

The legacy of a polarizing icon

This year marks the 50th death anniversary of Jamini Roy, often hailed as the father of modern Indian art. But he has had his fair share of detractors too.

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One of the most influential artists of the post-Independence era, Jamini Roy, passed away in Kolkata on April 24, 1972, at the age of 85. Following his death, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi wrote a short but touching letter to the artist's son Amiya Roy: "I am deeply grieved by your father's passing away. I have known him for nearly 30 years. It was always a joy to meet him. The country and the world of art long ago recognized his outstanding worth and achievement as an artist. He deepened our understanding of ourselves, and his art showed how idiom which is deeply rooted in a region also becomes universal. We lose an eminent Indian..." Mrs Gandhi also reportedly arranged for buying all the paintings that were in his home; and proposed that a section of his house be preserved as an art gallery.

Among the many who mourned Roy's demise was writer Mulk Raj Anand, then Editor of 'Marg' magazine. In his letter to Amiya Roy, he recalled how in spite of early struggles, Jamini Roy had come to be recognized as one of the immortals of Indian art. "One of the unmistakable signs of his genius lay in his grasp of the modern idea that man does not discover the truth, but creates it - thus making truth into the vitality of impulse, the inspirative centre of life and vitalist transformation into a love of the whole cosmos."



Fascinating journey

Born in an obscure village of the Bankura district in West Bengal, Jamini Roy faced several personal and artistic challenges on his way to becoming one of the best-known Indian artists of the 20th century. After obtaining his diploma from the Government School of Art, he began painting landscapes and portraits in the academic tradition of Western classical art. It did not take long for him to be disillusioned by the quality of his creations.

As he abandoned the European style, he faced considerable financial distress; and had to fight his own demons while sustaining himself with petty jobs. “No painter in India has lived in such concentrated seclusion,” recalled art critic Shahid Suhrawardy. “Hardly any patronage came his way during the period of his struggle. For years he was held to be a crank, a rebel against the traditions of the Bengali revivalist movement, a fanatic in vain pursuit of originality.”

Roy’s quest for a personal artistic idiom took him back to his essentially Bengali roots. His intense engagement with folk art and artists of rural Bengal began to bear fruit. Before long, he had abandoned the expensive medium of canvas and chosen to make his own paintings surfaces out of cloth, wood, and mats coated with lime. He also rejected the lure of oil paint and instead worked with tempera. He made his own colour pigments from local rock dust, alluvial mud, tamarind seeds, local flowers, indigo, and common chalk. More importantly, with deceptively simple outlines derived from lampblack, he created works that bore a distinct and delightful character. He dealt with a range of rustic themes inspired by Kalighat paintings and friezes of the terracotta temples of Bengal.

As his career took off in the 1930s, Jamini Roy’s work began drawing national and international attention. “The path he has pursued is that of all great artists in all ages and climes and the result has been that he has attained a mastery of draughtsmanship which is unrivalled by any painter in India including the best-knowing amongst them,” wrote Suhrawardy.

Missionary zeal

Throughout his artistic career, Jamini Roy displayed a missionary zeal to make paintings affordable to ordinary people. Towards that end, his studio churned out paintings in large numbers with the help of other artists including his son, Amiya. Rendered with simplified forms, bold lines, and primary colours, his paintings showed mythological characters, birds, beasts, mother-and-child themes, and images based on the life of Jesus Christ, all of which became a rage. They drew the attention of the common public as well as eminent personalities including Rabindranath and Abanindranath Tagore. His foreign admirers included art critic Rudi von Leyden, historian Stella Kramrisch, novelist E M Forster, film director Vsevolod Pudovkin, and collector Peggy Guggenheim.

Roy was honoured with the Padma Bhushan by the Government of India in 1954. He was elected Fellow of the Lalit Kala Akademi in 1956. By the time he died in 1972, he was one of the most celebrated modernist artists in India. Over time, Roy became an auction favorite with his paintings attracting huge bids. On the flip side, the art market, according to some experts, has a considerable number of fake Jamini Roy paintings in circulation.

Critical voices

While Jamini Roy gained unprecedented fame and recognition, there have been critical voices about his art as well. Several artists and historians have found his paintings to be static, frigid, lacking in originality, and alienated from contemporary life and reality. He is also criticized for indulging in soulless repetition and mechanical craftsmanship in his work.

Well-known artist and scholar K G Subramanyan felt while Roy made a conscious effort to forge a link with traditional practices, he was more involved with the stylistic minutiae of Kalighat pats than with cultivating a familiarity with their visual language that held together sensuousness and irony in delectable ways. “Jamini Roy’s neo-folk painting had no valid lore to back itself with, its intentions were apparently confined to aesthetic parallelism. So, it never rose to any degree of authenticity; it never had the earthiness

and verve (or the sly humour) of its close prototypes, whether those of Kalighat or Puri; its linear and formal conventions – the almond shaped eyes, the deadpan looks, the phlegmatic lines were terribly formulaic.”

Some observers accused Roy of catering to the increasing demand of ‘popular’ stereotypes which included metropolitan admirers, intellectuals, and foreigners. He was also seen as one craving mass admiration and becoming an ‘art machine’ to gain financial stability.

The legacy of Jamini Roy, thus, stands between two polarized clusters – one of the devotees, and the other, of detractors.