

## Jottings from a Personal Diary: Random Notes on Select Pictorial Images by Rabindranath Tagore

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Insightful accounts on Rabindranath Tagore's emergence to eminence as a painter of consequence to Indian modern art are so numerous that there should hardly be any necessity for a reiterative essay. In fact, the extensive amount of profound art-historical scholarship on the issue is so thoroughly pervasive that one begins to doubt the relevance of a further discourse, unless one *really* has an earth-shattering proposition to offer. I don't! But at the same time I fail to deny an intimately personal attachment to Rabindranath's pictorial images—the distinctly individual personalities seem to address me from the portrait-faces he painted, I continue to be swept away by a sense of displacement from the here-and-now actualities of current space-time continuum when I find myself sucked in and lost within the illuminated expanse of one of his landscapes, I find it impossible to withhold a tickled laughter gurgling and ascending from somewhere deep within me when face-to-face with his one of his doodled creatures that bear the imprint of limitless fantasy. All of these, nevertheless, are responses on a purely private level, and could probably fail to defend itself if confronted by interrogative scrutiny from serious, no-nonsense, art-historical/art-critical deliberation.

But that should not, I presume, preclude the possibility of personal jottings. Denouncing any claim to the aforementioned academic gravity, I can only hope that what follows hereafter would be spared the interrogation, perhaps ignored, and laughed away. For, bringing out private jottings into the glare and scrutiny of the public domain *itself* should seem a paradox unworthy of serious consideration.

### Jotting 1

*...When some of the artists in Paris told me that I have succeeded in what they have been making efforts to achieve, I did not quite see their meaning. On my asking them to explain what they considered signs of success, they said this was hardly necessary so long as I continued on my own path...*<sup>1</sup>



One of the most prominent thematic categories within the entire pictorial repertoire of Rabindranath Tagore has been landscapes. And in most instances, the word “landscape” in the context of Rabindranath conjures up a range of variations around the central schema of a glowing illumination from the open vistas, framed by the silhouette forms of trees grouped together, forming a well-structured pictorial composition. However, it is probably one of those exceptional and unique instances when Rabindranath painted the out-of-doors, framed not by the silhouette of trees, but by the walls of an interior. As the dense darkness borders the three sides of the opening, we look out through the open doorway, as ambient light from the nature outside casts its glow along the parapet of an open terrace and onto the floor. This image has a fascinating attraction precisely because of this small difference — its pictorial strategy of framing the view from inside the room. Strangely enough for partly inexplicable reasons, it tends to remind distantly related parallels from the early phase of the modern in European pictorial tradition. However, the distinctions and differences are too strong to ignore, either. This is not a framed view of the city observed from within an apartment through Impressionist eyes, neither is it a reveling in Fauvist unbound colour liberation where the pictorial dalliance with the chromatic overrides all other concerns to such a degree that it appears to assume exclusive prominence (at least, until one begins to take note of underlying sub-currents). Once we recognize the distinctions, it may be possible to claim that Rabindranath’s painting appears to be a close equivalent to his pantheist philosophy — neither is an urbane identity exclusively pronounced in the architectural fragment that he sets up in front of the viewer (in fact, on the contrary it is paradoxically too non-specific to be able to do so), nor is there a proportionately greater emphasis on the trees and natural elements beyond the boundary of the parapet that separates us from the lush vegetation. Instead, an uniformity of pictorial treatment, including the brushwork, the application of colour and an overall uniform palette, harmoniously blends the whole into a totality. The elimination of details in the dark depths of the shadowy trees outside, and the dissolving contours of the palm leaves that seem to blend into the orange-ochre glow of the sky further removes the distinction of the parts to achieve a homogeneous unity in the pictorial image. Given the fluidity of transition that our eyes experience, from the inside to the outside, from the ‘home’ to the ‘world’, the ‘small difference’ we initially began with now begins to index a potential of a larger, wider implication.

Most art historians draw a link or parallel between Rabindranath’s pictorial language and that of Expressionism (as the concept is understood in the context of German modern art movements), and there is a validity to the claim which can certainly be established through analytic logic and reasoning. Despite that, it may prove worthwhile to consider the reverse, to identify the differences and thereby the distinctiveness of Rabindranath’s practice from that which is by definition accepted as the ‘expressionistic’. The opulence of colour in the

example under discussion as well as the dark offset of the shadow areas, do have a dramatic impact in their expressive potential, but more than the violence of emotional urgency being translated into chromatic intensity of the purest hues that stand contrapuntal to one another, the tonal balance and unity of chromatic palette evidences a more controlled utterance of feelings. In fact, the evening glow in the skies and the reserved statement of feelings point towards an inner harmony rather than an outer tension of forces clashing in opposition.

## Jotting 2

In the course of the foregoing jotting we had referred to the more readily characteristic landscapes from the hand of Rabindranath, and therefore it is probably imperative that we should stop for a while to consider the dynamics within these relatively familiar images. The nature-man equation of harmonious balance in Rabindranath's world of ideas do find their pictorial equivalence in these painted vistas as well. However, it may be profitable to consider these images from a slightly different vantage point.

Explicating what Santiniketan meant to its responsive inhabitants, Binode Behari Mukherjee once mentioned:

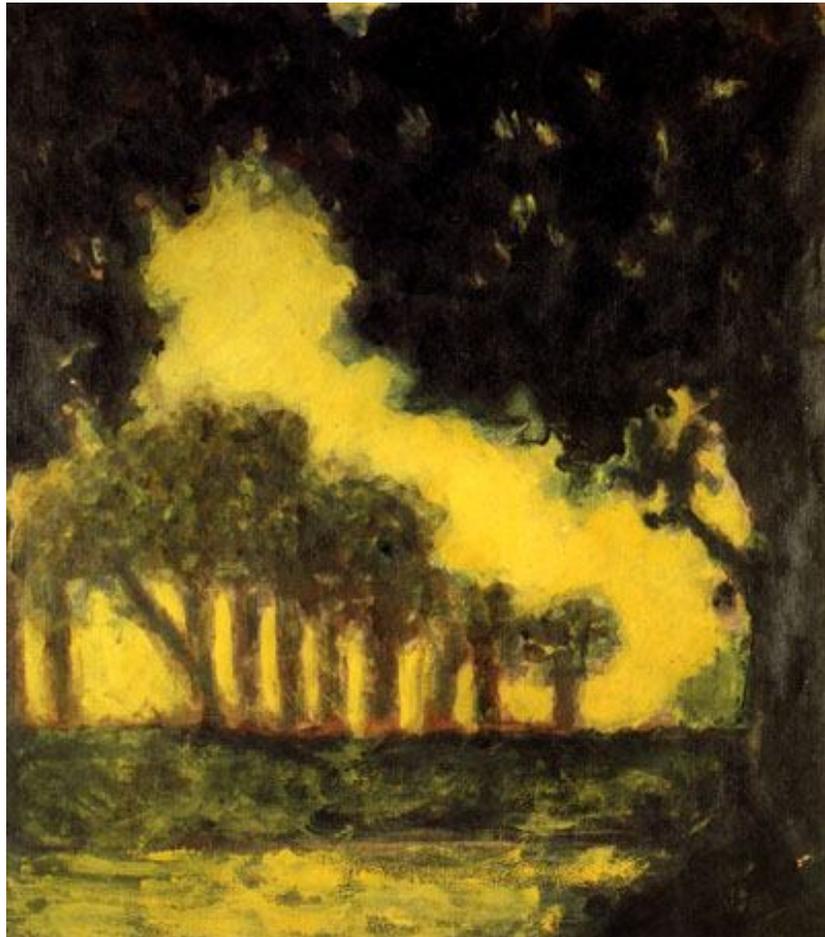
...Rabindranath did manage to create an environment where one could realize that life was full of excitement and that one could deliver oneself from the darkness of self-distrust and inertia through creative activity. With each change of season he brought us a basket of songs. The memory of the atmosphere that those songs and Nature's glory contrived together is still green in every student's mind.<sup>ii</sup>

Would it be too far-fetched to propose an analogy between the 'basket of songs' and these painted landscapes? Could we claim that he strove to contribute to that 'memory of atmosphere' not only through the literary equivalents but the



resonance of the pictorial as well? Or would we be faced by differences that override the similarities? Does the Rabindranath of literary creation echo the Rabindranath of the pictorial, or do they complement each other as distinct domains and concerns?

We have often been reminded that Rabindranath's landscapes are hardly ever descriptive passages, where it may be possible to determine the inspiring source in actual locations. Nonetheless, for the likes of us who have been fortunate to experience Santiniketan in all its natural glory, some of the glowing yellow skies behind the silhouette of trees in the foreground invariably seem so familiar as to find it difficult to deny a very close link. Yet again, despite a broadly general



identification through the essential underlying rhythm of form and its arrangement in space, the landscapes do remain largely non-specific. They manifest as visual images where a dominant tone of chromatic emotions translate into nature's mysteries to unfurl before us through the liquid tones of colour. There is what may be termed a bidirectional osmotic transference between the pictorial idiom and the felt experience, where the end product of the image is not so much an equivalent merely to the specificities of the visually perceived but the entire sum-total of all the sensory perceptions put together. While the aural in his basket of songs could paint visible equivalents of the seasonal bounty, the visible in his pictures could equally resonate to the ambient music of the seasons. Through the open-ended characteristic of the suggestive, both anticipate and expect active participation of reading into the statements, rather than a finite and closed

given.

*When I had not yet taken to painting, out of this phenomenal world melodies would enter my ears and give rise to feelings and emotions which would make their aural impact on on my mind. But when I turned to painting, I at once found my place in the grand cavalcade of the visual world. Trees and plants, men and beast everything vividly real in their own distinct forms. Then lines and colours began revealing to me the spirit of the concrete objects in nature. There was no more need for further elucidation of their raison d'être once the artist discovered his role of a beholder — pure and simple. Only the true artist can comprehend the secret of this visible world and the joy of revealing it. Others who seek to read senseless meaning into the pictures, are bound to get lost in a maze of futility...<sup>iii</sup>*

### **Jotting 3**

After a long period of disassociation, I had returned to Rabindranath's "Shey" the other day. Like a long lost friend whom we unexpectedly run into one fine morning, "Shey" was a delightful narrative to read afresh, to rediscover. The charming imaginative dialogue between generations, between a Pupey-didi and her grandfather (who speaks in the first person), collaboratively inventing a narrative alternating along flights of fancy and reason, was periodically buttressed by the line-drawn visualizations by Rabindranath that accompany the printed version of this prose.

And once again we come face-to-face with the poet as a painter, and this time more so, for Rabindranath provides us here a first hand visual rendering (I wouldn't call this illustration, and neither can I make up my mind whether we should term them illuminations either) of prominent personages and expressions chosen from his own literary creation. Ancient India has had a long tradition in text-image correlative statements in its tradition of manuscript paintings, where often the pictorial images went far beyond their preliminary role of translating the literary into the visual. In fact, one would certainly be justified if one began to doubt such an intention at all — the pictorial had its own narration to tell, its own course to follow and its own goals to reach. It had its own life. And it thus stood out as independent and to a large extent self sufficient. Given the particular tenor of "Shey" how should we comprehend Rabindranath's desire to evolve pictorial images to accompany the text?

The pertinence of the query lies in the fact that, just as Rabindranath opted not to hark back to past pictorial traditions as stylistic mannerism to be re-enacted through nationalist cultural renaissance, he also usually rejected associations of the literary in his pictorial oeuvre. His choice of themes is the best indicator—even when his pictorial compositions dealt with dramatic ensembles of multiple human figures, the narrative was entirely contained within the perimeter

of the painted page, without drawing direct reference to literary allusions, whether belonging to a shared tradition or to those of his own creation. What unfolds in front of the viewer of these paintings is a narrative told exclusively through the visual language—and meant to be read so as well.

How then should we perceive the exceptional instances of the books “Shey” and “Khapchara”—prose for the first, poetry for the second—where pictures compulsively accompany the texts? What exactly did Rabindranath do as a pictorial practice in these two instances? Consider the uncaptioned picture a dozen pages down the beginning, which corresponds to section three of “Shey”, that deals with the christening of jackal “Hou-hou” into a more humanly-decent name of “Shiburam”. Initially, the first step to making-a-man-out-of-a-jackal lies in the efforts to train him to stand erect on his hind legs. The picture of Shiburam is a flowing set of



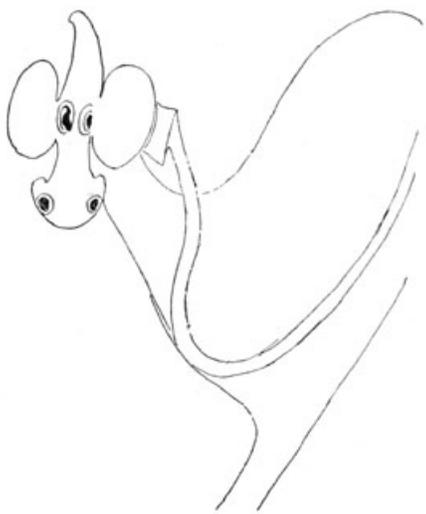
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arabesques, not so much a biological correspondence to a jackal, but certainly a not-too-distant cousin of the same either. Incidentally, the deftly fluid contour defining the character still possess a merrily optimistic tone about the Hou-hou to Shiburam transformation, and the liquid curve along his back comes to rest at a point where the lower limbs remain happily unstated, though a separate arabesque constituting his tail prominently closes the form through symmetry. This is relevant from the point of view of the narrative because, the tail is precisely the bone of contention to follow. As Shiburam utters his dissatisfaction in not-yet

looking as human as he would prefer to, despite his upright posture and the heavily cloaked attire, Gnosai-ji points out that the essential distinction continues to remain in the fact that he possesses a tail; would he be able to relinquish it so easily? Hou-hou’s tail has been his index to pride within his community; yet he agreed, unwillingly. Subsequently when his community rejected his new tail-less shaven-body appearance, the shocked Shiburam was not to be found for six months — all one came to know was that he has been howling the night away, lamenting “Where’s my tail gone, oh where’s my tail?” Rabindranath’s corresponding second pictorial image is a poignant image of lament; the

confident and assured single-line profile of Shiburam has a distinctly lean body, where the flowing linear convexity has given way to greater angularity. Not only does he open his mouth in utterance of the lament, baring his lower row of teeth in the process, the sharp spinal bump on his back and the jutting lower leg couple with the pointed projection of his ear to correspond in close approximation to an icon of distraught pathos.

The utter seriousness of striving towards a valid pictorial form is apparent in Rabindranath's attempt to draw a picture of Shiburam aka Hou-hou. In terms of the element of a flight-of-fancy, one would certainly be reminded of the results of Rabindranath's attempt to redeem the errors in his "Purabi" manuscript, that gave rise to a host of fantastic shapes and forms. But that was an early chapter in the history of the poet's emergence as a painter. At a date like 1343 Bengali era (1936-37 AD) for "Shey", he has the experience of nearly a decade in discovering the world of pictorial forms. The sophistication and confidence that he has by then arrived at is plainly evident in the assured confidence of the single-line contour as it delineates a personality. In fact, the same clarity of comprehension regarding the language of pictorial forms would be evidenced in the utterly fanciful imagination that differentiates the "Ghantakarna" from a "Ghantakarna-of-the-fierce-species".



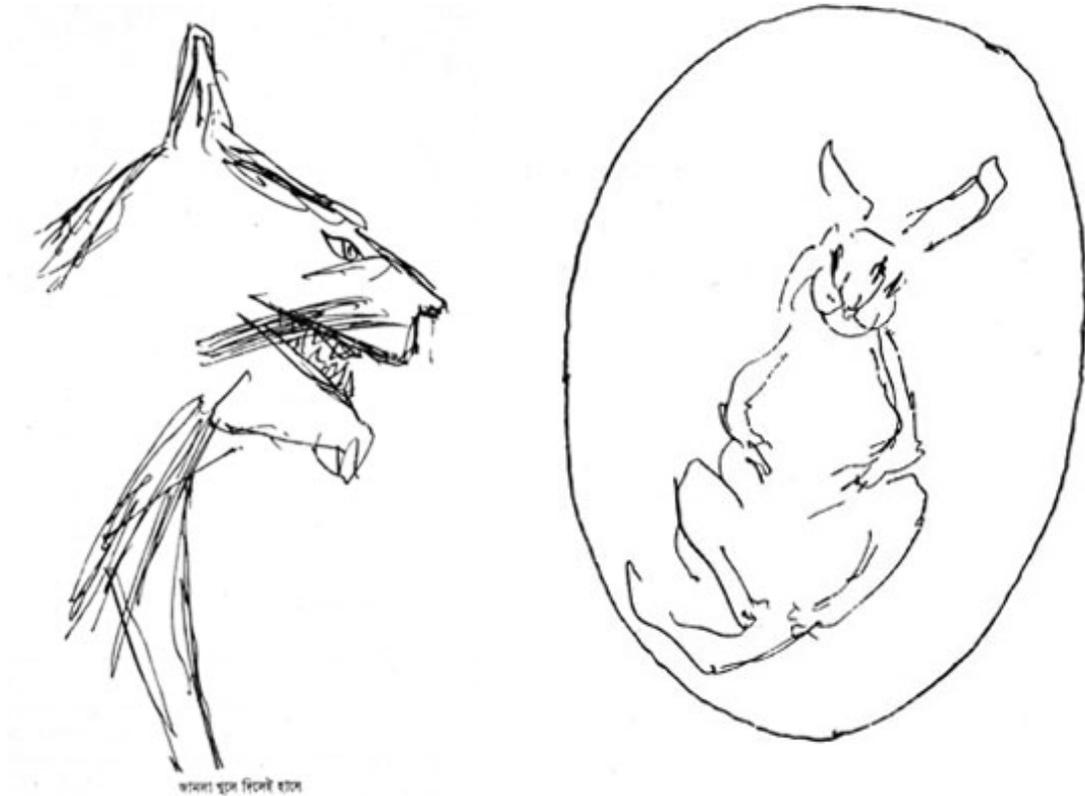
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What is remarkable about Rabindranath as a visual artist in the context of "Shey" (and subsequently for "Khapchara" too) is the fact that he was evidently at the most comfortable zone of operation where his lack of academic training or

the imbibing of the usual skills of pictorial depiction (if at all they are in any sense hindrances) no longer stood in the way of the desired expression. Rabindranath could come out with as fairly accurate and convincing correspondence to the essential facial structure of a tiger (one who “smiles as soon as the window is opened”) as the rabbit-within-the-orb-of-the moon. In fact, in the latter, one is actually caught off-guard with Rabindranath’s surprisingly effective rendering of a not-so-usual, completely frontal view of the animal.



But the most impressive impact comes probably from the 67<sup>th</sup> poem in “Khapchara” (also of 1343 Bengali era), which narrates how a toad returned as a ghost to place one foot on the table and the other on the shoulder of Banomali uncle. To his plea for being spared the touch of the cold body, the ghost-toad’s reply was a mere “croak”. The image accompanying this eight-liner is an exceedingly simple organic form that neither looks like a

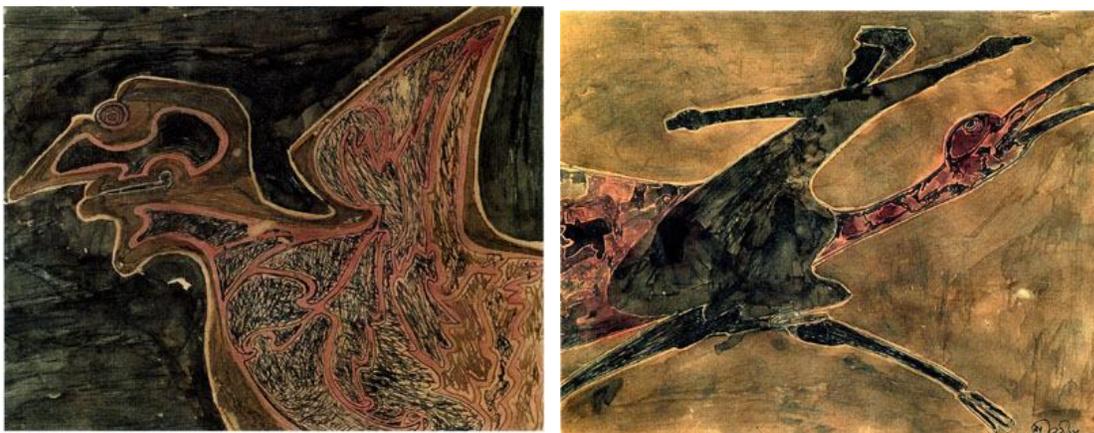


toad nor translates the narrative within the poem in absolute literal correspondence. A silhouette, with the contours carefully filled in by liberal and regular strokes, the most prominent aspect of the form is the expressive potential of an eye that rivets all attention, besides the softly open large mouth set in a nearly smiling (or is it, singing?) face. The sheer imaginative fancy involved in conceiving the return of a toad as a ghost is complemented by a visual image that is an essence of the glee of the narrator of the poem who chuckles at the delight in Banomali's distraught condition, rather than Banomali's fear or discomfort itself.

It therefore goes without saying that the pictures Rabindranath drew for his "Shey" and "Khapchara" are in their true spirit, independent expressions in their own right — complementary, rather than supplementary, to the text.

#### Jotting 4

I had been dreaming of an opportunity of a day when I would be able to see the "original manuscript" of the "Shey"—I nearly expected something like the "Purabi" or the "Raktakarabi" manuscript would exist . Scholars infinitely more informed than me shattered my dream saying that the pictures for "Shey" and "Khapchara" were painted/drawn as independent pictures. Coming back to independent pictures then, this final jotting is about three images, only this time they are full scale tonal paintings, not linear depictions.



The first amongst these series of undated pictures stands at the threshold between the manuscript page cancellation-evolved-image and the full-page painting. The part-human part-bird configuration continues to bear the imprint of the free-flowing line whereby the form emerges out of the rhythm of lines that join

each other across the span of the page. These lines are then supplemented by others that move within a network between the contours of the evolved shape, delineating an inner structure, or a scaffolding, a purely imaginary skeletal structure as it were, a maze of thick and thin width inter-spaces between two lines, which are then filled in with further scribbled tonal textures or washes of ink. The correspondences between the emergent form and our habitual identification of it to a bird with a human face makes one aware of the queerness of the form. One tends even to read an expression in the configuration of the seeming profile, whereby the upward tilt at the end of the mouth does seem to convey a smile. A smiling part-avian part-human form? Pure fancy? Limitless permutation of the impossible? We keep wondering at the implication of the sum total as rippling lines and the pale tones of colour washes project the form into the foreground against the dark depths of an unspecified backdrop, aided by the crisp and thin line of white running all along its outer contour.

In the second example, the sharp crispness of the white contour-border remains, though less obvious, because the tonal hue of a pen-drawn texture is considerably less here, and the fluidity of brushed-in colour tones achieve a greater homogeneity. As the human form astride the bird remain distinct from each other, unlike the metamorphosed fusing in the former instance, one becomes aware of a greater stress on the dynamic. The directional thrusts of the limbs are relatively more pronounced, and the diagonal stretched neck of the avian species extends parallel to the extended arms of the human form to give the whole pictorial image a thrust towards the right. With legs wide apart they leap ahead, the contrasting turn of the human head in a direction opposite to the movement only serving to heighten the expectancy of a chase or a flight.

In the final example to be considered here the circle of pictorial imagination is completed in its full maturity. Not only is there a more assured control over the handling of ink washes, a more intricate comprehension of the role of tonal gradation, but there is at the same time a relatively more evolved understanding of pictorial form itself. The maturity manifests in the realization of the optimum—



the textured rendering of form has a more subtle gradation of brush-drawn tones that blend into each other, the laying in of the tones at the carefully studied head and beak is more convincing in its appearance despite being as alien to biological classification as the former, the compositional discretion in the

placement of a brilliantly illuminated form against the dark depths of the background extremely effective in its simple solution of being cut at the left-lower edge of the painting, such that the sweeping curve from the wing-body to the beak creates an implied span of a wider scale—a silent, giant flight above our heads. Once again, we are witness to how Rabindranath evolved a successful solution to the issue of a pictorial form that defies his lack of orthodox artistic training. It is difficult to believe that he worked within the limits of his limitations, for here it is that image and content are so intimately bound together that manual skill takes a back-seat in the consideration of the effectiveness of a powerful pictorial idiom.

To Rabindranath Tagore, the issues that held a place of primary consequence for the practice of the visual arts were entirely different from those that determined the general course of art and its history at that date. Addressing issues of considerably wider implication than those that were of immediate concern to his contemporaries in the field of visual arts, Rabindranath personified a vision of much larger dimension—indexing a direction and a possibility in pictorial practice that was exemplary.

#### Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> From a letter written to Bisu Mukhopadhyay, 1941
  - <sup>ii</sup> Benodebehari Mukherjee, *Chitrakar, The Artist*, translated by K. G. Subramanyan, Seagull Books, Kolkata, 2006. p.41. [quoted in Pulak Dutta, “Visva Bharati Between Administrative power and Creative freedom”, *Nandan*, Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan, 2009]
  - <sup>iii</sup> From a letter written to Jamini Roy, 1941

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