

Reviving Tradition: The Artistic Renaissance in Colonial India through the Contributions of E.B. Havell and Abanindranath Tagore



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Abstract

This paper explores the pivotal contributions of E.B. Havell and Abanindranath Tagore to the artistic renaissance in colonial India. Their collaborative efforts significantly influenced the cultural and artistic landscape of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Havell, an English art historian and educator, opposed the prevailing Western art education system, promoting the incorporation of traditional Indian art forms. Abanindranath Tagore, a leading figure in modern Indian art, revitalized indigenous styles and pioneered the Wash' technique, merging Mughal and Rajput influences with his distinct creative approach. Together, they established the Bengal School of Art, which focused on Indian themes and aesthetics, aligning with the broader nationalist movement. This paper underscores their role in the formation of the Bengal School and their lasting impact on Indian art and cultural identity.

Key words : Reviving Tradition, Artistic Renaissance, Colonial India, E.B. Havell, Abanindranath Tagore

Research Paper

Introduction

The evolution of Indian art has been shaped by many cultural and religious influences throughout history. such as In the 17th century that a marked Western influence began to seep in, In term of realistic approach and techniques of perspective and chiaroscuro. The influence spread with increasing British political power in India following the setting up of the British East India company in 16th century, and more particular when schools of art were established in the metropolitan cities of Madras Calcutta and Bombay after the mid 19th century to impact training in western technique in a systematic manual. This was the so-called beginning of Modern Art in India. (Mago)

These art colleges have a contributed a lot to give Indian art a new Paradigm for its development. On the contrary, their European academic module of art training has not been accepted entirely by all, but their role cannot be neglected in the improvisation of Indian paintings. (Sarkar)

In the later half of the 19th century, both the direct administration of India by the British Crown and the technological change ushered in by the industrial revolution, had the effect of closely intertwining the economies of India and Great Britain.

The late 19th century witnessed a global cultural upheaval, with regions under colonial rule increasingly asserting their cultural identities. Beginning at the arrival of European artists to India in the late 18th century, before India was officially ruled by the British crown, the popular perceptions and ideas of art and artists on the ground began to change. (Cohen)

Western Art and Indian Nationalism

Under British colonial rule, Indian art and its traditions faced both neglect and active displacement. The establishment of the British art education system in the 19th century, such as the Government College of Art in Calcutta (1854), introduced European academic styles that emphasized realism, perspective, and oil painting

elements unfamiliar to Indian artists rooted in traditional techniques.

As Tapati Guha-Thakurta notes in *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, British art education systematized artistic training but simultaneously dismissed indigenous methods as “inferior” and “obsolete” (Guha-Thakurta 78). This ideological suppression coincided with growing nationalist movements, which demanded cultural rejuvenation as a response to colonial domination. In this climate, art became a means of resistance, reclaiming Indian identity through aesthetics.

E.B. Havell: Art Pedagogue and Visionary

Ernest Binfield Havell, as the principal of the Government College of Art in Calcutta from 1896, recognized the need to move beyond the European artistic framework. Havell firmly believed in the spiritual and aesthetic depth of Indian art traditions, such as the Ajanta murals, Mughal miniatures, and Rajput paintings. He argued that Indian art emphasized idealism and spirituality, contrasting the materialistic focus of Western academic art. In his seminal book, *Indian Sculpture and Painting* (1908), Havell asserts:



Fig.1 Photo of E.B.Havell

“The true test of Indian art lies in its power to inspire and uplift the human soul, not in its adherence to lifelike imitation” (Havell 142).

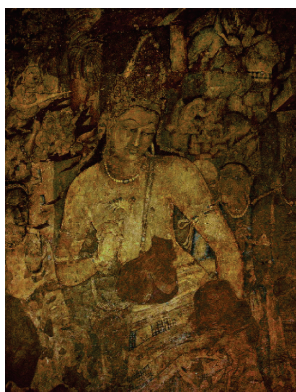


Fig.2 Ajanta Mural Painting Fig.3 Mughal Painting



Fig.4 Rajput miniature painting

Havell’s reforms at the Calcutta Art School included integrating traditional techniques, rejecting strict realism, and encouraging students to draw inspiration from Indian mythology, folklore, and classical art forms. His pedagogy laid the foundation for an artistic renaissance that celebrated indigenous creativity.

Despite criticism from his British contemporaries who labeled him as “unscientific” Havell’s advocacy of Indian art gained substantial support among Indian intellectuals and artists. His efforts ultimately bridged the colonial divide and legitimized traditional art as a source of pride.

Abanindranath Tagore: Inspiration behind the Bengal School

Abanindranath Tagore often regarded as the father of the Bengal School of Art, shared Havell’s vision of reviving Indian artistic traditions. Born into the illustrious Tagore family in 1871, Abanindranath trained initially under European painters but soon shifted his focus toward Indian classical and Mughal styles.

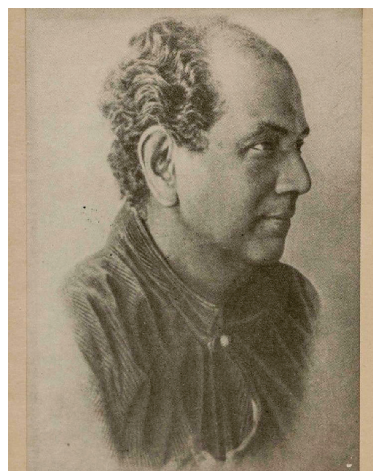


Fig.5 Photo of Abanindranath Tagore



Tagore's art embraced indigenous themes, techniques, and symbolism, offering an alternative to the Western academic style. His works such as *Bharat Mata*, *The Passing of Shah Jahan*, and *Krishna Lila* reflected an amalgamation of Indian miniature painting traditions and contemporary nationalist sentiment.

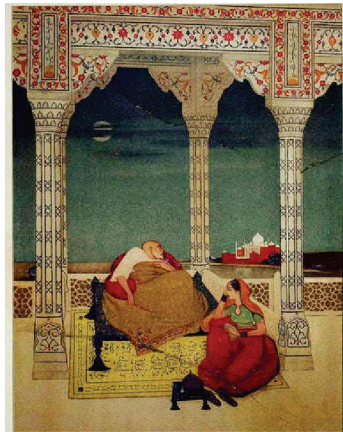
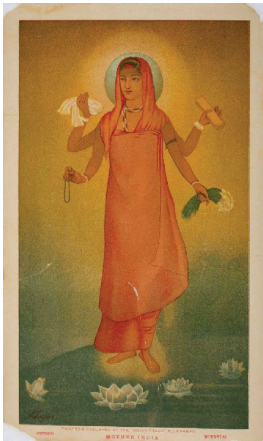


Fig 6 Bharat Mata Painting **Fig.7** The Passing of Shah Jahan

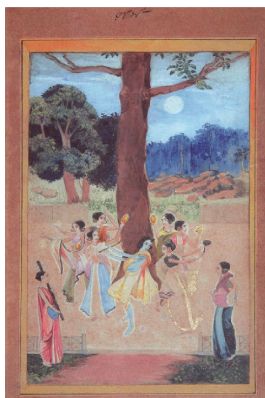


Fig.8 Krishna Lila

All the Above paintings are by Abanindranath Tagore

Bharat Mata (1905) Remains an iconic painting where a goddess-like figure embodies the spirit of a free and united India. The use of soft colors, symbolism, and religious imagery showcases Tagore's ability to fuse nationalism with spirituality.

Tagore believed that art should resonate with Indian sensibilities, much like its classical forms. As noted by R. Siva Kumar in *The Art of Abanindranath Tagore*, his art evoked a unique emotional depth "Abanindranath aimed to recreate a visual language that was not only Indian in form but also in essence" (Siva Kumar 112).

Through his innovative works, Abanindranath attracted a generation of disciples, including Nandalal Bose, who carried forward the Bengal School's legacy.

The Bengal School: Cultural Renaissance and National Identity

The Bengal School emerged as a significant artistic movement that redefined Indian art. Under Havell's reforms and Abanindranath's leadership, the School promoted techniques like wash painting and revived ancient Indian art styles such as the Ajanta frescoes and Persian-influenced Mughal miniatures.

The Bengal School resonated with Indian nationalists seeking cultural symbols of resistance. Art historian Partha Mitter, in *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, describes the Bengal School as "a counter-narrative to colonial dominance" (Mitter 134). The School not only revived Indian heritage but also inspired modern art movements that sought to balance tradition and innovation.

Critiques and Legacy Despite its significance, the Bengal School faced criticism for being excessively nostalgic and elitist. Some modernists, like Rabindranath Tagore, critiqued the movement for idealizing the past rather than engaging with contemporary realities. Nevertheless, the Bengal School played a foundational role in shaping India's modern art trajectory.

Its influence can be seen in the works of Nandalal Bose, who created murals for the Haripura Congress (1938), blending tradition with nationalist symbolism. Similarly, the Bengal School influenced post-independence art, reaffirming its lasting relevance.

Finding

E.B. Havell and Abanindranath Tagore played a pivotal role in reviving and promoting traditional Indian art forms.

Their collaborative efforts led to the establishment of the Bengal School of Art, which became a major cultural movement in India, focused on re-establishing indigenous artistic values and aesthetics.

The movement laid the foundation for future Indian modernism and had a lasting impact on subsequent generations of Indian artists, serving as a key moment in India's cultural renaissance.

Conclusion

The artistic renaissance in colonial India, spearheaded by E.B. Havell and Abanindranath Tagore, marked a crucial turning point in Indian art history. By reviving traditional forms and challenging colonial aesthetics, they created a movement that resonated with India's

cultural identity and nationalist aspirations. The Bengal School not only celebrated the country's artistic heritage but also paved the way for modern Indian art. This renaissance stands as a testament to the power of art in reclaiming cultural pride and resisting colonial subjugation. The legacy of Havell and Tagore endures as a beacon of India's artistic spirit—a revival that continues to inspire artists and historians alike.

Figure Reference

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