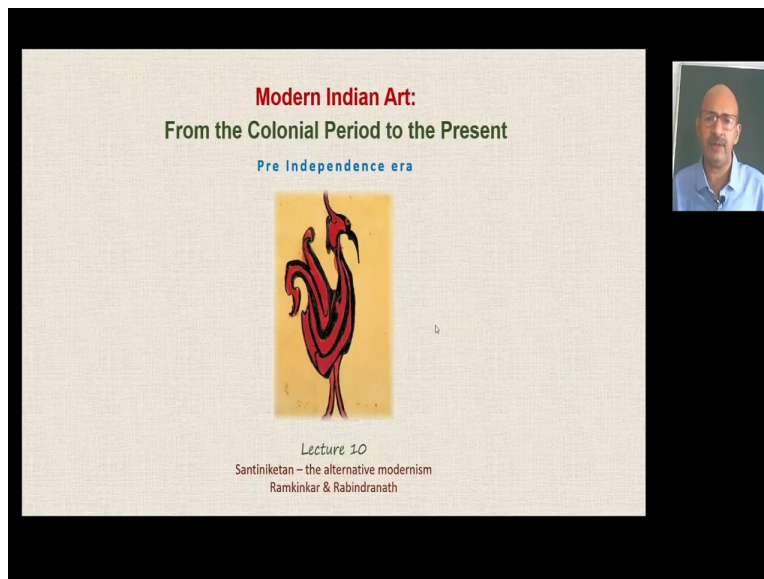


Modern Indian Art From the Colonial Period to the Present
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Lecture 10
Santiniketan- the alternative modernism Ramkinkar and Rabindranath

Hello viewers, welcome to NOC's online course on Modern Indian Art from the colonial period to the present. Today on the 10th lecture in this course, and the 5th one from the second week we will be looking at the works of 2 distinctively different artists Ramkinkar Baij and Rabindranath Tagore. But both of them are integrally connected to Santiniketan. Santiniketan was Rabindranath Tagore's brainchild, and Ramkinkar was one of the early products of Santiniketan and specifically Kala Bhavana, the fine arts Institute of Santiniketan.

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If you look at Santiniketan from the point of view of an extension of Bengal school, it is wrong. The whole notion that Santiniketan is an extension of Bengal school is a misinterpreted idea. And we have seen in our last lecture, when we were looking at the works by Nandalal Bose, the works he did after coming to Santiniketan.

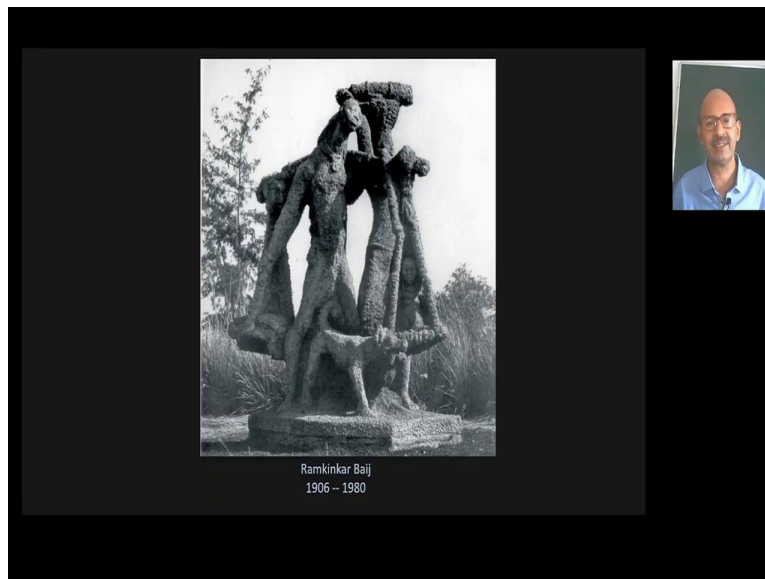
When we looked at the various paintings by Benode Behari Mukherjee, we have already realized how different their works are compared to the works produced following the style of Bengal

school. One thing is pretty clear that Santiniketan artists, at least the most gifted and talented ones of them, kind of resisted the temptation of falling into a mannerist trap. They resisted the habit of getting into a repetition, a repetitive style.

When you look at their paintings, in case of Benode Behari Mukherjee and Nandalal Bose, when you look at the paintings and sculptures, in case of one of the most energetic artists from this period Ramkinkar Baij, if you look at the paintings by Rabindranath Tagore, you can easily see that all these artists are trying to develop an idiom, a style of expression, a mode of expression, a particular technique of doing a painting afresh; every time they are reinventing the process.

Therefore, none of them were actually following a pre-given or pre-determined style. And this is one of the main reasons why you never find these artists repetitive or boring. Every painting that you come across by them could be and potentially is a new surprise for us.

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Therefore, when you look at a sculpture by Ramkinkar Baij, because we need to remember though Ramkinkar Baij did produce a huge number of watercolors, and plenty of canvases, oil paints, etc., but primarily, he would be remembered as, he would be known as a sculptor, possibly the first modern Indian sculptor, possibly the pioneer of the modern Indian sculptural movements.

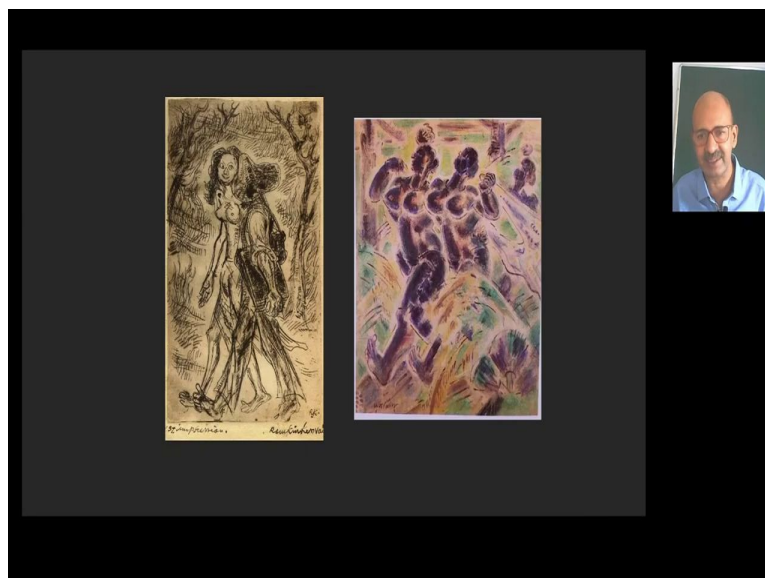
Now, this is very, very important to remember that this modern Indian cultural movement was not just again, an extension of the early modern sculptural practices as we have seen done by

Mhatre, Karmakar, D P Roy Choudhury and really speaking, with all due respect to them, we needed somebody like Ramkinkar to break the norms. Because modern art, be it sculpture or painting is primarily about breaking, breaking the chain of continuity, breaking the norms, creating and producing radically different and radically something that reflects your own time, your own response, your individuality.

Now, this particular sculpture that we are looking at right now by Ramkinkar Baij is, of course, something that we have never seen before; historically speaking, chronologically speaking, first time ever, we have a huge sculpture like this without any kind of academic finish, without any kind of naturalistic beauty, the very roughness of the surface, the uneven textures on the body, the exaggerated and accentuated shapes of the limbs, of the neck, of the heads, everything about the forms of this sculpture are absolutely different and far apart from what we understand as naturalistic representation.

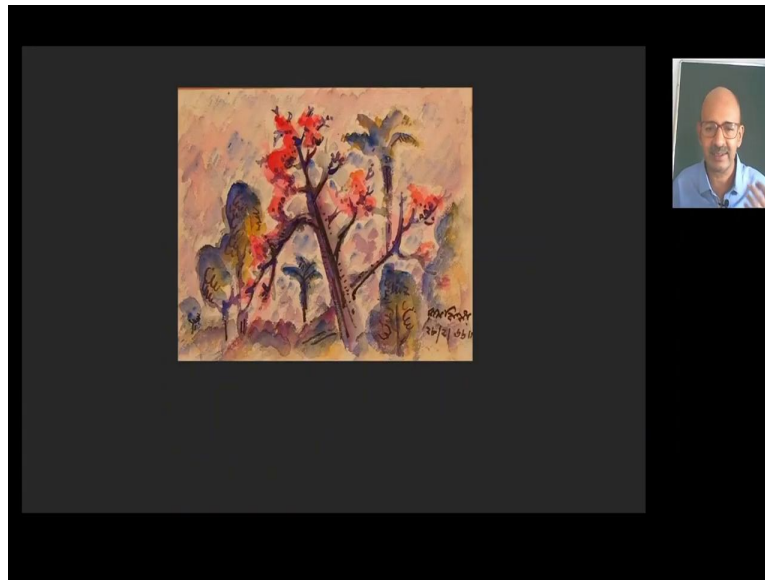
Now, why would Ramkinkar go for this when he actually had the talent for making realistic sculptures, naturalistic sculptures, academically perfect sculptures. So, this is one question that we are going to address. But before that, let us look at a couple of paintings by Ramkinkar.

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And let us see what are the very specific characteristic features of his paintings, where again, you see the entire surface of his paintings and drawings are replete with textural marks, brush work, rough patches of color, and a lot of movement.

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Nothing is really static, even when he is doing a painting of a so-called static object like a tree, which cannot move. But in his paintings, they tend to move as it were, they tend to create a kind of or generate energy that blows across the paintings, not just by the sheer position of the tree, which is slightly tilted, but by the application of the colors, by the application of the textures and strokes on the painting.

But the directional paintings, if you look at the directional paintings, they are not necessarily conforming to reality. Direction is sometimes left to right, sometimes right to left, sometimes top to bottom, from bottom to top, whatever, could be diagonal, could be horizontal, vertical. They are not necessarily conforming to what Ramkinkar probably saw before he did this painting, he probably saw this tree.




So, his actual physical observation of an object or for that matter, in this case, it is a tree and then the representation, the pictorial representation of what he had observed, could have a different relationship altogether. So this is a straightaway refusal to photographically, represent what one observes. Here, an artist like Ramkinkar takes a plunge, he ventures into certain expressive qualities of painting, certain modernist criteria of any artwork, where, for everything, no matter what, an artist can, and in this case, Ramkinkar does, exercise freedom.

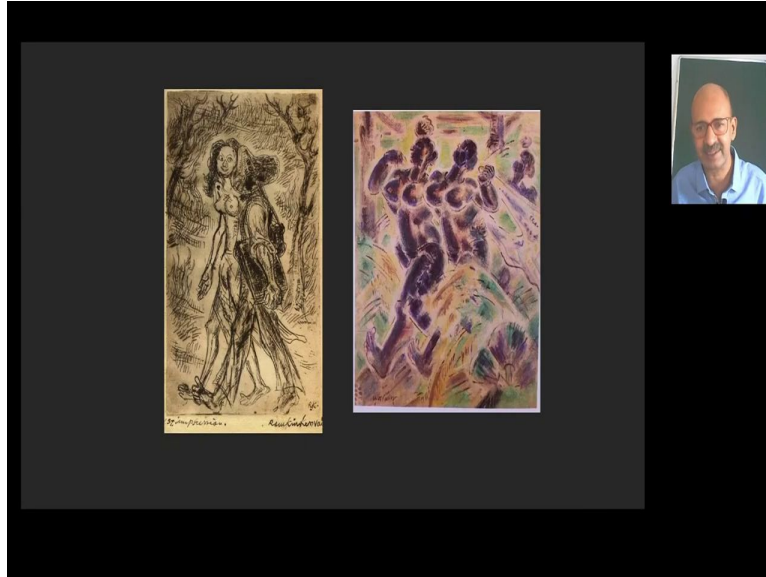
So, you have a responsibility to look at the world and respond properly. But at the same time, as an individual modern artist, you have the freedom to play with what you have observed in order to achieve certain inner sensibilities, inner meanings.

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- o Real life observation
- o Proximity to nature
- o Heightening and exaggerating the forms
- o Emphasizing the expression
- o Accentuating the treatment of the surface
- o Energetic brushworks and color patches

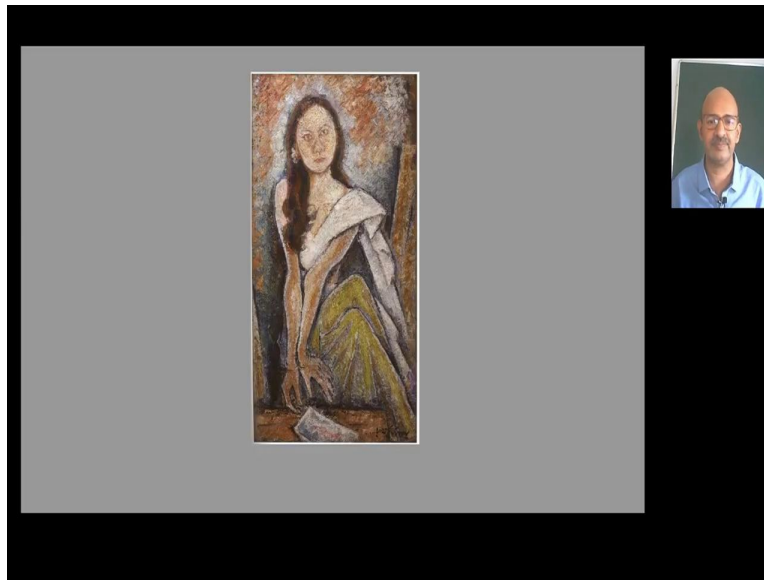




And in this case of the paintings by Ramkinkar, the inner sensibility is nothing but the inherent energy and dynamic quality of life around and how do you express that? So, you have real life observation. You have proximity to nature. You have heightening and exaggerating of the forms. You have this quality of emphasizing the expression, you have accentuating the treatment of the surface, be it sculpture or painting, Ramkinkar does that. In fact, later today in this lecture, you will also hear about how Rabindranath Tagore has been doing the same, that is accentuating the treatment of the surface. It's not a smooth finish of the surface.

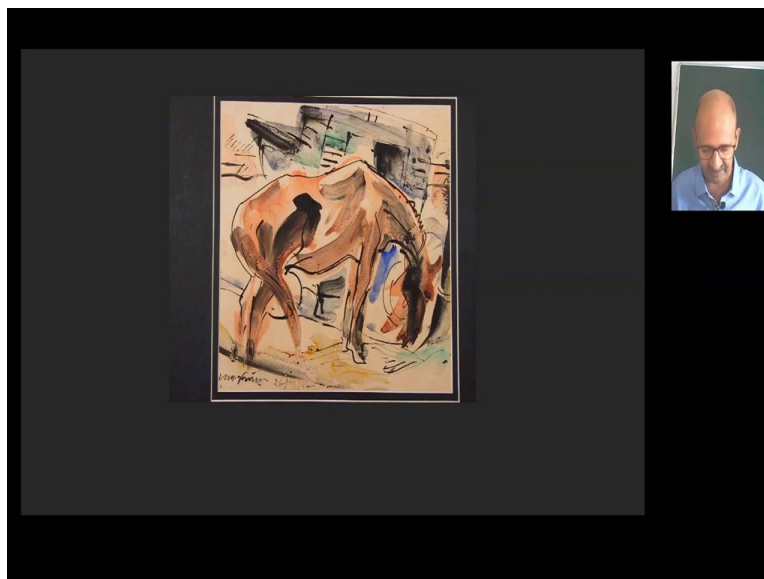
He is creating energy, energetic points all over the surface. Therefore, this dynamic energetic quality is being created not by something outside, but right from within the language of the painting or sculpture. Energetic brush works for example, you see plenty of them in Ramkinkar's works. Look at any work, you will always see energetic brush works. So, these energetic brush works once again may not directly conform to the observed visual fact of real life, but they do evoke that hidden energy, that passion of life.

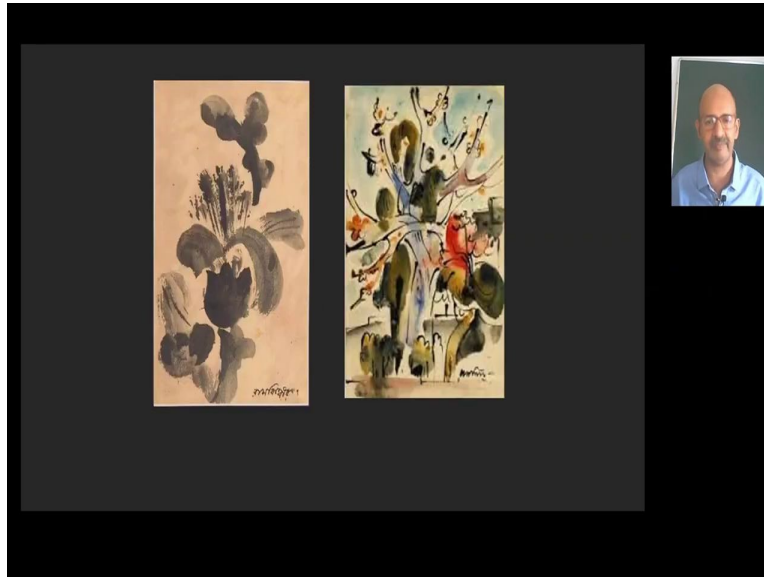
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Look at any such paintings by Ramkinkar- the energetic surface, the textural quality, the accentuation of the forms, the way he always keeps accentuating certain shapes of the forms, whether they are the limbs, legs, arms, neck, body, face, there is a tendency to accentuate.

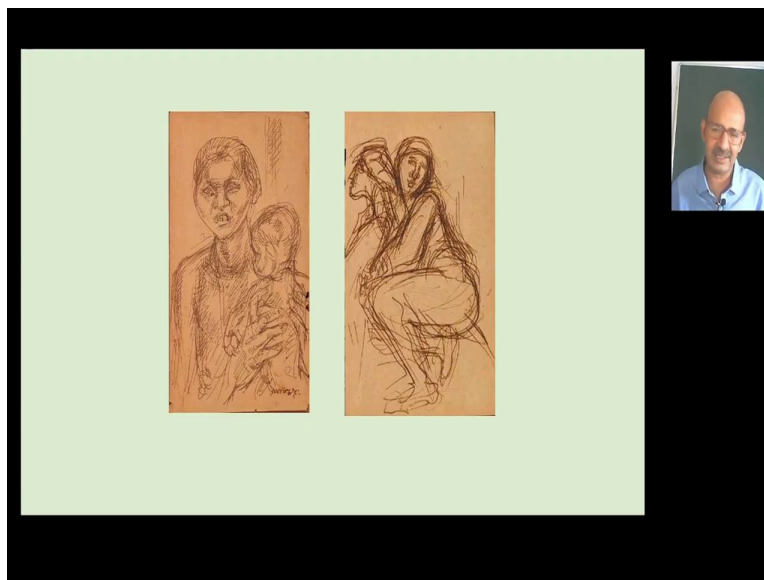
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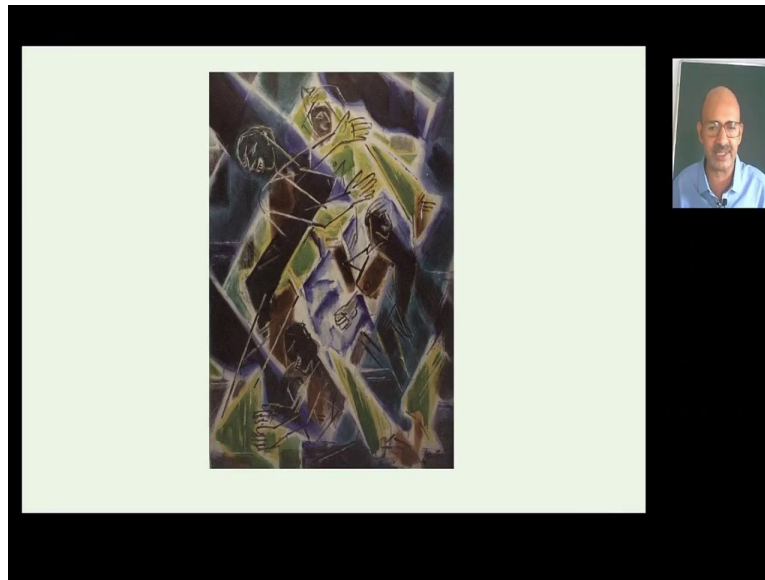
Or for that matter animal. There is a tendency to not to make the contour line too finished, too harmonious. So, he creates a certain kind of disharmony, only to let the energy of the forms explode out of the painting.

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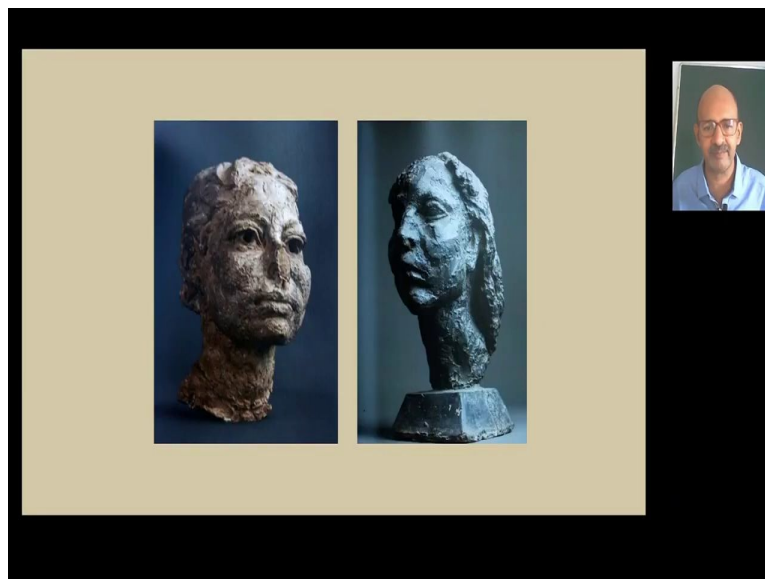
As a result, when you look at the details of the human faces, you often see very strong, very powerful expressions on the faces.

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Human faces at least in Ramkinkar's paintings are not flat, not blank. They are so powerful that you feel they are about to tell you something. There is instantly a dialogic, a kind of interactive mode is created between his paintings, sculptures and us the onlookers, the viewers.

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Now, we come to Ramkinkar as a sculptor. As I told you, he is now considered to be the pioneer of modern Indian sculpture. The first major modern Indian sculptor who paved the way for breaking down certain traditional and academic norms and creating one's own sculptural ideas, sculptural language and sculptural idiom. So, right from the beginning, you can see there when

even when Ramkinkar was doing portraits of real people, who are out there, he is not necessarily making the portraits exactly look the way they are.

Again, he is exaggerating, he is controlling, he is accentuating the surface. Well, the sculptures do look like the real models, the real human beings, but they also, they also produce some expressions, which were not necessarily his or hers, the expressions are given by the sculptor Ramkinkar to them.

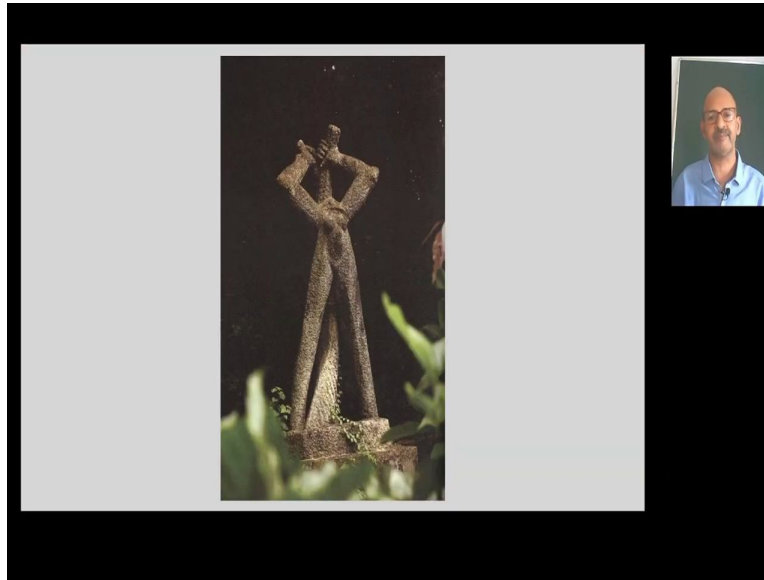
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And this is where lies the freedom of a modern independent artist. So emphasis on rough uneven textural surface, amplifying the material quality of the medium and introducing this new concept of finish. Now at this juncture, I must say whether we are talking about paintings or sculpture but it is more so with the sculptures because after all a sculpture is directly made up of a certain material, bronze or stone or clay or plaster or whatever.

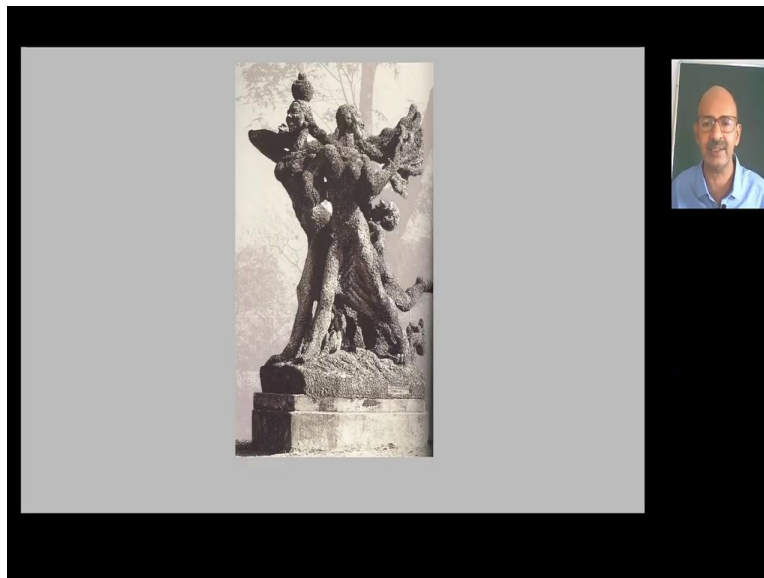
Now, instead of making the material or the medium, submit to the form, Ramkinkar makes his medium- be it bronze or stone or clay, he makes him also speak their voice as well. So, the moment you look at these kinds of sculptures by Ramkinkar, even before you are able to identify or recognize the subject matter, you have knowingly or unknowingly, already begun to respond to the characteristic features of the medium. So, because the quality of the medium has been heightened, along with the quality of the sculpture, the face, the figures, whatever.

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And sometimes, the sculptural form could be extremely distorted, kind of deformed in order to create a sense of figuration. A pattern bordering on abstraction, where you almost lose the identity of the figure or about to lose the identity of figure. But what compensates this loss is a huge generation of energy. He generates energy, he generates force to say the least.

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So, at the cost of realistic, naturalistic representation, Ramkinkar is able to generate force, able to generate energy. So, when you look at these huge monumental group sculptures, you can clearly

see that he does not mind distorting the forms a little bit, exaggerating certain parts of the body a little bit.

Because at the cost of these things, what Ramkinkar as a sculptor is achieving in these sculptures is that expression, and that energy, and these are the two things. Expression on their faces and bodies, and the energy that this entire group of sculptures produce. These are the two things that actually a viewer responds to, they touch the viewers. Therefore, a viewer standing in front of a sculpture like this gets completely moved.

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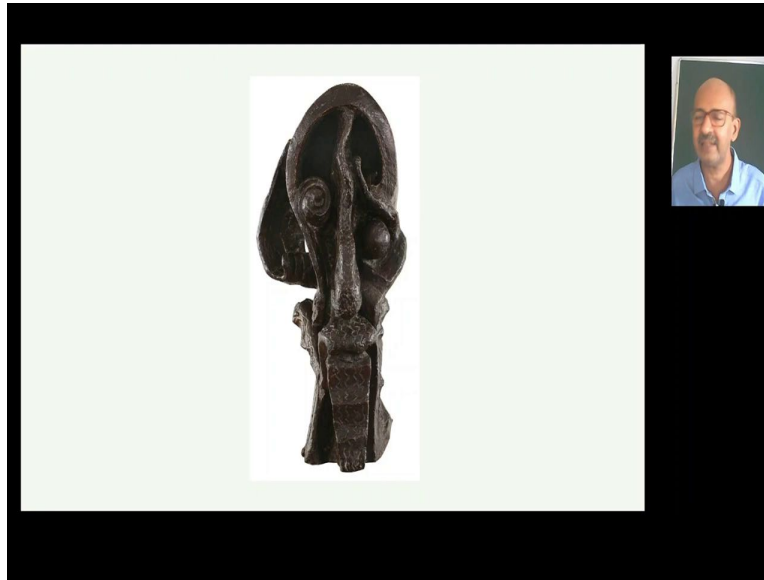
So, the more you look at Ramkinkar sculptures, you realize that it is actually difficult to use the word distortion in this context. After all, it is not about distortion. After all, it is not about a deliberate deformation of the body. At the end of the day, all his sculptures are about generating expression and energy.

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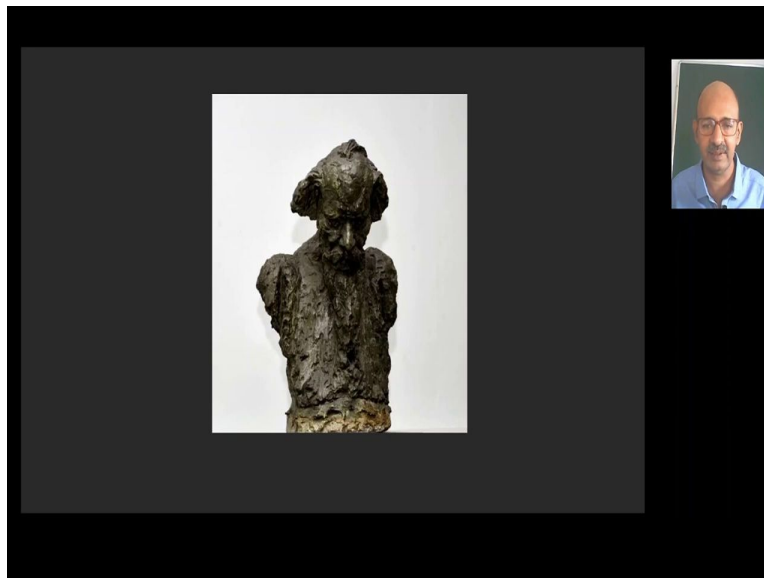
One more that you have already seen, even when he does this beautiful statue of Gandhi. You know, he does not make Gandhi like a Godlike divine figure, with meticulous finish. No, he does not do that. He makes Gandhi, a real person with a real force and a real commitment, a real dedication to his cause. Therefore, the surfaces, the treatments of the body remain very, very organic. And yes, Ramkinkar sculptures have this quality of organic. With a tremendous sense of organic quality, both the form and the medium, Ramkinkar paves the way for Modern Indian Sculptures for a long way to come from his time.

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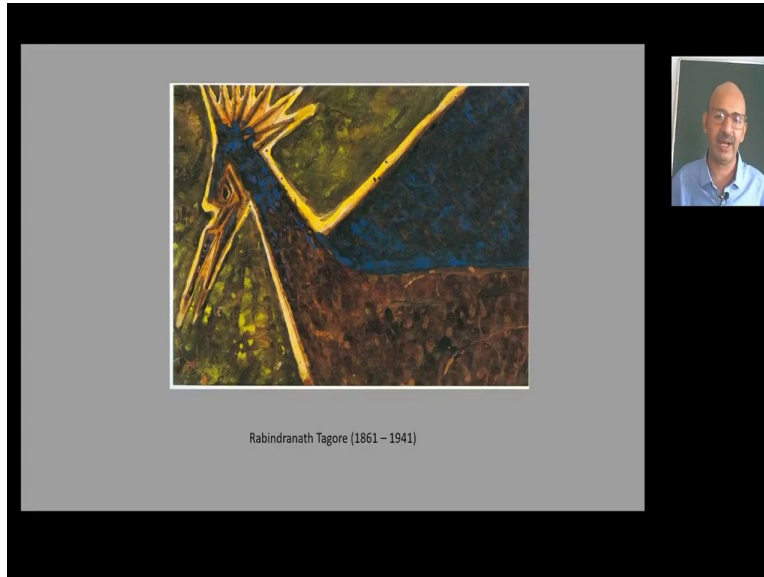
And there are a couple of sculptures where he deliberately goes for abstraction. So the kind of reduction that he was making, in his paintings and sculptures already, it was only a matter of time that Ramkinkar one day would do a portrait of Rabindranath Tagore, nobody but Rabindranath Tagore with all these “distortions” bordering on abstraction.

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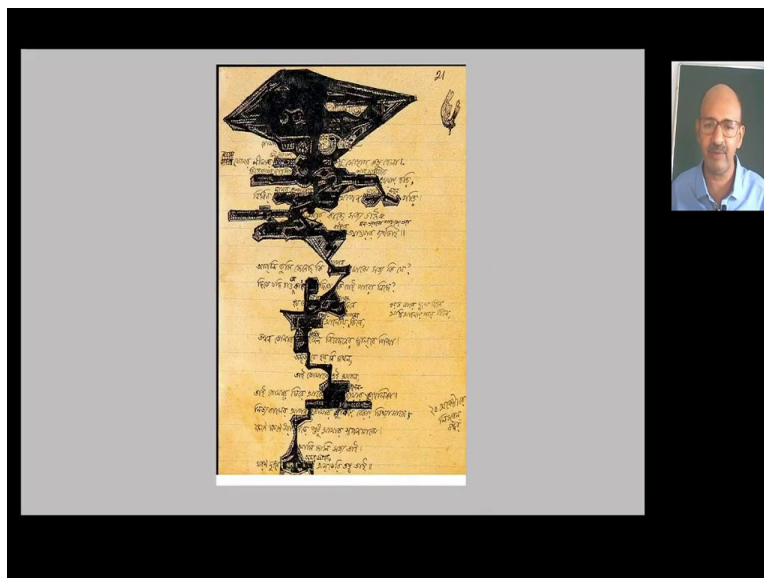
This one by Ramkinkar is fairly close to the real look, but the other one was more abstract.

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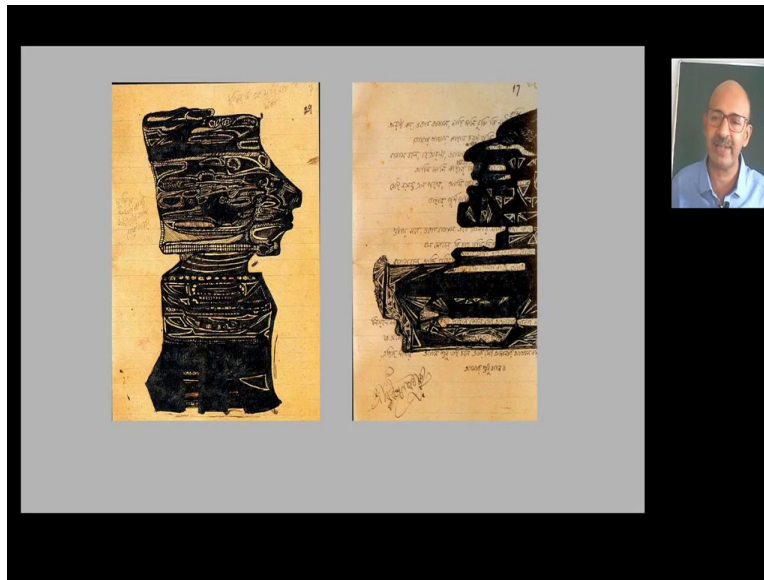
And now we have this most incredible painter Rabindranath Tagore. Who started painting almost at the last stage of his life. In fact, he painted just the last 13, 14 years of his life. And when he died in 1941, he left behind more than 2000 paintings.

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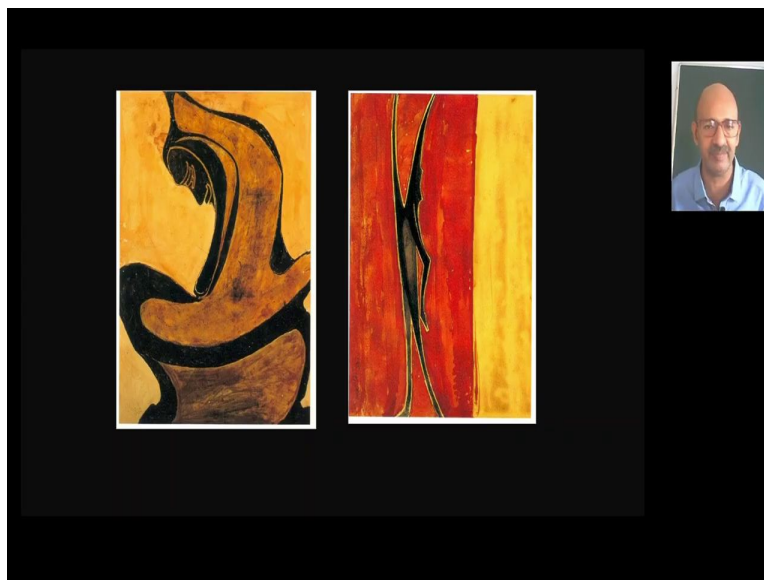
Now when you look at Rabindranath Tagore's paintings, the kind of fantasy images that you see, the kind of surreal forms that erupt from his paintings probably have a root in the early manuscript doodlings that he was doing. In most of his manuscripts, in the name of deletion, crossing, over writing, he would create very strange but beautiful shapes and forms with his pen and ink.

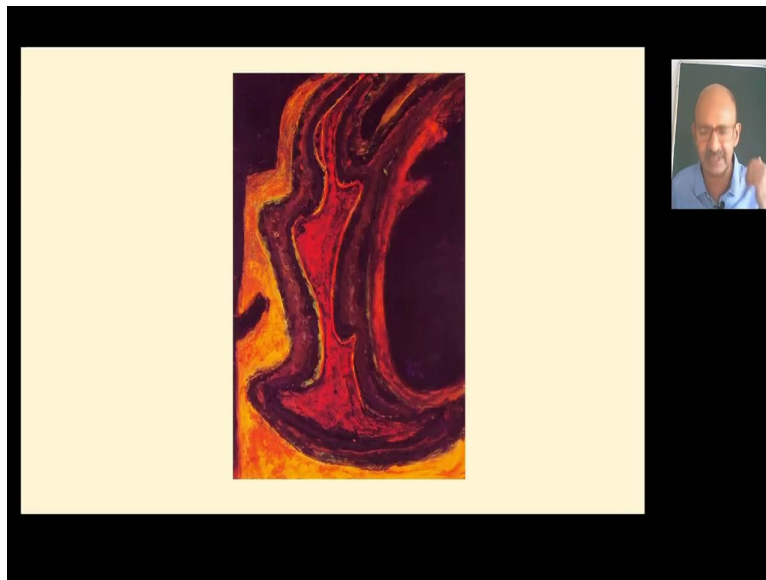
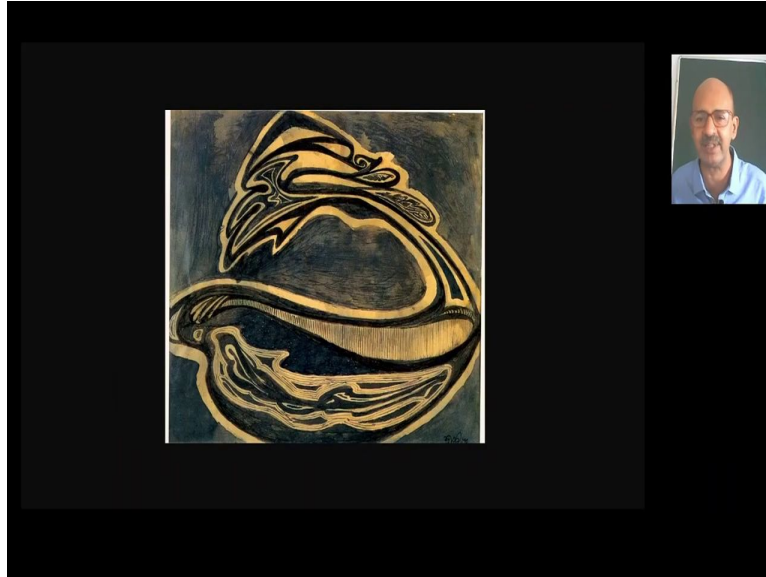
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Probably that was the beginning of his journey as a painter, when he began to discover forms.

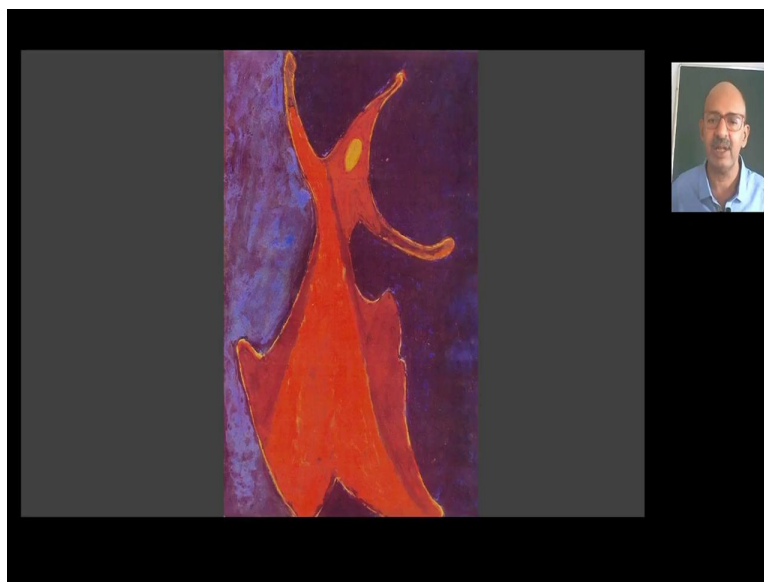
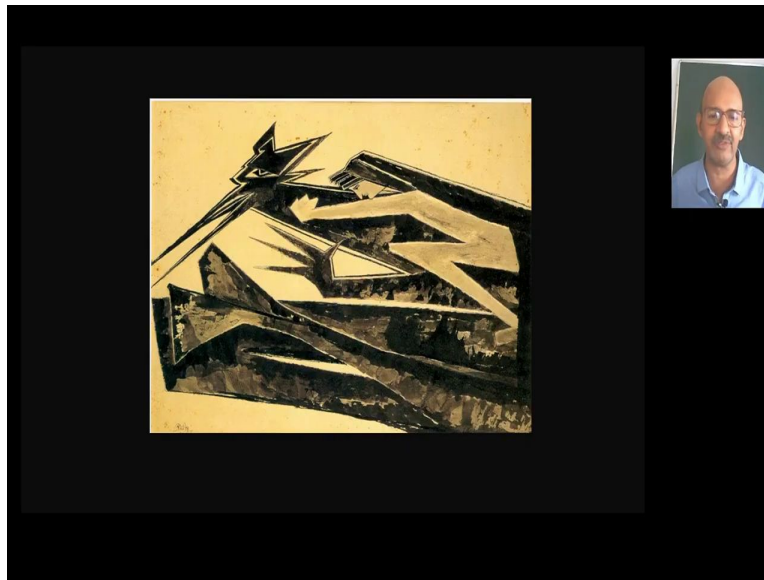
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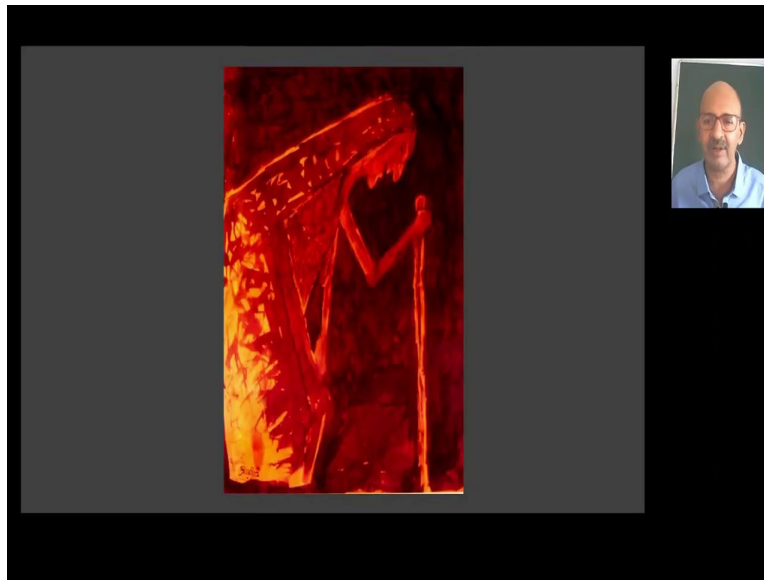
And as he himself said, on several occasions, he said that ‘I do not draw or paint a figure, I discover them.’ Now what does it mean? It simply means that these figures were not predetermined in his head. It simply means that these figures do not have a clear cut compositional layout in him. Maybe he begins with a vague idea, maybe there was no idea at the beginning. But as he keeps applying colors, and drawing lines, certain forms develop and they evolve. They kind of take birth. And these are the forms that Tagore “discover”.

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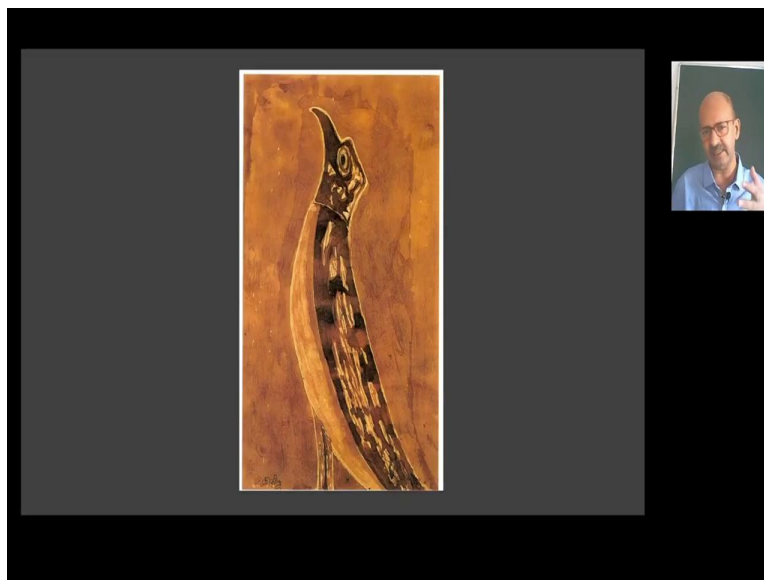
Now this whole idea of discovering a form while you are painting was completely new to the Indian history. Nobody ever saw that. Nobody even knew about a process, which always claims that we do not have anything pre-determined, preconceived. Everything is a discovery during our journey. That is during the time when a painting is being painted.

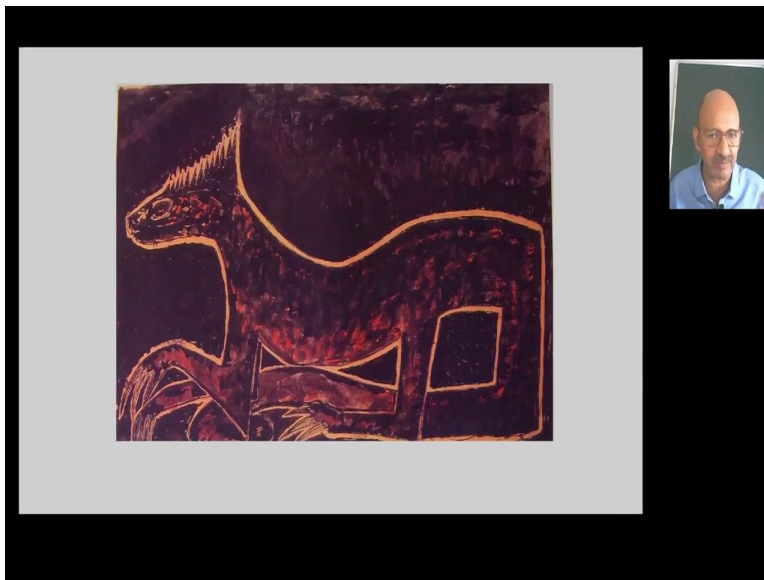
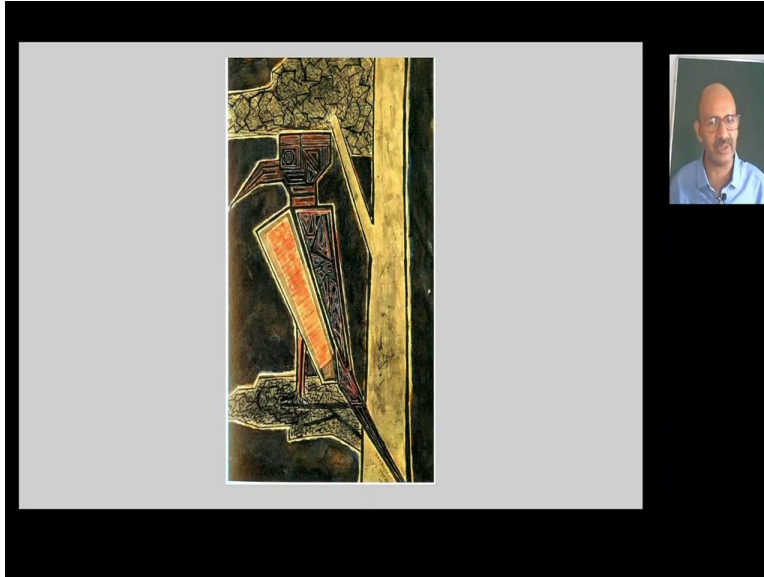
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Now, categorically speaking, Rabindranath Tagore did several kinds of paintings he did landscapes, number 1. Number 2, he did several drawings and paintings of birds and animals. Number 3, he did a whole category of paintings where he deals with shapes of different figures, and also figures in movement like a dancer. Then, number 4, he did most fascinating paintings of nature, which you may call landscape paintings. And finally, he also left for us, a huge body of drawings and paintings of only faces and portraits.

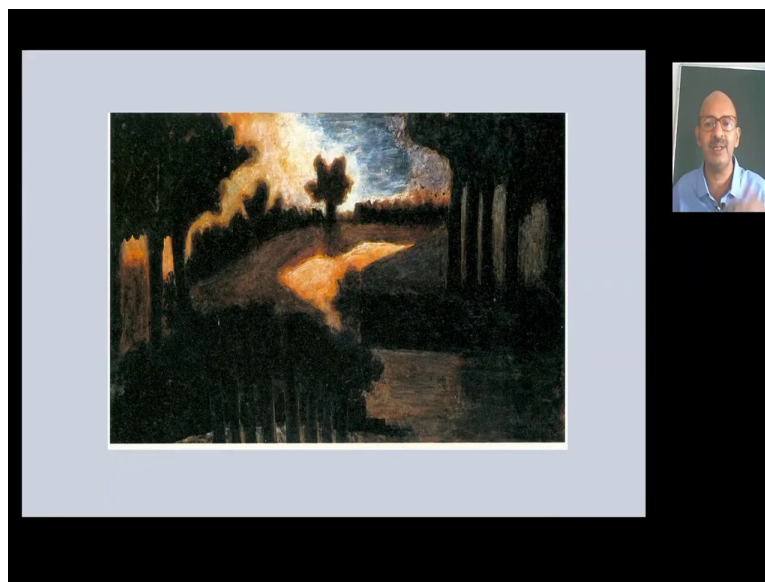
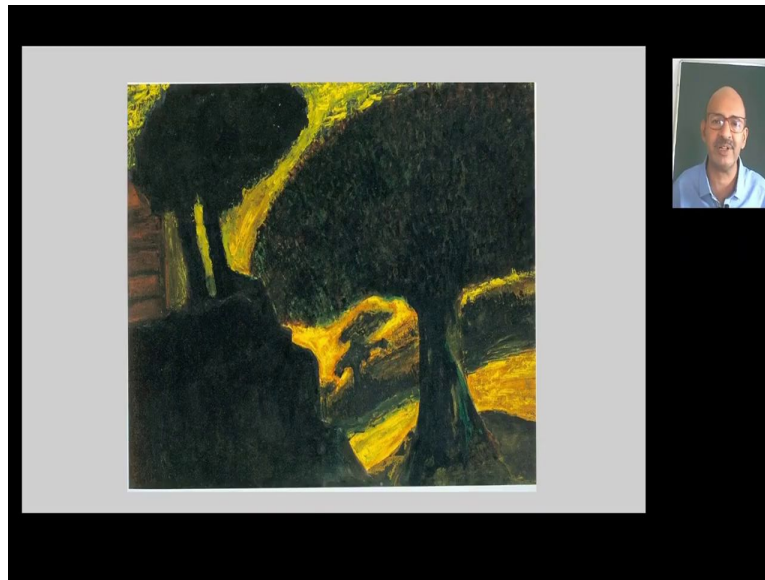
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So it is pretty obvious that Rabindranath Tagore, despite the fact that he was not formally trained, he was not doing anything absolutely arbitrary, absolutely random, absolutely chaotic. There was a certain kind of order, a mental order that he was following. Maybe directly speaking, his paintings look absolutely surprising motifs, just appearing right in front of you. But mentally, and psychologically, Tagore as a painter was always in the process of discovering forms, from real life, imaginary life.

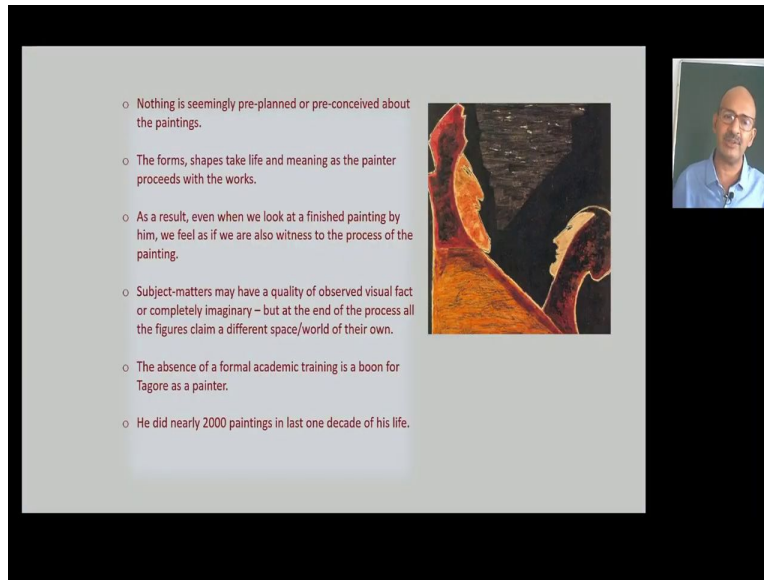
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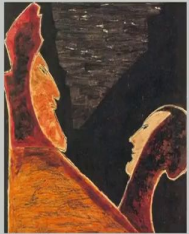
And also memory life, there are forms of birds, animals and natural surroundings, which he never saw during the time when he was painting. Maybe he saw them 20 years back, 30 years back. So he was recalling, like you open out your memory, like a Pandora's box, and pick up things that you have left behind.

But already, they are also enriched by new imaginations, new thinkings, and what do you want to do about them, you combine them. Combine them on the basis of a very free pictorial rendering like this. Not on the basis of a well-trained pictorial criteria, or well trained and well-conceived pictorial drama. It is all coming from within.

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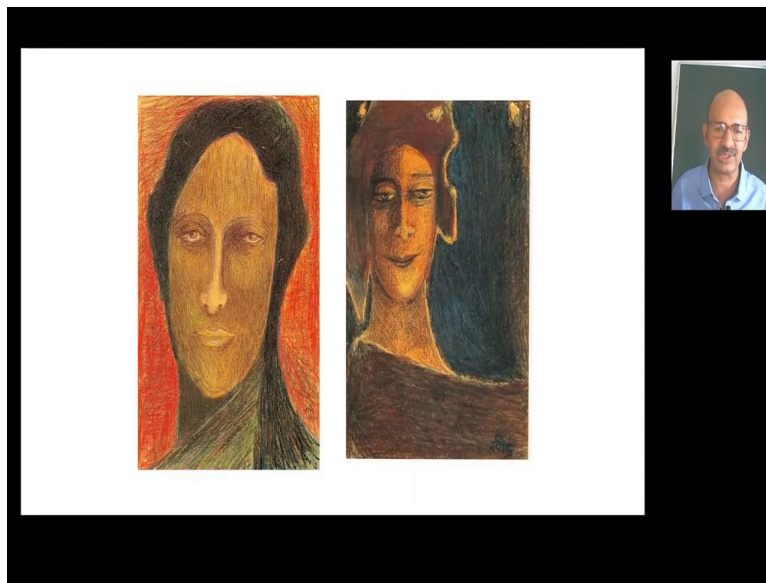
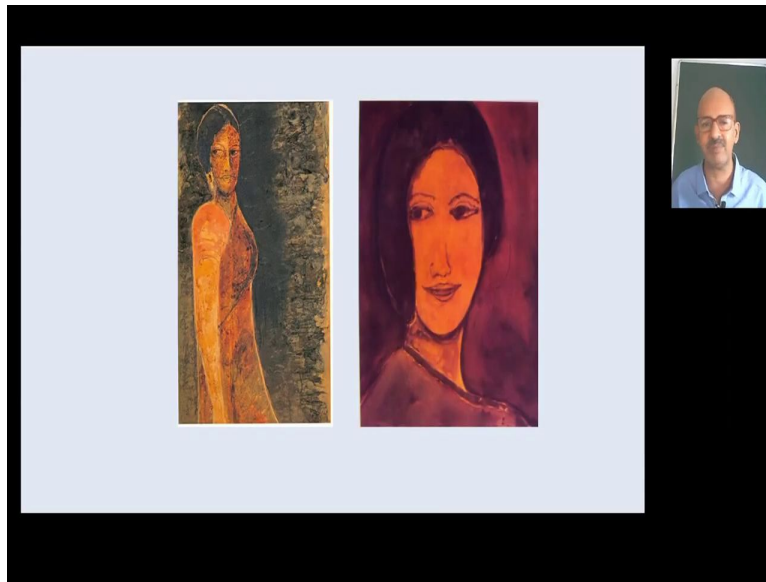


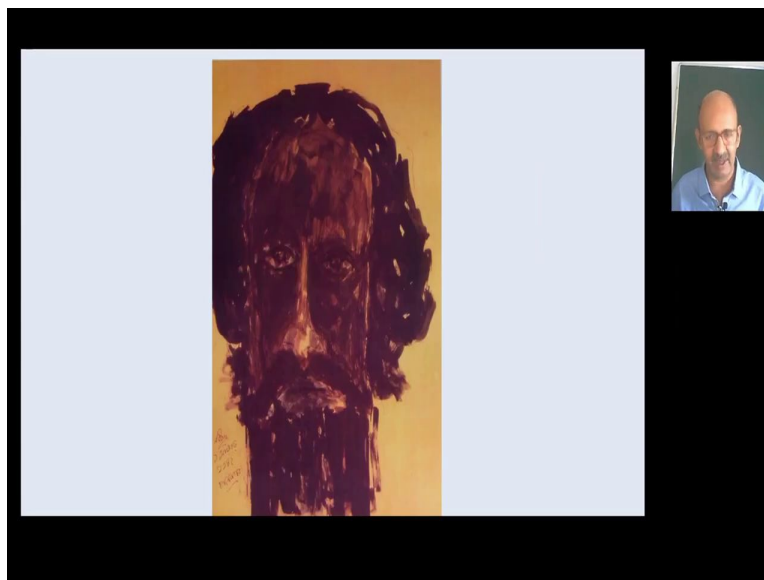
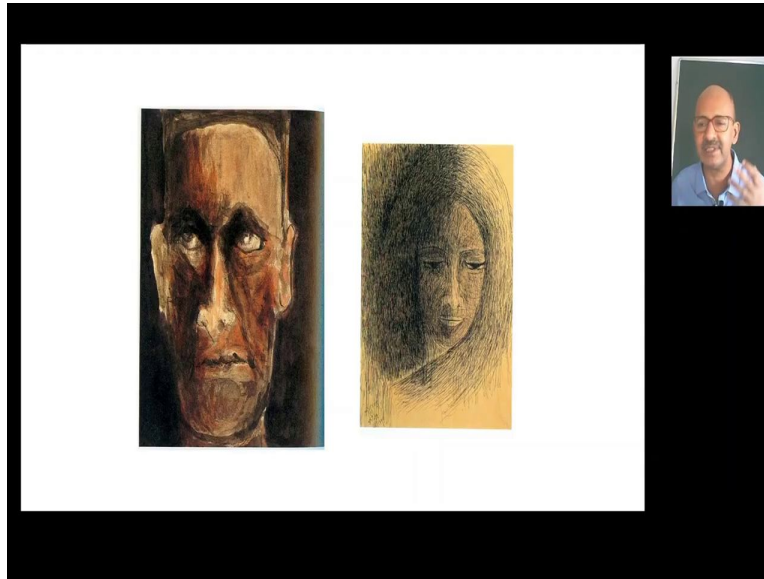
- Nothing is seemingly pre-planned or pre-conceived about the paintings.
- The forms, shapes take life and meaning as the painter proceeds with the works.
- As a result, even when we look at a finished painting by him, we feel as if we are also witness to the process of the painting.
- Subject-matters may have a quality of observed visual fact or completely imaginary – but at the end of the process all the figures claim a different space/world of their own.
- The absence of a formal academic training is a boon for Tagore as a painter.
- He did nearly 2000 paintings in last one decade of his life.



So in Tagore's paintings, nothing is seemingly pre-planned or pre-conceived about the paintings. The forms, shapes take life and meaning as the painter proceeds with the works, as he progresses. As a result, even when you look at a finished painting, by him, we feel as if we are also witness to the process of the painting. So you can never look at a Rabindranath's paintings, ignoring the process of his painting, they are so integrally related to each other. And this is a very important point we must remember, the subject matters may have a quality of observed visual facts, or completely imaginary, but at the end of the process, all the figures claim a different space and world of their own. So this is the interpretive part of his paintings, where you can feel free to interpret the inner meanings of his paintings. So I am not going into that because it is very subjective, it is very personal, how you might interpret a work of art by him. Now the absence of a formal academic training, the fact that he was not formally academically trained thoroughly, like many others of his family Gaganendranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, he did not go through that. So that absence of a formal training was also a boon for Tagore as a painter. But as I told you, he did nearly 2000 and could be more than that, in the last 1 decade of his life.

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So finally, we come to portraits, where he does amazing expressions, where he does amazing gazes, looks, colors, shapes. Now, it is for sure that all these faces cannot be completely imaginary, he must have derived them from his actual observation of real faces. But what is important here is how he is transforming them, how he is transforming them into something slightly unknown, though they are known.

So his paintings, the central feature of his paintings are all about achieving that space between the known and the unknown. Creating a kind of mystery and enigma, not only with birds, animals, landscapes, figures, and other's faces, even with his own face, as this painting suggests, this is of course a self-portrait, but this is not the way he actually looked like.

He looked different from what he looks like here. So why this distortion? Why is this shaped? Sometimes people say this is because he lacked the skill of a realistic, proper, actual, accurate representation. This answer is not very convincing. Because if we say this, then we are completely ignoring the conscious deliberate involvement of Rabindranath as a painter, the way he could play with the forms.

Because remember, he did- not 10, 20, 30, 40, 100 but nearly or more than 2000 paintings. And when a person does so many works, he almost automatically naturally develops that skill, that confidence to intervene, to apply their deliberate decisions. Now this is what makes Rabindranath a very different kind of modern Indian painter. Thank you.