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Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin in Calcutta

The Creation of a Regional Asian Avant-garde Art

Partha Mitter

The phrase ‘avant-garde’ is commonly associated with the transcultural revolutionary movement in western modernism that ‘emancipated’ 19th-century European art from its academic shackles and bourgeois conformity, creating an art that revelled in the constant pushing of formal boundaries. Avant-garde, which literally means vanguard or the advance guard in a revolution, was involved with cutting-edge experiments, inaugurating a new aesthetic expression that challenged tradition and made a central contribution to modernism as an aesthetic discourse. Therefore, modernist studies and avant-garde studies co-exist as part of larger developments of modernity.

We are all familiar with Picasso’s formalist invention of Cubism, the primitivism of Expressionism and the irrational juxtaposition of images and the play of the unconscious in Surrealism. The avant-garde, initially confined to western Europe, quickly enjoyed global circulation. However, as recent debates indicate, scholars have begun to expand the hitherto narrow horizon of the heroic era of the avant-garde. Because of the imbalance between the global centre, that is the West, and the peripheries, such as Asia, Africa, Latin America, non-western avant-garde continue to remain under the radar in art historical discourses (Mitter 2008).

However, peripheries, Piotr Piotrowski reminds us, not only apply to the global colonial order but they also relate to the margins within the metropolis, in Eastern Europe, for instance (Piotrowski 2009).

As a recent major conference in Vienna “Concrete Media: Avant-gardes beyond Western Modernism” reiterated, we cannot afford to think of the global avant-garde discourse only in its present form, but must also recognise its global implications that go back to the beginning of the last century to regions beyond western Europe. I need to mention an important publication in this context. An edited volume, Decentring the Avant-Garde, sets itself the task of uncoupling the
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avant-garde discourse from its western moorings (Bäckström/Hjartarson 2014).

In this chapter, I wish to take up a half-forgotten avant-garde movement in Asia at the turn of the last century that threw a gauntlet down to the technologically and materially dominant West. This was the short-lived Pan-Asian movement in art, which produced a regional avant-garde discourse that represented a major transcultural event at the turn of the century. It was also an early example of the global circulation of artistic ideas. One word of caution here: western avant-garde is predicated on formalist experiments that we are all familiar with. The point to bear in mind is that the Pan-Asian art that I am about to discuss was not concerned with the formalist inventions of the West, such as Cubism, Expressionism and Surrealism. That is because the contexts of European and Asian art were very different.

So, in what way was this Asian movement avant-garde? I have turned to another, equally resonant definition that is also a key aspect of modernism: ‘avant-garde’ signifies innovation, rebellion and pushing the boundaries of art against the dominant tradition, ruffling the status quo as it were. As I hope to show, it is precisely this definition that helps to explain the importance of this particular trans-cultural movement that arose in Asia at the turn of the 20th century. To repeat, Pan-Asian art created a new radical language of art, though this language did not derive from the western formalist tradition. An equally important point, both the western avant-garde works of artists like Kandinsky and the Pan-Asian paintings were challenging 19th-century naturalist art going back to the Renaissance.2

But let us first examine the political and economic conditions that gave rise to such worldwide exchanges in art. Transport and communication revolutions – the railways, steamships, the telegraph and, for our purposes, print technology – enabled colonial empires such as Britain to secure global dominance; but this also had a contradictory global effect; it created the ideal conditions for conversations across the globe. Hegemonic languages, notably English, French and Spanish/Portuguese, circulated in areas outside the West through print culture, namely through texts and images (books, periodicals and art reproductions), encouraged a worldwide dissemination of ideas and artistic styles, giving rise to what I have called a ‘virtual cosmopolis’ in my recent writings (Mitter 2012). These conversations, generated globally among intellectuals in the East and the West, but with a strong Asian regional accent, were responsible for proposing an anti-colonial modernity in the face of western dominance (Hay 1970).

For students of art, our interest lies in the fact that some of the most resonant cross-fertilisation of Pan-Asian ideas took place in art, as networks were established, ideas exchanged and alliances formed between Indian and Japanese artists in particular. One notices similarities with the development and spread of modernism
through forms such as Cubism, Expressionism and Surrealism around Europe, which was also facilitated through wide and complex networks consisting of a variety of individuals and organisations. The Vienna conference explored the various media, most notably magazines and journals, that enabled artists to exchange theory and practice across boundaries, thereby consolidating and universalising the different avant-garde movements. I would like to add that the meetings, friendships and intellectual exchanges between individuals also had a decisive effect on the spread of Pan-Asian regional modernism.

Pan-Asianism was essentially an urban phenomenon, in which the city of Calcutta played a crucial role. Global colonial expansion between the 16th and 19th centuries gave rise to the worldwide phenomenon of the ‘hybrid’ cosmopolis, often centring on port cities or entrepôts such as Calcutta, Shanghai and Hong Kong, for the circulation of material goods mediated by local merchants and middlemen (Abbas 2000, 775). These cosmopolitan cities emerged as flourishing centres of cultural exchange. As the capital of British India, Calcutta became the locus of colonial encounters, its Bengali inhabitants emerging as beneficiaries as well as interlocutors of colonial culture. The Bengal renaissance ushered in Indian modernity in the 19th century, a hybrid intellectual enterprise underpinned by a dialogic relationship between the colonial language, English, and the modernised vernacular, Bengali.

Let me now turn to the actual history of the Pan-Asian Movement in art that spearheaded Asian anti-colonial resistance. The background to the rise of the transcultural Pan-Asian movement was the relentless momentum of European expansion, conferring almost total military and technological superiority over Asian countries from the mid-19th century onwards. India was colonised, China’s resistance crushed and, finally, Japan’s isolation shattered. Western military expansion was sustained by Enlightenment rationality, the ideology of progress and technological revolution. In the 1820s, Jeremy Bentham and the English Utilitarian philosophers, as well as Christian missionaries, convinced educated Indians that the Hindus were a backward superstitious people. A little later, the profound impact of western science and learning caused grave anxiety in Japan. Even though Japan had not been formally colonised, the Japanese too suffered from western cultural hegemony and their anxiety was no less acute than that of India (Bearce 1961; Beasley 1990).

The Meiji Restoration had opted for the radical westernisation of Japan. In art, by the middle of the 19th century, salon or academic art had established its primacy in most parts of the world, including Asia. Academic art taught under the Barbizon painter Antonio Fontanesi at the Imperial Art Academy in Tokyo from 1876 had the effect of ousting traditional Japanese painting. India had been exposed to
academic art even before Japan. In the 1850s, the British rulers introduced western art as conscious state policy. Colonial art schools, art exhibitions and the process of mechanical reproduction transformed traditional art practices and patronage, contributing to the triumphal progress of academic art in the subcontinent. The celebrated nationalist exponent of academic history painting in the late 19th century was Raja Ravi Varma, who imagined India’s past in a thoroughly Victorian mode.3

Asian nations started regrouping and hitting back intellectually, following their initial shock. The key year was 1893. The charismatic Hindu monk, Swami Vivekananda, won a rapturous ovation in Chicago at the World Congress of Religions with his ‘ecumenical’ speech, addressing his audience as “sisters and brothers of America”.4 Vivekananda’s reception in Chicago was the climax of a long process that went back to the European discovery of Sanskrit in the late 18th century, known as ‘The Oriental Renaissance’ (Schwab 1950). However, what precipitated the counter-tendency was the Romantic anxiety about the excesses of western rationality and the crisis of Victorian industrial society, as expounded in John Ruskin, Karl Marx and William Morris. A widespread Romantic longing for a pre-industrial utopia gave rise to an international network of intellectuals – Russian Slavophils, members of the Arts & Crafts Movement, Theosophists, and finally Pan-Asianists. They poured vitriol on industrial capitalism and the ideology of the Enlightenment. They were no less hostile to 19th-century academic art, the handmaiden of colonial empires. Thus as the Indian nationalist painters sought to free Indian art from the stranglehold of academic naturalism, they found unexpected allies in western romantic rebels against relentless modernity (Mitter 1994).

Arguably, the myth of ‘One Asia’, propounded by Pan-Asianism was based in part on western stereotypes of the Orient, eloquently expressed in Edward Said’s Orientalism (Said 1978).5 It nonetheless provided a powerful rallying point for Asian intellectuals in their attacks on western materialism based upon technological superiority. In this age of the Hegelian Zeitgeist, nations, cultures and races were seen in terms of their essences. The Pan-Asian doctrine rested on the binary relationship between masculine/materialist Europe and feminine/spiritual Asia. Vivekananda, for instance, projected Asia as the voice of religion, even as Europe was that of politics.

Despite the assertion of difference, however, the American philosopher and art historian, Ernest Fenollosa, an influential Pan-Asianist, dreamed of marrying ‘feminine’ Japan with ‘masculine’ Europe in order to create a higher world order, while Vivekananda, in a true syncretic fashion, imagined a universal religion led by India.6
The key players of global connectivity – the architects of this powerful though short-lived Pan-Asian vision – were the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore and the Japanese art ideologue Okakura Kakuzō Tenshin. Tagore’s alternative cosmopolitan values based on ancient Indian thought, and Okakura’s slogan ‘Asia is one’, formed the core of the Pan-Asian movement. The great Indian poet was arguably the most famous international personality in the inter-war years, 1919–1939. His reputation was nowhere higher than in Germany and Austria, his works inspiring intellectuals and creative individuals in a wide range of fields, among others, the Austrian composer Alexander von Zemlinsky, whose Lyric Symphony was set to his poems.

The satirical magazine, Simplicissimus, marked his visits to Germany with witty cartoons about him. Tagore took an active interest in modernism and was the inspiration behind inviting Klee, Kandinsky and other Bauhaus artists to show their works in Calcutta in 1922. A student of Joseph Strzygowski, the Austrian art historian, Stella Kramrisch, joined Tagore’s university at Santiniketan in 1919. She arranged for the works to be shown at the Indian Society of Oriental Art in Calcutta run by Tagore’s nephews (Mitter 2010). Finally, in 1930 Tagore’s radical expressionist paintings burst upon the western scene, prompting their enthusiastic reception in Central Europe (Mitter 2007, 65–78). However, even before he won the Nobel Prize in 1913, Tagore had become a trans-cultural figure and a cosmopolitan who spoke eloquently of the one unified voice of Asia (Hay 1970).

The aim of the Pan-Asian movement was to create an alternative mode of artistic expression that would pose a challenge to the western colonial aesthetics, which had dominated Asia from the end of the 19th century. Yet surprisingly, Pan-Asianism was a global tendency that fired the imagination of western intellectuals as much as it did eastern ones. For this powerful paradigm shift we need to look at what was happening in Euro-America that led a wide range of thinkers and creative personalities to seek an active dialogue with the eastern world.

The year 1900 – the Exposition Universelle in Paris held in that year symbolised the absolute triumph of the West – saw the genesis of the Pan-Asian doctrine and its expression in painting. It was the reaction of the East to the challenges of western rationality and material success. A new generation of artists and intellectuals in India and Japan constructed its own regional resistance by rebelling against western academic tradition. The creation of resistance was a joint project of easterners and westerners. In Japan, inspired by Ernest Fenollosa, his pupil Okakura Tenshin embarked on an ambitious plan of restoring the traditional art of Japan. He started by documenting the Buddhist art in the land. His first Pan-Asian move was to trace its origins to the 5th-century Ajanta Buddhist caves in India. During his directorship of the Imperial Art Academy, Okakura banned instructions in European art, a move that caused much bitterness among academic
painters. Okakura was soon forced to resign, forming the rival Nihon-Bijutsu-in (Japan Art Academy, Tokyo).

From the outset, Okakura had an eye for international networking, publicising his dismissal in the English art magazine, *The Studio*, complaining that westernisation in Japan had gone too far. He also made effective use of the magazine he founded, *Kokka*, in Japanese but with English summaries to address an international audience, to disseminate Pan-Asian ideas. Later the English-language magazine *Rupam* would become the chief mouthpiece of Indian Pan-Asianists (Mitter 1994, 262–266).

Okakura’s next step was to galvanise support for his movement outside Japan. Having read about Vivekananda’s triumph in Chicago, he set off for Calcutta in 1902, intending to bring the monk back to Japan with him. But this was not to be, as Vivekananda died soon after his arrival. While in India Okakura would take the opportunity to visit Ajanta in order to study at first hand the ultimate source of Buddhist art.

Okakura was a guest in Calcutta of the Tagores, whose mansion had become a meeting place of a host of European and Asian intellectuals. Okakura completed his book, *Ideals of the East*, in the Tagore residence in 1903 (Okakura 1903). The work, which described Japanese art as a synthesis of Indian religion and Chinese learning, became a classic Pan-Asian text, Indian nationalists listening avidly to his anti-colonial message of Asian unity. By 1913, on his last visit to Calcutta, Okakura was a broken man, his work in Japan discredited. The Pro-Western groups had won the day, leaving his Nihon Bijutsu-in movement seriously weakened. He died soon afterwards. The notion of ‘One Asia’ impacted on lesser Japanese figures as well. As recently shown by Miyuki Aoki Girardelli, the architect Itō Chūta travelled in Europe and Asia in this period, bravely seeking to trace, for instance, Indian elements in Ottoman Islamic buildings of Istanbul. In his treatise on the Horyu-ji Temple in Japan, Itō Chūta reiterates his opinion of “close relations between Islam and Buddhism” (Girardelli 2010, 101).

As Pan-Asian ideas were gathering force in Japan under Fenollosa, the English artist Ernest Binfield Havell, the American’s opposite number in India, arrived in Calcutta in 1896 to take charge of the government art school. Havell belonged to a new generation in Britain who were exhorted by William Morris to return to the medieval ideal of decorative art for the community in repudiation of Renaissance mimesis. Havell endorsed the idea that India’s spirituality was reflected in her ‘decorative’ art, because Indian art was not tainted by Renaissance naturalism (Mitter 1994, 279–283).

Havell faced violent local opposition to his plans for replacing western academic teaching with Indian methods. Colonial Bengal was simply too steeped in Victorian taste. It was at this moment that he met the young artist Abanindranath Tagore,
the poet’s nephew, a nationalist artist who had turned to Indian miniatures for inspiration. Under Havell’s guidance, Abanindranath discovered the works of Mughal masters, which led to his first political statement in art. In *The Last Moments of Shah Jahan* (1903), the artist carefully reproduced the Taj Mahal’s *pietra dura* work, and the flat application of colours in this work as an exercise in authenticity. Abanindranath blended the fading grandeur of the Mughal Empire with the pathos of Shah Jahan’s dying moments (Mitter 1994, 283–289).

However, the dramatic turning point in his life was his discovery of Japanese painting. He was deeply affected by Okakura who was a guest at the Tagore home at this time. In 1903, after his return to Japan, Okakura sent his favourite pupils, Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunsho, to Calcutta to work with Abanindranath with the aim of forging a common oriental style of art. Shunsho died young but Taikan became a leading exponent of Nihon-ga, the nationalist style, as opposed to Yo-ga, the western mode. Okakura’s brief stay in Calcutta led to an interesting symbiosis between Indian and Japanese artists that impacted equally on Indian and Japanese art. The Tagores were impressed with the simplicity of Japanese taste and design in household objects, and replaced heavy and ornate Victorian furniture with simple functional products.

The Japanese painters learnt the rudiments of Hindu iconography and Mughal painting. Abanindranath for his part watched with fascination how Taikan painted on silk with *sumi* ink and with a few deft brush-strokes, which displayed a mastery of understatement and significant gesture. The *morotai* technique inspired Abanindranath to invest his own watercolours with a pervasive melancholy that suited the nationalist nostalgia for the past glories of the nation. Significantly, Abanindranath named this fusion of Indian and Japanese styles ‘oriental art’ and not Indian art. The flat two-dimensional oriental painting was presented as the antithesis of western naturalism and a product of Indian spiritual culture, a culture that held sway in a large part of Asia from India right through to China and Japan. In Abanindranath’s oriental art, the flat treatment of Mughal miniatures remained; the difference was in the rendering of light, as seen in the *Music Party*, which was reproduced in Okakura’s journal, *Kokka* (Mitter 1994, 289–294).

The year 1905 witnessed the first anti-colonial political unrest in India centring on the Partition of Bengal imposed by the colonial regime, which had its implications for art. Invited by Havell to join the government art school, Abanindranath embarked with his first batch of students, Nandalal Bose, Asit Haldar, Samarendra Nath Gupta, Surendranath Ganguly and K. Venkatappa on ‘recovering’ the lost language of Indian art. The doyen of 19th-century academic painting, Ravi Varma’s Victorian visual language came under attack as a cultural hybrid. In opposition to the hybrid language of academic naturalism, an ‘authentic’
of oriental art sought to recuperate Asian indigenous artistic styles, in a blend of morotai and Mughal painting. Between 1900–1910 Abanindranath produced a series of serene atmospheric works that aimed at translating Pan-Asian ideals into painting: the subtle combinations of greys and chromatic modulations of pale shades were achieved through Japanese wash technique.

The visual language of ‘oriental art’ reflects Abanindranath’s own contemplative temperament in tune with the spirit of East Asia. Significantly, the actual content of Abanindranath’s oriental art was no different from that of Ravi Varma’s nationalist historicism. Both of them ransacked ancient literary classics for inspiration. Exceptionally, the unrest of 1905 inspired Abanindranath to make a rare overt political statement with his image of Mother India. The artist presents the mother in the guise of an ascetic though modelled on a middle-class Bengali lady. She is bathed in a hazy orange-green background achieved with morotai. Her four arms however confer divinity on her though he substitutes the conventional attributes of a Hindu deity with four objects of national self-reliance: food, clothing, secular and spiritual knowledge (Mitter 1994, 295).

In the final analysis what was achieved by Abanindranath? With the exception of Mother India, Abanindranath’s main effort went into creating a coherent Pan-Asian art through the Bengal School of Painting, the first nationalist art movement in India. He combined the Indian miniature format with the morotai technique that lent itself to an atmospheric mood suited to the nationalist narrative. The nationalist Bengal School insisted that the decorative quality of its paintings conferred an intense ‘spirituality’ to it, unlike the materialist Renaissance art. This was a powerful answer to the confident characterisation of the British rulers that academic history painting represented the pinnacle of world art. By this token, the Victorians observed, Indian miniatures, though pleasing in their colour schema and delicate lines, were merely the highest form of decorative art; while they had an undoubted appeal, that appeal was of a lower order than the intellectual content of Victorian painting. Since to the British the inferiority of Indian art consisted in its decorative quality, for the nationalists this very decorative quality of Indian art came to signify its spirituality, a quality supposedly shared by other Asian traditions. We should bear in mind here that decorative art did not simply mean the ornamentation of objects. The essential contrast here was between the flat treatment of shapes and colours in decorative art, as in Indian miniature painting, and western three-dimensional illusionist art.

I now return to the definition of avant-garde art that I had proposed in my introduction. Oriental art sought to create a new visual language that challenged hegemonic naturalism. The revolutionary implications of this new visual language become obvious once we compare these Asian artists with a very different kind of
anti-colonial art produced in Mexico for instance. Mexico was colonised by the Spaniards at an earlier date than India and both witnessed a period of nationalist resistance to European powers. In the 1920s, Marxist artists such as Diego Rivera contributed to the Mexican revolution with ambitious murals glorifying the Aztecs who had ruled Mexico before the Spanish occupation (Craven 2006). At the same time, formally these murals belong wholly within the Renaissance tradition, even though Rivera incorporated Pre-Columbian motifs in his work. To the Indian and the Japanese artists of the early 20th century, notably Taikan, resistance to the West took the form of an indigenous ‘style’ or visual language that challenged western three-dimensional illusionist art. The Bengal School deliberately flaunted the flat style of Indian miniatures that had been branded as decorative art by the Victorians.

The Pan-Asian movement, which set up an interesting dialogue among Asian intellectuals and artists, had run its course by the 1930s, as serious differences between Asian intellectuals surfaced. So what about its legacy? Okakura made a deep and lasting impression upon the nationalist art of Bengal with his assertion that in Asia influence flowed from India to China and Japan through the presence of Buddhism. There are however interesting tensions in Okakura’s doctrine since his Pan-Asian doctrine also sought to absorb western ideas, though critically and selectively. He iterated three cardinal principles: nature, tradition and creativity.

While respecting tradition, he wrote, one must not neglect progress in art. Originality counted for more than style because freedom and individuality kept ‘the soul free.’ This last principle, the European notion of the aura of work of art, was quite alien to Japanese art, in the same way that the Bengal School of painting quietly absorbed western notions of progress and originality (Mitter 2007, 80).

Finally, let us return to the question of the global links of the Pan-Asian avant-garde in its resistance to academic naturalism, viewed as the product of global colonial-capitalist hegemony. I want to end with some reflections on the links between the western avant-garde and the Bengal School. Abanindranath’s anti-colonial strategies displayed significant parallels with the anti-establishment radicalism of the western avant-garde such as Kandinsky. As I suggested above, the modernist movements in Europe – be it the formalist experiments of Cubism, the raw emotions of Expressionism, or the Surrealist assaults on classical rationality – united in their rejection of the mimetic salon art of the 19th century. In short, the rejection of Renaissance ideals of order, balance and harmony brought these avant-garde figures in East and West together to create alternative visual languages. It is not that these European and Asian artists had anything in common in their formal concerns or in their choice of themes. What they shared was a common front against figurative painting as a hegemonic expression. And that may well
be the lasting legacy of Pan-Asian artistic ideology, which itself became part of the larger romantic challenge to global capitalism and the western concept of material progress.

**Notes**

1. This was organised in 2011 by Christian Kravagna and Sabeth Buchmann at the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna (MUMOK) and the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna in connection with the *Abstract Space: Formations of Classical Modernism* exhibition.

2. See Mitter 2007 on the ideological consonance between Kandinsky, Klee and other Bauhaus artists and the Bengal School of painting inspired by Pan-Asian ideas, 10, 12, 15–18, 25, 34–37, 68–70, 72–3, 74, 79, 117.


5. See for instance, stereotyped images of the Ottoman Empire in *Consuming the Orient* 2007.

6. On Ernest Fenollosa see Chisholm 1963.

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