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The Changing World of Visual Arts



When you look at a work of art – a painting, sculpture, etc. – it may not be obvious that like most other things, art too is influenced by the world around it. You may not realise that what you see also shapes your own ideas. In this chapter we will be looking at the changes in the world of visual arts during the colonial period, and how these changes are linked to the wider history of colonialism and nationalism.

Colonial rule introduced several new art forms, styles, materials and techniques which were creatively adapted by Indian artists for local patrons and markets, in both elite and popular circles. You will find that many of the visual forms that you take for granted today – say, a grand public building with domes, columns and arches; a scenic landscape, the realistic human image in a portrait, or in popular icons of gods and goddesses; a mechanically printed and mass-produced picture – had their origins in the period we will discuss in this chapter.

To understand this history we will focus primarily on the changes in one sphere – painting and print making.

New Forms of Imperial Art

From the eighteenth century a stream of European artists came to India along with the British traders and rulers. The artists brought with them new styles and new **conventions** of painting. They began producing pictures which became widely popular in Europe and helped shape Western perceptions of India.



Fig. 1 – *Damayanthi*, painted by Raja Ravi Verma

Convention – An accepted norm or style

European artists brought with them the idea of realism. This was a belief that artists had to observe carefully and depict faithfully what the eye saw. What the artist produced was expected to look real and lifelike. European artists also brought with them the technique of oil painting – a technique with which Indian artists were not very familiar. Oil painting enabled artists to produce images that looked real.

Not all European artists in India were inspired by the same things. The subjects they painted were varied, but invariably they seemed to emphasise the superiority of Britain – its culture, its people, its power. Let us look at a few major trends within imperial art.

Engraving – A picture printed onto paper from a piece of wood or metal into which the design or drawing has been cut

Looking for the picturesque

One popular imperial tradition was that of picturesque landscape painting. What was the picturesque? This style of painting depicted India as a quaint land, to be explored by travelling British artists; its landscape was rugged and wild, seemingly untamed by human hands. Thomas Daniell and his nephew William Daniell were the most famous of the artists who painted within this tradition. They came to India in 1785 and stayed for seven years, journeying from Calcutta to northern and southern India. They produced some of the most evocative picturesque landscapes of Britain's newly conquered territories in India. Their large oil paintings on canvas were regularly exhibited to select audiences

in Britain, and their albums of **engravings** were eagerly bought up by a British public keen to know about Britain's empire.

Fig. 2 is a typical example of a picturesque landscape painted by the Daniells. Notice the ruins of local buildings that were once grand. The buildings are reminders of past glory, remains of an ancient civilisation that was now in ruins. It was as if this decaying civilisation would change and modernise only through British governance.

Fig. 2 – Ruins on the banks of the Ganges at Ghazipur, painted by Thomas Daniell (oil, 1791)





This image of British rule bringing modern civilisation to India is powerfully emphasised in the numerous pictures of late-eighteenth-century Calcutta drawn by the Daniells. In these drawings you can see the making of a new Calcutta, with wide avenues, majestic European-style buildings, and new modes of transport (Fig. 3). There is life and activity on the roads, there is drama and excitement. Look carefully at Figs. 2 and 3. See how the Daniells contrast the image of traditional India with that of life under British rule. Fig. 2 seeks to represent the traditional life of India as pre-modern, changeless and motionless, typified by faqirs, cows, and boats sailing on the river. Fig. 3 shows the modernising influence of British rule, by emphasising a picture of dramatic change.

Fig. 3 – Clive street in Calcutta, drawn by Thomas and William Daniell, 1786

Portraits of authority

Another tradition of art that became immensely popular in colonial India was **portrait** painting. The rich and the powerful, both British and Indian, wanted to see themselves on canvas. Unlike the existing Indian tradition of painting portraits in miniature, colonial portraits were life-size images that looked lifelike and real. The size of the paintings itself projected the importance of the patrons who commissioned these portraits. This new style of **portraiture** also served as an ideal means of displaying the lavish lifestyles, wealth and status that the empire generated.

Portrait – A picture of a person in which the face and its expression is prominent

Portraiture – The art of making portraits

Commission – To formally choose someone to do a special piece of work usually against payment

As portrait painting became popular, many European portrait painters came to India in search of profitable **commissions**. One of the most famous of the visiting European painters was Johann Zoffany. He was born in Germany, migrated to England and came to India in the mid-1780s for five years. Figs. 3 and 4 are two examples of the portraits that Zoffany painted. Notice the way

figures of Indian servants and the sprawling lawns of colonial mansions appear in such portraits. See how the Indians are shown as submissive, as inferior, as serving their white masters, while the British are shown as superior and imperious: they flaunt their clothes, stand regally or sit arrogantly, and live a life of luxury. Indians are never at the centre of such paintings; they usually occupy a shadowy background.



Fig. 4 – Portrait of Governor-General Hastings with his wife in their Belvedere estate, painted by Johann Zoffany (oil, 1784)

Notice the grand colonial mansion in the background.

Fig. 5 – The Aural and Dashwood Families of Calcutta, painted by Johann Zoffany (oil, 1784)

Thomas Dashwood was married to Charlotte Lousia Aural. Here you see them entertaining their friends and relatives. Notice the various servants serving tea.



▶ Activity

Look at Figs. 4 and 5.

1. In what ways are the Indians depicted as inferior?
2. Notice the clothes the British are wearing. What do they convey to you?

Many of the Indian nawabs too began commissioning imposing oil portraits by European painters. You have seen how the British posted Residents in Indian courts and began controlling the affairs of the state, undermining the power of the king. Some of these nawabs reacted against this interference; others accepted the political and cultural superiority of the British. They hoped to socialise with the British, and adopt their styles and tastes. Muhammad Ali Khan was one such nawab. After a war with the British in the 1770s he became a dependant pensioner of the East India Company. But he nonetheless commissioned two visiting European artists, Tilly Kettle and George Willison, to paint his portraits, and gifted these paintings to the King of England and the Directors of the East India Company. The nawab had lost political power, but the portraits allowed him to look at himself as a royal figure. Look at the painting by Willison (Fig. 6). Notice the way the nawab poses, and how he asserts his majesty.



Fig. 6 – Portrait of Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan of Arcot, painted by George Willison (oil, 1775)

Painting history

There was a third category of imperial art, called “history painting”. This tradition sought to dramatise and recreate various episodes of British imperial history, and enjoyed great prestige and popularity during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

British victories in India served as rich material for history painters in Britain. These painters drew on first-hand sketches and accounts of travellers to depict for the British public a favourable image of British actions in India. These paintings once again celebrated the British: their power, their victories, their supremacy. One of the first of these history paintings was produced



Fig. 7 – Lord Clive meeting Mir Jafar, Nawab of Murshidabad, after the Battle of Plassey, painted by Francis Hayman (oil, 1762)

by Francis Hayman in 1762 and placed on public display in the Vauxhall Gardens in London (Fig. 7). The British had just defeated Sirajuddaulah in the famous Battle of Plassey and installed Mir Jafar as the Nawab of Murshidabad. It was a victory won through conspiracy, and the traitor Mir Jafar was awarded the title of Nawab. In the painting by Hayman this act of aggression and conquest is not depicted. It shows Lord Clive being welcomed by Mir Jafar and his troops after the Battle of Plassey.

► Activity

Look carefully at Figs. 7 and 8.

1. How is Clive portrayed in Fig. 7?
2. What are the ways in which the artist has depicted the victory of the British?
3. Notice the position of the British flag (the Union Jack) in Figs. 7 and 8. Why is it placed there?



The celebration of British military triumph can be seen in the many paintings of the battle of Seringapatam (now Srirangapatnam). Tipu Sultan of Mysore, as you know, was one of the most powerful enemies of the British. He was finally defeated in 1799 at the famous battle of Seringapatam. Notice the way the battle scene is painted in Fig. 8. The British troops are shown storming the fort from all sides, cutting Tipu's soldiers to pieces, climbing the walls, raising the British flag aloft on the ramparts of Tipu's fort. It is a painting full of action and energy. The painting dramatises the event and glorifies the British triumph.

Fig. 8 – The Storming of Seringapatam, painted by Robert Kerr Porter (panorama in oil, 1800)

Imperial history paintings sought to create a public memory of imperial triumphs. Victories had to be remembered, implanted in the memory of people, both in India and Britain. Only then could the British appear invincible and all-powerful.

Look at the way General Baird, who led the British army that stormed Tipu's fort, is shown standing triumphantly in the middle. The lantern lights up Baird, making him visible to the spectator. Tipu lies dead (left corner), his body hidden in semi-darkness. His forces are defeated, his royal clothes torn and stripped off. The painting seems to announce: this is the fate of those who dare to oppose the British.

Activity

Look at Fig. 9
David Wilkie was commissioned by David Baird's wife to paint this picture. Why do you think she wanted such a picture painted?

Fig. 9 – The discovery of the body of Sultan Tipu by General Sir David Baird, 4 May 1799, painted by David Wilkie (oil, 1839)



What Happened to the Court Artists?

What happened to artists who earlier painted miniatures? How did the painters at Indian courts react to the new traditions of imperial art?

We can see different trends in different courts. In Mysore, Tipu Sultan not only fought the British on the battlefield but also resisted the cultural traditions associated with them. He continued to encourage local traditions, and had the walls of his palace at Seringapatam covered with **mural** paintings done by local artists. Fig. 10 shows you one of these. This painting celebrates the famous battle of Polilur of 1780 in which Tipu and Haidar Ali defeated the English troops.

Mural – A wall painting



Fig. 10 – Detail from a mural painting commissioned by Tipu Sultan at the Dariya Daulat palace at Seringapatam, commemorating Haidar Ali's victory over the English army at the battle of Polilur of 1780

Activity

Compare Figs. 8 and 10.

1. What similarities and differences do you see in the themes of the paintings?
2. If you were a nawab fighting the British, which battle scenes would you ask the artists to paint – the ones you lost or the ones you won?
3. Do you think that the mural in Fig. 10 is realistic?

In the court of Murshidabad we see a different trend. Here, after defeating Sirajuddaulah the British had successfully installed their puppet Nawabs on the throne, first Mir Zafar and then Mir Qasim. The court

at Murshidabad encouraged local miniature artists to absorb the tastes and artistic styles of the British. You can see this in Fig. 11. This is a picture of an Id procession painted by a court painter in the late eighteenth century. Notice how local miniature artists at Murshidabad began adopting elements of European realism. They use **perspective**, which creates a sense of distance between objects that are near and those at a distance. They use light and shade to make the figures look life like and real.

With the establishment of British power many of the local courts lost their influence and wealth. They could no longer support painters and pay them to paint for the court. How could the artists earn a living? Many of them turned to the British.

Perspective – The way that objects appear smaller when they are further away and the way parallel lines appear to meet each other at a point in the distance



At the same time, British officials, who found the world in the colonies different from that back home, wanted images through which they could understand India, remember their life in India, and depict India to the Western world. So we find local painters producing a vast number of images of local plants and animals, historical buildings and monuments, festivals and processions, trades and crafts, castes and communities. These pictures, eagerly collected by the East India Company officials, came to be known as Company paintings.

Not all artists, however, were court painters. Not all of them painted for the nawabs. Let us see what was happening outside the court.

Fig. 11

Nawab Mubarakuddaulah of Murshidabad at an Id procession, a miniature copy by a local court painter of an oil painting by the visiting British artist, G. Farrington (1799-1800)



Fig. 12 – Paired couples representing different religious sects of the Tanjore region, Company painting from Tanjore (1830)

In Company paintings, such as this one, people are painted against empty spaces. We get no idea of the social surroundings within which they lived or worked. The paintings tried to identify some of the visible features through which people and communities could be recognised with ease by people from foreign lands. Like the different types of Indian plants, birds and animals depicted in Company paintings, the human figures are shown as mere specimens of different trades, castes and sects of a region.

Scroll painting

Painting on a long roll of paper that could be rolled up



Fig. 13 – Battle between Hanuman and Jambuan, Kalighat painting, mid-nineteenth century, Calcutta (watercolour on paper)

Notice how the artists have modernised traditional images. Hanuman is wearing footwear which became popular in the nineteenth century.

The New Popular Indian Art

In the nineteenth century a new world of popular art developed in many of the cities of India.

In Bengal, around the pilgrimage centre of the temple of Kalighat, local village **scroll painters** (called *patuas*) and potters (called *kumors* in eastern India and *kumhars* in north India) began developing a new style of art. They moved from the surrounding villages into Calcutta in the early nineteenth century. This was a time when the city was expanding as a commercial and administrative centre. Colonial offices were coming up, new buildings and roads were being built, markets were being established. The city appeared as a place of opportunity where people could come to make a new living. Village artists too came and settled in the city in the hope of new patrons and new buyers of their art.

Before the nineteenth century, the village *patuas* and *kumors* had worked on mythological themes and produced images of gods and goddesses. On shifting to Kalighat, they continued to paint these religious images. Traditionally, the figures in scroll paintings looked flat, not rounded. Now Kalighat painters began to use shading to give them a rounded form, to make the images look three-dimensional. Yet the images were not realistic and lifelike. In fact, what is specially to be noted in these early Kalighat paintings is the use of a bold, deliberately non-realistic style, where the figures emerge large and powerful, with a minimum of lines, detail and colours.

After the 1840s, we see a new trend within the Kalighat artists. Living in a society where values, tastes, social

norms and customs were undergoing rapid changes, Kalighat artists responded to the world around, and produced paintings on social and political themes. Many of the late-nineteenth-century Kalighat paintings depict social life under British rule. Often the artists mocked at the changes they saw around, ridiculing the new tastes of those who spoke in English and adopted Western habits, dressed like sahibs, smoked cigarettes, or sat on chairs. They made fun of the westernised *baboo*, criticised the corrupt priests, and warned against women moving out of their homes. They often expressed the anger of common people against the rich, and the fear many people had about dramatic changes of social norms.

Many of these Kalighat pictures were printed in large numbers and sold in the market. Initially, the images were engraved in wooden blocks. The carved block was inked, pressed against paper, and then the woodcut prints that were produced were coloured by hand. In this way, many copies could be produced from the same block. By the late-nineteenth century, mechanical printing presses were set up in different parts of India, which allowed prints to be produced in even larger numbers. These prints could therefore be sold cheap in the market. Even the poor could buy them.

Popular prints were not painted only by the poor village Kalighat *patuas*. Often, middle-class Indian artists set up printing presses and produced prints for a wide market. They were trained in British art schools in new methods of **life study**, oil painting and print making. One of the most successful of these presses that were set up in late-nineteenth-century Calcutta was the Calcutta Art Studio. It produced lifelike images of eminent Bengali personalities as well as mythological pictures. But these mythological pictures were realistic. The figures were located in picturesque landscape settings, with mountains, lakes, rivers and forests. You must have seen many popular calendar pictures of Hindu deities in shops and roadside stalls. The characteristic elements



Fig. 14 – Englishman on an elephant hunting a tiger, Kalighat painting, mid-nineteenth century, Calcutta (watercolour on paper)

This painting is a typical example of how *patuas* depicted English life in India. In the colonies Englishmen loved to hunt. They saw hunting as a sport that could demonstrate their courage and manliness.

Life study – Study of human figures from living models who pose for the artists



Fig. 15 – Baboo on a chair, Kalighat painting, nineteenth century

In paintings like this you can see the artist's fear that the *baboos* will imitate the West and give up all that is valuable within the local culture. The *baboo* here is shown as a clownish figure, wearing shoes with high heels and sitting on a chair with ridiculously pointed legs.

Fig. 16 – Mythological scene from the legend of Nala and Damayanti, produced by Calcutta Art Studio, 1878-1880

Notice the contrast between this picture and Fig. 15. Which one do you think looks more realistic?

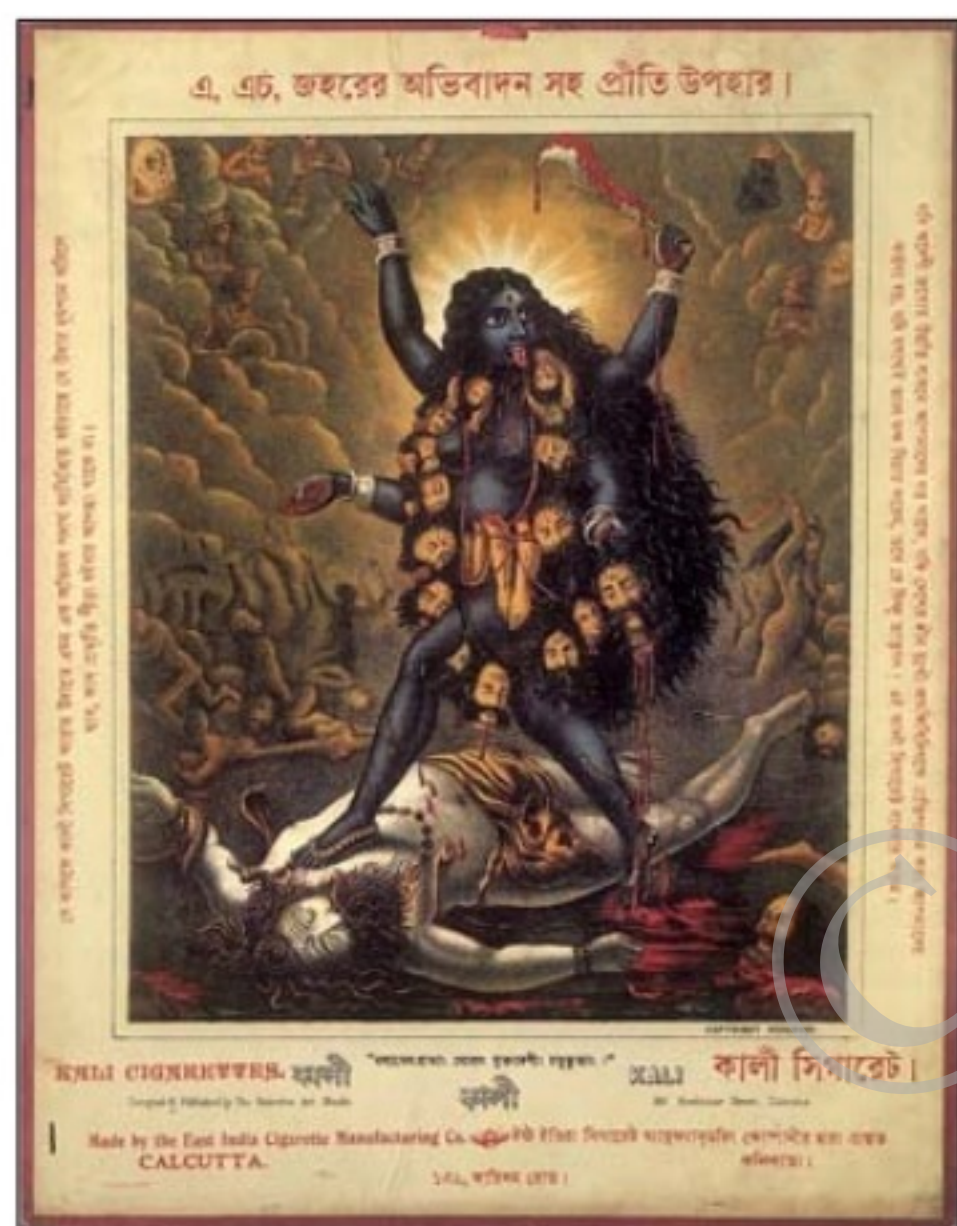


Fig. 17 – Kali, produced by Calcutta Art Studio, 1880s

This is an advertisement of an Indian brand of cigarette that was banned by the British in 1905. You can see the heads of British soldiers amongst the demons killed by the goddess. Religious images were thus used to express nationalist ideas and inspire people against British rule.



Fig. 18 – Bharat Mata, a popular print

Photographing India

You have seen how European painters created a variety of images of India. Such images were being produced by photographers as well.

By the mid- nineteenth century photographers from Europe began travelling to India, taking pictures, setting up studios, and establishing photographic societies to promote the art of photography. Some of them were portrait painters who began taking photographs of imperial officials, presenting them as figures of authority and power. Others travelled



around the country searching for ruined buildings and picturesque landscapes, very much like some of the painters we have discussed. Yet others recorded moments of British military triumph. There were also those who recorded the cultural diversity of India in ways that tried to show how India was a primitive country.

Fig. 19 – *The Horse Regiment led by William Hodson, which played an important role in suppressing the 1857 revolt, photograph by Felice Bearto, 1858*

Notice the way the British officer is shown at the centre, standing in an assertive and authoritative way, while his soldiers gather around him.



Fig. 20 – *Sati Chaura Ghat, Kanpur, photograph by Samuel Bourne, 1865*

Samuel Bourne came to India in the early 1860s and set up one of the most famous photographic studios in Calcutta, known as Bourne and Shephard. Compare this photograph with Fig. 2. Notice how the painter and the photographer are both fascinated by the image of ruins.

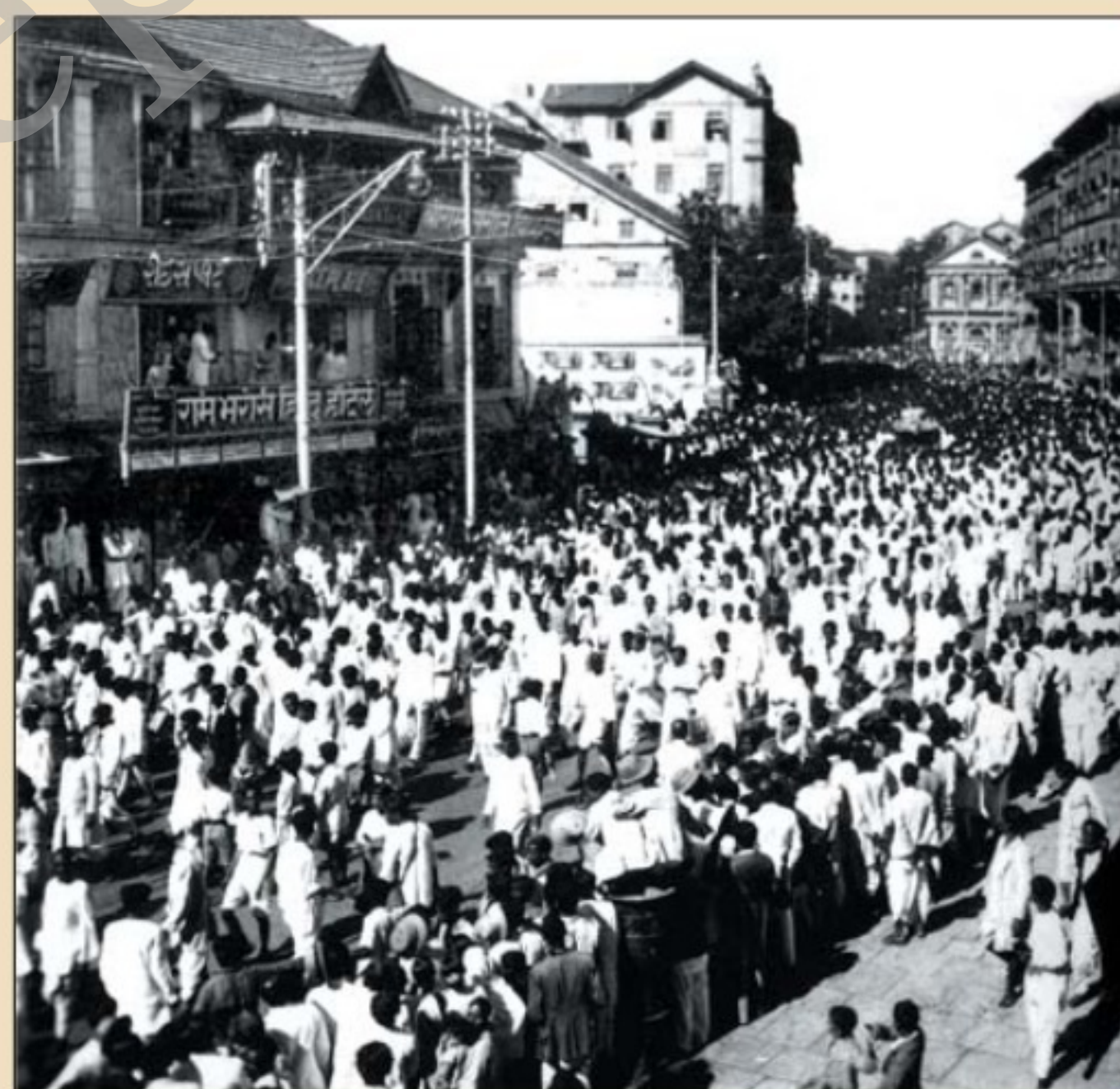


Fig. 21 – *A nationalist demonstration in a Bombay street, photograph by Vikar*

By the late nineteenth century Indian photographers began taking pictures that often offer us a different image of India. They recorded the nationalist marches and meetings, as well as the everyday life of the people.



Fig. 22 – Victoria Terminus, Bombay

The railway station was built between 1878 and 1887.

New buildings and new styles

With British rule, architectural styles also changed. New styles were introduced as new cities were built, new buildings came up.

Look at Fig. 22. The pointed arches in the buildings and the elongated structures are typical of a style known as Gothic. The new buildings that came up in the mid- nineteenth century in Bombay, were mostly in this style. Now compare this building with that in Fig. 23. The rounded arches and the pillars that you see were typical of another style that the British used in Calcutta. It was borrowed from the Classical style of Greece and Rome. The British wanted their buildings to express their power and glory, and their cultural achievements.



Fig. 23 – Central Post Office, Calcutta, built in the 1860s

The Search for a National Art

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a stronger connection was established between art and nationalism. Many painters now tried to develop a style that could be considered both modern and Indian.

What could be defined as a national style?

The art of Raja Ravi Varma

Raja Ravi Varma was one of the first artists who tried to create a style that was both modern and national. Ravi Varma belonged to the family of the Maharajas of Travancore in Kerala, and was addressed as Raja. He mastered the Western art of oil painting and realistic life study, but painted themes from Indian mythology. He dramatised on canvas, scene after scene from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, drawing on the theatrical performances of mythological stories that he witnessed during his tour of the Bombay Presidency. From the 1880s, Ravi Varma's mythological paintings became the rage among Indian princes and art collectors, who filled their palace galleries with his works.

Responding to the huge popular appeal of such paintings, Ravi Varma decided to set up a picture production team and printing press on the outskirts of Bombay. Here colour prints of his religious paintings were mass produced. Even the poor could now buy these cheap prints.

A different vision of national art

In Bengal, a new group of nationalist artists gathered around Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), the nephew of Rabindranath Tagore. They rejected the art of Ravi Varma as imitative and westernised, and declared that such a style was unsuitable for depicting the nation's ancient myths and legends. They felt that a genuine Indian style of painting had to draw inspiration from non-Western art traditions, and try to capture the spiritual essence of the East. So they broke away from the convention of oil painting and the realistic style, and turned for inspiration to medieval Indian traditions of miniature painting and the ancient art of mural



Fig. 24 – *Krishna Sandhan*, by Raja Ravi Varma



Fig. 25 – *My Mother*, painted by Abanindranath Tagore (watercolour)



Fig. 26 – *The Banished Yaksha* of Kalidas's poem Meghaduta, painted by Abanindranath Tagore (watercolour, 1904)

Notice the misty background, the soft colours, and the absence of any hard lines in the painting. These are stylistic elements you will often find in many Japanese water colour landscapes (see Fig. 28).

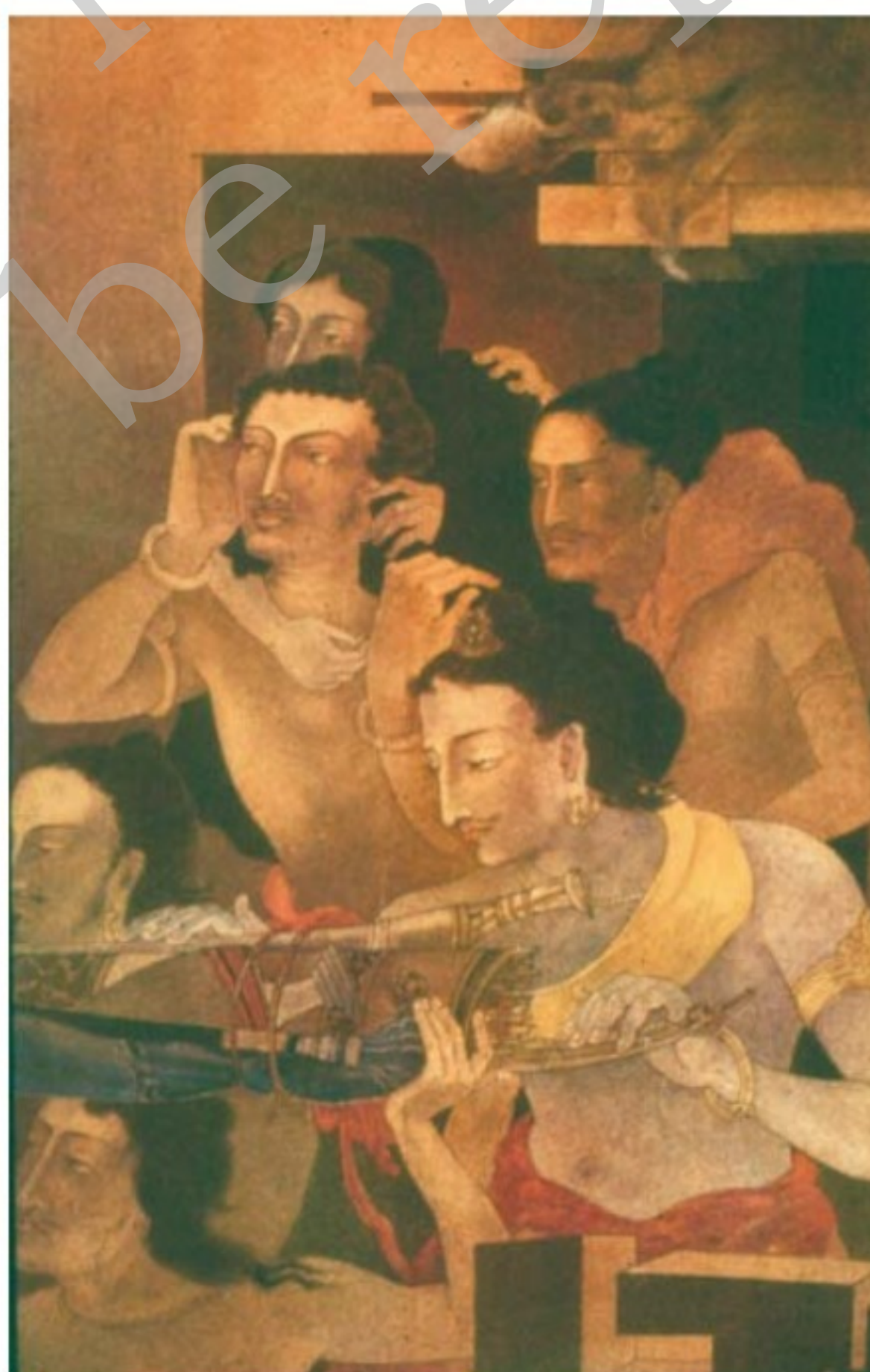


Fig. 27 – *Jatugriha Daha* (The Burning of the House of Lac during Pandava's exile in the forest), painted by Nandalal Bose (watercolour, 1912)

Nandalal Bose was a student of Abanindranath Tagore. Notice the lyrical flow of lines, the elongated limbs and the postures of the figures.

Abanindranath and Nandalal did not simply follow an earlier style. They modified it and made it their own. In this painting you can see how Nandalal uses shading to give a three-dimensional effect to the figures. You will not find this in Ajanta paintings.

► Activity

Look at Fig.25 along with the images of Indian miniatures you saw in the History book of Class VII. Can you identify some of the elements of similarity between them? Look for differences too.

painting in the Ajanta caves. They were also influenced by the art of Japanese artists who visited India at that time to develop an Asian art movement.

We can see a combination of these different pictorial elements in some of the new “Indian-style” paintings of these years. Look at Fig. 25. In this painting by Abanindranath Tagore we can see the influence of Rajput miniatures. The influence of Japanese paintings can be seen in Fig. 26, and the style of Ajanta is apparent in Fig. 27.

The effort to define what ought to be an authentic Indian style of art continued. After the 1920s, a new generation of artists began to break away from the style popularised by Abanindranath Tagore. Some saw it as sentimental, others thought that spiritualism could not be seen as the central feature of Indian culture. They felt that artists had to explore real life instead of illustrating ancient books, and look for inspiration from living folk art and tribal designs rather than ancient art forms. As the debates continued, new movements of art grew and styles of art changed.

ELSEWHERE

Kakuzo and the movement for an Asian art

In 1904, Okakura Kakuzo published a book in Japan called *The Ideals of the East*. This book is famous for its opening lines: “Asia is one.” Okakura argued that Asia had been humiliated by the West and Asian nations had to collectively resist Western domination.



Fig. 28 Pine trees, painted by Hasegawa Tohaku, sixteenth century

Okakura researched on Japanese art and emphasised the need to save traditional techniques of traditional Japanese art at a time they were being replaced by Western-style painting. He tried to define what modern art could be and how tradition could be retained and modernised. He was the principal founder of the first Japanese art academy.

Okakura visited Santiniketan and had a powerful influence on Rabindranath Tagore and Abanindranath Tagore.

Let's recall

1. Fill in the blanks:

- The art form which observed carefully and tried to capture exactly what the eye saw is called _____.
- The style of painting which showed Indian landscape as a quaint, unexplored land is called _____.

Let's imagine

Imagine you are a painter living in the early-twentieth-century India trying to develop a “national” style of painting. What elements discussed in this chapter will form part of that style? Explain your choice.

- (c) Paintings which showed the social lives of Europeans in India are called _____.
- (d) Paintings which depicted scenes from British imperial history and their victories are called _____.
- 2. Point out which of the following were brought in with British art:
(a) oil painting (b) miniatures (c) life-size portrait painting (d) use of perspective (e) mural art
- 3. Describe in your own words one painting from this chapter which suggests that the British were more powerful than Indians. How does the artist depict this?
- 4. Why did the scroll painters and potters come to Kalighat? Why did they begin to paint new themes?
- 5. Why can we think of Raja Ravi Varma's paintings as national?

Let's Discuss

- 6. In what way did the British history paintings in India reflect the attitudes of imperial conquerors?
- 7. Why do you think some artists wanted to develop a national style of art?
- 8. Why did some artists produce cheap popular prints? What influence would such prints have had on the minds of people who looked at them?

Let's do

- 9. Look at any tradition of art in your locality. Find out how it has changed in the last 50 years. You may check who supports the artists, and who looks at their art. Remember to examine the changes in styles and themes.