



Research Paper

The Forgotten Bengali Cubist Artist: Gaganendranath Tagore

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Abstract: Cubism is a modern art movement that ultimately began in Europe during the early twentieth century. It has been considered as one of the most influential art movements of the said century, pioneered by artists like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braques.

In India, Gaganendranath Tagore is considered as the earliest proponent of cubism. Along with his brother Abanindranath Tagore he was an exponent of **Bengal School of Art**. Instead of strictly following the cubist art style, he actually blended it with his own style which was already far from the traditional Indian type of art. He agreed with the simplicity and stark essentials of cubism. He also realized that light and space, as expressive values, had never been used in Indian painting before. He sought to combine structure, stark simplicity of form, light, space and surface design in a coherent whole, never achieved by any Indian painter, this far.

This essay has tried to trace back the uniqueness of Gaganendranath's cubist style.

Keywords: cubism, Gaganendranath, painting, artists

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Cubism was a revolutionary art movement that began in the early twentieth century in Europe which drastically changed the "idea of art". The origin of the movement is credited to artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque who were frequent collaborators, rivals and friends. In using such style, objects are analyzed, broken up and reassembled in an abstracted form to depict them from a multitude of viewpoints- thus showing the object in a much wider context. By 1912, most cubist artists had simplified their compositions by synthesizing forms.

However, cubist influence in art was not restricted to Europe. It reached far into the richness of Asian art, most particularly in India. Gaganendranath (1867-1938) was an Indian painter and cartoonist of the **Bengal School of Art**. While he initially pushed for the movement of the Bengal School, he eventually explored one art style after another, thus pioneering experiments in modernist painting. It is for this reason that he was described to have several phases in his art career, with each bearing a particular style in mind.

Gaganendranath's paintings are divided into five phases. The first phase (1905-1911) consisted of scenes from Calcutta, Puri landscapes and portraits. The second phase (1911-1915) also known as Chaitanya series, related to paintings of the spiritual leader Chaitanya and his devotees. This phase also included paintings of pilgrims. The third phase (1915-1921) also known as "Vichitra Period" consisted of his cubist experiments. The last phase (1925-1930) consisted of post-cubist paintings. I will be focusing on the third phase of his paintings which represents his experiments with cubism.

Gaganendranath was a rare artist who developed a highly-individual style by cherry-picking elements of oriental and Western art that made his paintings quite outstanding at a time when the **Bengal School** introduced by his younger brother Abanindranath Tagore. Gaganendranath is acknowledged as being the first Indian artist to create works in the cubist style, but he was perhaps too radical a thinker to be appreciated in his time as well as ours.

The first series of cubistic paintings that we know of by Gaganendranath were reproduced in "RUPAM" in 1922, along with an article by Stella Kramrisch which are definitely referred to as cubist by the author who titled her article significantly as **An Indian Cubist**. The reviewers too referred to the work of Gaganendranath during 1920s as cubist.

The most typical and fully worked out paintings of so-called cubistic phase from the second half of the twenties are the two versions of **Destruction of Dwarka (Swarnapuri)** the two versions of **Satbai Champa** the

cover of Rabindranath's play *Rakta Karbi (Red Orleanders)* which was published in 1925 and the maze like paintings in black and white in *Kasturbhai Lalbhai* collection.

Gaganendranath's genius is overshadowed by the towering personality of his uncle, Rabindranath, as well as by his younger brother, Abanindranath, whose life and work are better documented. But like both of them, he was not averse to experimentation and had a deeply analytical mind. Gaganendranath was introduced to painting at St. Xavier's Collegiate School but it was only after their Jorasanko residence played host to three Japanese artists, including the eminent Okakura, between 1902 and 1903, that he began to take lessons from Harinarayan Basu, then principal of the government art school. Thereafter, he began his first series on crows with Chinese ink and brush.

However, his cubist paintings became a major issue for some critics who debated over the validity of this influence on an Indian artist in light of the nationalist art movement in the form of the *Bengal School*, which Tagore was part of. Despite this, there are some who have acknowledged the cubistic influence on Tagore's paintings in the last two phases of his artistic career. According to Dineshchandra Sen, although Abanindranath was more enthusiastic than Gaganendranath about collecting and archiving traditional Indian art, the latter did take part in removing the European paintings from the walls of their drawing rooms and replacing them with indigenous artifacts including Mughal and Rajput paintings. On the other hand, Nandalal Bose was quite comfortable with Gaganendranath's cubist take is evident when he wrote, "(Gaganendranath Tagore) was inspired by the experimentalist art of modern Europe, but it did not sweep him off his feet, indeed his later paintings are splendid examples of how fresh forms and moods can be created through a complete assimilation of the alien and the familiar". By emphasizing on the aspect of assimilation Nandalal Bose was openly declaring his faith in eclecticism.

Stella Kramrisch, an American art historian who specialized in Indian art and Hinduism, commented that while Indian cubism is a paradox due to the stark contrast of the two styles, Gaganendranath Tagore successfully reinvented cubism by evoking and then tracing formal tendencies. She further asserted this point by saying that although cubism was ultimately discovered in Europe, its simplicity in a formalist way was neither significantly different nor unique from the objectives of the other forms of non-illusionist art. Hence, Tagore's already simplistic style using light and space worked well with the cubist style.

Gaganendranath can be considered as the one who introduced cubism in India through his modernist experiments with the said style. Instead of strictly following the cubist art style, he actually blended it with his own style. Unlike his contemporaries at that time, Tagore worked with light and space in his paintings, two concepts that had never been used in Indian painting before. Coupling this with cubism, which mostly emphasized simplicity and structure, he sought to combine structure, the stark simplicity of form, light, space, and surface design in a coherent whole.

From the hustle and bustle of the urban scene his vision seem to soar high into a dream land, where he could curtain off everything that was brutal and ugly, and focus an eerie light on some flight of steps, on the courtyards and perhaps of a castle or on the palace of a fairy princess. Sometimes he used purely geometrical patterns in his paintings, but never allowed himself to make a cult of like the cubists. It was not his intention to produce these inanimate shapes as a kind of purposeless cerebral exercise. Sometimes he would use these patterns just to produce a kaleidoscopic effect of light, and make the glimmering rays to be deflected from facet of pillars, pyramids and prisms and then to be swallowed up by semi-lucent or total darkness. In his fancy he would be a loan rider of a black horse, and visit forbidden castles or palaces of snow, or he would set out on a voyage in a dream boat in quest of far unknown lands beyond the sea.



City in the Night, c. 1920/25



House of Dead, c. 1920/1925

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