

Kalighat Paintings



The Kalighat school of painting is perhaps the first school of painting in India that is truly modern as well as popular. With their bold simplifications, strong lines, vibrant colours and visual rhythm, these watercolour drawings, usually called *pats*, have a surprising affinity to modern art. Yet their subjects and intentions are very specific to their time and place, far removed from the world of today. Part of the mystery of their distinctiveness lies perhaps in the fact that they are a fusion produced by a meeting of the East and the West, of ideas and techniques British as well as Bengali, modern as well as traditional.

They are the work of professional Bengali artists called *patuas* who painted thousands of such *pats* in their own style and sold them for two or four *pice* each (one *pice*=1 penny approximately) at temples, markets and fairs in and around Calcutta and, most famously, at the gates of the bustling temple at Kalighat in the southern part of the city. This popular cultural form thrived all through the 19th century and died out during early decades of the 20th century.

After the British East India Company gained control over Eastern India, Calcutta became the new political heart of India, and the center of an arc of power that soon swept from Aden to Hong Kong and it was this city through which profound cultural influences entered India from the West, principally Britain. The English had carried their penchant for watercolours to India, and engaged themselves in training local artists in drawing and watercolours of their own style, chiefly to record landscapes, monuments and natural history. The first paper mill was started as early as in 1809, and the ready availability of factory-made watercolours and cheap paper made the biggest difference to the emergence of the Kalighat style.

For centuries there had existed in the rural districts outside Calcutta, professional painters (*patuas*) whose occupation was to paint scrolls and visit markets and fairs to display them, reciting their related narratives. Their medium is modern mill-made paper but their colours are still traditional organic and vegetable dyes and the use gum Arabic as a binder.

During the early 19th century, enterprising generations of the *patuas* saw Calcutta as the biggest market place of them all. There are families of artists living in the Kalighat area today, who are descended from the last of the watercolorists. They continue to intermarry with Medinipur *patuas*, and make life-size straw and unbaked clay images of divinities for the rituals of Hindu Calcutta. The 1806 engraving of a *patua* by Solvyns clearly shows their multiple means of livelihood-painting *pats*, moulding images and making earthenware pots. One striking result of this facility of modeling clay in the 'round' was the ease with which volume was represented in Kalighat drawings. This is rare in Indian art. The Kalighat artists clearly translated their sculptural sensibility to their drawings. However, the need to represent volume on two-dimensional surfaces was also certainly in response to Western examples.

In Calcutta, the *patuas* adopted the new format of single rectangular panels. They adapted stylistic features like the plain background left empty. (Space in traditional Indian painting is never empty). This focusing on the main figures while excluding the background was probably influenced by contemporary English portrait prints. Their style evolved in response to the

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Cultural Calendar for February 2007

February 2

Bharatha Natyam Recital by Prakruthi Kolay from India
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m.

February 13

Film: Kabuliwala (with English subtitles)
Language: Hindi
Directed by: Hemen Gupta
Venue & Time: ICC 5.30 p.m. Duration : 3 hrs

February 20

Film: Mitr (with English subtitles)
Language: Hindi
Directed by: Revathy
Venue & Time: ICC 5.30 p.m. Duration : 3 hrs

February 23

Violin recital by Ms. E. M. Indrani Edirisooriya, Lecturer - University of Visual and Performing Arts
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m.

February 26

Film: Arth (with English subtitles)
Language: Hindi
Directed by: Mahesh Bhatt
Venue & Time: ICC 5.30 p.m. Duration : 3 hrs

February 28

Hindustani Vocal Recital by Ms. Chamila Edwards
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m.

(Admission to all programmes is free on first come first served basis)



market which was potentially huge. Price and portability were constraints. So single frames of colour drawings of religious icons, priced within an anna each, was the right solution.

Designs were kept simple to be repeated as often as required according to the popularity of a picture. The detailed draughtsmanship of the scroll painters was abandoned. A strong naturalism was evident in the work. Figures were outlined in pencil before the base colour was swiftly applied in broad wet strokes. Colours were vivid. A darker hue was added to obtained the sculptural volume before the base coat was dry, to avoid tide marks. Faces were mostly drawn in three-quarter profile. Eyes nose mouth beard/moustache distinguishing marks were added according to formula. This simplification resulted in the total number of figures

being severely reduced. Silver ornamentation, a major feature of the better and early examples, was added finally, using colloidal tin with a precise expertise and detailed brushwork, that belies the notion that these paintings were hurriedly produced.

There are a variety of themes in the Kalighat repertoire. The repertoire was essentially a set of religious icons. However, the flow of life in the surrounding world found its place, to form the border of the religious center. Calcutta and its mores were in the themselves a vast source: the Englishment, the newly modish Calcuttans, the soldiers, the traders, the luxurious lives of courtesans around Kalighat, Calcutta's resident rich-freed from the conservative constraints of

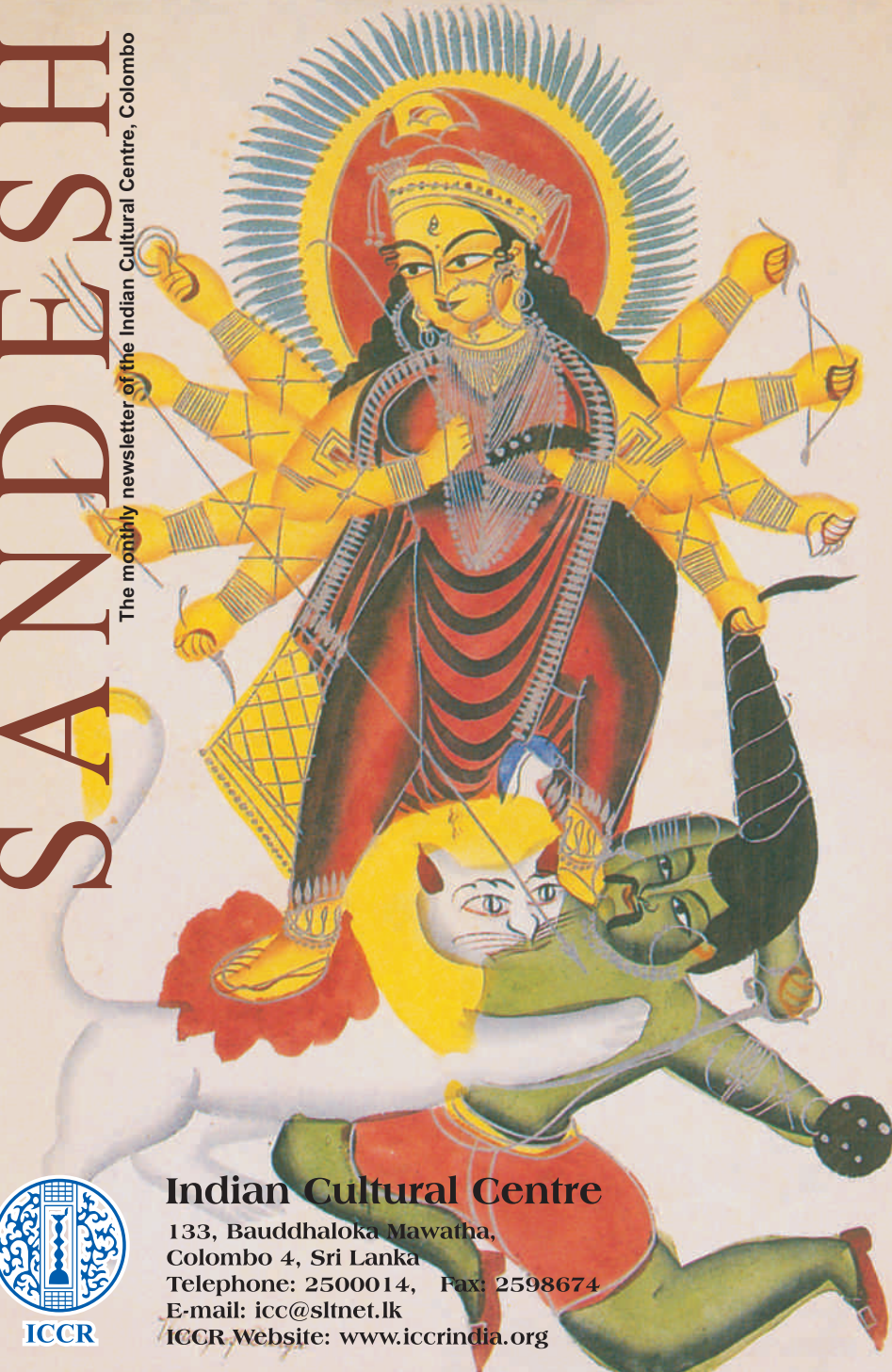
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Kalighat paintings, Durga slays Mahishasur, watercolour over pencil drawing with colloidal tin accents

Past Events

13th December

“Sounds of Christmas” by Soul Sounds , directed by Soundarie David



The award winning choir presented well known Christmas carols and

songs, together with a sing-a-long for audience participation. The programme commenced with the speech by the Deputy High Commissioner Shri A.Manickam. The concert was aimed to spread the joy of Christmas, with the sound of unique harmonies, together with the warmth of lovely voices. Indian Cultural Centre has been regularly celebrating important festivals of India and this show too was a part of it.

19th December

“The Indian Experience” – A cookery demonstration of Indian dishes by Chef Pawan Singh Rana of Taj Samudra Hotel



An enthusiastic audience gathered at the Centre to witness the expert Chef Pawan Singh Rana of the Hotel Taj Samudra turn out mouth watering Indian

cuisine. Some of the items prepared were 'Kadai chicken', 'Shahi tukuda' and 'Haryali kebab'.

15th December

“Taal Ki Awaz” An evening of Kathak dance, Tabla & Vocal music Recital by Ms. Mohksha Samarasooriya & her students along with Mr. Ranga Perera



The *Ghungroos* (ankle bells) and the rhythm of tabla kept the audience spellbound at the performance by Ms. Mohksha Samarasooriya & her students along with Mr. Ranga

Perera. Among the dance items performed was a captivating classical item performed for raag “Dhun”. Ms. Moksha Samarasooriya sang few classical ragas and Bhajans and Mr. Ranga Perera demonstrated various styles in playing Tabla.



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Films in February



Kabuliwala (with English subtitles)

Children known him as Kabuliwala. But they were afraid of him; he had such an imposing figure! Like all good men, however, Kabuliwala was very fond of children. Kabuliwala had come to Calcutta to earn his living, leaving behind his little daughter. Her memory haunted him all the time. And he came across little Mini – the city child in whom he saw the image of his little daughter. Fate, however, intervened and an unfortunate incident soon separated the two. They met again. Tagore's story Kabuliwala is so well known that perhaps you have read it. Here is a

film based on that great classic. A brilliant adaptation by the legendary Bimal Roy!

Language:Hindi

Directed by: Hemen Gupta

Mitr (with English subtitles)

Shot primarily by an all women crew, 'Mitr - My friend' is the directorial debut of the actress Revathy Menon. The story is about an Indian family settled in California for a past 18 years and brings out the dearth of emotional satisfaction they face in a materialistic world. The sensitivity of the movie lies in the identity of a strange Mitr (Friend)



Language: Hindi

Directed by: Revathy



Arth(with English subtitles)

The film Arth explores the theme of a married man involved in a relationship outside his marriage. What sets Arth apart is the layered, complex characterization of the three principal characters, the husband, the wife and the other woman. Besides three splendid performances by Shabana, Smita and Kulbhushan, Kharbanda, the film is lit by Rajkirans Sunny presence and a flint - sparking cameo by Kiran Virala.

Language: Hindi

Directed by: Mahesh Bhatt

Kalighat Paintings.. Contd.

rural life, were all fascinating subjects. There was also news, gathered and disseminated by new Western means, but finally grist for the narrative mill. There were stories to tell of the Rani who died fighting for her land in a soldiers uniform, the yogi who wrestled tigers, the abbot caught in adultery...

What was remarkable in the midst of all this modernity was the continuity of anonymous themes that traced their origin to classical temple architecture. The musician couple seated on chairs, was descended from the Gandharva musicians who played in paradise on innumerable temple friezes. The beautiful woman, adjusting the rose in her hair, the luxurious women in silks, petting peacocks, smacked of nayikas or heroines of an urban culture that went back to 4th century Gupta classicism.

The *patuas* painted stories from the great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, of the Hindu gods like Siva, Master of the Universe. In Bengal, Siva is recognised as the forgetful god, wildly dressed, easy to anger and easier to placate, everyone's son-in-law and popular with the *patuas*. Vishnu who maintains the universe, ending it when it has lost all virtue or dharma, whose cult expresses itself through avatars (incarnations), was equally well represented. But above all, the *patuas* painted Shakti (the Goddess personifying Power) who protects living beings in various personas – as the warrior goddess Durga who returns, poignantly like all married daughters, to every Bengali-Hindu home for a few brief days in autumn, as Kali who frees man from fear.

It is important to note the presence of strong images from Islam and Christianity in the Kalighat repertoire. The painters sought to capture all slices of the truly cosmopolitan market available to them.

The Kalighat paintings appeared in the opening decade of the 19th century and by the 1930s, they had almost entirely disappeared. The need to produce more pieces with a smaller expenditure of time and materials in the face of competition from imported and local woodcuts., lithographs and prints, made by artists trained in Western styles, was always a battle that the Kalighat style had to fight. It fought with many weapons-by even going into simplifications and creating black and white drawings-but eventually lost.

The vivid lines and mature brush techniques, the minute finish, deft precision, rhythmical arrangement of limbs, shading to give a strong effect of roundness and an almost tubular simplicity make this style still extremely attractive. The softly modeled, round faces with narrow noses, widely open eyes under high eyebrow arches and delicately outlined lips are richly sensuous.

But by the 1930s these pictures had entirely vanished and been replaced by oleographs. 'The artist craftsmen are nearly all dead, and their children have taken up other business... The old art is gone forever-the pictures are now finding their last asylum in museums and art collections as things of beauty which we cannot let die.'

Source: *Aditi Nath Sarkar & Christine Mackay*, Published in association with National Museums and galleries of Wales