

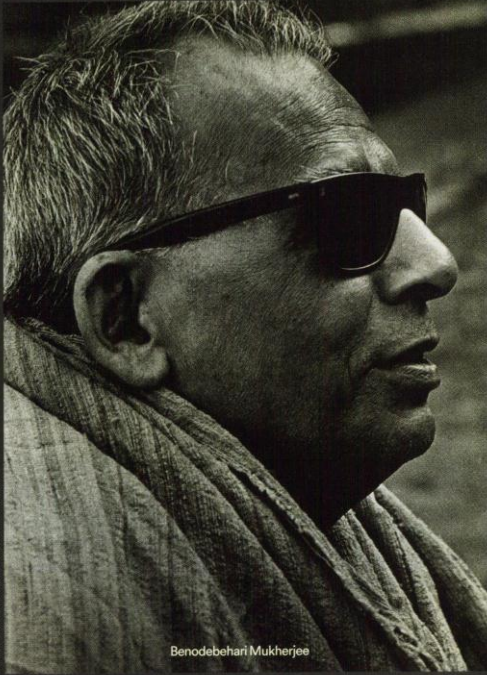
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ART

THE MASTER



The discovery of a handscroll by Benodebehari Mukherjee offers



Courtesy: NEHA GHOSH AND BATYAKI GHOSH


Benodebehari Mukherjee

In

art, the final chapter of an artist's life is usually mythologised, as if suggesting that creativity, when paired with longevity, can give birth to genius. While there may be some truth to this notion, one wonders why the world doesn't emphasise enough on the portrait of an artist as a young man. A new exhibition at the Kolkata Centre for Creativity (KCC) might help us gain some perspective on the subject. Held in collaboration with Gallery Rasa, *Scenes from Santiniketan & Benodebehari's Handscrolls* is an intriguing invitation to ponder over some of the themes related to the formative genius of Benodebehari Mukherjee (1904 - 1980). In his memoir *Chitrakar*, Mukherjee reflects, "An artist gets his personal insight or basic inspiration quite early in his life," further asserting, "it is thereafter enriched by experience and practice." At the heart of this ongoing exhibition is the eponymous handscroll depicting the spiritual landscape of Santiniketan, while the rest of the artworks provide a broader personal and historical context. Richa Agarwal, chairperson of KCC says, "The *Scenes from Santiniketan* scroll not only points towards Benodebehari Mukherjee's affinity for the world of nature, which was to become an important subject in most

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OF MURALS



Village Scenes

fresh insight into his early career devoted to nature *By Shaikh Ayaz*

of his works throughout his career but also marks his distinct difference from the Bengal School of Art. The exhibition also showcases his later works including the mural on the ceiling of Kala Bhavana hostel, which celebrates the trajectory of his artistic progress.”

What makes the handscroll *Scenes from Santiniketan* unique is that Mukherjee painted it at just 20. At 44.6 feet long, this particular work is among the earliest and largest handscrolls of this nature ever undertaken by the artist. It is being displayed for the very first time. With its deliberate choice of an austere colour palette (primarily, shades of ochre and olive green), the scroll evokes serenity — even as Mukherjee’s mature execution of the ink wash technique belies his youthful age. The show’s curator, R Siva Kumar, who is known for his extensive writings on Mukherjee and his curatorial expertise on the Santiniketan School, describes the scroll as “an early and captivating masterpiece”.

In a telephonic interview from Santiniketan where he continues to live even after his retirement as art history teacher from Kala Bhavana in 2021, Kumar explains that back in the early 1920s, the Birbhum district had a different topography with fewer trees

and shrubs and more arid fields. “This allowed for an unobstructed view of the entire landscape, making the handscroll an ideal format for capturing such panoramic images. What distinguishes this particular scroll is that even though Benodebehari has done such work throughout his life, none of them encompasses such a gamut of natural elements that defines the rural life of Santiniketan. From arid areas and woodlands to villages, Benodebehari weaves these various aspects into a single, comprehensive picture.” Landscapes are typically perceived as non-narrative but the handscroll format enabled artists like Benodebehari Mukherjee “to narrate the story of the nature around him through a seamless horizontal continuity.” Kumar perceives the act of browsing through a scroll as akin to a cinematic experience. “One views it like scenes of an absorbing journey,” he says, adding, “or to use another analogy, like the unfurling of a landscape viewed from a train window while you sit still on your seat.”

Drawn from East Asian traditions, handscrolls were commonly used in Kala Bhavana during the early 1920s. It is worth noting that Rabindranath Tagore, the visionary behind Visva-Bharati University, held a deep admiration for

Japanese culture. Though it was Nandalal Bose, Mukherjee’s mentor at Kala Bhavana, who played a crucial role in popularising handscrolls following his visit to the Far East in 1924, Kumar maintains that ultimately Mukherjee emerged as the foremost exponent of this artistic medium. Collotype reproductions of the Japanese and Chinese handscrolls were available at Kala Bhavana’s library, thanks to Tagore and others who carried them back from their trips abroad and it was here that Mukherjee likely had his first brush with East Asian arts. Particularly, the Chinese handscroll was renowned for its intimate portrayal of both calligraphy and imagery. In contrast, the Japanese handscroll has a rich history as an art form well-suited for narrative style paintings, and grand landscapes. Mukherjee’s trip to Japan and China in 1936-37 emphasises the influence of East Asian art on his career. Kumar says, “Among the Japanese artists, he was drawn to Sesshu Toyo and even the other Japanese painters he liked tended to work in a more Chinese manner.”

What sets Mukherjee apart in the pantheon of Indian modern art is his pioneering exploration of landscape art — a genre that was introduced to the subcontinent by itinerant European