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### How Jamini Roy found a home in Baker Street

Nirmalya KUMAR

Singapore Management University, [nirmalyak@smu.edu.sg](mailto:nirmalyak@smu.edu.sg)

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## **How Jamini Roy Found a Home in Baker Street**

### **Nirmalya Kumar**

I was educated in India in the 1970s and early 1980s, a time when it was difficult as a teenager to be truly proud of being Indian. The British had left in 1947; and thirty years of post-independence following the socialist model, had left the economy in a shambles. As a result, many educated youngsters escaped the perceived constraints of India to seek their fortunes in the West, especially in the USA. I was no exception.

Gaining a scholarship to study in the USA gave me a powerful immigrant experience of boundless opportunities. But it was also a time of deep personal cultural conflict, trying to escape my 'Indian-ness' to become 'American'. At some stage, realising it was an impossible transformation given my obvious Indian looks and observing the substantial changes taking place in India in the early 1990s, I felt a tug back to India. Unfortunately, India was not yet a place for anyone with an ambition to be a world-class business academic. As a compromise, I moved to Switzerland.

In 1997, on a flight from Geneva to Frankfurt, the inflight magazine contained an advertisement from a gallery in Germany selling a nineteenth century Pichhvai painting. A week later this large, 2 x 1 metre. Beautiful painting of Krishna and the gopis arrived at my apartment in Lausanne.

Suddenly, I discovered the transformational power of paintings on my walls and a tangible connection to my Indian heritage. The next few years led to the acquisition of works by a few Bengal school painters from the first half of the twentieth century, artists such as Abanindranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, and Sunyanani Devi. Slowly but surely, I was being sucked into modern Indian visual art. And, then I saw my first painting by Jamini Roy (1887-1972).

It was love at first sight. After that I could not stop, and whenever I considered a Jamini Roy painting versus one by another artist, I always acquired the Jamini Roy. Now more than a decade later, I find myself on Baker Street, the first English street I had heard of courtesy of Sherlock Holmes, with the largest collection of Jamini Roy paintings outside India. Considered to be the father of Indian modern art, the more I learnt about Jamini, the more I was attracted to his work and its 'idea'. And serendipitously, as a result, I found a resolution to the meaning of my own identity, whilst living in London, the world's most multicultural city.

## **The British Empire's Judgment on Indian Art**

A natural tendency for any academic is to research whatever they are interested in. Besides, all collectors share the common character flaw of being obsessive. Combining these two traits led not only to a unique collection but also an expertise in the artist's work. While initially drawn to the stunning visual appeal of Jamini's art, the research revealed for me the concept of 'modern Indian art' behind his paintings. As a result, my connection to Jamini's paintings moved from purely the visual plane to the deeper emotional and intellectual levels. In order to fully grasp the historical significance of Jamini's art and the idea behind it, it must be understood in the light of India's freedom movement, where the quest for cultural freedom was happening in parallel with the fight for political independence.

By the nineteenth century, in their role of being 'masters' of India, the British had convinced themselves that India had no artistic culture to compare with that of the West. Reflective of this attitude is the quote from the Official Handbook of the Victoria and Albert Museum of

1880: 'The monstrous shapes of the puranic deities are unsuitable for the highest forms of artistic representation and this is possibly why sculpture and painting are unknown as fine arts in India.' This received wisdom was widely shared by the leading British 'India scholars' of the time. For example, Sir Monier Monier—VWilliams, Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University, observed in 1885 that: 'As it is, not a single fine large painting nor beautiful statue is to be seen throughout India. Even the images of gods are only remarkable for their utter hideousness.'

The colonial British attitude did, however, also have a more benign aspect. To 'educate' the natives about the superiority of the Western culture and thought, the British took over and managed the first educational institution where Indians could obtain formal training in fine arts. The Government College of Art had a few incarnations before coming under the control of the British government in 1864, with an English principal, in Calcutta. The school exemplified the complex web of good and bad that the British had woven. Before their arrival, not only was there nowhere to study art as a profession, but the concept of creating paintings to be hung on walls of homes simply did not exist in India. However, as with the rest of the colonial education system, the curriculum was entirely western, and its aesthetic principles were alien to the indigenous population. Western art was classically realist, depicting form and volume through illusion, whereas Indian art was tonally flat, decorative, and relied more upon the quality of line and expression of colour.'

### **Jamini's Quest for Artistic Freedom**

The end of the nineteenth century was a time of great fervent in India for freedom. As Indian artists joined the freedom movement, they questioned what 'Indian modern art' should be. Perhaps, not surprisingly, given their training, the initial answer was Indian subjects painted in the Western academic style. Raja Ravi Varma became the leading exponent of this form in the 1880s. The popularity of his oil paintings led them to being reproduced as posters. In retrospect, his art seems rather old-fashioned even by the standards of his times. Raja Ravi Varma was stuck in the tradition of the artist as a photographer, and Indian modern art was still waiting for the artist as a conceptualiser and as a poet.

It is within this milieu that Jamini Roy entered as a student, and ultimately graduated from the Government School of Art in 1908. He was trained in, and his early paintings were inspired by, western academic style or the Impressionists (e.g., Figure 1: Jamini Roy - Landscape). Derivative as these paintings were, this training led him to become a successful portrait painter in Calcutta.



*Figure 1: Jamini Roy: Untitled Landscape, oil on canvas, 55 X 56.5 cm*

In the 1910s, seeking independence from notions of quality grafted on Indian art from a Western perspective, Indian artists turned towards the East. Inspired by visiting Japanese artists, Calcutta painters began adopting pan-Asian techniques and motifs. The result was the 'Bengal revival school' led by Abanindranath Tagore, Sunayani Devi, and Nandalal Bose. Jamini Roy took part in this movement for a couple of years. His most popular painting from this period is reproduced here



(Figure 2.: Jamini Roy — Flower). One can clearly see the far eastern

The second half of the decade of the 1910s was a period in Jamini's career where he was in artistic wilderness. He had achieved competence in painting portraits and landscapes inspired by Western art techniques. These were even signed by him using his English initials 'JR'. However Jamini could not help but feel that depicting Indian scenes using European techniques lacked vitality and an inherent truth. He was faced with the conundrum that all artists must try and resolve at some point: How can I be modern + unique + true to oneself (which in the context of Jamini was being Indian)? What makes Jamini a great artist, beyond merely an accomplished painter, was his signature resolution to this puzzle.

Inspired by Indian folk art, he made a conceptual breakthrough to advance a unique vision of modern Indian art. Starting from the early 1920s, he developed his 'flat technique' and for the next fifty years. We were privileged to watch a perfectionist who single-mindedly pursued his artistic vision to its logical end. The trigger was the traditional Indian Kalighat paintings, where artists sitting by the famous Kalighat temple in Calcutta, produced paintings which were sold for a few paise to visiting pilgrims. Each artist had a distinctive style, and usually a favourite image, which they executed repeatedly. Characteristic of the Kalighat style was to have an unbroken line which was followed by quickly filling the plane with colour. Figure 3 (Kalighat - Cat with Lobster) is a rather sophisticated Kalighat painting in terms of the line and complexity, but a popular image of the times.



Figure 3: Kolighut, Early Twentieth Century: Unfilled Cat with Lobsler, watercolour on paper, 46.5 x 27cm

The early paintings by Jamini after finding his Voice (e.g., Figure 4: Jamini Roy- Musicians) demonstrate how his 'flat technique' was in opposition to the Western art he was trained in. The Santhals depicted in the painting were a popular subject for Jamini. Being the indigenous people of Bengal, unlike the Calcutta babus, they reflected an India that had supposedly not been 'corrupted' by British rule. As can be observed from the painting, he had now taken a diametrically opposing path from his earlier career as a portrait painter. The medium was watercolour instead of oil; the subjects were the rural rather than wealthy Calcutta patrons; and its technique was Indian in its representation in contrast to the Western realism.



Figure 4: Jamini Roy: Untitled Musicians, tempera on paper, 36 X 71 cm

Jamini borrowed but never mimicked. Jamini's line and perspective had the sophistication to transform indigenous folk art into high art. The absorption and transformation is best seen by contrasting the Kalighat cat with Jamini's cats (Figure 5: Jamini Roy- Cat with Crayfish). As William Archer explained in his seminal book on Modern Indian Art, Jamini's two cats represent the Hindu priests, who claim they are vegetarians, but behind the scenes are skirmishing for shrimps, a prized Bengali delicacy. Their bodies may be distinct, but their minds have fused together in avarice and greed. The emotion is captured so eloquently in



their sly eyes, the bodies puffed up in self-importance, and their tails erect in arrogance. [its impact is multiplied manifold by the blazing yellow dots set off by the black ground. It punches you like a brilliant poster adorned with a master's signature (which is now in the Bengali script).



Figure 5: Jamini Roy: *Untitled Cat with Crayfish*, tempera on paper, 65 X 77 cm

Jamini continued to evolve until his death in 1972 and went through several distinct phases but always remained true to his conceptual flat technique. At times, he did revert to the Western style, but these paintings were few and far in between. Over time, his paintings became more formalised with Figure (1 (Jamini Roy— Mother and Child) being an exemplar of his peak and most popular period.



Figure 6: Jamini Roy: *Untitled Mother and Child*, tempera on card, 43 x 28.5 cm

As would be expected, some of Jamini's phases were less successful than others. For example, in the early 1950s. Jamini was in the 'pink period'. Many of his popular paintings were reinterpreted in pink. Thankfully, it was not a brash Barbie pink. Rather, an earthen Indian pink, more reminiscent of the pink sandstone so ubiquitous in Jaipur.

In the late 1930s, Jamini became enamoured by the mosaic Byzantine style and went through what is sometimes referred to as the 'Oyster period'. This was a more successful phase, and again, many of his popular paintings were reworked in this style. The two cats (Figure 5) is from this period. As can be seen, over time, the mosaic had turned into larger dots, almost like crazy paving.

For me, the more artistically successful phase was closer to the end of his career when he became minimalist. Here, the paintings were devoid of the colour that was so characteristic of his most recognisable work (e.g. Figure 6). Now the old man had turned to black, white and all the greys in between. Everything was stripped bare and the linear simplification had the Matisse touch about it. The face displayed in Figure 7 is quintessential of this phase. This is what modern art is all about, condensing experience, emotions, and objects into a few meaningful strokes and gestures.



Figure 7: Jamini Roy: *Untitled Woman's Face*, Iompera on card, 33.5 x 25 cm

One of my favourite Jamini paintings is from this minimalist phase, it is a 'mother' (Figure 8: Jamini Roy - Mother) that is conceptualised in six strokes. At his peak, Jamini painted the mother and child theme in many different forms, from the cow and the calf to Parvati and Ganesh, to Mary and Jesus. Overtime, he realised, and argued, to successfully portray the essence of a mother, one had to capture the somewhat opposing attributes of love and strength. After a lifetime devoted to painting the mother and child comes this tour de force of simplicity. The child is merely suggested and a perfect balance is achieved between the two figures. The work epitomises the revered Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu's observation, roughly translated as: to gain knowledge, add something each day; to gain wisdom, remove something each day. The painting is a distillation of a life's work, and we are forced to conclude that, in Jamini, we were privileged to watch a perfectionist who quietly pushed himself to repeatedly prove that 'he has still got it'. Here Jamini shares with the other great artists something that seems so often missing in contemporary art, art that is made by a solitary person out of an intense personal necessity.



Figure 8: Jamini Roy: *Untitled Mother*, tempera on paper, 66 X 35 cm

### Transcending National Identity

Jamini's house was a popular destination for foreigners interested in art, especially visiting Americans and the British who were stationed in pre-independence India. Often they purchased a painting from him which found its way back home. The market for Jamini works outside India is now made up of the descendants of these original buyers selling their inheritances. Jamini's death had provoked the Indian government to declare his paintings a national treasure and ban all further exports in 1974.

While Jamini painted all the religions including Buddhist and Muslim themes, after his paintings of Hindu subjects, the largest output was related to Christianity. An astute marketer, Jamini probably recognised that a substantial base of his clients would be attracted to this theme. Starting in the 1940s, Jamini had a Christian phase.

In Jamini's development as an artist, the 'Christian' phase was important for two reasons. First, Jamini was forced to confront the fact that themes such as the Crucifixion, Flight to Egypt, or The Last Supper had been painted millions of times for almost two thousand years. What could he add to them? Was it possible, for example, to paint 12 people around a table with Christ, stay true to his flat concept, still be unique, and capture the needed emotion? Jamini dips the paintbrush into the imagination of his genius and gives us a masterpiece of a The Last Supper (Figure 9: Jamini Roy — Last Supper). The painting appears to scream: compare with those painted by others, more famous than myself. Christ is seated in the middle and all eyes are upon him. The feeling of treachery has been poignantly captured and the anonymity of the disciples makes



Figure 9: Jamini Roy: *Untitled Last Supper*, tempera on card, 25.8 x 74.5 cm



it impossible to know who will turn traitor. You can feel the impending betrayal as Jamini plays with your mind in a painting that is brilliantly conceptualised.

Second, as explained above, at the start of his career, being Indian was important given the need to free oneself of Western conceptions of art. Part of this quest, was searching for subjects and motifs that were truly Indian. The Christian phase allowed Jamini to transcend his Indian identity as he had evolved to painting anything, provided it fit within his vision of Indian modern art. As a result, Jamini became probably the first Indian artist whose power and interest for non-Indian art buyers did not have to depend on Indian subjects and themes. The subject had become secondary to having his paintings look different and uniquely Jamini. Being an artist is all about individuation and difference; finding a voice of your own. To secure his place in the global art history, the final part of the puzzle for Jamini was the reconciliation of nationalism and individuality. It is here where Jamini speaks so eloquently to my own identity conflict. Unlike the previous need to escape my 'Indian-ness' and become 'American', came the subsequent realisation that my nationality should be a source of pride, not of shame. But as an academic playing on the global stage, I do not want to be a prisoner of being Indian either – this is about independence. As we inhabit a World that is becoming more global, our search for identity becomes more intense. It has been my good fortune to visit more than sixty countries, hold three nationalities, and call four countries home. But, it has taken me fifty years to grasp that you can visit many countries, hold many nationalities, but you can only be from one place, and I am from Calcutta. Jamini has helped me create a mini Calcutta in the middle of London, where I can be simultaneously connected with both my roots and the world.

### **Jamini Roy and the Indian Art Market**

I hope by now I have convinced readers that people usually collect art that features something close to their hearts. As time goes by, a great hobby is one that allows you to grow as an individual. This collection has introduced me to many interesting people in the art world, connected me to my culture, helped me develop a more expanded sense of self, and more recently, aid charities that I wish to support.

As the Indian art community for modern and contemporary paintings is relatively small, I quickly got the reputation for being a collector of Jamini Roy. This led to my being in the 'deal flow'. Whenever a dealer or an auction house had a Jamini for sale, I was often the first port of call. I owe them a debt as they enabled me to become an expert. Now, I am honoured to say, that I am even being approached by some of them to ascertain if the painting is genuine. The resulting self-reinforcing spiral of love, expertise, reputation, hobby, and passion has consumed me for more than a decade.

Buyers from India on the world art market are a new phenomenon. Most Indian art buyers have probably been in the art market for less than ten years. As a result, these collectors are still learning about art and the art market. Many of them believe that it is risky to focus a collection on a single artist and there are two responses to this!

Firstly, it is about one's objectives. If you are a 'speculator,' who buys art as an investment, then the portfolio should be diversified. Similarly, a 'decorator,' who buys what he or she likes to cover the walls and display their taste, or a 'striver,' who buys art as status symbols, will more often be eclectic in their acquisitions. In contrast, a 'collector' is motivated by passion for what they buy. With Jamini Roy, I see myself as a custodian rather than the owner of the works. It is part of India's heritage, and with no plans to sell the paintings, the

market value of the works is irrelevant. Many speculators and investors were attracted by the giddy returns of the ten years that ended with the collapse of the Indian art market in 2008. Now it is mostly the 'collectors' and 'strivers' that remain. For the 'strivers', it is not the art that is important here but what it represents. To them, art is a status symbol like a Bentley car or a Rolex watch. Buyers of contemporary art are insecure and need reassurance. As David Hockney observed, 'people need to look intensely, but they can't. They need to be shown how to'. Most buyers are unwilling to spend the time required to educate themselves to the point of overcoming insecurity. They need the confidence of the most recognisable signature styles. And, the higher price, the more attractive the object is, provided other people are aware of the prices and can immediately recognise the object. This is what drives prices of contemporary art in general, and especially Indian art, given that it is a particularly thin market.

Jamini repeatedly painted his most popular paintings. They differed in terms of size and with small variations in colours. In this, he was being true to the Kalighat tradition, but also anticipating the editions that today's contemporary artists do. He used his two assistants to help make these later works, reportedly assigning them the task of filling the colours after the primary lines were drawn by him. To some Indian art collectors, this negates the value of Jamini as an artist and the commercial value of his work. But, he was in this sense, a true modern conceptual artist. His genius lies, for example, in his concept and his idea of the 'Last Supper', not in the physical act of painting it, no matter how accomplished the execution maybe.

Secondly, as has been observed in the past, the big idea in collecting is to limit yourself, only then can your collection become something. Seventy unrelated paintings by different Indian artists would be interesting, but not unique. To be a collection, it must be more than the sum of its parts, and how much more is determined by the quality of the concept behind the collection. Thus, being wealthy is not a prerequisite for becoming a collector, though of course it does not hurt. It is about imagination and vision.

As the collection grows, it becomes more challenging to find a Jamini that will add to it. Now, I will only acquire a Jamini if it will be among the top 12 paintings of my collection. Recently, that led to the acquisition of the widow (Figure 10: Jamini Roy— Widow). Here is a woman in the traditional widow's garb of a white sari with a black border. India, and especially Bengal, had a major problem with respect to treatment of widows. Well-off Indians tended to marry multiple times and consequently were often survived by young spouses. Within the structure of the joint Family, this was a potential problem. To desexualise widows, they were stripped of all adornments, including their make-up, jewellery, and in extreme cases, by shaving their heads. Jamini's painting is his statement on the emancipation of widows. Can defiance ever be more evocative or attractive? As a collector, this painting had everything one covets: perfect condition, great execution, a strong message and clear provenance. How could I not fall in love?



Figure 10: Jamini Roy: *Untitled Widow*, tempera on paper, 77.2 X 36.6 cm

### Final Thought

In conclusion, let us recall Sir Howard Hodgkin's comments in the introduction to the catalogue of the Six Indian Painters exhibition which he organised at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1982: 'Jamini Roy signifies not just the advent of modern art in India, but the advent of the modern Indian artist. There is a special relationship between the identities of "modern" and "Indian" which is uniquely tied to the historical moment. Jamini Roy's painting was modern because he created a new and distinct style, and it was Indian because of its "technique and conception".'

What I have tried to argue in this chapter is that one can limit oneself to appreciating the striking sublime beauty of the Jaminis on my walls and his position in art history can comfortably rest on that. Yet, at another level, they represent the cry of an oppressed nation yearning to break free from a subjugation that went beyond merely the political domain. Today, Indian modern art in Britain has come a long way. The Victoria and Albert Museum has an excellent collection of Jamini Roys, while both the British Museum and the National Galleries in Scotland possess a couple of his paintings, besides other modern and contemporary Indian art.

## Notes

1. Munier Murder-Williams, *Brahmanism and Hinduism: Or Religious Thought and Life in India as Based on the Veda and Other Sacred Books of the Hindus*. Reprinted Kessinger Publishing 2005, p. 469.
2. Josephine Rea, 'Bond Philanthropy: Nirmalya Kumar' Bond, 2012, pp. 68-77.
3. William G. Archer. *India and Modern Art*. Macmillan, 1959.
4. Nirmalya Kumar, 'A Collector's Perspective", in *Urban Patna: The Art of Jamini' Roy* by Sana Datta (Marg 2010), pp. 11-13.
5. Geeta Alvares Mencscs, 'Repository of One Man's Genius: Libas, 2012, pp. 148-153.