Kalighat Icons

Paintings from 19th Century Calcutta

10th October 1998 - 3rd January 1999



Lady putting a rose in her hair NMWA 11610

These fresh and charming coloured drawings in the 'Kalighat' style were probably acquired in Calcutta around 1880. They have never been exhibited in their entirety before. They are the work of professional artists called *patuas* in Bengali, who painted in their distinctive style thousands of such *pats*. These were sold for the equivalent of a penny each at markets and fairs in and around Calcutta, mostly at the gates of the famous temple at Kalighat. This popular art form thrived through the 19th century, but had died out by the 1930s.

Their appeal is direct but complex. With their bold simplifications, strong lines, vibrant colours and visual rhythms, these drawings have a surprising affinity with Modern Art. Yet their subjects and intentions are very specific to the time and place in which they were produced. Part of their mystery lies in the fact that they are a hybrid of east and west, combining traditions and techniques which were both Bengali and British.

In August 1690, when the East India Company founded its trading post in a cluster of rural marketplaces on the east bank of the River Hooghly, a distributory of the Ganga, there was probably already a religious centre at Kalighat, a few miles south. According to Bengali Hindu belief, in mythical times, a portion of the dismembered body of the Goddess Sati had landed here. This was preserved in the temple altar as a *palladion*, giving the temple a special claim to sanctity as a *pitha*. As the 18th century progressed, the British

asserted themselves against the distant and ever more weak Mughal Emperor in Delhi, and in 1765, in a surprising and lavish *puja* of thanksgiving at Kalighat, the Company celebrated its accession to power over Eastern India. Calcutta was now the new political heart of India and the centre of an arc of power that ultimately swept from Aden to Hong Kong.

By the time these drawings were produced, the town had grown into a thriving industrial and business centre with a population of just under half a million. As the chief port, it was the place through which cultural influences entered India from the West. The pursuit of knowledge, especially of the arts and sciences, was just as important to the transplanted 18th century gentlemen in Calcutta as it was at home. Many were competent amateur artists who sketched and painted the landscape in watercolour. They trained Indian artists to record the natural history of India as part of a stocktaking survey of the newly acquired country, providing them with imported paper and western-prepared watercolour pigments. As well as importing books and engravings by the thousand which found their way into the bookstalls, bazaars and auction houses, the colonialists encouraged the founding of printing presses in the city. In 1809, the first mill producing machine-made paper was opened. This ready supply of cheap paper, together with the western pigments, was a formative influence on the emergence of the Kalighat style of paintings.

India has always had a long tradition of story telling using visual aids. For centuries in Bengal, itinerant professional artists known as *patuas* or *chitrakars* painted pictures - *pattas* - on cloth or handmade paper, using organic pigments and vegetable dyes. These pictures were often sewn together to make long scrolls of sequential images. The itinerants toured rural villages, unrolling the relevant frame as they recited or sang the narrative. *Patua* families living in the rural areas near Calcutta, mainly centred in the Medinipur district, continue to this day the tradition of painting and singing stories; the great epics, like the Ramayana, are interspersed with more contemporary happenings, such as 'The Steamer Disaster of Kakdwip' or 'The Bangladeshi War'.

As the East India Company tightened its grip over the whole economy of the area, some *patuas* moved to the city, which was fast becoming the biggest bazaar in Bengal. Their presence in Calcutta is first mentioned in a volume, Les Hindoos, published in 1806 by the Belgian artist-engraver, Baltazar Solvyns. Among the many illustrations of the varied crafts and trades practised in the city, Solvyns included an etching of a *patua*, pictured with his coconut shells containing pigments, earthernware pots decorated for sale, and, in the background, a clay image of the Goddess Saraswati carrying a veena. The text elaborates :

'The Hindoo painters are also sculptors, they carve and colour images of their gods and there is great consumption of them, both because they are everywhere exposed to public view and because some of their feasts terminate by throwing them into water, the Puttooas (sic) *never want for employment.... There are also Puttooas who make only pictures and drawings, but always upon the same subjects, Mr Solvyns never having seen any other represented than their deities...'.*

The *patuas* who had moved to Calcutta also made religious images in unbaked clay and decorated earthernware to supplement their earnings, as their descendants in Kalighat continue to do today. It is interesting that Solvyns, who left India in 1803, refers to 'pictures and drawings', suggesting that many had discarded the older format in favour of the single sheet picture by this date.

The new urban market had huge potential. In addition to residents, seasonal visitors to Calcutta, particularly pilgrims to the Kalighat shrine, wanted affordable souvenirs. By taking advantage of the plentiful supply of cheap machine-made paper and manufactured paints, and continuing the *pat* tradition of using family members to help with the production, the essential characteristics of the style emerged.

Designs were kept simple, to be repeated as often as required according to the popularity of the picture. The detailed draughtsmanship involved in the scrolls was abandoned. Following the style of some of the English prints found in the bazaars, the composition focused on the main figures, leaving the background mainly untouched. Occasionally a proscenium arch would indicate that the scene was set indoors, a tree outdoors, or lotus leaves suggested a river or the sea.



Siva begs food from Annapurna
NMWA 11629

Figures were outlined in pencil before the base colour was swiftly applied in broad, wet strokes. A darker hue was added to obtain the sculptural volume; in the most skilful hands this was applied before the base coat was fully dry to prevent tidemarks. Most faces were drawn in three-quarter profile, with moustaches or caste marks included when appropriate. The main features of eyes, nose and mouth followed a set formula, giving little indication of character, although the eyes of Siva are the notable exception to this rule. Finally, the silver ornamentation, a major feature of this collection, was added.The pigment is tin colloidal and the precise expertise of this detailed brushwork belies the notion that all of these paintings were rapidly produced at minimum cost.

Certain general canons or traditions of Hindu representation guided the Kalighat painter. Each Divinity had a particular meditational formula - *dhyan mantra* - which the painters sought to realise in line and colour, so the icon served as a manifestation - *prakash*, a coming into light. The traditional narratives relate the appearance and actions of the gods and goddesses with their complexions, poses, mounts and weapons as part of a tight iconography, which had to be depicted correctly to allow the devotee to meditate on the divinity in question. The gods and goddesses express through their complexions one or a combination of three characteristics or *gunas* : essence - *satva*, power and action - *rajas*, and chaotic power - *tamas*. These too had to be accurately realised; Saraswati, Goddess of Learning is pure white, Lakshmi, Goddess of Wealth, is reddish gold, her *satva* shining through worldly *rajas*, while Kali, with her power to dissolve the cosmos, is dark.



Lakshmi NMWA 11644

The Hindu gods provided the most popular subject. Siva, as Master of the Universe, controls all space and the five senses, but to the Bengali Hindu, he is also the forgetful god dressed in a tiger skin, quick to anger but easy to placate. Vishnu, who maintains the Universe and will end it when it has lost all virtue - *dharma*, appears in incarnations or *avatars* such as Rama, the ideal king, and Krishna, the pastoral god. Most popular of all were images of the Mother Goddess - *Shakti*. She could be seen as the warrior goddess Durga who protects every living being, as Kali who frees devotees from fear, as Annapurna full of rice in the Autumn, as Parvati the Mountain God's daughter. These gods populated the painted stories, which drew on the great epics of Hindu India; among them, the Ramayana, which is well represented in this collection.

Each religious icon was part of a known narrative, and the inherent desire of a *patua* to tell a story is evident in the secular paintings. Even natural history subjects were the vehicle for illustrating proverbs. The artists painted a picture for as long as there was public interest. Sometimes a secular story would hit the headlines - the biggest of all was the Tarakeshwar Murder of 1873, reported in detail in newspapers and periodicals. Books were written about it, plays were acted, and sixteen different scenes illustrated by the Kalighat painters are to be found in various collections.



Nabin murders Elokeshi NMWA 11653

The painters also reflected the satirical theatre, which enjoyed great popularity during this period, in lampooning the rich Indian youths - *babus*, whose foppish antics were seen as a source of great amusement and ridicule. However, the courtesans were painted with respect shown for their educated taste in music and poetry, and their independent lives.

The three major religions of the city find their place in the paintings - Calcutta, because of the diversity of the immigrant cultures, was exceptionally cosmopolitan. In addition to the Hindu images, the important Muslim festival of Muharram is represented by two paintings in this collection *(Nos 16 and 17)*. It is entirely possible that many Kalighat artists accepted beliefs and practices from both the Hindu and Muslim faiths, as many of the scroll painters from Medinipur still do, to the extent of having two personal names, one from each tradition.

The Christian images of *Angel and stag (No 18)* and *Angel and Trumpet (No 19)* could have been taken from a number of sources, engravings of paintings, statues or illustrated religious tracts distributed by missionaries. There were several Christian missions in and around Calcutta. The Baptist, William Carey (1761-1834), founded one of the most active in 1800, and his mission was to have a profound influence on the education, publishing and journalism of Calcutta. Many Baptists from Wales joined this mission, a fact to which some attribute the sing-sing English accent of the native Calcuttan. It is known that some collections of Kalighat paintings now in European museums were brought back by returning missionaries.

The provenance, however, of the Cardiff collection is unknown prior to 1954 when they were transferred to the Art Department by the Archaeology Department, with the intimation they may have come from the old Cardiff Museum. Assuming they constitute a single group, it is likely that they were acquired in Calcutta at some date around 1873, the year of the Tarakeshwar Trial. The pencilled inscriptions, present on many of the religious subjects and one of the murder paintings, suggest that the original owner was French. Ink inscriptions in a similar style appear on works in other collections. These may have been intended as information for foreign buyers, but seem at times to have been unwittingly copied from an inaccurate source.



Angel and stag NMWA 11647

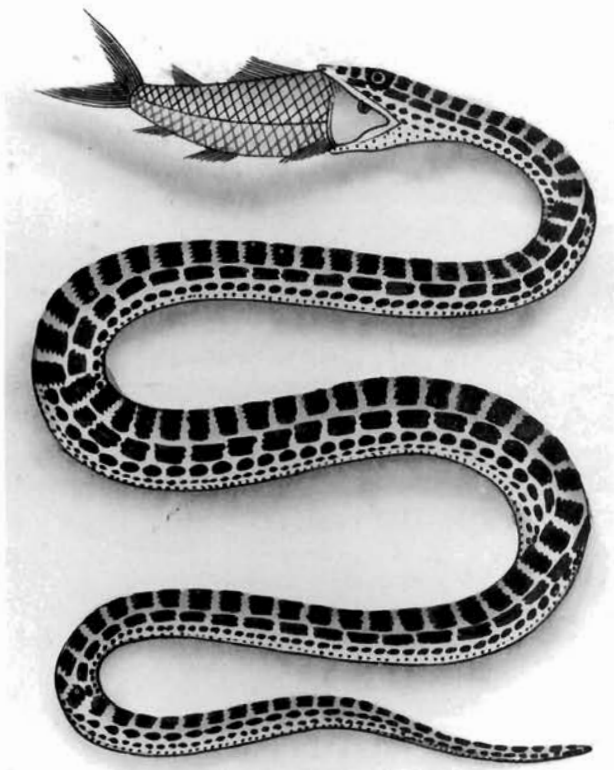
There is a painting similar to *Two Sepoys (No 2)* in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, which is known to have been bought in Calcutta in 1874. The Monier-Williams Collection, now in the Bodelian Library, Oxford and purchased between 1860-70, contains similar images, most notably the rarely-repeated *Snake swallowing a fish (No 20)*. The Cardiff collection is also close in choice of subject and style to the seventy three *pats* donated by Rudyard Kipling to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, in 1917. These were acquired by his father, an artist and principal of Lahore School of Art, in India, between 1865 and 1893. Both collections contain the rarity of the *Angel and Stag (No 18)*.

The art historian, Hana Knizkova, has identified the period around 1870 as *'the summit period of development, representing the highest artistic level of all surviving drawings of the Kalighat style'*. She notes *'the vivid line and mature brush technique. The figures are outstanding for their balance and harmonious faces and their movements are natural. The function of colour is clearly defined; they are chosen to supplement one another and create a balanced composition. Sensitive hues are used in shading, chiefly darker tones of the ground colour, and an attention is paid to the transition from one tint to another making certain it comes about in gradual fashion. The softly modelled, round face with a straight narrow nose, widely open eyes under high eyebrow arches and softly outlined lips is particularly remarkable'*.

The style deteriorated, victim of its own appeal. The woodcut prints of the same subjects produced in North Calcutta had challenged the handpainters throughout the century. To speed production, some families tried using a lithographic outline during the 1840s, but the practice did not survive many years. It was the chromolithograph, capable of even brighter colours and a huge print run, which ultimately undercut the handpainting families and took over the market.

Sadly, very few of the thousands of Kalighat *pats* produced during the 19th century survive in India today, either in museums or private collections. They were never bought by the rich, who considered them unworthy of the name of art. In the poorer homes, the lack of protection from both the humid climate and physical damage soon destroyed the inherently weak cheap paper on which the *patuas* had worked their art.

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Snake swallowing a fish NMWA 11611

Select Bibliography

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