

Modern Indian Art From the Colonial Period to the Present
Prof. Soumik Nandy Majumdar
Dept. History of Art, Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan Visva-Bharati
Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

Lecture 5

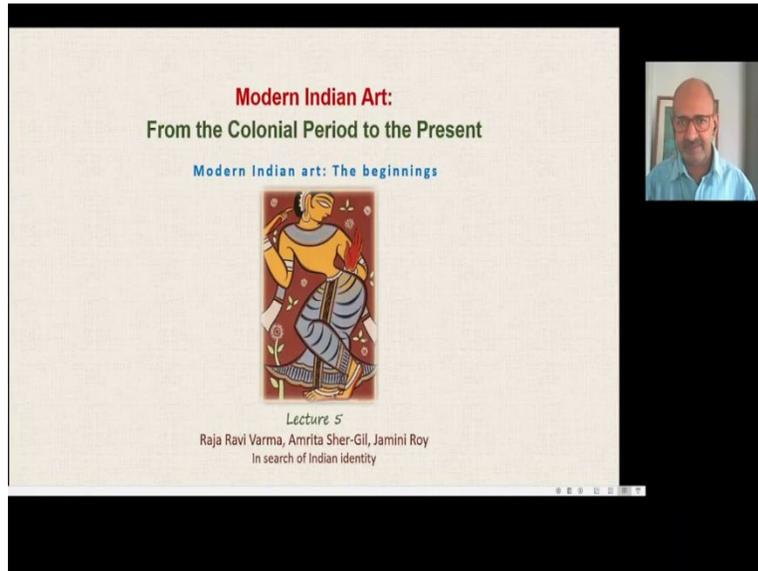
Raja Ravi Varma, Amrita Sher-Gil, Jamini Roy: In search of Indian Identity

Hello, viewers. Welcome to NOC's online course on Modern Indian Art from the Colonial Period to the Present. This is the fifth or last lecture from the first week. And just to remind you once again, the first week we have dedicated to explore the beginnings of Modern Indian art. And so far, we have seen a few very significant milestones of the early history of Modern Indian art.

First of all, we have seen that Modern Indian art, early or later, is a history teeming with diversity, variations in every respect of the term, stylistically, aesthetically, content wise, purpose wise, even intellectually and conceptually. We have also seen that Modern Indian art began because of or due to a rupture, a major setback created by the advent of the British colonial power in India and then followed by two very important phases. One, that is generally known as company painting; and secondly, Kalighat painting.

Remember, both these categories of paintings created a tradition of their own. Company painting created a tradition of their own despite the fact that individual talented painters did contribute a lot to make these two traditions very significant, very important and also creating extremely fascinating works of art, namely paintings, both in case of Kalighat painting and company painting this is true. But from today's lecture we are about to venture into a different kind of historical moment when it is no more about a collective tradition but about the rise of individual artists. Extremely gifted individual artists are slowly making themselves visible through their artworks, through their contributions. Therefore, from now onwards we can category the history in terms of chronology and once in a while in terms of certain ideology but not as a one singular body of tradition. So, from this lecture, basically and primarily, we are looking at the rise of individual artists in the context of Modern Indian art.

(Refer Slide Time: 03:38)

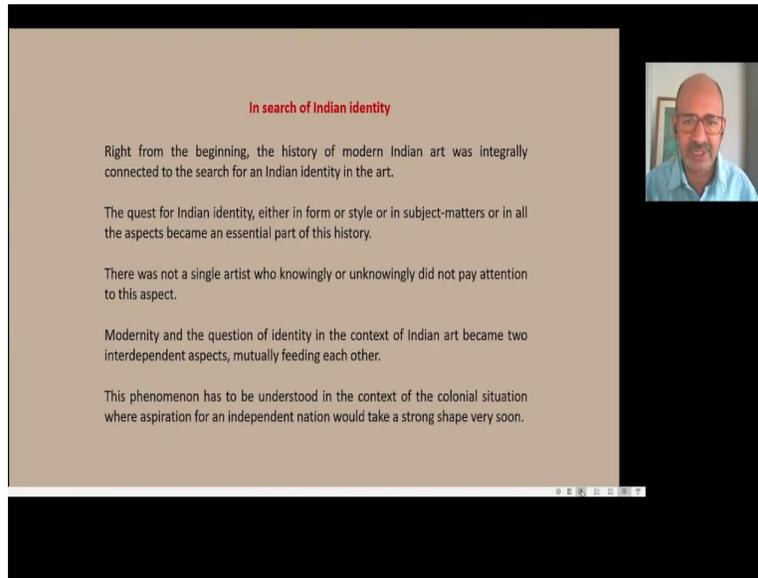


Today's lecture, we are looking at three very, very important figures from early Modern Indian art, Raja Ravi Varma, Amrita Sher-Gil and Jamini Roy. And interestingly, these three painters, these three artists beside more or less sharing the same, not exactly the same, but closely they are chronologically pretty close to each other. Beside that both of them, I mean all of them, all three of them rather, they identified one very, very important problem or as a question, as a quest, that is the quest for Indian identity.

They realized right at the outset that to create Modern Indian art or the very question of creating Modern Indian art is equivalent to creating Indian identity and we need to understand this idea keeping the colonial background in our mind. Always remembering that these three artists, Raja Ravi Varma, Amrita Sher-Gil and Jamini Roy, and others are extremely aware and conscious of the fact that whatever they would be creating in the form of art, visual art, painting, sculpture anything, it has to have something to do with the present social, cultural and political climate, because nobody, to put it very simply, wanted to remain under the British colonial power forever. Everybody slowly began to dream of an independent India and everybody more or less felt that the present political climate might make people forget their actual identity, cultural identity, social identity, namely.

Therefore, in search of Indian identity becomes essentially a very important artistic tool for not only these three painters but other painters as well. But today, we are going to look at these three painters and see how they have been negotiating this question.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:27)



The slide features a light beige background with a dark border. At the top center, the title "In search of Indian identity" is written in a small, red font. Below the title, there are five paragraphs of text in a small, black font. To the right of the text, there is a small, square video inset showing a man with glasses and a light blue shirt speaking. At the bottom of the slide, there is a small, dark navigation bar with several icons.

In search of Indian identity

Right from the beginning, the history of modern Indian art was integrally connected to the search for an Indian identity in the art.

The quest for Indian identity, either in form or style or in subject-matters or in all the aspects became an essential part of this history.

There was not a single artist who knowingly or unknowingly did not pay attention to this aspect.

Modernity and the question of identity in the context of Indian art became two interdependent aspects, mutually feeding each other.

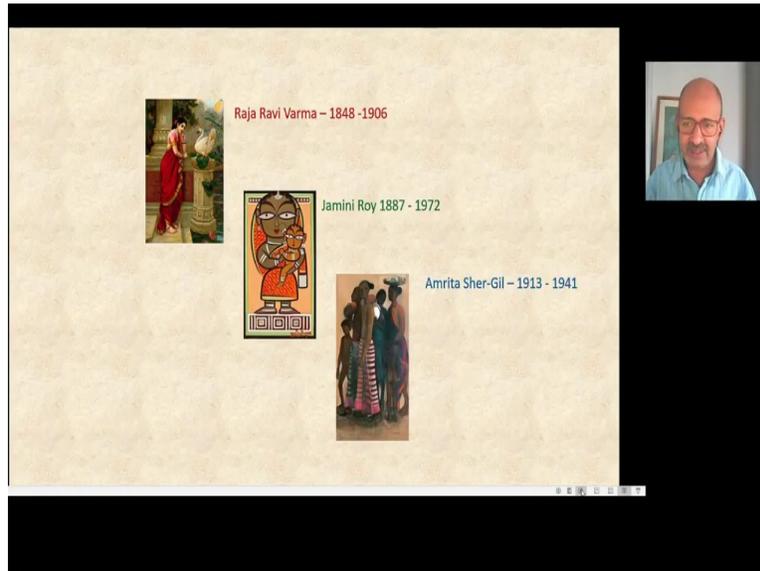
This phenomenon has to be understood in the context of the colonial situation where aspiration for an independent nation would take a strong shape very soon.

So, in search of Indian identity, in other words, meant that the history of Modern Indian art was integrally connected to the search of an Indian identity in the art. In terms of subject matter, in terms of style, in terms of temperament that may be different in case of different artists, but the central point is to create a kind of art which will be or can be easily identified as Indian and that will make their art Modern.

So, Modernity and Indian identity in case of Indian art become very, very, if not synonymous, but at least closely woven into each other. So, the quest for Indian identity either in form or style or in subject matters kind of became an essential part of this history. There was not a single artist who knowingly or unknowingly did not pay attention to this aspect.

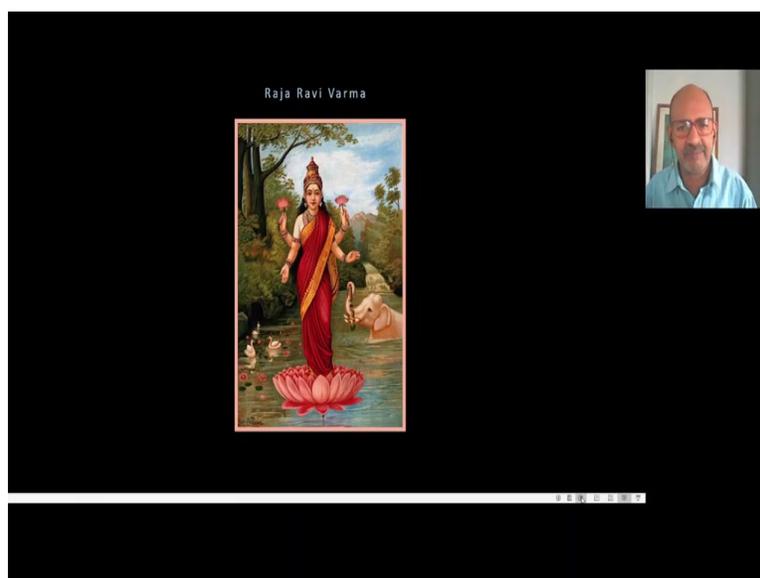
Modernity and the question of identity in the context of Indian art became two interdependent, as I told you just now, closely woven into each other and mutually feeding each other. This particular phenomenon has to be understood in the context of the colonial situation where aspiration for an independent nation would take a very, very strong shape very soon.

(Refer Slide Time: 08:09)



So, Raja Ravi Varma, please pay attention to the chronology, I mean their timespan. Born in 1848 and died in 1906, Jamini Roy born in 1887-1972. Then Amrita Sher-Gil, born in 1913 and died pretty early, 1941. Amrita Sher-Gil happens to be the youngest among this lot. So what binds them together, these three artists, is the quest of identity, Indian identity. But interestingly, each one of them came up with a different solution. Each one of them came up with a different idea to negotiate this quest, to address this quest.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:05)



Raja Ravi Varma

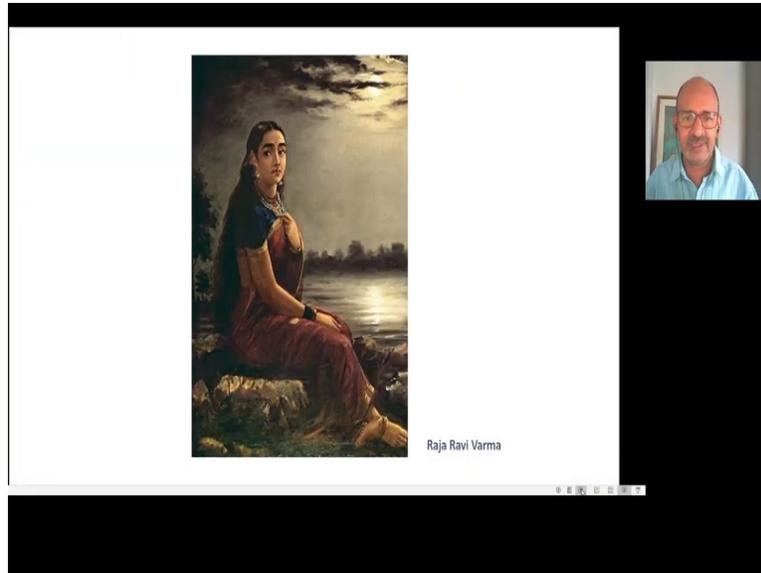


Navigation icons: back, forward, search, etc.

Raja Ravi Varma



Navigation icons: back, forward, search, etc.



For example, Raja Ravi Varma, he diligently acquired the skill of Western naturalism, but if you look at his subject matters, for example, the Goddess Lakshmi here, it could be something else there or maybe a scene from a mythological story or maybe a woman from an upper caste Indian family, she is in a certain kind of pose, looking at a swan in a beautiful architecture and you can see the garden behind or this woman holding a fruit in her right hand or this woman sitting next to a splendid nature landscape.

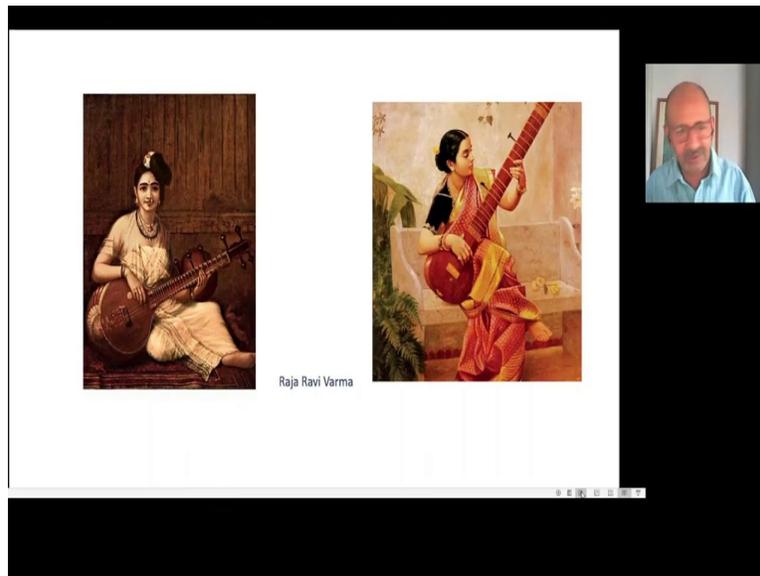
Now these are the subject matters, whether it is mythological or non-mythological, non-religious, secular subject matters, they are Indian in every sense of the term, but executed in a method, which is fundamentally Western, fundamentally very Academic, and in terms of its representational quality it is no doubt very realistic, very naturalistic.

So, Ravi Varma was basically playing with apparently two different challenges, but being a very, very intelligent painter he could actually blend them perfectly. Because if you look at Indian traditional painting it was almost impossible for Indian traditional painters to even imagine painting a Bhagavata Purana in Western Academic naturalistic style, but Ravi Varma does that.

After all, Ravi Varma does not belong to any particular tradition anymore. After all, Ravi Varma, like Jamini Roy and later Amrita Sher-Gil- they are all individual and independent artists. Now, when we say independent artists, it does not mean that they did not have any patrons. For example, Ravi Varma had not one, several patrons from very royal families of Travancore, royal

families of Maharashtra, etc. But nevertheless his aesthetic choice, he could make his aesthetic choice independently.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:48)



Now, what is very interesting to look at in Ravi Varma's paintings is that every time you look at Ravi Varma's painting even if you have not seen these paintings before, you feel that you have seen them. Why? Because Ravi Varma's paintings have kind of transgressed their own paintings and later on became very, very popular images in the domain of popular art.

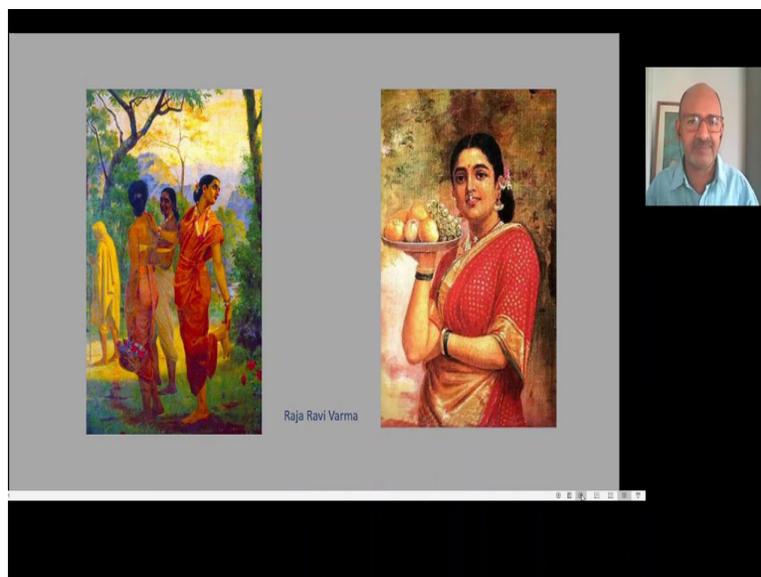
Even without knowing that originally these were paintings painted by Raja Ravi Varma, I am sure all of us at one point or the other in our life must have seen these images painted or printed on calendars, on various kinds of popular images, maybe somewhere in a tea stall, in some Indian town or maybe in somebody's house or maybe in some shop.

So, even today, I mean, usually we may not know it, but if you look at the popular kind of street markets along with the pinups of the popular film heroes and heroines, you still find Ravi Varma's paintings, but sometimes a little transformed and changed, having a bright space, even today, on calendar pages, on posters.

So, this is very important to know that Ravi Varma became a very popular painter, sought after painter because of these two things which he himself kind of resolved to play with. Number one,

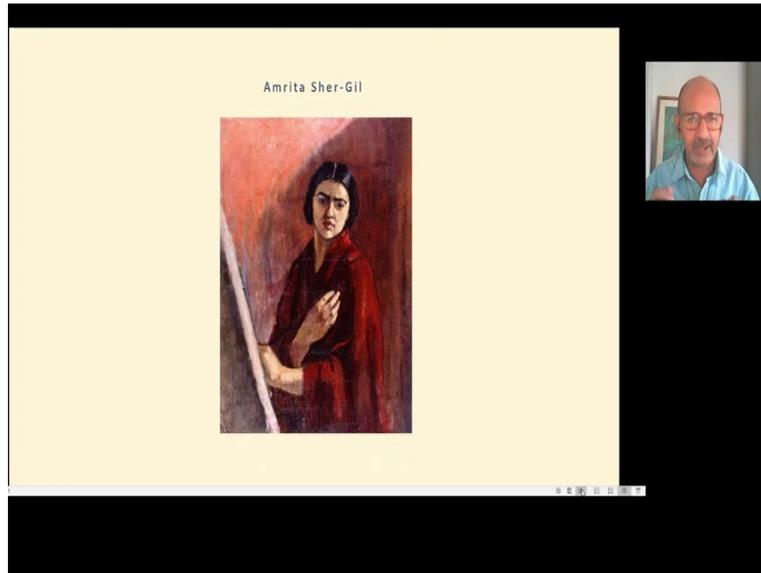
Indian people have not seen such realistic paintings before. They were completely kind of overwhelmed and heavily impressed by the very nature of these paintings.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:12)



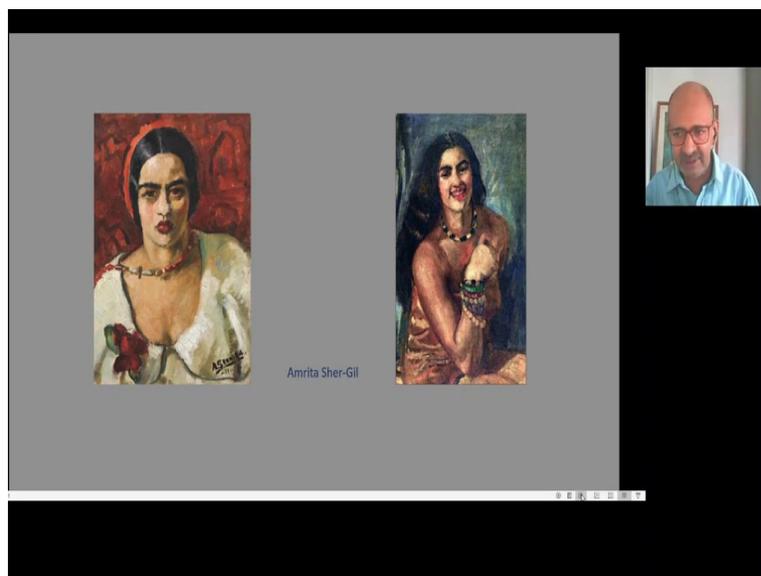
Secondly, the subject matters have always been very, very Indian. Indian people, Indian men, Indian women, Indian landscape. And also Ravi Varma is probably the first Indian artist to have used models in his studio to paint, to imagine, to compose his subject matters. So his process was thoroughly realistic.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:38)



Now, Amrita Sher-Gil also has a root in European realistic training. She was born in Hungary. Her father was Punjabi Indian, mother European. As a child, she grew up in Europe and she took some training from a teacher, European teacher who was very, very well versed with this European Academic naturalism.

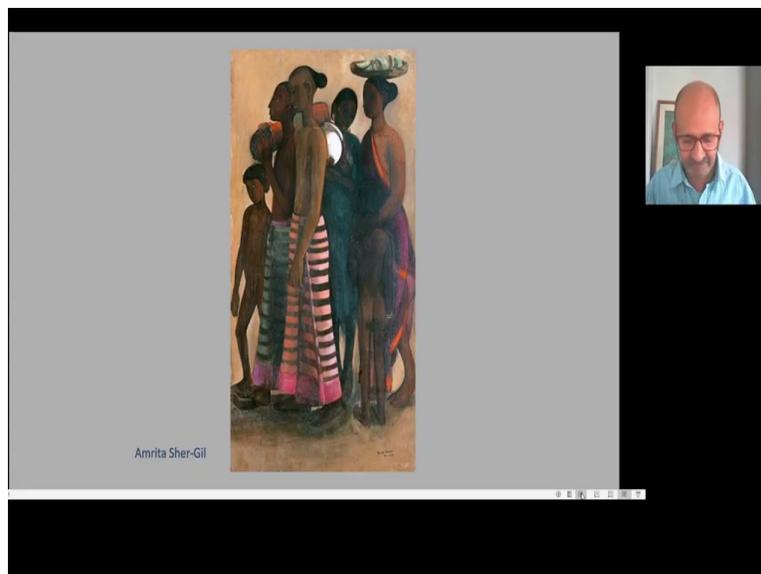
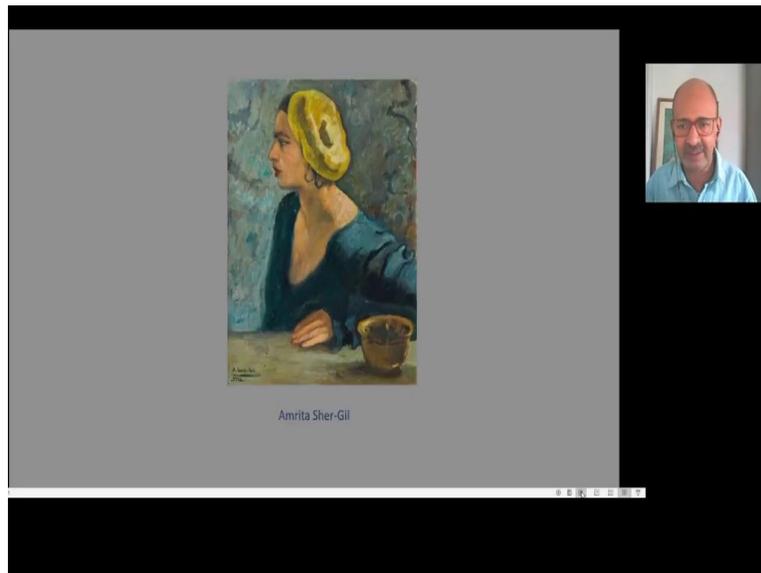
(Refer Slide Time: 15:18)



So, when you look at some of these paintings, these self-portraits by Amrita Sher-Gil, they really do not have anything Indian about it except the fact that the paintings portray herself, Amrita.

But the style, the technique, the colour application, they are not strictly Academic realism, comparatively more Modern. They remind you of probably Post-impressionistic styles yet they are not Indian, maybe Modern but not Indian.

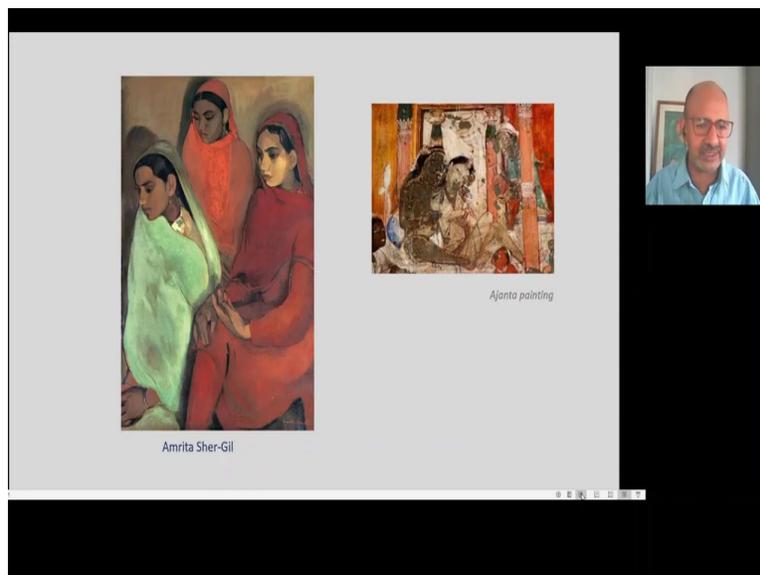
(Refer Slide Time: 15:49)



So, leaving behind this particular style, Amrita Sher-Gil begins to experiment with something else when she arrives in India and stays here forever till her death. So, what happens is that she started observing the Indian society, Indian culture, Indian ethos. She started observing the beautiful scenarios, not only landscape but social scenarios. She also started observing the colour

scheme of the Indian land, Indian people. Now, all these things began to kind of influence her paintings. Therefore, her paintings gradually became very Indian in terms of subject matter.

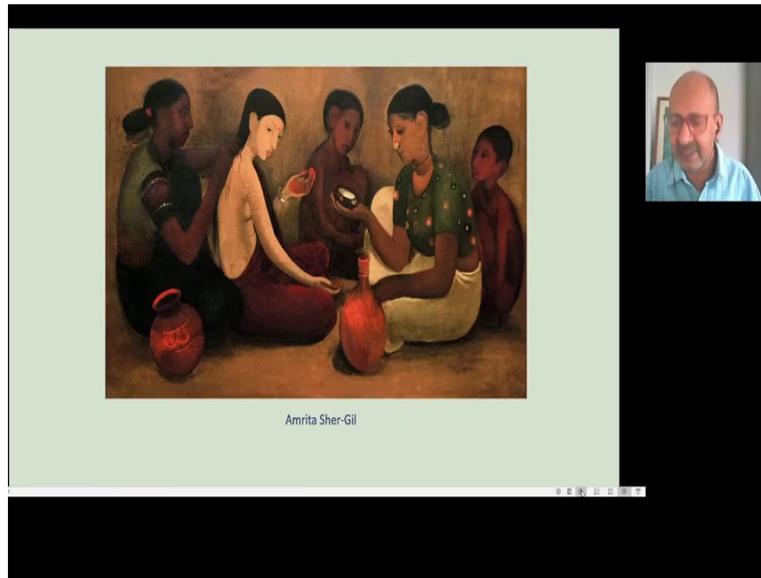
(Refer Slide Time: 16:42)



They gradually became also very Indian in terms of style because meanwhile she went to Ajanta. She looked at Ajanta paintings. She responded to the warm colour palette of Ajanta paintings. She responded to the certain Indian figuration of Ajanta painting and she was intelligent enough to try out those forms in her own paintings and make them look truly Indian.

Therefore, when you look at Amrita Sher-Gil's works they look very Indian not just because the subject matters are Indian. Of course, her subject matters became thoroughly Indian after she reached India and started painting here.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:38)



Look at this painting. All these subject matters are very Indian. They are from her own observation of the entire India in fact. She also went down to the South, she traveled to various parts of India, she was observing Indian society, Indian culture, Indian people, Indian villages and very importantly she was observing Indian women.

So, undoubtedly her subject matters are completely Indian, but that is not the only factor which makes her paintings very Indian. It is her treatment of color, it is her compositional methods, it is her line, the quality of the contour line of the bodies of women, men.

(Refer Slide Time: 18:26)



Amrita Sher-Gil

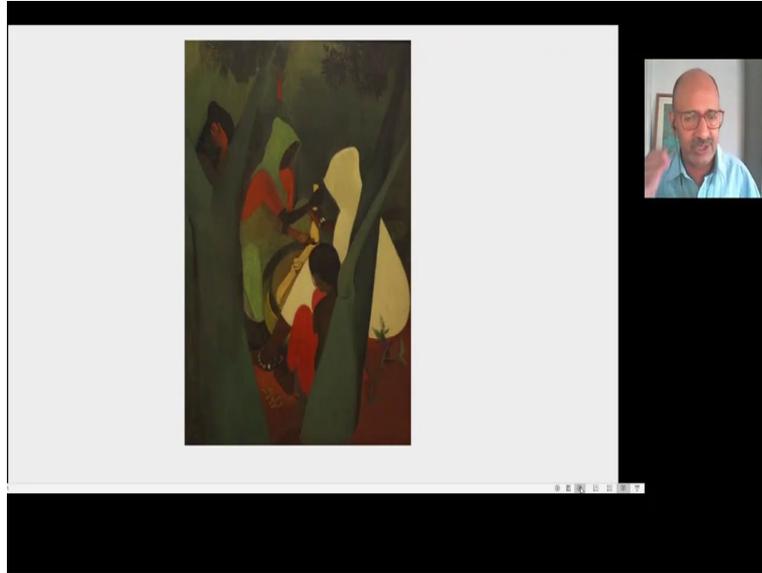
A painting by Amrita Sher-Gil depicting five individuals sitting on the floor in a circle. The figures are rendered in a style characteristic of her work, with a focus on form and color. The background is a solid, dark reddish-brown. The figures are dressed in simple, light-colored clothing. The overall mood is contemplative and intimate.



Amrita Sher-Gil

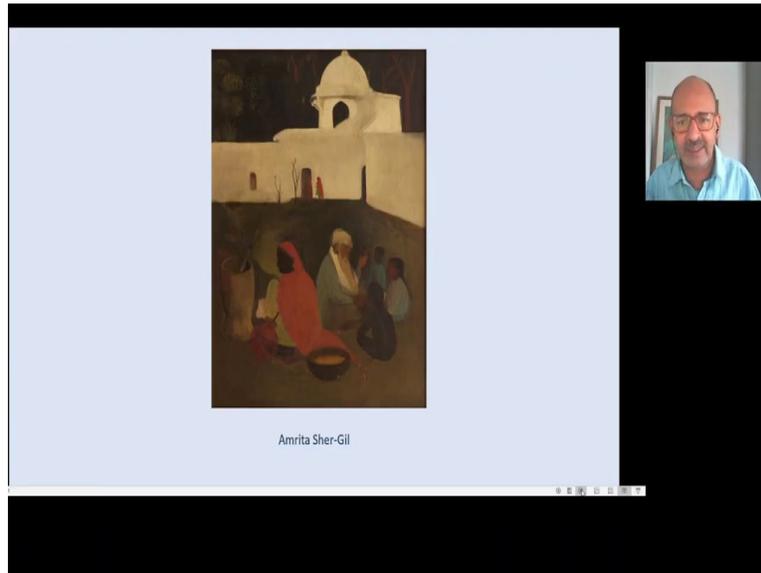
A painting by Amrita Sher-Gil depicting five women sitting on the floor. They are engaged in a communal activity, possibly preparing food or a drink. The women are dressed in simple, light-colored clothing. The background is a solid, dark reddish-brown. The overall mood is intimate and focused on the shared activity.





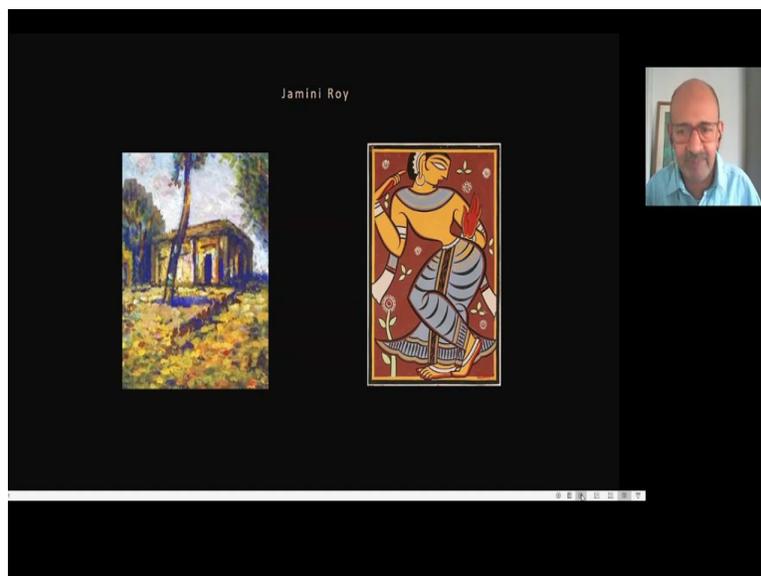
Look at this and compare this with her earlier paintings when she was following the Modern western style, the Post-impressionist style, which was a rough patch, contour lines were pretty agitated, but here you find extremely subdued contour line, controlled figuration and there is also a stillness of time in her painting, the stillness of moment which she found very typical of Indian life in those days. And also the look, the eyes of her people, the dress, the color scheme and there is some amount of subdued quality in her paintings because of the temperament of Indian weather, the Indian atmosphere. So, she was certainly responding to Indian culture, but she was also reinventing certain colour schemes to suit that observation.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:37)



And therefore, Indian life, Indian architecture, Indian houses, all these things played a very, very important role in her painting. This is one of the last paintings she did after which she died at a very, very young age. So, we always think that had she lived a longer life, she would have truly created a benchmark for the early Modern Indian art.

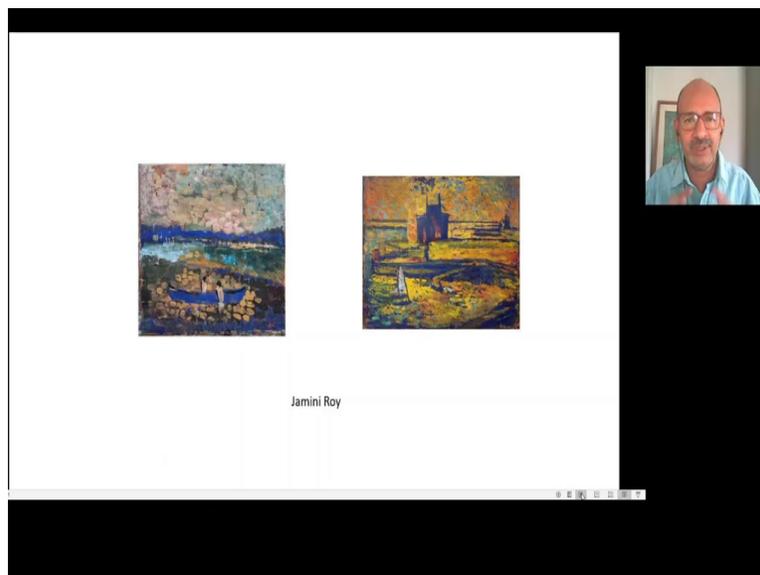
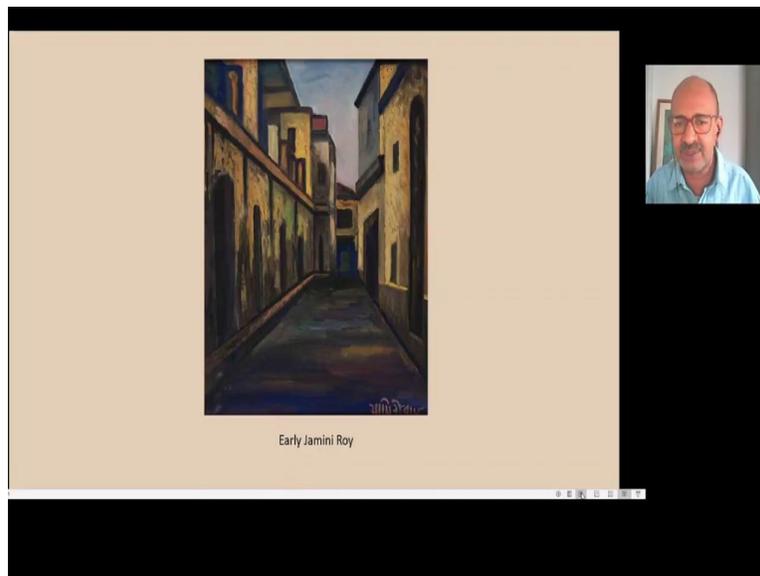
(Refer Slide Time: 20:08)



Now, the last painter in today's lecture is Jamini Roy, born in West Bengal and Jamini Roy is the one, again, like Amrita Sher-Gil started off with his extremely superb skill to paint in Western

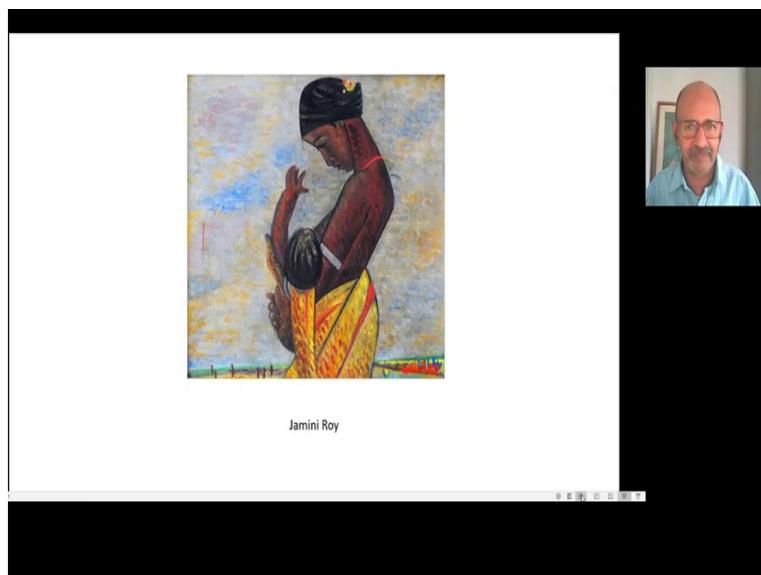
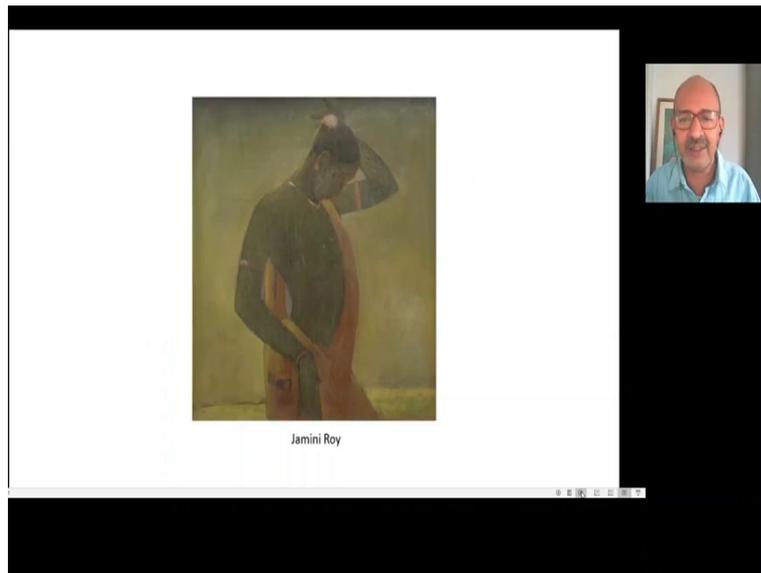
style. Look at the painting on the left. This is an example of an early Jamini Roy when he was painting in Western style.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:53)



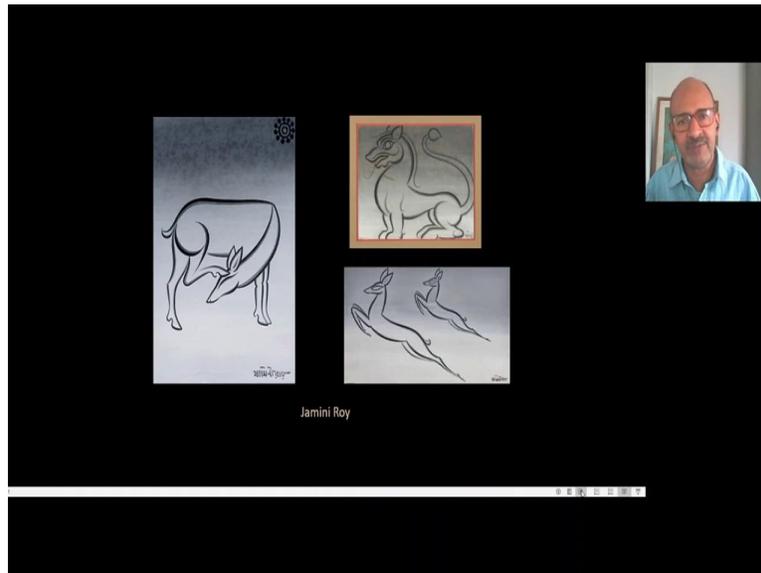
And his Western style paintings remind us of sometimes Post-impressionist styles, sometimes Fauvism, which was a very important Modern Western style introduced primarily by Henri Matisse. So, Fauvism, Post-impressionist styles kind of combined together and found a new pictorial feature or character in Jamini Roy's early paintings.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:35)



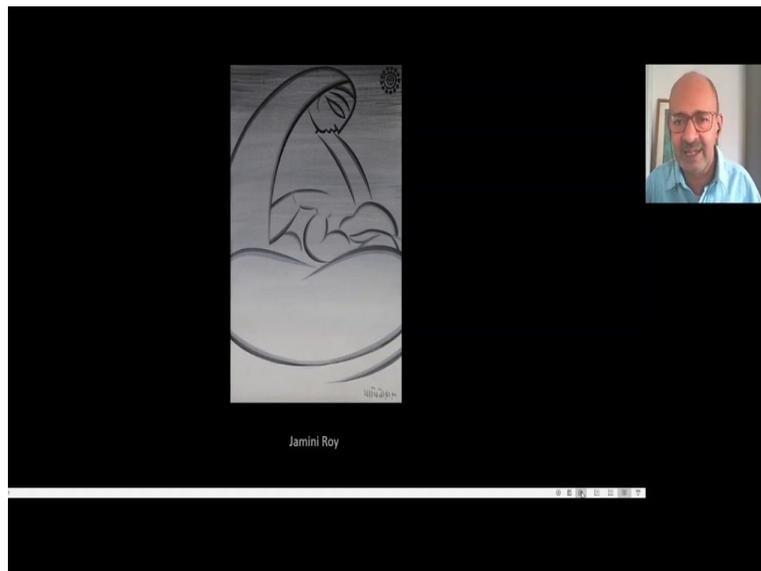
And this Jamini Roy who was so skilled in dealing with these Western modes, Western methods finally decided to leave the Western styles and embark upon a new journey based on Indian styles, like this one. So, initially, he was exploring, trying to figure out what could be the best possible way to achieve an Indian identity in his works.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:03)



Jamini Roy sourced his solution from Bengal Pata painting from the local and traditional Bengal paintings, namely the Pata paintings, of which we saw a few examples when we were looking at some of these Pata painting examples during our lecture on Kalighat painting, if you remember.

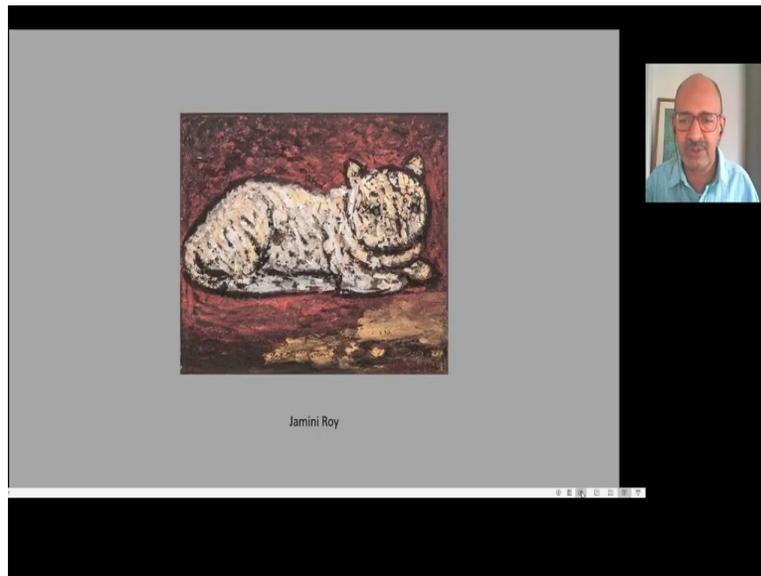
(Refer Slide Time: 22:28)



So, Jamini Roy changed himself completely. Look at his drawings. There is nothing western about it, completely Indian, and sourced from primarily the local, rural, traditional Pata

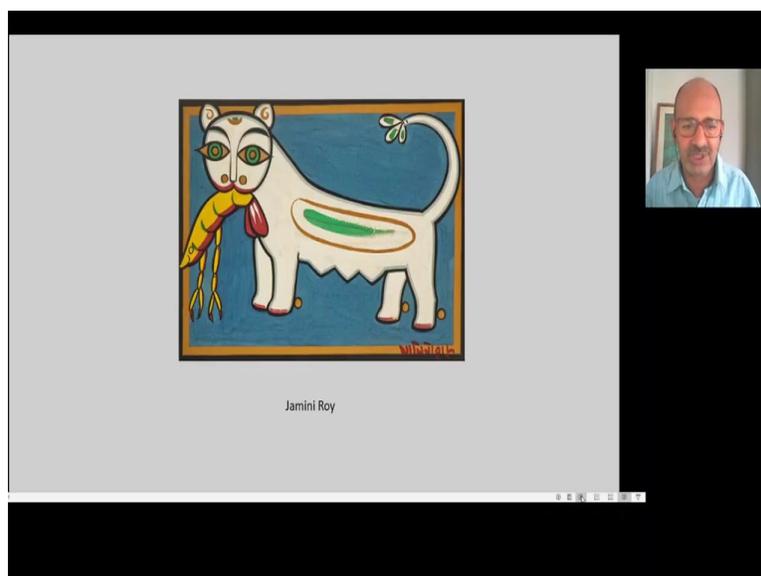
paintings, but he sort of refined the lines. Very gracefully refined the lines to a stylized form. This is something that you see and he is also using one typical characteristic feature of Kalighat painting where you see a light brush mark or a wash along the main contour lines.

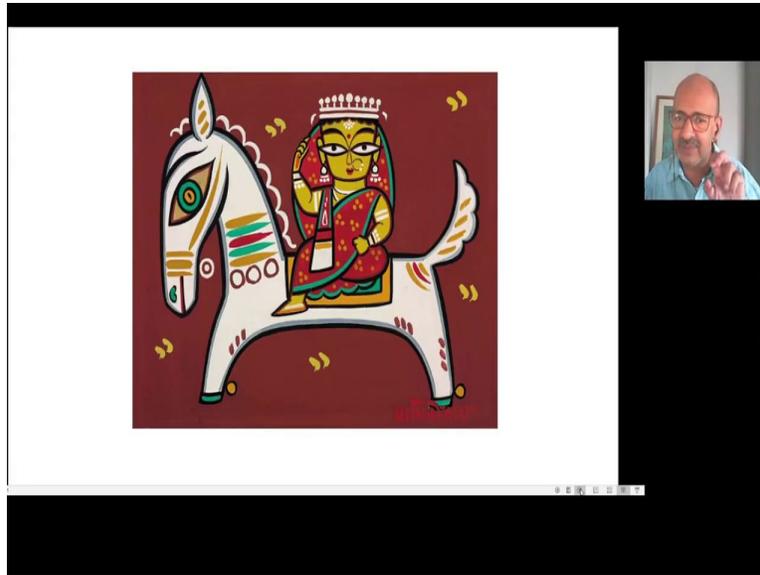
(Refer Slide Time: 23:14)



So, he is groping, he is trying to figure out how to leave behind completely the western style and achieve something that is Indian, something that is more close to his culture, Indian culture.

(Refer Slide Time: 23:31)

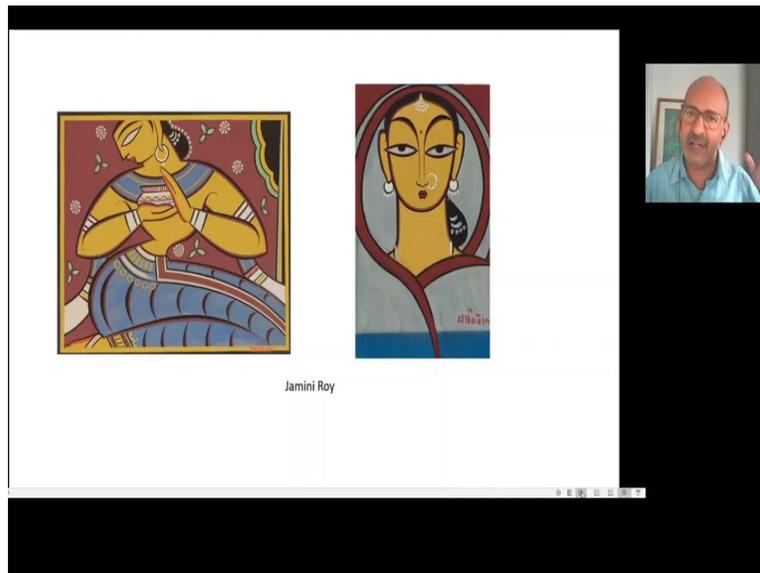




So he comes up with this kind of solution- strong, bold contour lines. Strong flat colours, maybe sometimes a wash or secondary color, a supportive color, darker tone around the contour line. And not only Bengal painting, Pata painting that is the rural scroll paintings or square paintings, he was also looking at other forms of traditional culture. For example, toys of Bengal tradition.

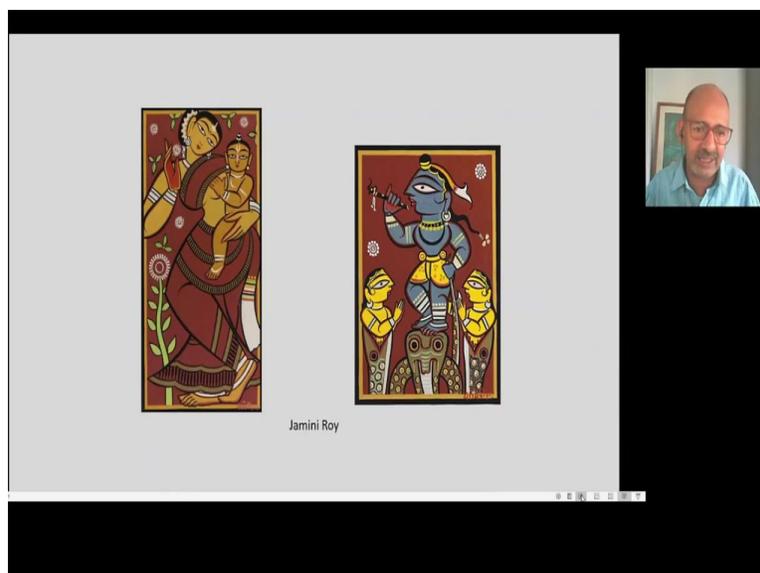
I mean these paintings remind us of more than the Bengal rural paintings, they remind us of the Bengal toys. So, he is sourcing his ideas. He is kind of deriving his pictorial ideas from these traditional sources, namely Bengal Pata painting and the traditional toys and trying to make new forms, entirely new in the context of Modern Indian art.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:31)



So, Jamini Roy's brand of Modern Indian art is integrally connected to the traditional folk art of Bengal. Somebody else might do in some other way. For example, Amrita Sher-Gil sourced her Indian identity from the actual observation of Indian life, its flora and fauna. Ravi Varma was focusing on Indian subject matters, mainly mythical subject matters and the actual royal subject matters to make his paintings Indian. So, everybody was coming up with his own solutions.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:09)





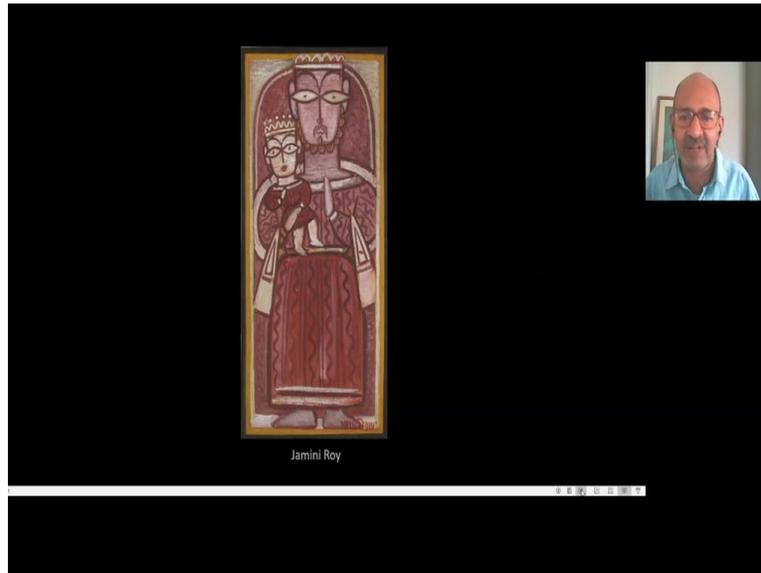
Jamini Roy



Jamini Roy

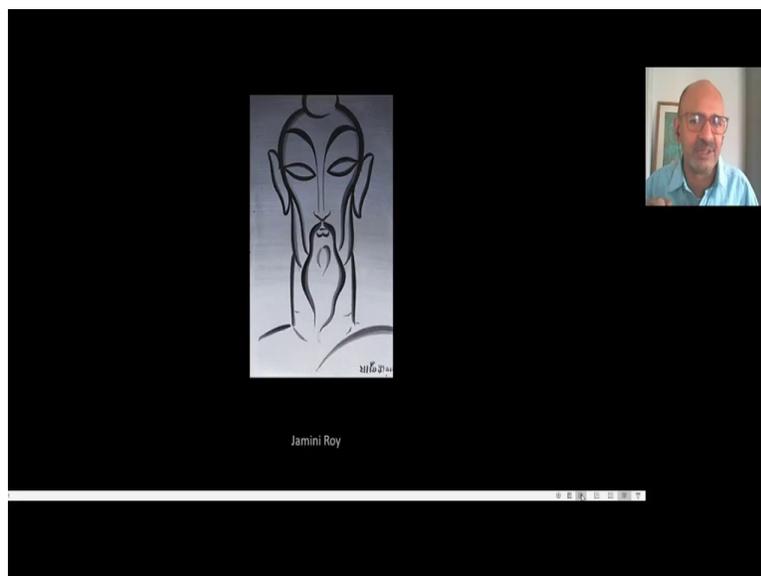
And as you go on looking at various paintings by Jamini Roy, you realize very strongly that how this man not only discovered this style deriving from the local tradition, but also was able to take it further, refine it and turn it into an inescapable contribution to Modern Indian art.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:47)



His subject matters also vary from Jesus Christ like you just saw or child Krishna with his mother, the one that you saw before or the cat holding a fish in his mouth, the subject matter of which is derived again from Kalighat painting, but he is kind of styling it, reinventing it in a new pictorial format.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:17)



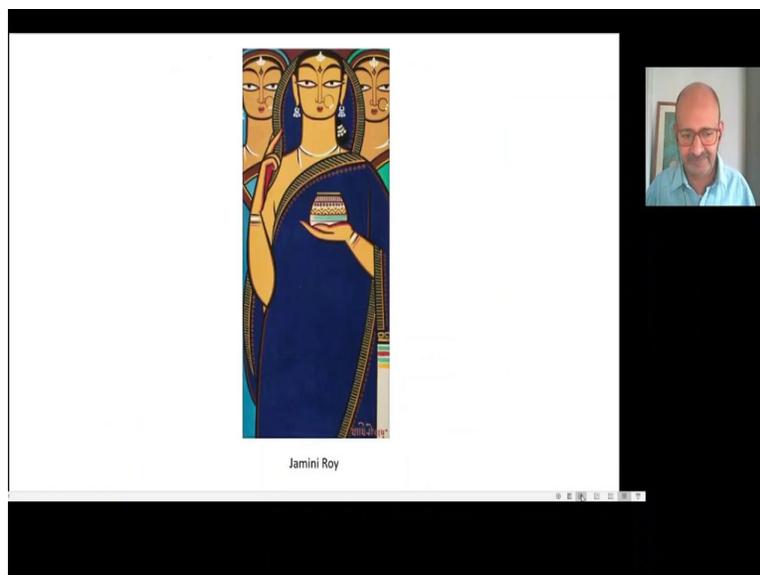
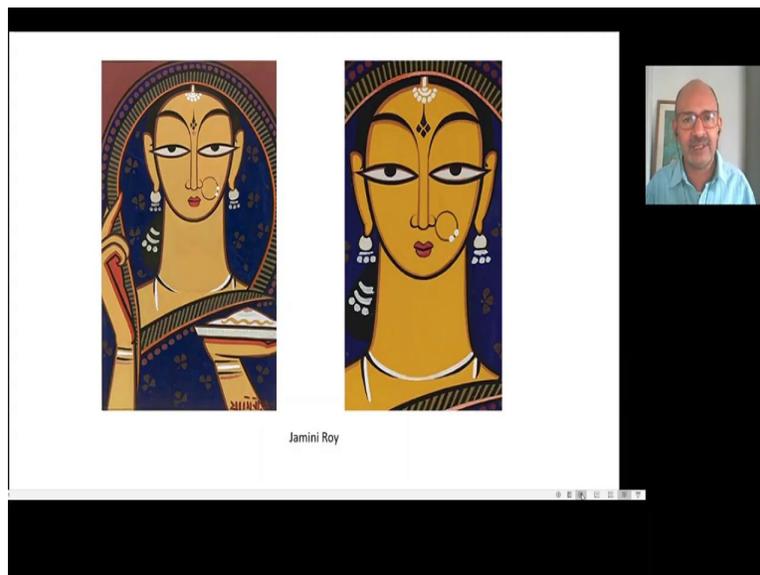
So, clearly despite the fact that Jamini Roy did derive his styles from tradition, his paintings do not look traditional at all. They look urban, they look Modern and they also bear this very imprint of an artist who had a tremendous control over line, color, shape and form.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:47)



So, this control, extreme control over the form and very nicely arranged motifs, elements within a given format without any scope of any little change or shape is a hallmark of Jamini Roy, something that we will never find in folk art. Folk art always leaves a space for slight change. There is a kind of flexibility. In Jamini Roy's paintings it is done in a final manner like a master's work. Nothing remains to improve or to add to change.

(Refer Slide Time: 27:31)



It is this finality of his style that makes him one of the greatest painters of early Modern Indian art. So, we are at the end of this lecture today completing the first week of this course looking at the various beginnings and trying to understand all the beginnings with their own contextual logics. From the second week onwards, that is from the sixth lecture, we will be looking at how more directly some of the artists are responding to the idea of nationalism and how the different centers like Calcutta, Santiniketan coming up as major Modern art centers, from the early 20th century. Thank you.