition was most pleasing."<sup>36</sup> Despite this, ultimately Tagore felt that Mughal art was insufficient in developing a new national Indian art. *Swadeshi* never garnered the mass support of Muslims, and its leaders made few efforts for Hindu-Muslim harmony. Thus, many contemporary artists and critics who interpreted the *swadeshi* doctrine strictly viewed the Mughals, who were Muslim, as outsiders and thus not truly Indian.<sup>37</sup> In addition, Mughal art was perceived as lacking human emotion whereas Tagore actively sought to encapsulate the feeling of life in his paintings. Later in his career, the emphasis on life and spirit would come to be the reoccurring theme in Tagore's art and would be realized with the help of new Japanese experimental techniques.<sup>38</sup>

## OKAKURA KAZUKO'S VISIT TO INDIA

During his lifetime, Okakura Kazuko was celebrated as "the foremost living authority on Oriental Archaeology and Art" by his contemporaries.<sup>39</sup> In his youth, the Japanese government selected and sent Okakura to the United States as a member of the

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<sup>36</sup> Percy Brown, *Indian Art at Delhi*, ed. George Watt (Calcutta: Government Printing Press, 1903), 458.

<sup>37</sup> Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, 285.

<sup>38</sup> Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, 288.

<sup>39</sup> Sister Nivedita, "Introduction" in *The Ideals of the East* (London: John Murray, 1905), ix.

Imperial Art Commission in 1886. As a member of this delegation, Okakura studied the art and art history of the United States and Western Europe – part of the Meiji government’s agenda to modernize Japan through art. When Okakura returned to Japan, he helped found the Tokyo School of Fine Arts in 1887 and was appointed its director in 1890. Despite his exposure to Western art and his studying of European painting and aesthetics, Okakura, alongside Fenollosa, became a vocal proponent of returning to a traditional Japanese style of painting, *nihonga*, in opposition to the Meiji government’s ambition of “wholesale Westernization.”<sup>40</sup>

Okakura viewed the European art that the Japanese government tried to teach and replicate as outdated and overly academic. For instance, he felt the Western art that had reached Japan was from a period prior to contemporary Western modernity; the artworks that Japanese artists imitated were from a time period “before Delacroix had uplifted the veil of hardened academic chiaroscuro” and “before Millet and the Barbizons brought their message of light and colour,” and thus, Japanese art could not be propelled into modernity if it was based on the “lowest ebb” of Western art.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, Okakura understood modernist European art as incompatible with the “active individualism of Meiji, teeming with life in other cycles of thought.”<sup>42</sup> The only solution was to look to models from ancient Japan. In 1884, as a part of a committee created by the Ministry of Education, Okakura and Fenollosa, successfully argued for brushes to replace pencils altogether as the instrument for students to use in drawing classes.<sup>43</sup> This shift was significant as brushes are

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<sup>40</sup> Ashby, *Art Nouveau*, 153.

<sup>41</sup> Kazuko Okakura. *The Ideals of the East* (London: John Murray, 1905), 226.

<sup>42</sup> Okakura, *The Ideals of the East*, 227.

<sup>43</sup> Toshio Watanabe. “Japanese Imperial Architecture: From Thomas Roger Smith to Ito Chuta.” in



traditionally used in Japanese calligraphy and painting whereas pencils are a Western import. Five years later in 1889, when the Tokyo School of Fine Arts opened its doors to students, oil painting, another Western import, was nowhere to be found in the curriculum. The lack of oil painting was a complete departure from earlier when the Japanese government was formally inviting Western artists to teach at such art institutions. Under Okakura's directorship, the Tokyo School of Fine Arts did not offer any classes related to Western art. The emphasis on traditional Japanese forms even extended beyond art and the materials directly necessary to create it; the mandatory school uniform for students was based on the uniforms of eighth-century government officials, indicating the emphasis on Japanese tradition over Western modernity as the new modern image of Japan.

In 1897, however, the balance between Western and Japanese art shifted once again. Okakura resigned from his position at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts along with 39 other prominent artists in protest as European methods started to be incorporated into the school curriculum by the government authorities.<sup>44</sup> Together, this dissenting faction formed the *Nippon Bijutsuin*, an alternative school located in the outskirts of Tokyo where Okakura and his like-minded colleagues and students continued their dedication to renationalizing Japanese art. A few years later, in 1902, Okakura visited India as the guest of Surendranath Tagore, the nephew of the poet Rabindranath Tagore. Okakura's journey to India was facilitated with the help of Margaret E. Noble, more commonly known as Sister Nivedita, and Josephine MacLeod, Irish and American disciples of Swami Vivekananda, an

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*Challenging Past and Present: The Metamorphosis of Nineteenth-Century Japanese Art*, ed. Ellen P. Conant (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 246.

<sup>44</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian Art'*, 168.

Indian Hindu monk, philosopher, and spiritual leader.<sup>45</sup> This trip to Calcutta was pivotal for Okakura's later development of theories of Asian unity (what is known as Pan-Asianism) and furthering his corresponding ambitions of returning to traditional Japanese styles of art and developing a new Japanese and Asian identity.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, Okakura's embrace of the traditions of Japanese art while simultaneously advocating for the modernization of both painting and Japan as a nation has distinct parallels with Vivekananda's writings of inviting the future while maintaining and keeping true to older traditions.<sup>47</sup>

For the Tagores and the Indian artists associated with them through the Bengal School of Art, Okakura's initial visit was more important for its Japanese nationalist ideology rather than its artistic inspiration. Specific artistic exchanges would be more important in later interactions between the *nihonga* artists in Okakura's camp and the Indian artists in the Bengal School of Art. Even before Okakura's stay with the Tagores in India, Japan was considered to be an important learning center by proponents of *swadeshi*. Many Indian artists and thinkers were impressed by how Japan managed to take the 'best' aspects of Western civilization and incorporate them to their own advantage.<sup>48</sup> During his trip to India, Okakura was on the cusp of publishing his book *The Ideals of the East* (1903), which promoted a new Asia and introduced a new conversation about Orientalism. Okakura believed in "Asia [as] one;" a superior Asia, not one of golden antiquity but a modern, contemporary Asia that could oppose the materialism of Western colonialism

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<sup>45</sup> Shigemi Inaga, "Okakura Kakuzo's Nostalgic Journey to India and the Invention of Asia" in *Nostalgic Journeys: Literary Pilgrimages between Japan and the West*, ed. Susan Fisher (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2001), 120.

<sup>46</sup> Inaga, "Okakura Kakuzo's Nostalgic Journey," 121.

<sup>47</sup> Inaga, "Okakura Kakuzo's Nostalgic Journey," 121.

<sup>48</sup> Ramananda Chatterjee, *Modern Review* 1 (1907): 502.

through its spirituality and integration.<sup>49</sup> The Pan-Asianism to be described in *The Ideals of the East* was initially very appealing to the Bengal School of Art and its associates because it was based on Okakura's centering of India, the birthplace of Buddhism, as the spiritual capital of Asia. According to Okakura, "Buddhism is growth," and that growth toward modernity which he and other like-minded individuals sought originated in India, then spread to China, Japan, and eventually the rest of Asia. For Asia to continue to grow and modernize in opposition to the materialistic culture of modern Europe, one must first understand the origins of that growth and trace it back to India.<sup>50</sup> This ideology directly challenged the prevailing British narrative that suggested Indian art history had its origins in ancient Greece and Rome. Instead, Okakura's Pan-Asianism repositioned the center of Indian art as well as the significance of Indian religion and philosophy within Asia in India.<sup>51</sup>

## THE CONTROVERSIES OF PAN-ASIANISM

Pan-Asianism is an extremely controversial ideology today due to its associations with Japanese Imperialism in Asia prior to and during World War II.<sup>52</sup> However, even when it was first formulated during Okakura's lifetime, many contemporary individuals also felt uneasy with its implications, including Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore's poet

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<sup>49</sup> Okakura, *The Ideals of the East*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> Okakura, *The Ideals of the East*, 79.

<sup>51</sup> Vincent Smith and other British historians frequently attributed the development of 'fine art' in India to European origins. For instance, the Buddhist sculptures found in Gandhara were often described as having Greco-Roman features. There was a significant debate over the origins of Gandharan art, with some arguing that it reflected the superiority of Western art, while others believed it demonstrated the influence of Indian styles on foreign craftsmen who visited the region (Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian Art,'* 169, 176).

<sup>52</sup> Many of Okakura's writings were published in English, written with a Western audience in mind. His aim was to elevate Japan's standing in the West. However, even so, Pan-Asianism ideology was known in Japan because other intellectuals and political leaders shared similar views.

uncle, who was noted to be close friends with Okakura. As mentioned earlier, Pan-Asianism did initially resonate with the Tagores and other Indian intellectuals, but, for both Rabindranath and Abanindranath, this interest eventually waned as they both became more and more withdrawn from the *swadeshi* movement.<sup>53</sup>

Even though Okakura ideologically advocates for a united Asia, he ultimately only acknowledges three “mighty civilizations” in his writings, India, China, and implicitly, Japan, thus ignoring the many other nations on the continent.<sup>54</sup> Many Japanese nationalist and imperialist groups, such as the Black Dragon Society, took their version of Pan-Asianism a step even further, focusing only on Japanese supremacy. Furthermore, while Okakura praises India and China for their contributions to Asian culture – India as the birthplace of Buddhism and its association with faith and China for its Confucian values and “intellectual hospitality” – he argues that they are no longer capable of being leaders in Asia.<sup>55</sup> Both India and China have been weakened from their lack of self-agency due to colonialism and other powers ruling the respective nations. India and China serve as the origin of many values that Okakura believes necessary to build a modern Asia in opposition to the West. However, only Japan could uniquely synthesize the wealth of Asian knowledge and ideas since it had never been ruled by another nation, retaining sovereignty for centuries. Okakura also justifies Japan’s claim to Asian leadership through its peoples’ mixed bloodlines which allows Japan to “mirror the whole of Asian consciousness.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Rustom Bharucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 54.

<sup>54</sup> Okakura, *The Ideals of the East*, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Okakura, *The Ideals of the East*, 2.

<sup>56</sup> Okakura, *The Ideals of the East*, 5.

Pan-Asianism sometimes served as a basis for justifying Japanese imperialism as an act of love for the sake of Asian autonomy. World War II was viewed by some Japanese as a dual-purposed war, one simultaneously fought to combat Western aggression in Asia and to liberate Asia from the West. For instance, the Japanese government partially embodied this philosophy when it annexed Korea in 1910 through the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty. However, like other Japanese scholars, politicians, and intellectuals, Okakura also believed that Korea's annexation was warranted for historical reasons, as he states that "Korea was originally a Japanese province."<sup>57</sup> In reality, Korea is acknowledged by most world history scholars as having its own unique culture and history as an independent nation. During the period of annexation and subsequent war, the Japanese government attempted to distinguish its own imperialism from that of the West by promoting an ideology that centered on the desire to improve Korea and the Korean people by incorporating them into Japanese culture. This 'assimilationist' strategy was designed to make Koreans more 'Japanese,' and thus, according to the Japanese government, more civilized and advanced. Unfortunately, under Japanese colonial rule, Koreans faced many forms of exploitation, abuse, and cultural suppression such as forced labor, sexual slavery, medical experimentation, and the erasure of the Korean language and history in schools. Because of this oppression, the idea of liberating other Asian nations from the West through war is particularly reviled and remains a source of contention in both Japan and Korea.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Kazuko Okakura, *The Awakening of Japan* (New York: The Century Co, 1905), 123.

<sup>58</sup> Kojin Karatani and Seiji M. Leppit, "The Discursive Space of Modern Japan," *Boundary 2* 18, no. 3 (1991): 205

## BENGALI-JAPANESE CROSS-POLLINATION: *MOROTAI* AND BUDDHISM

After Okakura returned to Japan, he continued his personal relationship with the Tagores by sending two of his students, Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso to Calcutta the next year to stay again with the Tagore family in late 1902 or early 1903.<sup>59</sup> During this time, Abanindranath Tagore and his own students such as Nandalal Bose learned about Japanese art techniques and concepts through direct observation of Yokoyama and Hishida's work as well as through the Japanese prints they brought to India. These techniques and concepts included Japanese brushwork, Japanese flower and other nature paintings, and the artists' monochromic palette and overall sparing use of color.

Abanindranath Tagore, his painter brother, Gaganendranath Tagore, and their students did experiment with Japanese techniques and concepts through studies (Figure 2, Figure 3). These two studies are of bamboo, the most basic of the four paragons of *sumi-e*, also known as Chinese black ink painting, and adhere to the simplicity of *sumi-e* through the sole usage of black ink and the purposeful composition that takes advantage of white space.<sup>60</sup>

However, none of these methods were as influential as the experimental style of water-dripping known as *morotai*. *Morotai* is a technique characterized by "brushing and rinsing the paper with water" and similar techniques were used earlier by *ukiyo-e* artists who were the main focal point of Western Japonisme.<sup>61</sup> However, *morotai* was different because it was a deliberate attempt by *nihonga* artists to create dimensionality and perspective in

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<sup>59</sup> Ashby, *Art Nouveau*, 153.

<sup>60</sup> The other subjects in *sumi-e* are orchid, plum, and pine. Bamboo is the simplest since it contains all the basic strokes.

<sup>61</sup> Ashby, *Art Nouveau*, 153.

Japanese painting, which at the time was widely considered to be flat due to its characterizing strong outlines, without any reliance on Western scientific perspective or chiaroscuro shading. This ambition can be seen in Hishida's *Autumn Landscape with Colored Leaves* (Figure 4) where the clouds in the sky fade into the oranges of the autumn leaves which in turn seamlessly blend into the blacks and greys of the rocky mountain. By saturating paper or silk with water, *morotai* results in washed-out color fields without edges, hence it also sometimes being referred to as a the 'wash' technique. *Morotai* is not a traditional Japanese technique, and it fell out of style even during Yokoyama and Hishida's own artistic careers. It was eventually seen by other Japanese artists as being too Westernized and likened to European chiaroscuro with its lack of bold outlines and adaptation by European avant-garde artists.<sup>62</sup> Despite this, Tagore readily incorporated *morotai* and even took it a step further by submerging the entire paper in water in lieu of brush application.<sup>63</sup> Tagore viewed the translucent quality and gentle luminosity resulting from this altered technique as a material manifestation of nationalist sentiments at the climax of the *swadeshi* movement.<sup>64</sup> One can see Tagore's *morotai* technique, emphasizing India's sanctity, and thus the noble and spiritual endeavor of the independence movement, in his most famous painting relating to the *swadeshi* movement, *Bharat Mata* (Figure 5), a four-armed goddess representing Mother India. In *Bharat Mata*, the background is a luminous, yet hazy yellow blending into a more muted green of the earth. There is no clear

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<sup>62</sup> Shigemi Inaga, "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus in the First Half of the Twentieth Century (1901–1945): Rabindranath Tagore, Arai Kanpō, and Nandalal Bose," *Japan Review*, no. 21 (2009): 152; John M. Rosenfield, "Western Style Painting in the Early Meiji Period and Its Critics." In *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*, ed. Donald H. Shively (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 204.

<sup>63</sup> Aida Yuen Wong. "Landscapes of Nandalal Bose (1882–1966): Japanism, Nationalism And Populism In Modern India" in *Okakura Tenshin and Pan-Asianism: Shadows of the Past*, ed. Brij Tankha (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2009), 96.

<sup>64</sup> Wong, "Landscapes of Nandalal Bose," 96.

delineation of when the sky and the ground meet and end which is common in other paintings from the Bengal School other than a faint, watery line that does not go across the entire horizon.

There are scholars who question the impact of Yokoyama and Hishida's stay and whether their artistic technique can even be considered to have affected Abanindranath Tagore's subsequent work. As mentioned earlier, Tagore did not exactly replicate Yokoyama and Hishida's *morotai*. Furthermore, the haziness of Tagore's atmospheric paintings bears some resemblance to European techniques of glazing and scumbling.<sup>65</sup> Even though debates about the extent of the Japanese artists' influence on Abanindranath Tagore and on the Bengal School of Art persist, their actual presence in India had an undeniable impact. At the very least, their techniques and ideas became known and recognized by artists in the Bengal School of Art. Furthermore, there are examples of Japanese artists who were invited to India to teach specifically Japanese art techniques. A few years later in 1906, at the request of Rabindranath Tagore, Okakura sent a third Japanese painter, Katsuta Yoshio (also known as Katsuta Shokin), to Calcutta. Katsuta not only continued the cross-fertilization of artistic techniques and ideas in the Tagores' sphere of influence, but he also served as a staff member at the Government School of Art, teaching the Indian teachers there about Japanese art techniques. Katsuta was a well-known *nihonga* artist prior to his travels to India.

In return, Japanese artists were exposed to the iconography of Buddhism and Hinduism in India. Yokoyama and Hishida made copies of Buddhist divinities from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and incorporated these depictions of deities into their

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<sup>65</sup> Bharucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin*, 47.



paintings as exemplified in Hishida's *Sarasvati* (Figure 6) and Yokoyama's *Indo Shugojin* (Figure 7).<sup>66</sup> The common heritage of Buddhism in both India and Japan created a link between the two cultures. Furthermore, the Japanese saw the relocation of the heart of Buddhism from China to India as a means of achieving their own colonial aspirations in Asia. By diminishing China's role in Asian power, this repositioning served an ideological purpose for Japan.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, during their time in India, Yokoyama and Hishida painted alongside Abanindranath Tagore, resulting in a mutual integration of each other's styles and the blurring of Indian and Japanese techniques and iconography into what they considered to be the beginnings of a modern, cohesive, Asian art.

The parallels between the artworks of Tagore, Yokoyama, and Hishida produced during this time of exchange are obvious. The *morotai* wash, despite the different treatments of the Japanese artists' applied brush and Tagore's complete submersion, is evident through the hazy, dream-like, otherworldly background of Tagore's *The Banished Yaksha of Kalidasa's 'Meghaduta'* (Figure 8), or in Tissarakshita's hair as it blends into her translucent veil in *Tissarakshita, Queen of Asoka* (Figure 9). Most of the background in *The Banished Yaksha of Kalidasa's 'Meghaduta'* is compositionally empty, but certain areas are highlighted such as the delineation between the black and the grey in the background and foreground which accentuate the image's dream-like, hazy, and melancholy mood in addition to revealing the other central character in the composition – a cloud. Tagore's painting is based on an ancient Indian poem, *Meghaduta*, a story about a *yaksha*, or nature spirit, who has been banished to a remote mountain. In this scene that Tagore has depicted,

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<sup>66</sup> Inaga, "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus," 151.

<sup>67</sup> Ashby, *Art Nouveau*, 153; Inaga. "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus," 151.

the *yaksha* asks a passing cloud to develop a message of love to his wife. The cloud's shape is not clearly defined due to the hazy nature of *morotai*, but the technique is still able to accentuate the cloud's muted whiteness, mirroring the glimmer of hope the cloud provides the *yaksha* in his solitude. Meanwhile, the surrounding darkness conveys the *yaksha's* longing for his love. In contrast, *morotai* is not present in the background of *Tissarakshita, Queen of Asoka*, but there are other indications of Japanese art techniques such as the stylized branches of the bodhi tree and the linear shape of Tissarakshita's eyebrows.<sup>68</sup> During their time in India, the Tagores commissioned Yokoyama and Hishida to paint Indian subjects, and once they returned to Japan, Indian motifs and content continued to permeate their work. For example, in *Floating Lanterns* (Figure 10), Yokoyama depicts three Indian women on the banks of the sacred Indian river, the Ganges, while the leaves of the trees above their heads are rendered in traditional Japanese style. By blending elements Indian Buddhist and Hindu drawings and paintings with their own artistic traditions, these artists all sought to create a new modern Asian style.

## THE CONTINUATION OF JAPANESE INSPIRATION IN BENGAL

Though Abanindranath Tagore's experimentation with brush painting with Chinese ink did not remain in his repertoire past his direct exposure to Japanese painters and their techniques, *morotai* did. Tagore was drawn to the watery effects of the 'wash' technique and how it could abstractly convey mood and emotion compared to realism or naturalism. 'Wash' became one of the pillars in his principles of painting: *dhauta, bighattita, lanchchita*,

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<sup>68</sup> Ashby, *Art Nouveau*, 153.

and *ranjita* (washing, analyzing, drawing, and coloring).<sup>69</sup> The centrality of *bhava*, an emotional and spiritual quality that Tagore and his followers, including his student, Nandalal Bose, believed should characterize modern Indian art, was amplified with the introduction of the ‘wash’ technique as a means of achieving it. Over time, this emphasis on *bhava* became so essential it resulted in the criticism of Mughal art as being insufficient – marking a departure from the earlier stance of Indian art proponents who cited Mughal art as evidence of the value and worthiness of Indian art as a fine art.<sup>70</sup>

Until the 1920s, works by the Bengal School of Art painters were largely identifiable by the ‘wash’ technique as its emblematic style. Eventually, however, newer art techniques and styles did develop and the Bengal School of Art’s original ideological ties to *swadeshi* and Indian nationalism also became less direct. Many paintings that incorporated the ‘wash’ technique became important in the wider context of Indian identity and nationalism in the decade of the Japanese artists’ visits. The most obvious and direct example is Tagore’s *Bharat Mata*, which as introduced earlier, was a direct product of Tagore’s involvement in the anti-partition *swadeshi*. In 1904 and 1905, the painting was reproduced on silk banners and briefly used for *swadeshi* fund-raising processions. Even though through this painting, Tagore became known as a ‘nationalist artist,’ he ultimately started to distance himself and his art from *swadeshi* as he became increasingly disillusioned with the violence associated with the movement. For instance, Tagore’s use of color in painting often ran contradictory to the *swadeshi* values of promoting local and indigenous products

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<sup>69</sup> Abanindranath Tagore, “Likeness” in *Abanindranath Tagore* (Calcutta: Indian Society of Oriental Art, 1987), 10.

<sup>70</sup> Natasha Eaton, “‘Swadeshi’ Color: Artistic Production and Indian Nationalism, ca. 1905-ca. 1947,” *The Art Bulletin* 95, no. 4 (2013): 624.

in favor of foreign-made goods since he favored foreign, imported colors such as Prussian blue over vernacular muted earthy hues.<sup>71</sup> Some scholars have even argued that the 'wash' technique in *Bharat Mata* may indicate Tagore's deliberate detachment from political activism.<sup>72</sup> With the blurred wash, the depiction of the Indian nation, Mother India, is transformed from a representation of reality to one of myth, allegory, and spiritual revelation, elevating the ideal of the nation above the constraints of everyday life.

One of Tagore's notable pupils, Nandalal Bose, joined Tagore at the Government School of Art in Calcutta in 1905 and became formally became Tagore's student a year later in 1906. Initially, Bose adopted his teacher's fascination with what the 'wash' technique had to offer. Like his teacher, Bose was interested in *morotai* because it was an avenue through which he could break away from the styles of Western academic art emphasized in the Indian art school curriculum. For instance, Bose's painting, *Sati* (Figure 11), is a perfect example of his implementation of his teacher's style and depicts either the goddess Sita or Sati and became a well-known example and visual representation of the Hindu ideal of womanhood and self-sacrifice as an expression of love and glory.<sup>73</sup> In Hindu mythology, both Sita and Sati are revered for their purity and loyalty, as they underwent great pain and sacrifice in fires as a symbol of their devotion to their husbands. In Bose's depiction of Sati, he places a strong emphasis on the central figure and her pose of piety. The background serves as an empty canvas except for the abstracted flames in front of Sita or Sati, which direct the viewer's attention back to her. This deliberate use of negative space accentuates

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<sup>71</sup> Nandalal Bose, *Vision and Creation* (Calcutta: Visa-Bharati, 1999), 130.

<sup>72</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian Art,'* 260; Inaga, "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus," 154.

<sup>73</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian Art,'* 286.

the central figure, alludes to her supernaturalness, and highlights her spiritual significance in the composition. Furthermore, Bose also developed relationships with Yokoyama and Hoshida during their travels to India, painting and experimenting alongside them. Bose was in return invited to Japan as Yokoyama's guest in 1924 and later again four years later in 1928.<sup>74</sup>

## NANDALAL BOSE: LINE

Eventually, Bose forged his own artistic paths and introduced fresh perspectives to the realm of avant-garde Indian art. He introduced structure in contrast to Tagore's freeform experimentation and incorporated additional Japanese art techniques into his art after his travels to Japan. Even while he was still Tagore's student, Bose's approach to creating art was markedly different from his teacher's. Tagore adopted the 'wash' technique from Yokoyama and Hishida without significant changes other than submerging the paper in water rather than directly applying water to the paper, being almost complacent with staying in this experimental stage. In contrast, Bose was more interested in how he could formalize, give structure to the technique, and incorporate 'Indian-ness.' For instance, Bose's work often featured thicker decorative lines in addition to the haziness of *morotai*, showing that he valued drawing as the basis for his art, reflecting his colonial art school training which featured geometry as the foundation for drawing.<sup>75</sup> The emphasis on line can be seen through his paintings, *Agnideva, The Fire God* (Figure 12) and *Yudhishthira* (Figure 13). In *Agnideva, The Fire God*, Bose uses different line weights,

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<sup>74</sup> Amita Kini-Singh, "Japanese Inspiration in the Art of Nandalal Bose," *South Asia Research* 42, no. 3 (2022): 352.

<sup>75</sup> Kini-Singh, "Japanese Inspiration in the Art of Nandalal Bose," 345.

depending on whether the line is outlining Agnideva's general form, details in Agnideva's jewelry, folds in Agnideva's clothes, the fire signifying his godliness, or the ram he is riding. In addition, the painting almost looks print-like, perhaps signaling Bose's later pioneering work in introducing print techniques to Indian fine art. Likewise, in *Yudhishthira*, Bose again uses sharp, clear lines to outline Yudhishthira, his clothing and jewelry as well as secondary figures such as Yudhishthira's dog and the moon behind his head. Most notably in this painting, Bose's mastery of combining line with *morotai* is obvious where Yudhishthira's legs meet a white cloud or mist at the bottom of the composition. There, the cloud is thinly outlined with slight variations in weight in some areas while in others, the white wash directly fades into Yudhishthira's red clothing. This blend of line and wash gives weight and depth to the cloud and thus the overall composition while still preserving the haziness and ambiance associated with *morotai*. Contrast this with Tagore's *Bharat Mata*, which relatively has less focus on line and looks comparatively washed out and imprecise.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, whereas Tagore used brighter foreign paints and colors in his work, Bose was interested in adhering to the Indian color traditions of earthy tones and hues which can also be seen in *Agnideva, The Fire God* where the entire painting is monochromatic brown and the warmer rusty colors in *Yudhishthira*.

## NANDALAL BOSE: SCALE

In 1919, Bose formally broke with his teacher and mentor, Abanindranath Tagore, and joined Rabindranath Tagore at Kala Bhavan, the College of Fine Arts and Crafts where Bose introduced a new curriculum based on folk and ancient art focusing on utility. Bose

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<sup>76</sup> Asok Mitra, "Nandalal Bose" in *Nandalal Bose: A Collection of Essays, Centenary Volume* ed. R.L. Bartholomew and A. Mukhopadhyay (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1983), 19.

experimented more with linear forms and ornamentation while also incorporating more dynamic and naturalistic content notably on a larger scale.<sup>77</sup> Though Tagore's work departed from its original roots in Mughal art, it had still maintained an intimate format. In contrast, Bose worked on larger-scale works, cultivating his technique in his frescos at Santiniketan, where Rabindranath Tagore had founded Visva Bharati University of which Kala Bhavan was a part. Bose's interest in monumental-sized art was a result of his exposure to these types of works in both India and Japan. His interest was partly inspired and influenced by Rabindranath Tagore's 1916 visit to Japan. While there, Tagore had been amazed by the room-encompassing Japanese screens and scrolls.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, Bose's interest was also shaped by his own experiences through earlier studies in 1909 of classical Indian Buddhist art in the Ajanta Cave murals in Aurangabad, India. In addition, during his second visit to Japan in 1928, he saw the murals in the Golden Hall of Horyuji Temple.<sup>79</sup> The Ajanta Cave murals were also important for Japanese artists and their art, including Kanpo Arai, a Japanese artist who also traveled to India at the invitation of the Tagores in 1916 and worked with Bose. Kanpo's expedition to India was sponsored by the Japanese government through politicians and professors of the state-run Tokyo Imperial University. He was explicitly instructed to make copies of the Ajanta Cave murals alongside other Japanese artists with permission from the local Indian government.<sup>80</sup> According to Kanpo's diary, the cave conditions were rough, with the air smelling like dung, the caves themselves being inhabited by bats.<sup>81</sup> Most worrisomely, the surrounding area was frequented by

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<sup>77</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian Art,'* 304, 314.

<sup>78</sup> Kini-Singh, "Japanese Inspiration in the Art of Nandalal Bose," 348.

<sup>79</sup> Kini-Singh, "Japanese Inspiration in the Art of Nandalal Bose," 349; Wong, "Landscapes of Nandalal Bose," 98.

<sup>80</sup> Inaga, "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus," 161.

<sup>81</sup> Inaga, "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus," 162.

dangerous animals such as wild boars, snakes, tigers, and jaguars. Despite these tribulations, or perhaps because of them, Kanpo was strongly moved by the spirituality of the murals, through both the lore of the murals' original artists cutting off their hands when they had finished, signifying its completeness as well as his own experience with copying the paintings. Upon Kanpo's return to Japan, Japanese art historians drew comparisons between the Ajanta paintings and Japanese ancient paintings, thus finding merit in studying ancient Indian art in order to better understand Japanese art.

Indian artists were also strongly inspired by the Ajanta Cave paintings, which date to the second century BCE. They are considered to be one of the greatest picture galleries from antiquity alongside the frescoes of Pompeii, the murals of Livia's Garden House, and the encaustic wax portraits of the Egyptian Fayyum. The paintings tell the story of the lives of Buddha through a three-dimensional style, showcasing a mastery of shadow and perspective in addition to featuring strong colors and bold outlines.<sup>82</sup> Abanindranath Tagore himself was guided by these paintings through his works' emphasis on portraying India's past and nostalgia for a time before colonialism, but the Ajanta paintings' style is still put aside in favor of the hazy 'wash.' In contrast, Bose's interest in the Ajanta Cave paintings and murals more broadly was differently through his adoption of the cave paintings' strong outlines. However, Bose's fascination with murals is also significant because it signaled a change in the materiality of Indian art in addition to his willingness to embrace the Japanese philosophy of mastering and incorporating the styles and techniques of other civilizations. Whereas Abanindranath Tagore's 'wash' technique centered on

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<sup>82</sup> Partha Mitter, Parul Dave Mukherji, and Rakhee Balaram, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Indian Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2022), 38.



watercolor on paper, the resurgence of murals necessitated the use of tempera. As the principal of Kala Bhavan, Bose directed the curriculum towards exploring the impasto effects of tempera in lieu of *morotai*, marking a continuing fracturing within the Bengal School that had started with his own departure from the movement's recognizable style.<sup>83</sup>

## NANDALAL BOSE: PRINT

During his visits to Japan, Bose also had the chance to view the original works of earlier famous Japanese artists dating back to the fourteenth century such as Tawaraya Sotatsu as well as from the beginning of the nineteenth century such as Katsushika Hokusai, better known simply as Hokusai.<sup>84</sup> Bose was inspired by these works, specifically by the Japanese masters' mastery of formal drawing, signaling their deep understanding of their subjects' physicality and essence. Bose had already been familiar with the practice of draughtsmanship through various other means. As Tagore's student, he had observed Yokoyama and Hishida's routines of sketching their natural surroundings and even tracing these images on their palms when art materials were not readily available. Additionally, his familiarity with the meticulous process of copying paintings from the Ajanta Caves further contributed to his exposure to the power of drawing. After joining Rabindranath Tagore at Kala Bhavan, Bose kept a sketchbook, not for preliminary studies of larger works, but to simply document his observations of daily life.<sup>85</sup> Bose's unique focus on the art of drawing and his particular emphasis on lines within his works established him as a pioneer in the use of graphic media in India. He was the first Indian artist to utilize techniques such as

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<sup>83</sup> Mitra, "Nandalal Bose," 19.

<sup>84</sup> Tawaraya was a *ringa* artist; *Ringa* was an Edo period Japanese style characterized by decorative natural motifs such as flowers and landscapes. Hokusai was an *ukiyo-e* artist, best known for his woodblock print series, *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji* (1830-1832).

<sup>85</sup> Kini-Singh, "Japanese Inspiration in the Art of Nandalal Bose," 354.

woodcuts, wood engravings, linocuts, etchings, dry-point, lithography, and cement blocks for creative expression.<sup>86</sup> With this new expertise and plentiful avenues of new experimentation, Bose introduced graphic design to Kala Bhavan's curriculum. Bose shared the *ukiyo-e* prints he had brought back from Japan with his students, which motivated them to create their own prints using Japanese woodcut techniques to depict Indian themes. Over the course of his artistic career, Bose made several noteworthy prints, such as a linocut print commemorating Mahatma Gandhi's Dandi March, a famous act of civil disobedience against the British monopoly on salt in 1930, and another series of linocut prints for Rabindranath Tagore's children's book about the Bengali language, *Sahaj Path*, published in 1937. In this manner, Bose elevated the status of printmaking in India from a means of commercial reproduction to a fine art in its own right.

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<sup>86</sup> Nirmalendu Das, "The Place of Nandalal Bose in Indian Graphic Art" in *Nandalal Bose: A Collection of Essays, Centenary Volume* ed. R.L. Bartholomew and A. Mukhopadhyay (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1983), 83.

# CONCLUSION

## THE LASTING LEGACY OF THE BENGAL SCHOOL OF ART, *NIHONGA*, AND INDO-JAPANESE RELATIONS

By the end of the 1920s, the Bengal School had begun to decline in its relevancy to modern Indian art. In the West, academic art had become obsolete, being replaced by modernism. For instance, Gaganendranath Tagore, who was previously associated with the Bengal School of Art, began his experimentations with cubism in the early 1920s.<sup>87</sup> Thus, there was no longer a need to contrast Western academic art and traditional Asian art. Pan-Asianism was also waning in India, due to the conflicting views and growing wariness of Japanese Imperialism by other Asian actors. Furthermore, some critics argue that Abanindranath Tagore's preoccupation with *morotai* inadvertently caused stagnation within the movement as it standardized art coming out of the Bengal School.<sup>88</sup> The Bengal School was never the sole entity in India during the early twentieth century that attempted to grapple with Indian nationalistic art. However, the Bengal School of Art, with the combination of art forms and techniques from Japanese artists, did manage to be a center for new artistic experimentation and identity reconstruction. The movement was also significant as it played a key role in the development of modern Indian art. The Bengal School of Art was also a part of the broader cultural and political movement in India that sought to reclaim Indian identity and resist British colonialism. Subsequently, the Bengal

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<sup>87</sup> Mitter, Mukherji, Balaram, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Indian Art*, 44.

<sup>88</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian Art'*, 314.

School of Art and its circle of artists also influenced future generations of important Indian artists such as Amrita Sher-Gil, Bireswar Sen, and Jamini Roy.

Similarly, through art, *nihonga* artists also attempted to reconcile a modern Japanese identity in relationship to Japan's stance in comparison to Western powers on the world stage. The movement was a way for Japanese artists to assert their cultural identity in the face of Western art by revitalizing traditional Japanese painting techniques and materials with new modern twists. *Nihonga* art was also closely tied to Japanese nationalism in the same way the Bengal School's art was in India, in addition to many of its associates being involved in political discourse. After World War II, *nihonga* experienced a decline in popularity as Japan industrialized and artists shifted their interest back to Western-style art and other native avant-garde movements such as the Gutai Art Association. However, it is still taught in art institutions in Japan today and has also influenced later artists such as Murakami Takashi, Isamu Noguchi, and other contemporary Japanese artists.<sup>89</sup>

The artistic exchange between Bengali and Japanese artists in the early twentieth century had a profound impact on both parties. Bengali artists adapted the Japanese *morotai* technique, transforming it into their own 'wash' style that became the hallmark of their movement. Similarly, Japanese artists were inspired by the historical and spiritual themes of the Bengal School, incorporating them into their own work. However, the

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<sup>89</sup> Isamu Noguchi was an American artist with Japanese heritage. However, he spent much of his childhood in Japan and his artistic career was heavily influenced by Japanese aesthetics and techniques. Furthermore, Noguchi also worked on many projects in Japan.

exchange of ideas between these artists went beyond art, informing the politics of both countries and their relationship with each other.

Historically, India and Japan have maintained a good relationship with each other, most notably due to each country's culture being strongly shaped by Buddhism. A common interest in Buddhism, specifically in Buddhist art and philosophy, also manifested itself when Okakura and other Japanese artists went to Calcutta in the early twentieth century. The resulting exchanges between the *nihonga* and the Bengal School artists maintain their significance, as demonstrated by the joint international conference on Rabindranath Tagore and Japanese culture held in 2016 by Visva-Bharati University and Reitaku University, commemorating Tagore's visit to Japan a century earlier. This event was celebrated by important political figures from both countries, such as the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the acting Consul General of Japan in Kolkata, Tanaka Yasuhiko, who wrote letters of commemoration. Today, Japan and India still strive to balance nationalist and broader Pan-Asian or transnational aspirations. For the *nihonga* and the Bengal School artists, this tension was a key theme, as they sought to create their own unique national identities, often by building on each other's ideas and commonalities.

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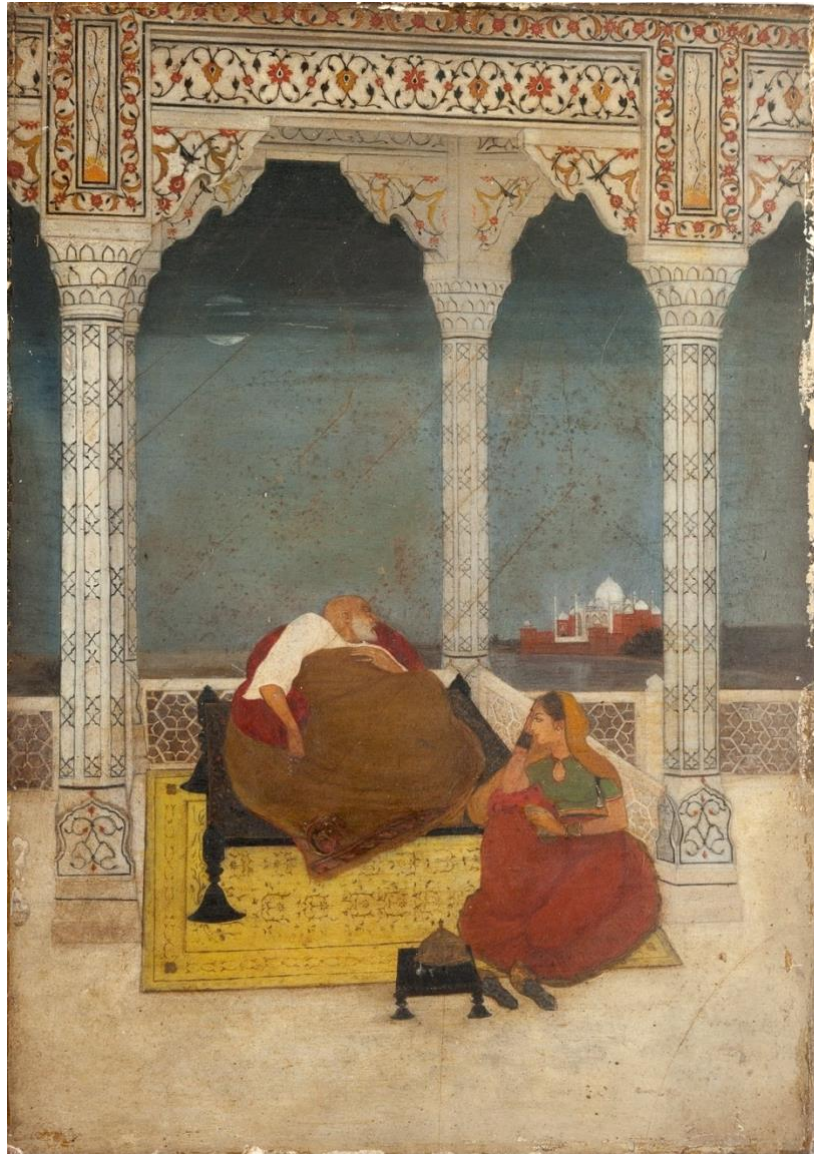


Figure 1 Abanindranath Tagore, 'The Passing of Shah Jahan' (oil on wood, 1902). From the collections of the Rabindra Bharati Society, Kolkata.



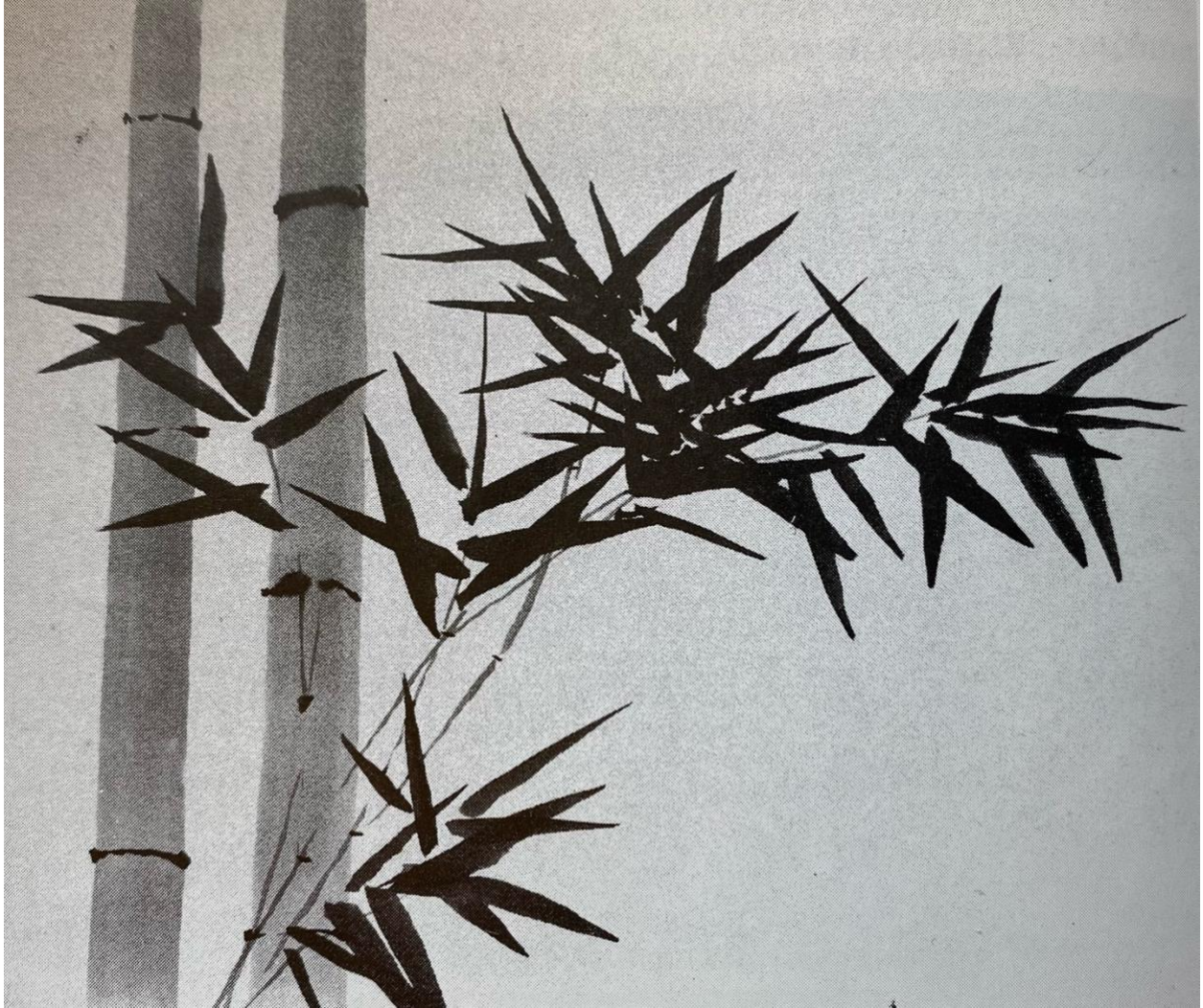


Figure 2 Abanindranath Tagore, 'Bamboo Stalk and Leaves' from his sketch book (watercolor, 1903). Adapted from Partha Mitter's *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922*.





Figure 3 Gaganendranath Tagore, 'Study of Bamboo Leaves' (brush and ink, unknown date). From the collections of the Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata.



Figure 4 Hishida Shunso, 'Autumn Landscape with Colored Leaves' (color on silk, c. 1899). From the collections of the University of California, San Diego.



Figure 5 Abanindranath Tagore, 'Bharat Mata' (watercolor, c. 1905). From the collections of the Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata.





Figure 6 Hishida Shunso, 'Sarasvati' (c. 1903). From a private collection.

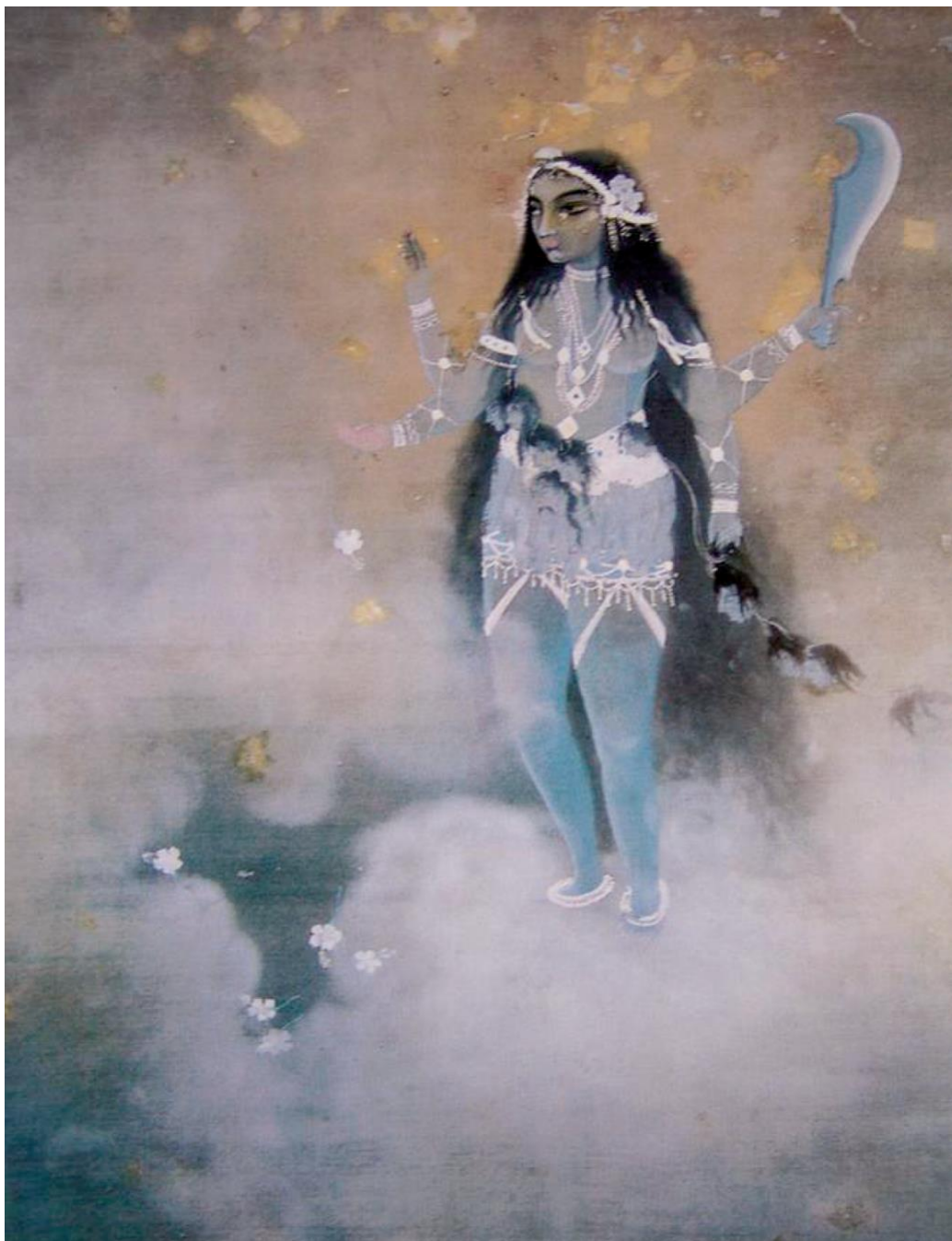


Figure 7 Yokoyama Taikan, 'Indo Shugojin' (c. 1903). Adapted from Shigemi Inaga's "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus in the First Half of the Twentieth Century (1901-1945): Rabindranath Tagore, Arai Kanpo, and Nandalal Bose."



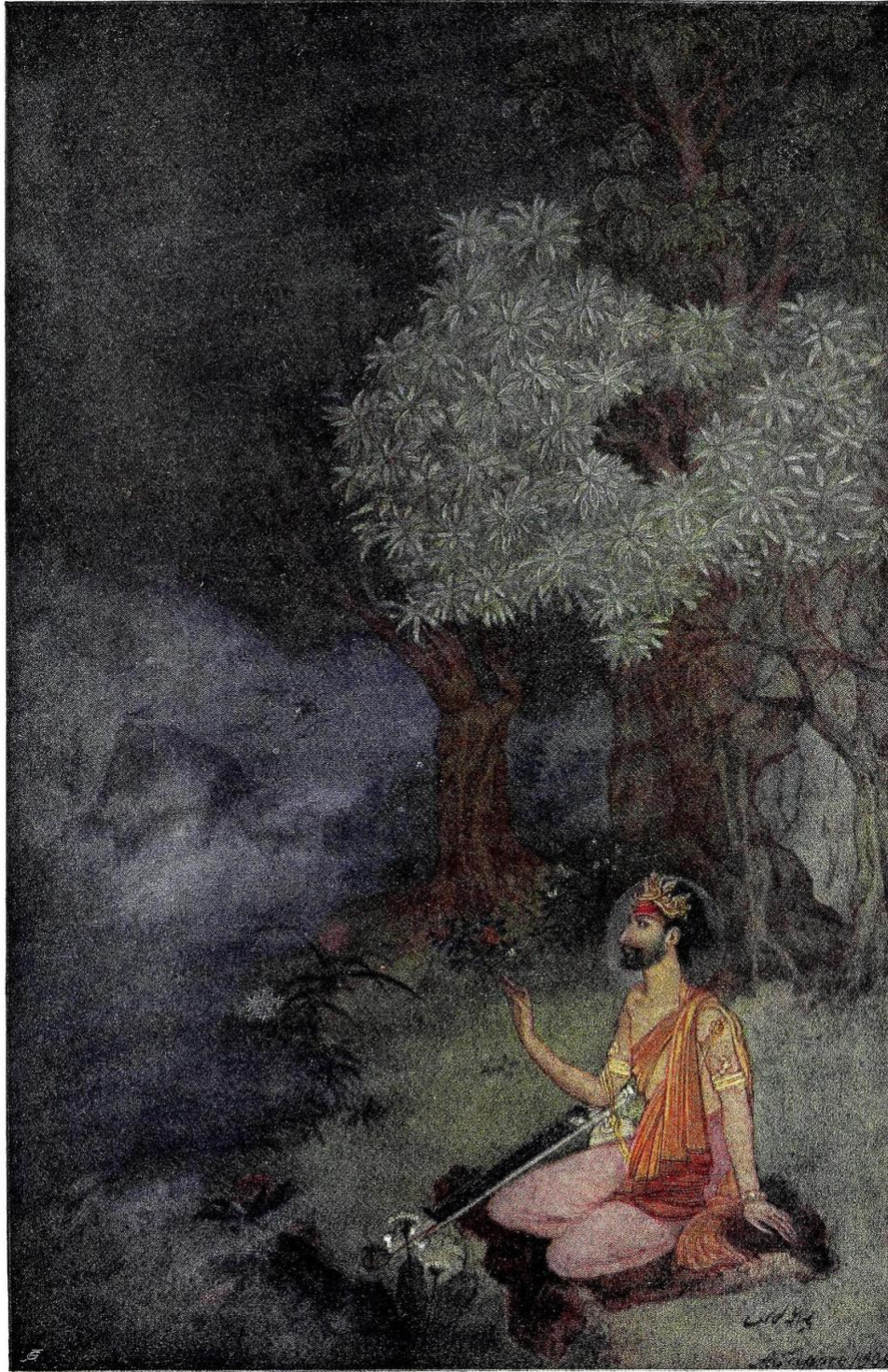


Figure 8 Abanindranath Tagore, 'The Banished Yaksha of Kalidasa's Meghaduta' (watercolor, c. 1904). From the collections of the Rabindra Bharati Society, Kolkata.





Figure 9 Abanindranath Tagore, 'Tissarakshita, Queen of Asoka' (watercolor, c. 1911). From the collections of the Rabindra Bharati Society and the Victoria and Albert Museum.



Figure 10 Yokoyama Taikan, 'Floating Lanterns' (ink on silk, c. 1909). From the collections of the University of Michigan.





Figure 11 Nandalal Bose, 'Sati' (watercolor, c. 1907). From Sotheby's.



Figure 12 Nandalal Bose, 'Agnideva, The Fire God'  
(watercolor, unknown date) From the Wikimedia Commons.



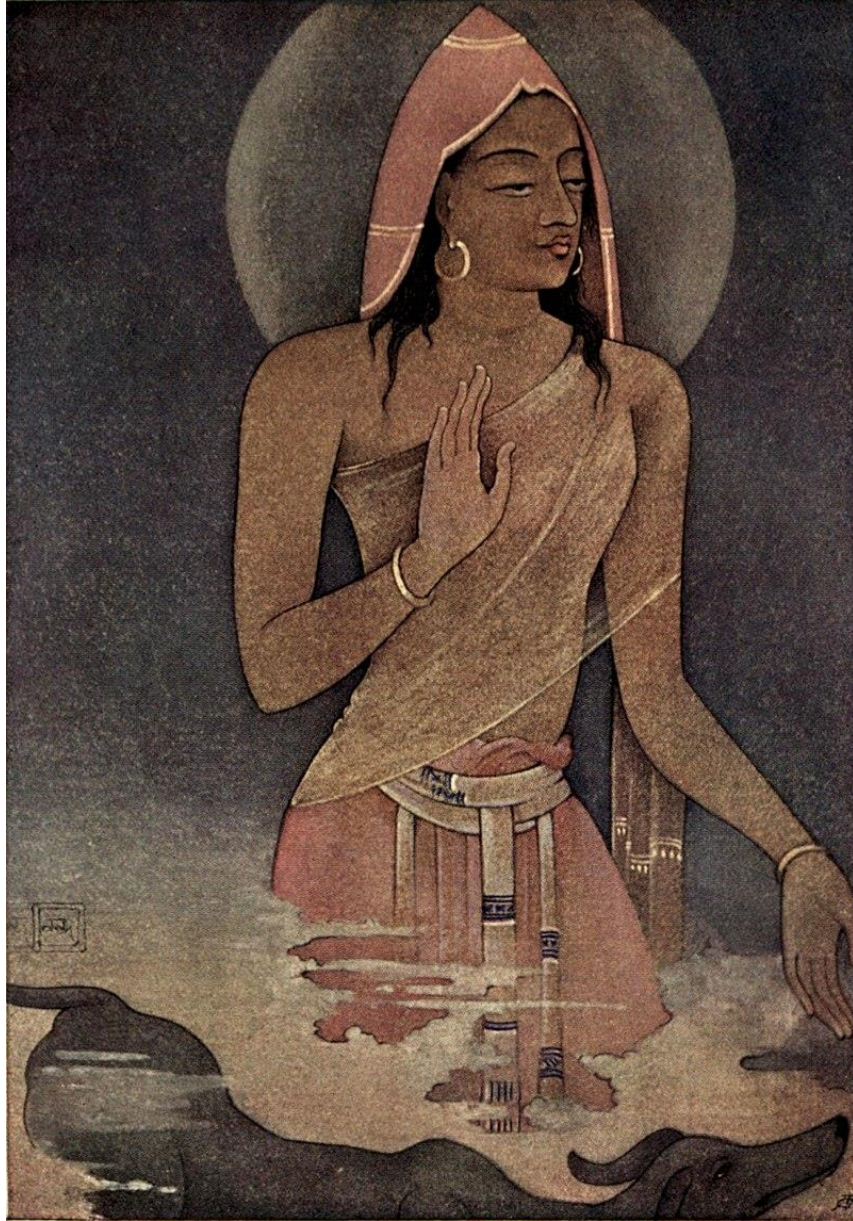


Figure 13 Nandalal Bose, 'Yudhishtira (watercolor, c. 1914) From the Wikimedia Commons.

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