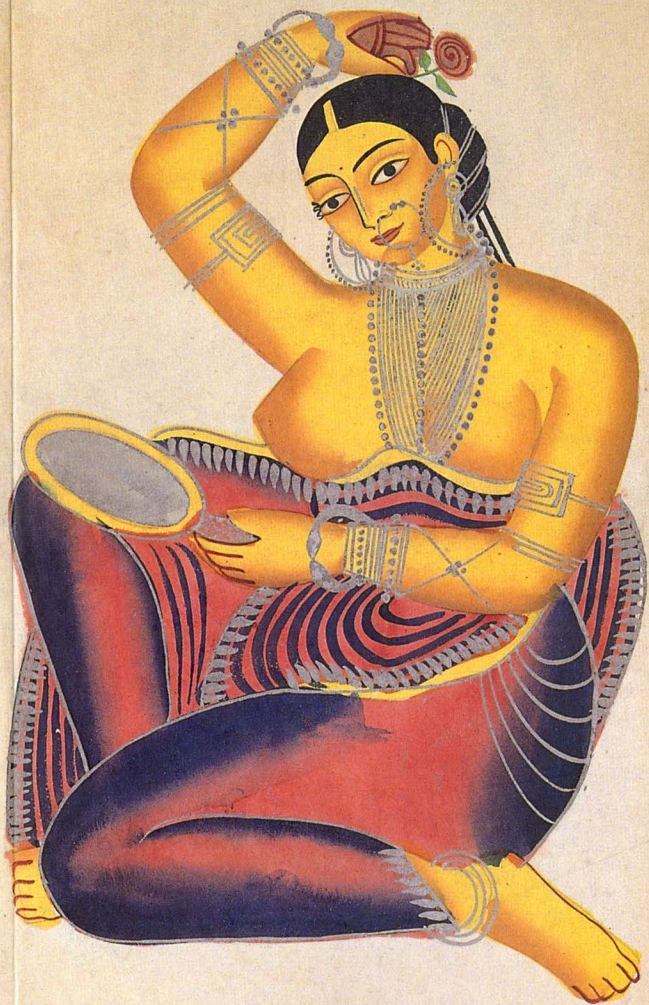


POCKET ART SERIES

# 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.

In August 1690, when the British East India Company founded its trading post in a cluster of rural market places on the east bank of the river Hooghly (Ganga), there was probably a permanent religious centre at Kalighat, a few miles south, in a forested environment. According to Bengali Hindu belief, a holy relic of the Goddess Sati was preserved in the temple altar. This gave the temple a special sanctity. By 1757, the Company army asserted itself against the local Viceroy of the distant and weak Mughal Emperor. In 1765, the Company, in a surprising *puja* of thanksgiving at Kalighat, celebrated its accession to power over eastern India. Calcutta became the new political heart of India, and the centre of an arc of power that soon swept from Aden to Hong Kong.

Calcutta thrived and by the time this particular set of drawings was produced around 1880, it had grown to be a metropolis with a population of just under half a million. Till the



end of the First World War, it remained the capital of British India, its most thriving industrial and business hub, and its chief port. It was the city through which profound cultural influences entered India from the West, principally Britain. Apart from the overwhelming growth of the influence of the English language (and literature), a notable influence was felt in fine as well as in applied arts. Thousands of books and prints were imported from Britain and Europe through Calcutta, and a good portion stayed and circulated there, eventually finding their way to booksellers, bazaar stalls and auction houses.



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. Such itinerant artists are mentioned in the Sanskrit play *Mudrarakshasa* (6th century). Today, *patuas* in Medinipur district still work at this profession, painting their scrolls and singing them from door to door. Their subjects are from the Hindu epics, scriptural narratives, cults important to Hindus and Muslims alike and contemporary themes like The Bangladesh War. Their medium is modern mill-made paper but their colours are still traditional organic and vegetable dyes and they 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 watercolourists. 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 modelling 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 market which was potentially huge. Not only was there the fixed population, but also the seasonal visitors, specially pilgrims who wanted souvenirs. The *patuas* decided to capture this market. Price and portability were constraints. So single frames of colour drawings of religious icons, priced within an anna each, was the right solution.

For the painters to make a living, vast numbers had to be rapidly produced to meet the endless but low-priced demand. This was mass production before mechanical reproduction. Family *ateliers*, where the less expert members completed less demanding parts of each *pat*, emerged. Thus vast numbers of artefacts, each carrying the stylistic peculiarities of an individual master painter, could be produced. 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 obtain 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.



The painters could not afford to alienate any shade of opinion for fear of losing a slice of the market. They expertly thematised a narrative, whether the traditional *Ramayana* or the contemporary Tarakeshwar murder scandal, and



reduced it to a set of scenes. They evolved a minimalist style of generalised figuration (one heavy-set male, one slim male, one ample female, clothed and ornamented) that could be used for any narrative situation, religious or secular. But the technique worked only within the context of cultural knowledge.

Through all this, a picture postcard of Calcutta was made available to the humble buyer. He could now have at this price, a religious icon of his choice, for worship at home.

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 centre. Calcutta and its *morés* were in themselves a vast source: the Englishmen, the newly modish Calcuttans, the soldiers, the traders, the luxurious lives of the courtesans around Kalighat, Calcutta's resident rich – freed from the conservative constraints of 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 soldier's 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.

Certain general Hindu canons guided the painters. Each divinity had a meditational formula that they sought to realise. Each icon was regarded as a *prakash* or manifestation, a coming into light, which was particular to that divinity. In Hindu belief, gods are blessed with

*maya* (transformative power) and can take illusory forms. The religious struggle for a devotee, as much as for an artist, was to be able to perceive this. Traditional narratives related the appearance and actions of the gods and goddesses, their iconography, complexions, weapons, poses and mounts. The *patuas* had to represent all this correctly to enable the devotee to recognise and meditate on that divinity. Gods and goddesses express one of the three cosmic *gunas* (qualities) or combinations thereof: *satva* (pure essence), *rajas* (power and action) and *tamas* (chaotic power), and this had to be conveyed in their complexions. Thus Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning, was represented as pure white, while Lakshmi, Goddess of Wealth, was reddish-gold – her *satva* shining through worldly *rajas*. Kali, with the power to dissolve the cosmos, was dark.

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 simplification 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 modelled, round faces with narrow noses, widely open eyes under high eyebrow arches and delicately outlined lips are richly sensuous.

Strolling through Kalighat in 1910, Mukul Dey, Principal of Calcutta Art College, could wander into its lanes and bylanes full of small

shops dealing with everything interesting to the pilgrims, specially womenfolk and children: sweets, toys, utensils, bangles and what was most important to his artist's eyes, 'pictures in colours as well as in lines, hung up, in almost all shops . . . which attracted the attention and interest of any man who had any taste for art and drawings. The drawings were bold and attractive and at the same time their technique was so different and simple, that they looked something absolutely distinctive from their class found anywhere else'.

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.'