Kalighat Paintings from Nineteenth Century Calcutta in Maxwell Sommerville’s “Ethnological East Indian Collection”

by Pika Ghosh

Kalighat paintings, as the name suggests, were created in the Kali Temple area on the ghat (bank) of the Buri Ganga (a canal diverging from the Ganges River) in south Calcutta (Figs. 1, 3). From at least as early as the 1830s until the 1930s, the images were painted and sold as pilgrimage and tourist souvenirs, not only in the shops and stalls lining the alleys of the Kalighat area but also in other temples in the city. These inexpensive pictures, executed with swift brush strokes on cheap paper, would have been purchased initially as mementos of a trip, and subsequently would have decorated a home or been consecrated to em-
body the depicted deity and worshipped at a home altar.

Despite its link with the famous Hindu temple, the painting tradition was diverse enough in its repertoire to include subjects from other religious traditions, as well as non-religious themes. Popular Islamic representations included the prophets and angels and juttas (tomb models: Fig. 2). Contemporary events were depicted in series of drawings and paintings, and literary scenes from contemporary novels, depictions of popular proverbs, and genre scenes were equally popular (Fig. 4).

Depictions of life in Calcutta's cosmopolitan hub, its English rulers, the emerging Bengali upper and middle classes, and the supporting classes (servants, prostitutes, wandering mendicants) have survived in large numbers (Fig. 5). Having flocked to the city, abandoning the uncertain income from performances at rural fairs and festivals, the painters (patuas) appear to have recorded what struck them as distinctive about the urban setting in which they found themselves. Kalighat renditions of traditional Hindu deities also indicate the profound impact of the British colonial capital on the artists (Fig. 6). Goddesses wear Victorian crowns, play violins instead of veenas (the traditional string instrument associated with Saraswati), and adopt the elegant poses of English noblemen. These deities are often framed against the heavy curtains of the English playhouses of the city (Fig. 7). As ethnographers, the patuas were not unlike their European counterparts, artists like the Dailis or the engraver Balchazar Soylanya, who sketched prolifically during their travels through India.

The works of the patuas supplied the city's fledging tourism industry, stimulated by the influx of visitors brought by new modes of transportation—trains, steamships, and horse-drawn trams. As items of mass production for a mass market, this genre of painting exhibits marked repetition of topics and iconographic formulas. Their production process was characterized by a division of labor. A master painter often penciled the basic form which his family members would then ink. It is really as souvenirs, not unlike postcards, that we must understand works such as those in the Sommerville collection in the University of Pennsylvania Museum. Since the paintings were never intended to be unique in the way we anticipate works of art in a Western museum to be, it is not surprising that their subject matter and even details of line and color have close counterparts in other surviving collections such as the R.P. Gupta collection in Calcutta. Within the available repertoire, however, there are images that are clearly more elaborate and carefully created than others.

The migrant painters from the Bengal countryside were able to respond to the economic opportunities opened up by the changing circumstances of the late 19th century. They modified the multi-registered traditional scrolls (joota) that function essentially as props for sung narratives, transforming them to depictions of single images without detailed delineation of specific settings (Fig. 8). Other changes included the use of paper rather than the traditional medium of cloth, and a preference for quick-drying watercolors in the place of gouache and tempera. Scholars from W.G. Archer to Tapati Guha-Thakurta and (most recently) Jyotindra Jain have pointed to "the basic imperative of producing pictures cheaply, quickly, and in vast numbers to cater to the growing market of the city" as motivation for the changes in form and format (Guha-Thakurta 1992:18).

Other innovative techniques introduced attest to contact with contemporary European paintings. Shading for volume in the latter was interpreted as a wash of color graded from dark on the outer perimeter of the form to the bare central zone. The three-quarter profile was added to the repertoire of frontal and profile faces. The painters' rudimentary experiments with perspective, however, suggest that these conventions were not understood through training but interpreted through their encounters with European artworks. They would have seen the cheap reproductions of these circulating freely and oil paintings purchased by the pioneering Bengali merchants for adorning their 19th century mansions in north Calcutta.

However, it is the continuities with the traditional painted scrolls that probably initially stimulated the market for the Kalighat images, since the familiar subjects and iconographic conventions would have appealed to pilgrims who, like the artists, were also visiting the urban center from the rural hinterland. These continuities were also meaningful for Bengali families who had flocked to the growing mercantile capital since the 18th century, settled in north Calcuta.

"The migrant painters...modified the multi-registered traditional scrolls...that function essentially as props for sung narratives, transforming them to depictions of single images"
Fig. 4. Cat with a prawn in its mouth. UPM 29-225-8

Fig. 5. Two women with hookah (tobacco apparatus). UPM 17857, Cramp Collection

Fig. 6. The dashing young deity Kartikeya flaunts a Prince Albert hairstyle and English-style hat and pumps. UPM 29-225-28

Fig. 7. The deity Shiva, as a mendicant, approaches the martial goddess Durga. UPM 29-225-29

Fig. 8. Gurupada Chittarakar, a modern potter, painting a narrative handscroll. Such scrolls functioned essentially as props when the narratives were sung during rural fairs and festivals.

Fig. 9. The deities Shiva and Parvati seen in more intimate interaction, in keeping with the long tradition of Bengali depictions of the divine couple. UPM 29-225-3

Fig. 10. The goddess Kali dancing on Shiva’s corpse. UPM 29-225-4
paintings were carried back as momento to Britain, Russia, Czechoslovakia, France, and the United States. English scholars and cultural figureheads in India including Sir Monier Monier-Williams and Lockwood Kipling amassed vast personal collections, which are now housed in the Bodleian Library and Victoria and Albert Museum respectively.

MAXWELL SOMMerville’s COLLECTION

The Kalighat paintings that Maxwell Sommerville gave to the University of Pennsylvania Museum in 1895 reflect his collecting interests. In so doing, they mark a little noted moment in the transformation of these objects from commodities for the tourist trade and documents of ethnographic “fieldwork” to artworks worthy of museums. Sommerville (1829–1904) was a Philadelphian who made his fortune in publishing. From the 1860s on, he traveled through Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, India, Burma, Thailand, China, Japan, and Korea, observing and recording the customs and practices of these foreign lands, in particular their religious beliefs and mystical traditions. During his travels, Sommerville collected voraciously—vast quantities of artifacts of uneven quality and diverse function. The bulk of this eclectic collection, including the 57 Kalighat paintings, went to the Museum.

The Kalighat paintings must first be understood as mementos of particular collecting experiences from Sommerville’s travels in India. As souvenirs, the paintings brought back by the traveler would have been the visual accompaniment to narratives about a remote other world. As Susan Stewart puts it: “Removed from its original context, the exotic souvenir is a sign of the survival, not its own survival, but the survival of the possessor outside his or her own context of familiarity. Its otherness speaks to the possessor’s capacity for otherness; it is the possessor, not the souvenir, which is ultimately the curiosity” (1984:148). While of little monetary value at the time of their acquisition, their worth probably lay in their connection to the collector’s biography, to their capacity to imbue the individual with an exotic aura.

KALIGHAT PAINTINGS AND THE STUDY OF HINDUISM

Today Sommerville’s choice of pieces and his notations on them reveal his interests but also speak of trends in collecting and contemporary attitudes toward the “East.” The Kalighat paintings that Sommerville selected from the available range of subjects were almost exclusively depictions of Hindu deities. They include scenes from the biographies of major Hindu gods such as Shiva and his family, Vishnu and his incarnations Rama and Krishna, and the goddesses, all deities that enjoyed a wide circulation (Figs. 9–12). The Kalighat painters’ more ethnographic endeavors were clearly not interesting to the scholar in search of an “authentic” indigenous culture, one uncontaminated by the increasingly global tourism of the 19th century (Clifford 1988:1–19) or the overwhelming imperial presence in the colonial capital. Sommerville, unlike some other collectors of the period, appears for the most part to have rejected subjects that responded overtly to this presence.

Rather, his interest in the paintings appears to have been as depictions of the Hindu pantheon he had encountered through the monumental 19th century translations of the Hindu sacred books: the Vedas, Epics, and Puranas. His collection includes most of the major popular deities of the pantheon reconstructed from the Puranic literary corpus. In fact, the set provides virtually a visual analog to the colonial compendia of Hindu gods, in which the earlier generations of Orientalist scholars in search of the Hindu religion had classified the deities by name, function, attributes, and relationships to each other.

The paintings may well have served as a personal study collection for Sommerville, the scholar of world religions. Other collectors of Kalighat paintings included scholars of Hinduism such as W.J. Wilkins, who used Kalighat drawings to illustrate the principal deities in his book, A Handbook of Hindu Mythology (Calcutta 1882). Christian missionaries concurrently acquired these works to comprehend the beliefs and practices of their potential converts.

Sommerville’s Western humanist approach inclined him to place more value on the texts than the images. Each work bears an identification of the depicted deity and the brief handwritten notes often occur squarely within the body of the images rather than on their mounts. This suggests that he treated them as illustrations, such as would have been found in contemporary publications, or as tourist souvenirs rather than as deity images or works of art. Neglecting to document any artists’ names at a time when it would have been easy enough to do so, also contributes to the sense of this as an ethnographic collection rather than of works of art.

Some labels, written above the heads of figures, provide terse iconographic identifications that are clearly by someone unfamiliar with the visual vocabulary of the Kalighat tradition. Systematic misidentifications also attest to his textual approach to the paintings, in lieu of exploring oral sources or contemporary local tradition. For example, he identified a figure of the goddess Chandi with an elephant (see cover), a distinctive locally deity, as Parvati, the wife of Shiva and mother of the elephant-headed god Ganesh, because of a narrative that has survived in song, scrolls, and ritual. Sommerville did not distinguish between the animal associated with Chandi and the anthropomorphic figure of Ganesh with elephant’s head. While the story of Ganesh’s miraculous birth, created by his mother Parvati, is ubiquitous, that of Chandi is not. As an iconographer, Sommerville had not accounted for local distinctions and contemporary ritual needs.
Chandi, as traditional protector of merchants trading overseas, had much to offer to the burgeoning Bengali bourgeoisie, a mercantile community that had prospered from its recent move to the British capital. A second misidentification likewise refers to the textual material of the 19th century rather than to the local beliefs and customs. He labeled an image of a goddess with an owl (Fig. 13) as Amba, a goddess who was no longer popular in popular circulation in urban Calcutta or its agricultural hinterlands, though she had been featured in early and medieval narratives, including the epic, Mahabharata. In contemporary Bengal, however, a goddess with a pure white owl was more likely to have been Lakshmi. The accompanying white owl is to this day considered an auspicious harbinger of a fruitful harvest season and is called Lokhi pancha (Lakshmi’s owl).

These Kalighat paintings were transformed from records of contemporary urban life in the colonial capital into documents for scholarly understandings of Hinduism in the late 19th century. They satisfied Sommerville’s search for an authentic, uncorrupted Eastern culture and religion as well as an obsession with taxonomy that marked the particular predilections of anthropologists at the time. As self-styled professional ethnologist, he was part of the set that provided the larger conceptual compartments into which acquired objects were slotted. His travels may be perceived as part of the larger network in American anthropological and museum circles that directed excursions and collecting trips to “the field.” Upon his return, he sorted his acquisitions into appropriate categories that were believed, in the world of ethnological museums, to simultaneously reflect ethnicity and material culture (Phillips 1995:107).

Ironically, it is in the appropriate depiction of religious subject matter that Kalighat painting came under greater criticism from contemporary elite Indian circles. Unlike foreign travelers and missionaries, the coterie of nationalist artists, collectors, and literati who were constructing an art historical canon at the turn of the century located authenticity, that is Indianess, in emotional and spiritual qualities, and denounced the Kalighat tradition for its lack thereof. The civil servant–cultural anthropologist Gurusaday Dutt, for example, wrote disparagingly of the Kalighat painters:

A great deal of attention has been given by art connoisseurs to the so-called Kalighat painting, which is the work of the traditional representation of volume appealed to the newly formulated Modernist aesthetic. In 1926 Calcutta collector and critic Ajit Ghose wrote enthusiastically: “There is an exquisite freshness and spontaneity of conception and execution in these old brush drawings...there is a boldness and vigour in the brush line which may be compared to Chinese calligraphy” (p. 98). Contemporary European scholars in Calcutta, who would later become the early curators of South Asian art, also acquired the works for personal collections at this time. In time, they declared Kalighat paintings worthy of collections such as those of the British Museum and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Here in Philadelphia, Stella Kramrisch justified their inclusion in her groundbreaking exhibition, Unknown India, in part by establishing a successful comparison with major Modernist painters:

Kalighat paintings...and brush drawings are monumental in their presentation on an otherwise mostly blank page. Preceding the work of Matisse, some of the brush drawings prefigure it. Out of Indian tradition and impressions of Western painting, the “bazaar” painters, descendants of low-caste and hereditary craftsmen created forms as valid as, and akin to, some of the later work by leading artists in the West. (1968:72)

Implicit in their relocation from souvenirs and ethnographic collections to art museums is a removal of their earlier function as “Bazaar Paintings,” that is, cheap souvenirs of travels or pilgrimage to be picked up in the markets. Instead, Kalighat paintings entered the domain of art, which by the mid-19th century designated a special sphere of creativity, spontaneity, and purity, a realm of refined sensibility and expressive “genius” (Williams 1983:32). As anthropologist Igor Kopytoff observes: “Because it [in this case, such art] is done by groups, it bears the stamp of collective approval, channels the individual drive for singularization, and takes on the weight of cultural accredence” (1986:81). He has termed this process of transition in the cultural biography of objects “singularization.” Their elevation in status, not accidentally, coincides with the extinction of the living tradition in the 1930s. At the time when these objects lost in the competition with mechanically reproducible images, they were removed from the market situation in which they were created and circulated. They have now become rare and tinged with nostalgia in the process and prized in museum collections (Phillips 1995:109).

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Bibliography

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Kalighat Paintings as Art

In the early 20th century, validated by the particularized vision of Modernism, Kalighat paintings were gradually upgraded to “art.” The abstract quality of these works resulting from the sparse composition, elegant line, and brevity in
Guha Thakurta, Tapati

Jain, Jyotindra

Kopytoff, Igor

Kramrisch, Stella

Phillips, Ruth

Singer, Milton

Stewart, Susan

Williams, Raymond

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