

Mukul Dey's Sacred Tree, A Symbol of Hope to Decolonize Indian Art

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Abstract: Dey dedicated his life to the artistic revival of Indian art and adapted the traditionally Western technique of drypoint etching to this end, creating many prints that drew on Indian cultural heritage. The artistic revival of traditional imagery helped fuel the Swadeshi movement by fostering a sense of national pride and attempting to develop a new national style. Dey's artworks represent his hope to decolonize Indian art and restore Indian national pride.

Keywords: The Sacred Tree, Mukul Chandra Dey, Rabindranath Tagore, Bodhi tree, The Bengal School of Art.

1. Introduction

"[Art's] rebirth in India today can only take place if it be consciously made the servant and poet of the mighty dream of an Indian Nationality. For the same reason, there is little or nothing in England now that can be called Art. An imperialized people have nothing to struggle for, and without the struggle upwards there can be no great genius, no great poetry.

—Sister Nivedita, *Modern Review*, 1907[1]

Born in India in 1895 under the British Raj, Mukul Chandra Dey was a pioneer of drypoint etching during the time of the Indian independence movement and subsequent nation-building period. In his early years, he received his first artistic training while studying at Rabindranath Tagore's school at Santiniketan, located in West Bengal.[2] Although the school at the time did not have an art teacher, Dey's family connections to the Tagores—his father was a personal friend of Rabindranath's—enabled him to receive informal instruction from Abanindranath Tagore and Gagonendranath Tagore at the family's Jorasanko house.[3] At the age of 21, Dey began travelling internationally to study print-making techniques. In 1916, he travelled to Japan with Rabindranath Tagore to study under the artists Yokoyama Taikan and Kanzan Shimomura. During his stay, Dey was also introduced to Pan-Asianism, an early twentieth-century movement and ideology that advocated solidarity amongst Asian nations against Western imperialism. Later that same year, Dey travelled to Chicago to study etching with Bertha Jaques (whose work is also featured in this exhibition) and became a lifelong member of the Chicago Society of Etchers. In 1920, he traveled to the United Kingdom studied at Slade School of Fine Art and the Royal College of Art in London. He returned to India bringing with him both a knowledge of Western print-making techniques and a familiarity with the British system for art pedagogy, knowledge which he utilized during his later appointment as Principle of the Government School of Art in Calcutta.[4]

Along with his early mentor Abanindranath Tagore, Mukul Dey became a leading figure of the Bengal School of Art, which sought to develop a national style that at once drew on and modernized India's rich artistic heritage (especially Mughal miniatures and Buddhist cave paintings) in support of the Swadeshi movement for Indian self-sufficiency and independence.[5] Dey dedicated his life to the artistic revival

of Indian art and adapted the traditionally Western technique of drypoint etching to this end, creating many prints that drew on Indian cultural heritage. The artistic revival of traditional imagery helped fuel the Swadeshi movement by fostering a sense of national pride and attempting to develop a new national style.[6] Dey's artworks represent his hope to decolonize Indian art and restore Indian national pride.

1.1. The Sacred Tree

Mukul Dey's *Sacred Tree* (1927) can be situated in this context (Fig. 1). This print was created with Dey's signature drypoint etching technique on thin laid paper. The work dominated by a gigantic tree—a *figus religiosa*, known as the sacred Bodhi tree—that is potted in a large urn. The tree is situated in the middle of the work and surrounded by people coming to the tree to make offerings or ask for its blessings. The quality of line is much softer than that produced by traditional etching techniques, giving the work a sense of animation and temporal extension. The overall composition of the print can be divided into three parts, the bottom of the artwork, which is composed of eleven figures, and one big planter for the sacred tree; the middle is the main body of the tree, which is filled with a variety of small animals masterfully depicted by the artist; and the upper region of the print features four kinnaras—celestial musicians traditionally depicted as half-bird, half-human—floating within two clouds.

The human figures at the bottom of the composition adopt various postures that point to the tree's significance as an object of devotion and adoration. Four female figures kneel and bow in front of the large urn, loosely forming an inverted triangle that frames the tree. To each side of these women, additional figures approach the tree with tributes. The gazes, postures, and even the lines of the individuals' clothing all direct attention to the Bodhi tree that presides over the composition, encouraging viewers to similarly raise their gaze upwards in admiration.

The tree itself is expertly modelled with a wealth of subtle tones that add a sense of dimension and animation to its mass of leaves. So intricate is the design that, at first glance, the viewer might not notice that the tree is also teeming with life. Hidden amongst its leaves are many animals—close inspection reveals squirrels, birds, and small monkeys that enliven its verdant canopy. These animals point to the complexity of the tree's meaning, suggesting that it holds

significance both as an object of religious devotion and a place of refuge for a host of small creatures. The overall impression is one of harmony between the human, animal, and vegetal, presided over by the celestial figures of the kinnaras.



Figure 1. Mukul Dey, Sacred Tree. 1927, drypoint etching. University Transfer from Max Epstein Archive, Carrie B. Neely Bequest, 1940, Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, 1967.116.540.

1.2. The Bengal School of Art

As Tapati Guha-Thakurta has observed, in the Bengal art scene of the turn of the twentieth-century, British art historians, art educators, and cultural authorities attempted to “[remodel] attitudes and aesthetic preferences, [...] fostering a new code of ‘legitimate’ taste.”[7] The art teacher Ernest Binfield Havell, for instance, attempted to reform the art pedagogy of the Calcutta School of Art by encouraging his students to emulate Mughal miniatures. Although some artists criticized his approach as retrograde, Havell’s methods received the support of Dey’s mentor, Abanindranath Tagore, who was also interested in the possibility of developing a new national style inspired by Mughal miniatures. Tagore’s influence led to the emergence of the Bengal School of Art. Concerned with the future of Indian art, these artists were interested in fostering an inventive revival of Indian artistic traditions. They also questioned the educational system of the British Raj and the attempt of colonial authorities to influence Indian aesthetics and ways of life.[8]

This group of artists, which included Mukul Dey, eventually developed a style called the “Indian style of painting,” which they conceived of in relation to the aforementioned Swadeshi movement, which advocated for a boycott of imported foreign goods, especially English cloths and encouraged Indians to buy Indian-made products and materials. The main drive of the Bengal school of art movement came from a desire for independence and a

perceived need to combat the overt westernization of Indian culture. In a letter Abanindranath Tagore wrote to his friend, he described his concerns about this process:

“We are no longer satisfied that our son should set up home with a plain homely wife; we are now busy searching for a mem [Western] bride to bring home. We are no longer happy that our Kala-Lakshmi [the goddess of the arts], the innocent Hindu girl, with kajal in her eyes, vermilion on her forehead, clothed in a resplendent Benarasi sari, will brighten up with the soft tinkle of her anklets our lives and as Griha-Lakshmi [goddess of the home] bring to it beauty and prosperity. We want a bride we can pass off as a memsaheb. We no longer care for the goddess on a lotus seat, blessing us with her protection. We desire instead that half-undressed another woman, reclining on a couch, portrayed on a gilded frame, preening with an ostrich- feather fan in hand.”[9]

From this letter, we can see that the individuals like Tagore had become fully aware of the westernization of Indian culture, society, and minds and were deeply concerned with this development. The rise of the Indian middle class also helped foster a demand for artworks representing the Indian traditions and aesthetics. At the same time, the recovery and collection of Indian artistic heritage during the nineteenth and early twentieth century helped fuel an interest in artistic revivals. With the brewing Swadeshi movement and Indian independence movement, the call for Indian art for an Indian nation grew louder.

Mukul Dey was trained as an artist in this broad historical context. He understood his practice as an opportunity to contribute to the development of a strong national culture during this critical phase in the Indian independence movement. Like many of his artists and colleagues, he traveled to ancient ruins to help recover and promote traditional motifs and aesthetic forms.[10] Dey was deeply concerned by the loss and neglect of India’s cultural sites and published a number of books that aimed to reintroduce Indians to their cultural heritage. In one of these, *Birbhum Terracottas* (1959), which documented the terracotta works depicting folk tales and deities from the temples of Bengal, Dey lamented that these sites were “neglected” and “forgotten by villages,” pointing to a loss of Indian culture not only in urban centers, but also in the countryside.[11]

This book represented a continuation of Dey’s lifelong effort to recover and disseminate Indian artistic heritage. Early in his career, Dey undertook an arduous journey to the caves at Ajanta and Bagh to copy Buddhist frescos from the fifth century, publishing an illustrated account of his journey in 1925, entitled *My Pilgrimages to Ajanta and Bagh*. [12] When he encountered them, the frescoes were much damaged by not only natural forces, but also by vandalism. The actions of British officials also contributed to this vandalism. For instance, a large portion of the Ajanta frescoes had been removed by a British captain and sold at an auction house on Bond Street, eventually arriving at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Although Dey’s anger at the destruction of frescoes in Ajanta caves was strong, he is also expressed appreciation for the preservation of artistic heritage, even when undertaken by foreign museums, and saw himself as contributing to this effort. In one section of the book, he describes his process of copying and tracing the damaged frescos. He carefully traced the image from the wall, then transferred it to another sheet of paper more suitable for painting. He then applied color to the paper, and later, when the British Museum collected some of his works, he was happy to see it being shown and well

preserved.[13] The love Mukul Dey had for art surpassed the narrowness of nationalism, and he perhaps recognized the value that preserving and exhibiting Indian artistic heritage—even under the bitter conditions of colonization—might have for the future artists and citizens of an independent India.

Indeed, Dey's encounter with the frescoes at Ajanta and Bagh, as well as sculptural fragments and reliefs in temples around Bengal, served as an important inspiration for his own printmaking and painting practice. Yet it would be wrong to consider Dey nothing more than a revivalist. Rather, Dey and the artists of the Bengal School of Art sought to develop a new artistic language that would cultivate a sense of national pride and contribute to the project of building an independent Indian nation. His was a project that looked both simultaneously to the past and the future.

2. Conclusion

With this in mind, we can return to Dey's Sacred Tree. At first glance, the print might seem like nothing more than a traditional depiction of a traditional religious motif, one whose concern with the natural world has little to say the political struggle that animated Dey's historical context. However, by contextualizing the print within the project of the Bengal School of Art and Dey's own commitment to the recovery of Indian artistic heritage, it becomes possible to understand the work as an attempt to develop a modern national aesthetics. This meant not only returning to Indian cultural traditions and motifs, but also reinventing them. Characteristics such as the use of the Western medium of drypoint etching to depict a traditional theme, the three-dimensionality of the subtly modelled tree, and the naturalism of its approach to human figures, animals, and vegetation all speak to Dey's efforts to connect with his lineage as an Indian artist while at the same time developing a modern visual language that expressed his hopes and dreams for a newly independent India.

References

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- [2] Satyasri Ukil, "Mukul Dey: Pioneering Indian Graphic Artist," Mukul Dey Archives, accessed December 8, 2021, <http://www.chitralkha.org/#:~:text=Photo%3A%20Keisuke%20InanoIndian,of%20drypoint%20Detaching%20in%20India>. The Santiniketan school represents the origins of today's Kala Bhavana (Institute of Fine Arts) at Visva-Bharati University.
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