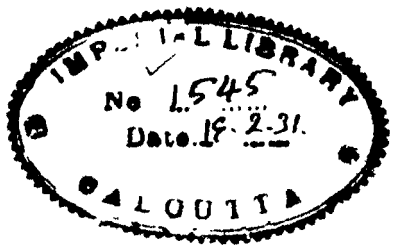
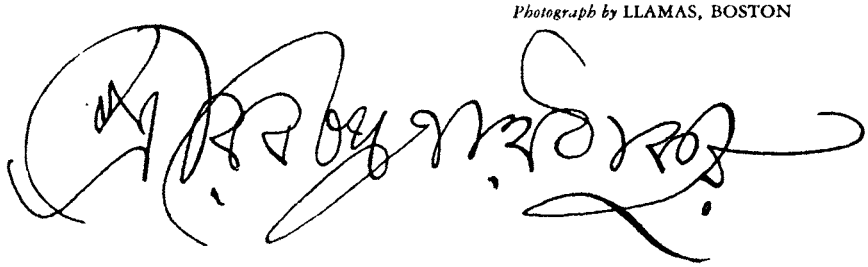


Exhibition of Paintings by Rabindranath Tagore

The Fifty-Sixth Street Galleries

New York November, 1930

Photograph by LLAMAS, BOSTON



Foreword

An exhibition of drawings by Rabindranath Tagore is of particular interest because it puts before us, almost for the first time, genuine examples of modern primitive art. One may well wonder how those artists and critics who have so long striven for and praised the more calculated primitivisms, archaisms, and pseudo-barbarisms of European origin will respond; will they admire the real thing?

Because Rabindranath is a great and sophisticated poet, a citizen of the world, acquainted with life by personal experience, and by familiarity with the history of culture in Asia and Europe, it must not be inferred that these paintings, all a product of the last two years of the poet's activity, are sophisticated or metaphysical. It would be a great mistake to search in them for hidden spiritual symbolisms; they are not meant to be deciphered like puzzles or code messages. Nor do they bear any definite relation to the contemporary Bengali school of painting led by his nephews Abanindranath and Gogonendranath Tagore, or to the contemporary movement elsewhere. It is obvious that the poet must have looked at many pictures in the course of his long life; but there is nothing in his own work to show that he has seen them. This is a genuinely original, genuinely naive expression; extraordinary evidence of eternal youth persistent in a hoary and venerable personage.

Childlike, but not childish. It is perfectly legitimate to be amused by, to laugh at, or with, some of these creations, as one is amused by a child's vision of the world; it is not legitimate to ridicule them. From a few examples one might gather that the artist "knows how to draw"; but this is not a consistent quality, and it would be as much beside the mark to praise this apparent knowledge when it appears, as to criticise the work as a whole as

that of a man who does not know how to draw. In these days we have become familiar with the cult of incompetence, and have professed to admire the work of countless artists who do not know how to draw, and in addition have voiced sufficiently loudly their contempt of training. Rabindranath, on the other hand, has no contempt for training or virtuosity; he simply does not possess it, and knowing this he puts before us in all simplicity, certainly not cynically, the creations of his playful vision, for us to use as we will. There is, indeed, one quality in respect of which these pictures may be called at once typically Indian, and adult in spite of their naivete; this quality finds expression in satisfying composition, clear cut rhythms, and definition of forms. They do not mean definite things, but are in themselves definite; in this sense they may be called truly mystical, and offer a refreshing contrast to the vague and sentimental works of the pseudomystics, in which more recognizable forms appear, but which none the less "sprechen immer nur im Luft herein". A comparison with the work of William Blake is naturally suggested; for here too was a mystic poet who from the resources of a vivid visual imagination created forms not to be seen in nature, but yet endowed with the precision and definition of natural forms. The parallel can be carried even further; for most of the work of Blake is actually a kind of marginal comment to poetry; while the separate paintings now exhibited by Rabindranath are actually, as he himself tells us, a development from marginal and interlinear pen-play enjoyed when composing, or correcting manuscript.

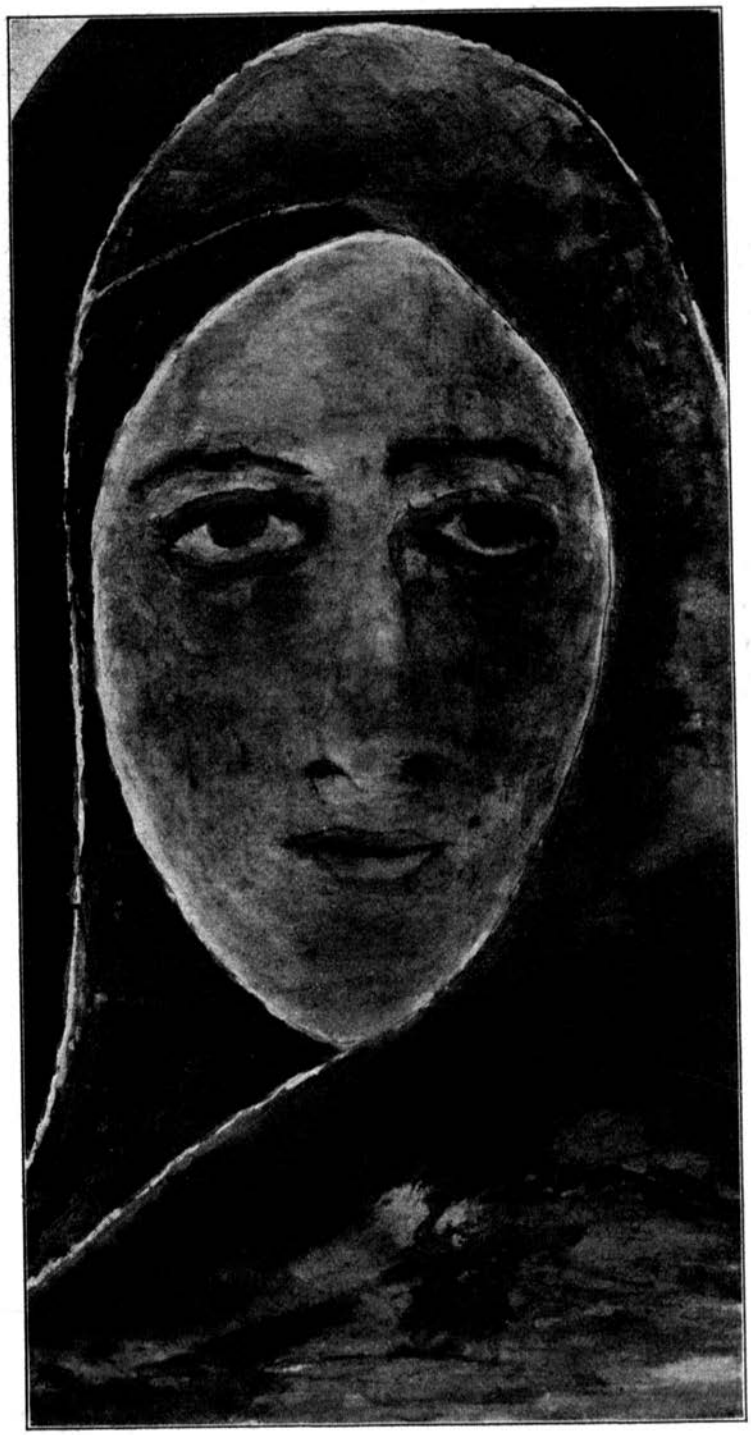
The poet gives no descriptive titles to his pictures—how could he? They are not pictures about things, but pictures about himself. In this sense they are probably much nearer to his music than to his poetry. In the poetry, so far at least as the content is concerned, he is not primarily an inventor, but rather the sensitive exponent of a racial or national tradition, and therefore his words are more profoundly sanctioned and more significant than those of any private genius could be; all India speaks and understands the same language. The poetry reveals nothing of the poet's personality, though it establishes his status. But the painting is an intimacy comparable to the publication of private cor-

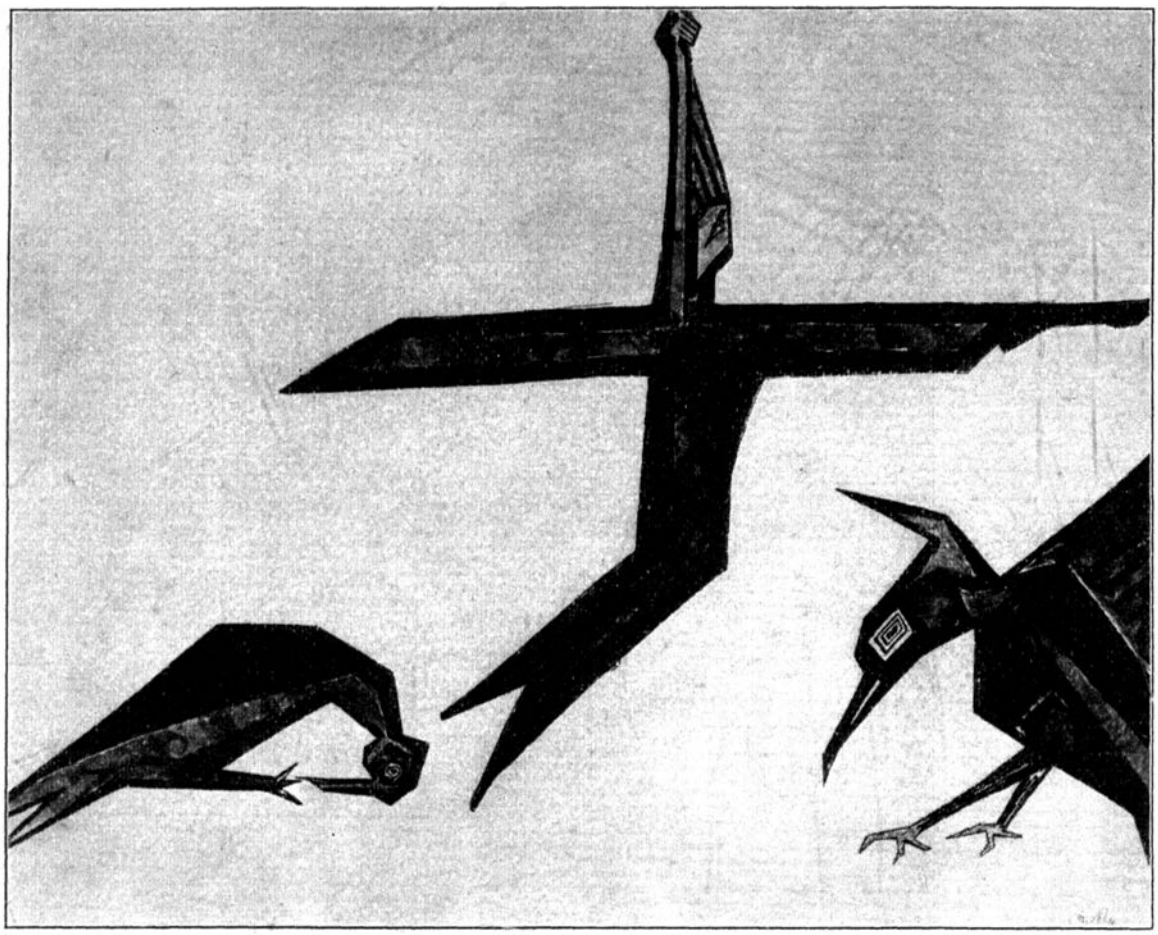
respondence. What a varied and colorful person is revealed! One picture, that might be taken for a representation of a cross between Shylock and Ivan the Terrible, has qualities strangely suggestive of a stained glass window; others, in the poet's own words, depict "the temperate exaggeration of a probable animal that had unaccountably missed its chance of existence", or a "bird that can only soar in our dreams and find its nest in some hospitable lines that we may offer it in our canvas"; in others, human seriousness is made ridiculous by animal caricature; others representing a crowd attentive to a flute player may embody some allusion both to Krishna, and to the call of the infinite in the poet's own songs; another is a dancing Ganesa, far removed from the canons of Hindu iconography; the "Conference of Birds" is incidentally a comment on the League of Nations; there are portraits, including one of a young Bengali girl, the direct antithesis of "Ivan the Terrible"; groupings of colored flowers; pages of actual manuscript; and soft ethereal landscapes. The manner is as varied as the theme, and this despite the fact that all the pictures are done with a pen, usually the back of a fountain pen, and colored inks or tints; any method is employed that may be available or that may suggest itself at the moment. The artist, like a child, invents his own technique as he goes along; nothing has been allowed to interfere with zest. The means are always adequate to the end in view: this end is not "Art" with a capital A, on the one hand—nor, on the other, a merely pathological self-expression; not art intended to improve our minds, nor to provide for the artist himself an "escape"; but without ulterior motives, truly innocent, like the creation of a universe.

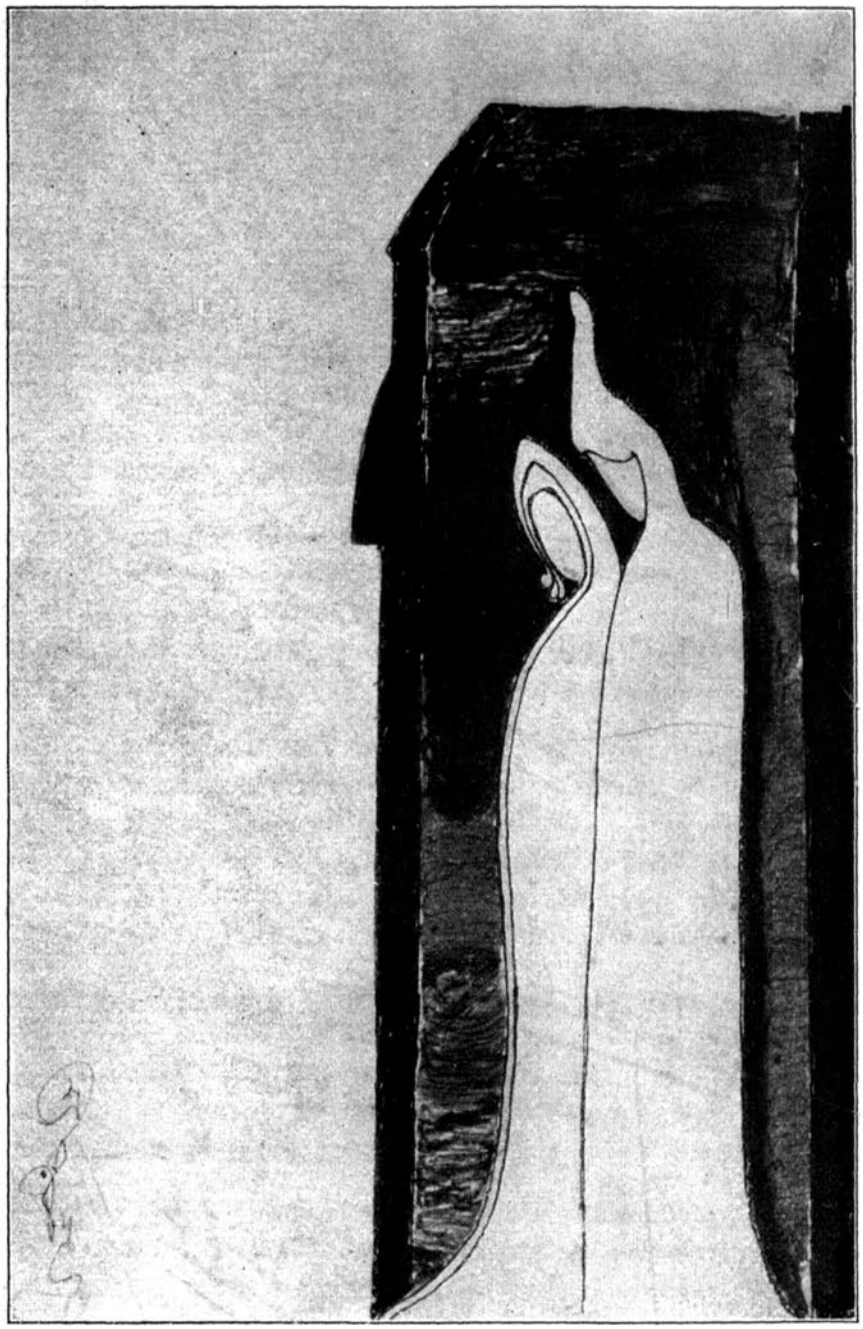
ANANDA K. COOMARASWAMY

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

October 20, 1930.







The Language of Pictures

The world of sound is a tiny bubble in the silence of the infinite. The Universe has its only language of gesture, it talks in the voice of pictures and dance. Every object in this world proclaims in the dumb signal of lines and colours the fact that it is not a mere logical abstraction or a mere thing of use, but it is unique in itself, it carries the miracle of its existence.

There are countless things which we know but do not recognise them in their own dignity of truth, independent of the fact that they are injurious or beneficial. It is enough that a flower exists as a flower, but my cigarette has no other claim upon me for its recognition but as being subservient to my smoking habit.

But there are other things which in their dynamic quality of rhythm or character make us insistently acknowledge the fact that they *are*. In the book of creation they are the sentences that are underlined with coloured pencil and we cannot pass them by. They seem to cry to us "See, here I am," and our mind bows its head and never questions, "Why are you?"

In a picture the artist creates the language of undoubted reality, and we are satisfied that we see. It may not be the representation of a beautiful woman but that of a commonplace donkey, or of something that has no external credential of truth in nature but only in its own inner artistic significance.

People often ask me about the meaning of my pictures. I remain silent even as my pictures are. It is for them to *express* and not to *explain*. They have nothing ulterior behind their own appearance for the thoughts to explore and words to describe and if that appearance carries its ultimate worth then they remain, otherwise they are rejected and forgotten even though they may have some scientific truth or ethical justification.

It is related in the drama of Sakuntala, how one busy morning there stood humbly before the maiden of the forest-hermitage a stranger youth who did not give his name. Her soul acknowledged him at once without question. She did not *know* him, but only *saw* him and for her he was the artist God's masterpiece to which must be offered the full value of love.

Days passed by. There came at her gate another guest, a venerable sage who was formidable. And, sure of his claim to a dutiful welcome, proudly he announced "I am here!" But she missed his voice, for it did not carry with it an inherent meaning, it needed a commentary of household virtue, pious words of sanction which could assign a sacred value to a guest, the value that was not of the irresponsible art, but of moral responsibility. Love is kindred to art, it is inexplicable. Duty can be measured by the degree of its benefit, utility by the profit and power it may bring, but art by nothing but itself. There are other factors of life which are visitors that come and go, Art is the guest that comes and remains. The others may be important, but art is inevitable.