

**Modern Indian Art From the Colonial Period to the Present**  
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**Lecture 09**

**Santiniketan- the alternative modernism Nandalal & Benode Behari**

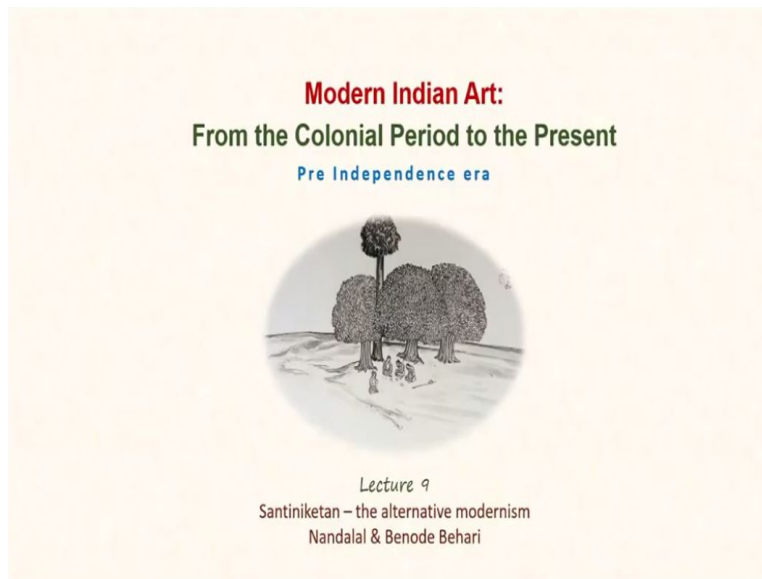
Hello viewers, welcome to NOC's online course on modern Indian art from the colonial period to the present. As you all know, this week, that is the second week of this course, we are looking at the developments of Modern Indian art during the pre independence era. From this week, we are left with the last two lectures that are lecture number 9 and 10. And both these lectures will be dedicated to the developments of another newly emerging center for modern Indian art.

The name of the place is Santiniketan and the name of the fine arts Institute, which propagated the new developments is known as Kala Bhavana. So, we are looking at not only another center of modern India art, more than that the significance of Santiniketan or Kala Bhavana in particular lies in the fact that right from its inception, whether in terms of its pedagogy, that is art education, or in terms of the art practice that happened in Santiniketan in Kala Bhavana, was completely opposed to what the colonial art education stood for.

We need to remember that it was around the mid 19th century that three major art schools or Art colleges were established by the British rulers, namely in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. So, when Kala Bhavana as an alternative art school came up in Santiniketan in 1919, there was already more than 50 years of history of colonial art education, which obviously the founder of Santiniketan, Rabindranath Tagore did not want to copy or imitate or follow.

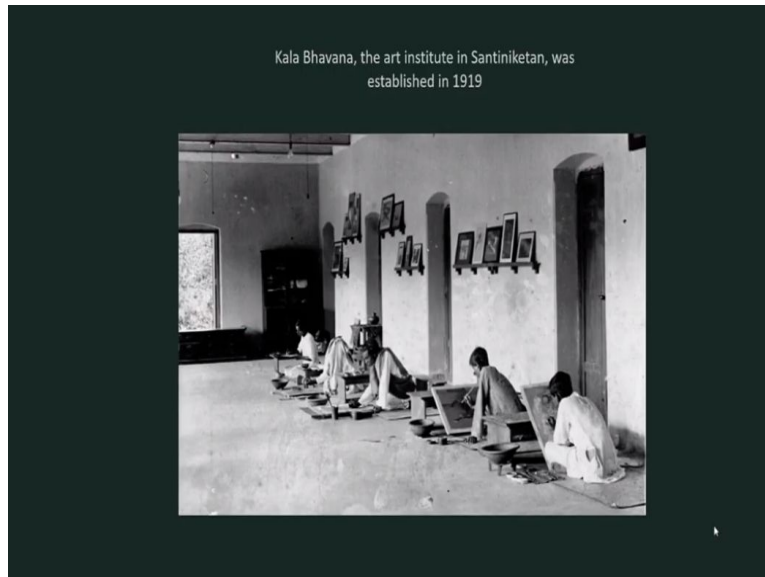
He wanted his teachers in Santiniketan to develop a different model of art education altogether. And this new education model conceived by, applied by, practiced by initiating one of the earliest Principals of Kala Bhavana, Nandalal Bose and followed by his students later on, created not only a new mode of art education, but also new ideas for modern Indian art.

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So, here we are looking at one of the major centers of modern Indian art in early 20th century and we are also looking at a couple of very significant artists from this place, that is Santiniketan. Although Santiniketan has produced not a few, but many important artists, who left a very significant contribution to modern Indian art, but again, because of time constraint, we are looking at a few, but when you look at the artworks, by these few artists, you do get an overall idea of the Santiniketan art practice. And why and how it became a very important example of modern Indian art.

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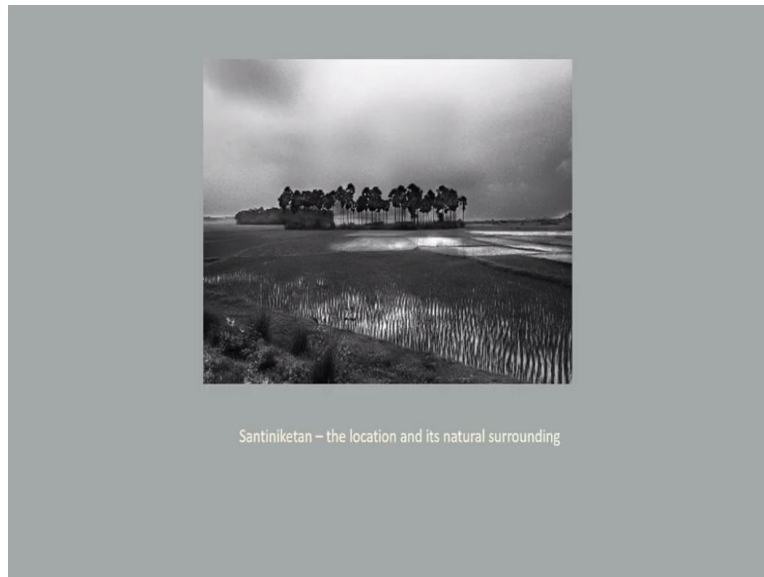
Now, the founder member, or let me put it this way, one of the founder members of Kala Bhavana, the Art institute in Santiniketan was Nandalal Bose. And as I told you, this art institution was established in 1919, with very, very minimum and bare infrastructure because Santiniketan itself is located far away from the center that is Calcutta, it was 150 kilometers away from Calcutta. And those days, the communication was a real problem. So, therefore Santiniketan was actually a very remote locality, compared to what it is now, today.

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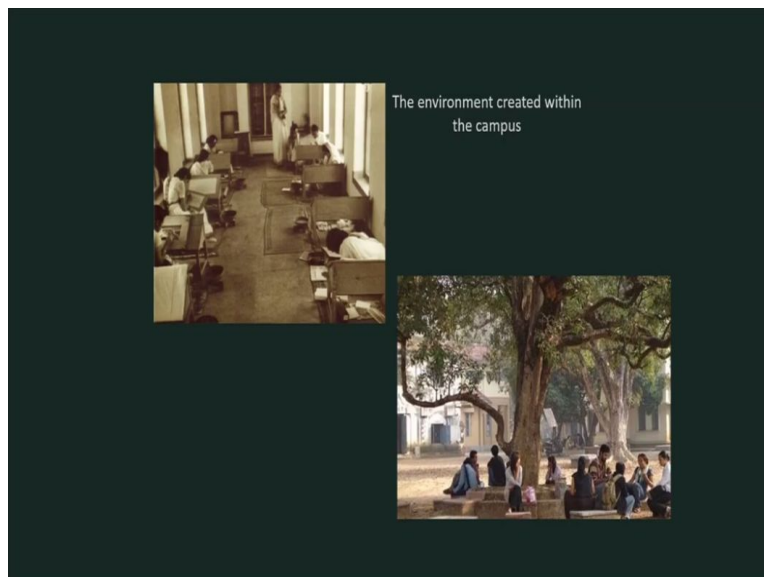
Now, what is happening in Santiniketan right from the beginning was, first of all, the location. Here, you have an art college, located amidst a very, very vibrant, natural surrounding. So how does it matter? Yes, it does matter. Because when you get to know that the founder person of this place Santiniketan- Rabindranath Tagore or one of the first Principals of Santiniketan Art college that is Kala Bhavana, Nandalal Bose, when they were talking about how to connect your art practice with the nature, with the life around you, then you really realize, you understand how important it was to find yourself as an artist, as an art student amidst a very powerful natural surrounding.

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So, this natural surrounding is extremely important, as far as the Santiniketan art practice is concerned.

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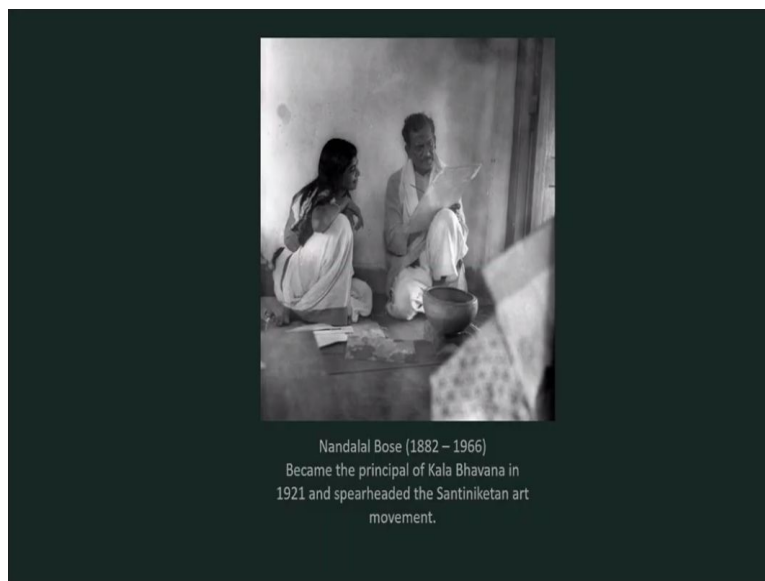


And along with that, what also became a very important part of Santiniketan art practice was this idea that whereas on the one hand, you do have a very strong presence of natural surrounding, on the other hand, you need to kind of create a cultural environment, an artistic environment, an aesthetic environment, within the campus, where you are living and working. So, continuously

and the process is still on, that people do put in efforts to create an artistic environment within the campus.

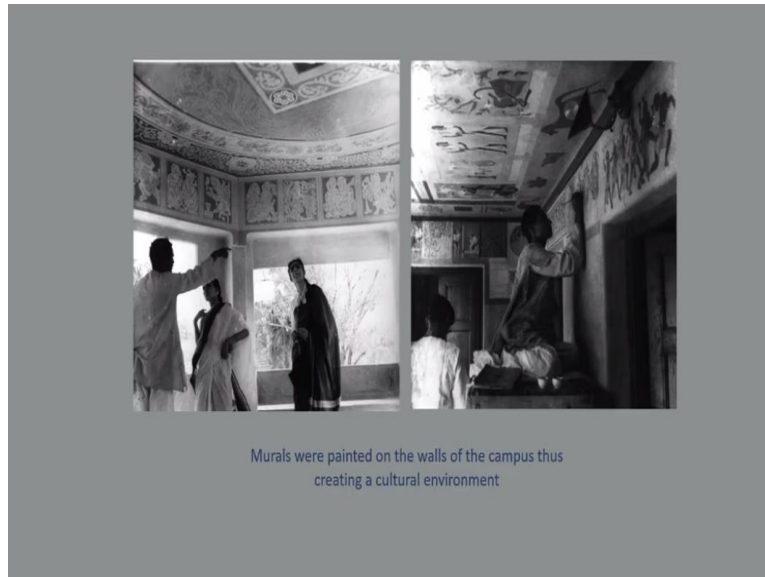
This is not to contest the natural environment out there. But actually to compliment the natural environment, which is undoubtedly beautiful. Therefore, the idea was that we cannot keep our own manmade environment, the atmosphere, the environment, the place that we use, as a part of our daily activity- we cannot leave it barren, we cannot leave it blank. We need to enhance the quality of that environment aesthetically, as well.

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Now, this is Nandalal Bose, one of the founder members of Kala Bhavana and he became the principal of Kala Bhavana, in 1921. Here, you can see him seated next to a student demonstrating and he is the one who spearheaded the Santiniketan Art movement.

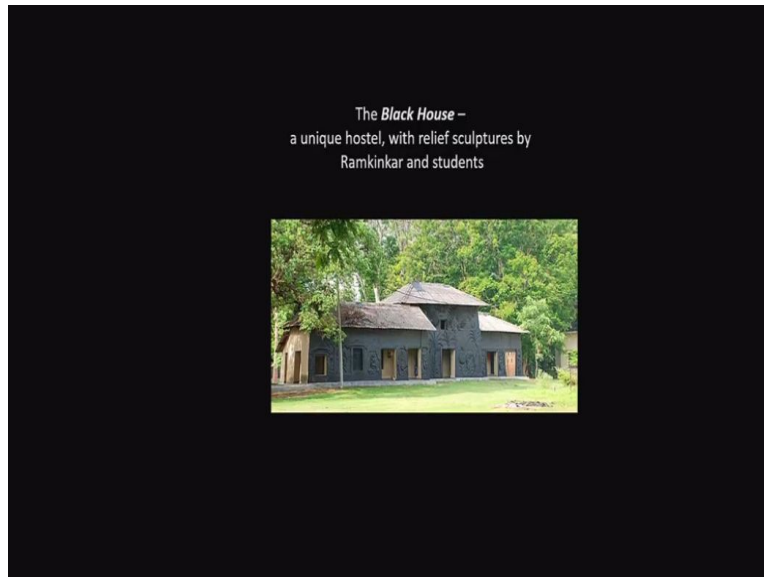
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And in Santiniketan, one of the ways to create that cultural and aesthetically charged environment was to paint murals on the walls of the newly established, newly constructed buildings. And remember, murals were also an activity and it is still like that, where you cannot do it all alone, you need people, you need to do them together.

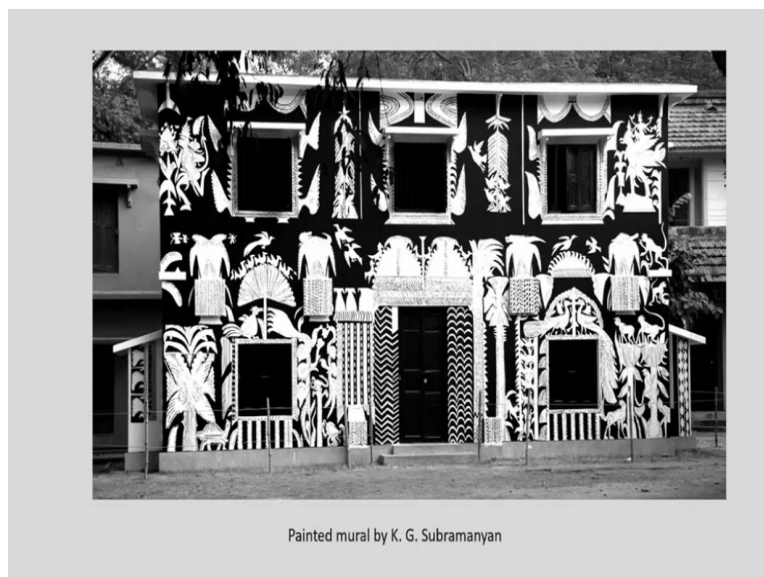
Therefore, doing murals, painting murals also implies that you are involved in an art activity, which is not individualistic, but it is collective. So this sense of community, community building, companionship, cooperation was introduced and it was encouraged right from the beginning.

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This is another example of another house in Santiniketan within Kala Bhavana, which is known as Black house because of its black color. It is a unique hostel with relief sculptures by the famous sculptor Ramkinkar and his students.

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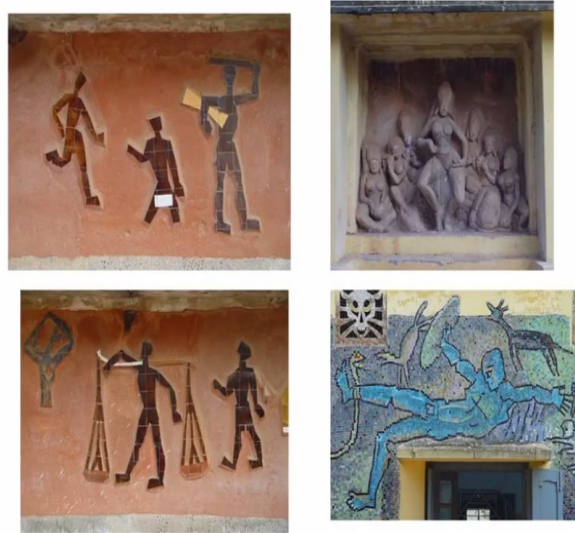


So beside doing your individual art, artists and students in Santiniketan, they were also expected to do such artworks outside their studio. Today we have a term to describe or to categorize this kind of arts, we use the term Public Art, which means you are doing arts not for a few, you are



doing that art, not within an enclosed studio space, but you are doing it for the public out there in an open space.

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And on the other hand, this kind of created spaces also enhance the aesthetic quality of the environment. So in Santiniketan, you do find a number of such painted murals, tiled murals, relief murals all over the place.

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- DENIAL OF THE EUROPEAN ACADEMIC STYLE
- REJECTION OF THE TYPICAL BENGAL SCHOOL STYLE
- NATURAL ENVIRONMENT
  - ART TEACHING
  - COMMUNITY LIVING
- COLLECTIVE ACTIVITIES (MURAL/OUTDOOR SCULPTURES)
- ADOPTING THE CHINESE AND JAPANESE STYLES

A painting showing a rural landscape. In the foreground, several figures are engaged in agricultural work, possibly planting or tending to a field. The background is filled with lush greenery, including tall trees and a large, open-sided structure that could be a traditional building or a communal space. The overall style is expressive and naturalistic, reflecting the 'Natural Environment' mentioned in the text above.

Now, obviously Santiniketan, as the new center for modern art would deny completely the European academic style as far as its art training is concerned, and art practice is concerned, both. And it also rejected to some extent not everybody, but quite a few important artists rejected the typical Bengal school style. Because by the 1920s, in Calcutta itself, Bengal school style was a kind of I would not say declined, but it got stuck into mannerism, repetitiveness.

Santiniketan artists, therefore, did not want to follow the stagnant style of Bengal school art. Thirdly, the natural environment, which I have already mentioned, happened to become a very important factor in shaping your ideas, in sensitizing your eyes, the way you look at life, and your own art, and also a very strong presence of natural environment undoubtedly, influenced your own aesthetic choices, and artistic procedures.

Including lines, colors, what kind of paper you would use, the compositional format, etc, etc. Community Living, I just mentioned. And that is one of the reasons that Santiniketan artists used to do and they still do a lot of mural works, a lot of public arts, so that you experience a community life, a collective life, not only in your daily life, but also in your art practices. And these collective activities, mural, outdoor sculptures, led to a certain kind of sharing of ideas.

So, as opposed to a very strong criteria of Western modern art, which always encouraged extremely, almost, I would say, isolated, alienated ideas of individualism. Santiniketan, on the other hand, encouraged, shared individualism of course, as an artist, you are individual, you have individual and independent, artistic elements in you.

You are free to have your independent aesthetic choices, but not in isolation. Not in any kind of cultural intellectual distancing between one and the other. So a shared environment, which was created in Santiniketan, in terms of daily life, was also practicing that artistic life in their artistic practice.


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- REDISCOVERING THE LOCAL / FOLK AND RURAL ART
- ART & CRAFT
- INTERDISCIPLINARY PRACTICE (DRAMA, MUSIC, DANCE, PERFORMANCE ETC.)



Now, along with the art of a higher kind, that is where you need a lot of intellectual and aesthetic understanding, in other words, along with what we call fine arts, with a strong cerebral input over there, Santiniketan also fostered, encouraged people to rediscover the local and folk and rural art. To practice art and craft as a very important part of art practice and also to practice interdisciplinary art forms like drama, music, dance performance.

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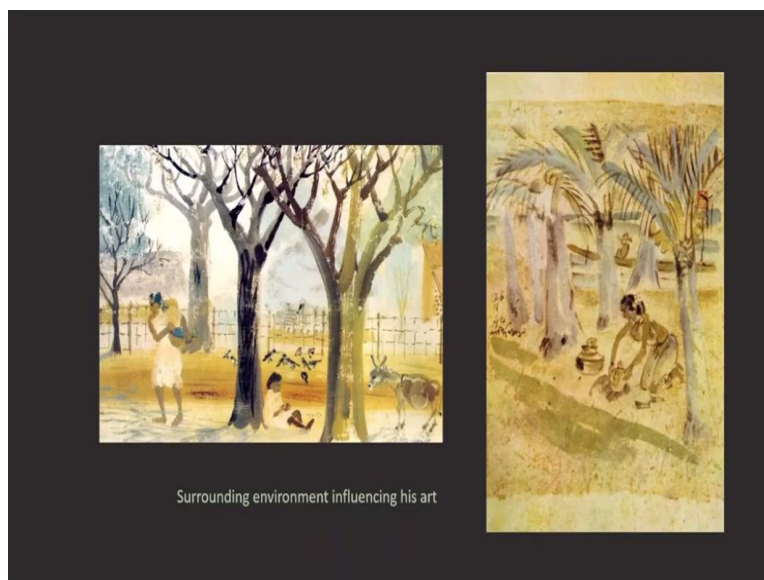


Early works in Bengal School style by Nandalal Bose

Now why so? Because it was very important for Nandalal, to make his art ideas as inclusive as possible. Not to create segregation between art and craft, between purely aesthetic art and functional art. And he also realized, right from the beginning, that unless you make your art ideas and art practice all-inclusive, you would not be able to propose or practice the new modern Indian art.

It would either get stuck in what we call Bengal school, or would only blindly imitate the western academic style. In order to make the ideas of modern Indian art viable, it has to be all-inclusive. So that was the idea why, right from the beginning, in Santiniketan, Kala Bhavana always had a very active department dedicated to art and craft, like weaving, textile, pottery, ceramics, etc. Now coming back to Nandalal, here we are. And we know that the early works of Nandalal, were more or less a kind of extension of Bengal school, also because he was a student of Abanindranath Tagore.

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Now, soon after this phase, after he arrived in Santiniketan, after he became the leader of Kala Bhavana, the Art movement of Santiniketan, he was also responding to the surrounding environment, which influenced his art very profoundly. So in other words, he left the role model of Bengal art style, he was actually observing the real nature and trying to create art based on that real observation. And also look at colors. The entire color palette is also a strong influence of the immediate natural environment.

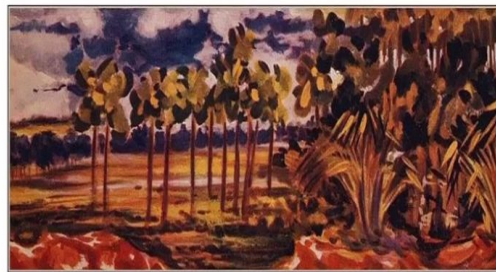
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Nandalal Bose

And Nandalal went on to do many such paintings, drawings, even murals, where one can clearly see the influence of the natural environment on his art.

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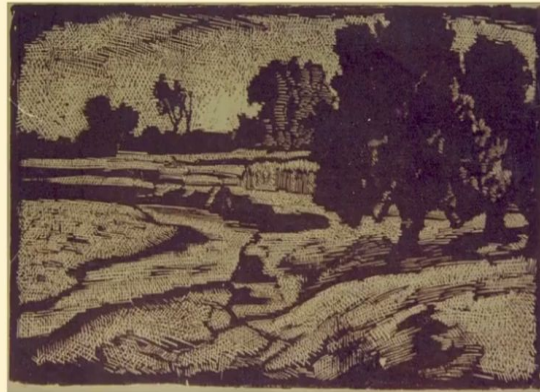


Rani Chanda

And not only Nandalal, many of his students, for example, Rani Chanda, she was also doing such natural subject matters, which we generally call landscapes, but not landscape as a particular form of art, but landscape as a natural response to your natural surroundings. So they never made this categorical distinction, that this is narrative, this is figurative, that is landscape. Everything

was a part of your response and followed by your technical innovations, methodological innovations that how you go about it, when you are to represent what you responded to?

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Ramendranath Chakravorty

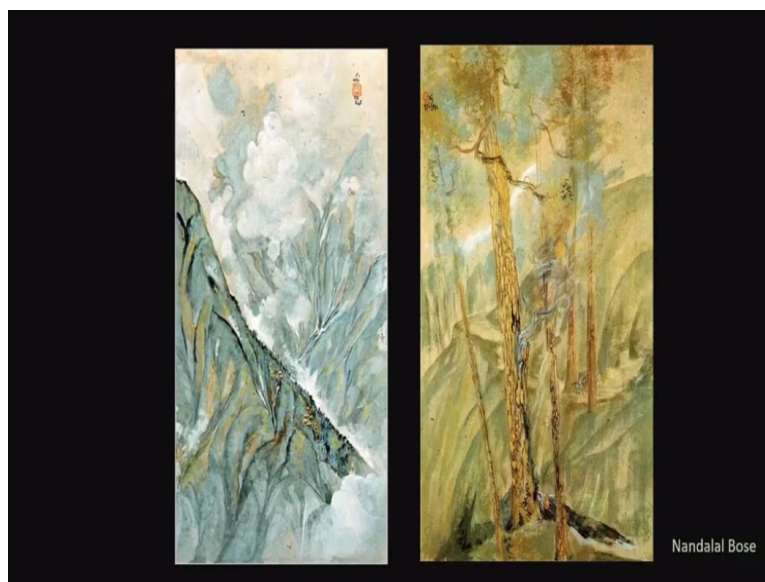
Ramendranath Chakravorty, another important student of Nandalal was also doing many such beautiful artworks, where you can clearly see that how artists of Santiniketan were keen on not only doing paintings and drawings and prints based on natural themes, but actually re-inventing the idea of nature as a subject for art.

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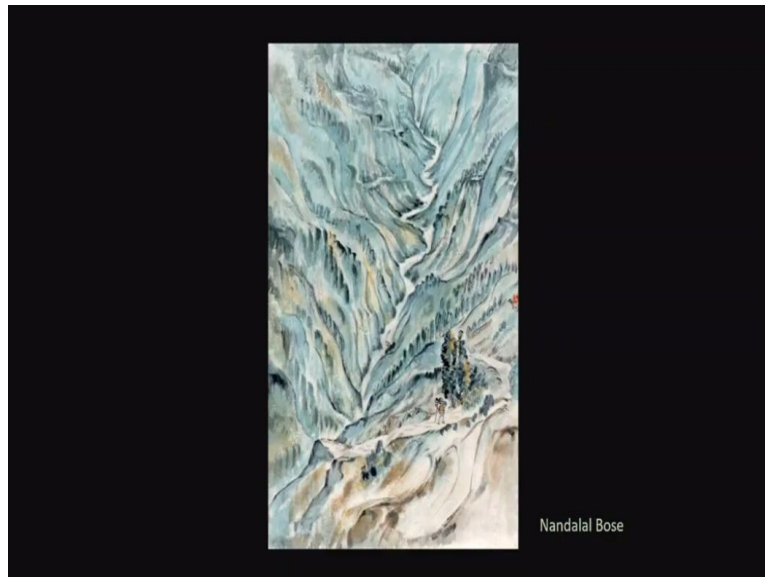
Now this reinventing of ideas took different shapes in different artists. So, Nandalal was not only responding to nature per se, but he was also responding to local people, people from different professions in different activities. So here, if you carefully look at the figure drawings by Nandalal, you can see that he is no more following the smooth and undisturbed lines of Bengal school painting, but he was rather looking at the musculature of the body looking at the anatomical details of human figure, not in a Western academic style, but purely on the basis of his own personal observation.

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So, therefore, not only Santiniketan wherever he went, he brought in nature not only as a subject matter, but as a part of his aesthetics.

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So, these are the paintings from a hill station that he visited, they used to actually venture out a lot near Santiniketan, far away from Santiniketan. Because visiting nature, looking at nature, to be there, as a part of your aesthetic exercise was very important for Nandalal and his students.

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So, if you look at various drawings by Nandalal, based on nature, you can also see that even when he was observing nature, and responding to nature in a certain way, he was not necessarily following the same stylistic mode in different drawings and different paintings, the same



Nandalal, coming up with different brushstrokes, different color schemes, different compositions and I must add different moods. The evocative quality that you feel in these landscapes in these nature drawings are also different from one another.

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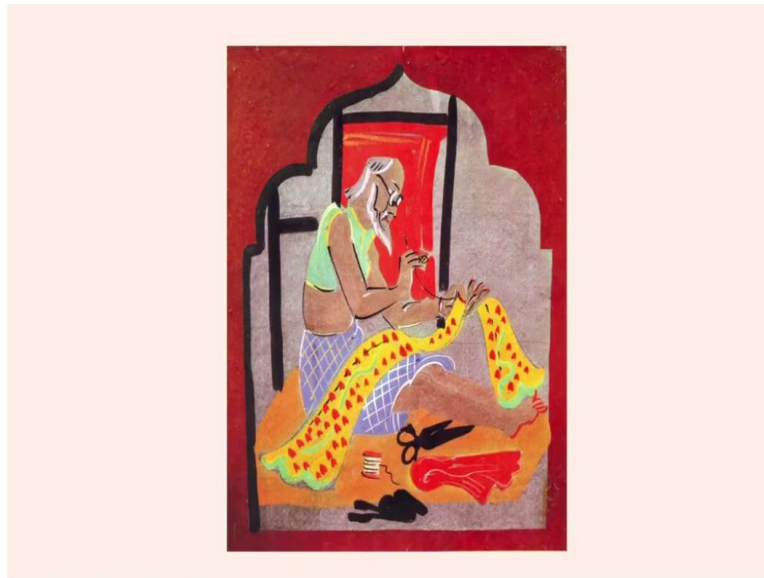
And one of the wonderful things to observe, in case of Nandalal, is to see how, Nandalal, look at people, human beings within nature, that is a wonderful thing to observe. He also creates a relationship, a bonding between human beings and nature.

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This is also by Nandalal.

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Now, we also must not forget, while on the one hand, Nandalal was deeply engaged with the natural surroundings, including nature as well as the local people, as part of his aesthetic exercise, he was also responding to certain nationalist calls. For example, he did in 1938, a series of posters which are famously known as Haripura Congress posters made for a very big Congress session. And it was nobody but Mahatma Gandhi, who wanted Nandalal Bose to do several such panels, which we call Haripura posters, to decorate the whole pavilion, in which that Congress session of 1938 would take place.

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So here we see a slightly different Nandalal, who was imagining different scenes, different kinds of characters, figures to decorate the pavilion using very strong colors, no tonality. And though the drawings are essentially Nandalal's drawing, very much bearing the characteristic features of Nandalal. But Nandalal, in some way, also follows a local style. That is a Bengal Folk style, where you have strong colors, strong contour lines, and no tonalities and very simple compositions, addressing different activities of human beings.

So, he was doing all these things in 1938. So remember, that, despite the fact that Nandalal, Bose relocated himself in Santiniketan, from 1919. He became part of, part and parcel of this place, so deeply integrated yet, he was also responding to some national calls, for example, this request from Mahatma Gandhi, to decorate the panels of Haripura posters in Congress in 1938.

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BENODE BEHARI MUKHERJEE  
1904 - 1980

Now here we have another artist from Santiniketan. A student of Nandalal Bose, Benode Behari Mukherjee and he is also one of those rare artists, who focused largely on the immediate natural surroundings.

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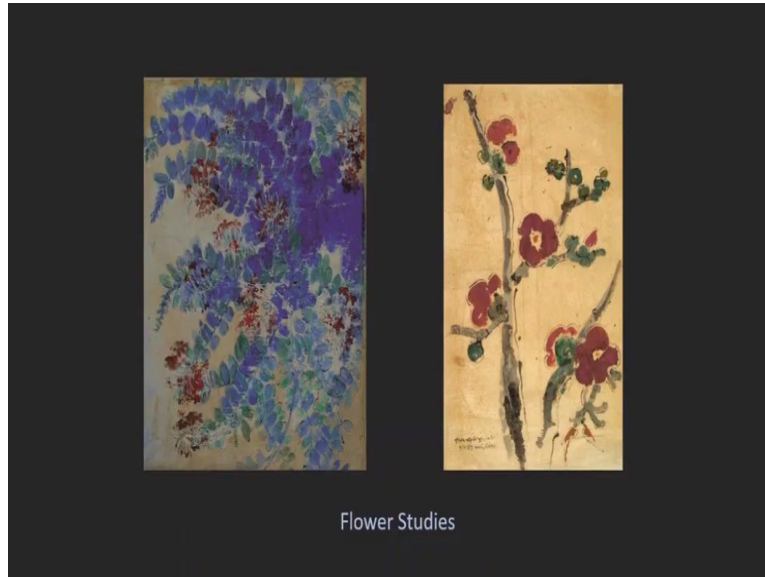


Turning away from the prevalent trends of painting romantic landscapes, mythological illustrations or nationalist subjects, Benode Behari was finding his themes in everyday scenes and the pastoral life around.

So he turned away from the prevalent trends of painting romantic landscapes, mythological illustrations, or nationalist subjects. And Benode Behari was finding his themes in everyday scenes and the pastoral and the natural life around.

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So here you see that even if his paintings do look a little decorative, a little you know decked up, but remember that there is not a single element which he did not see but painting, everything that they were painting, were also the same elements that they were looking at, they were responding to, they were finding them in their daily life.

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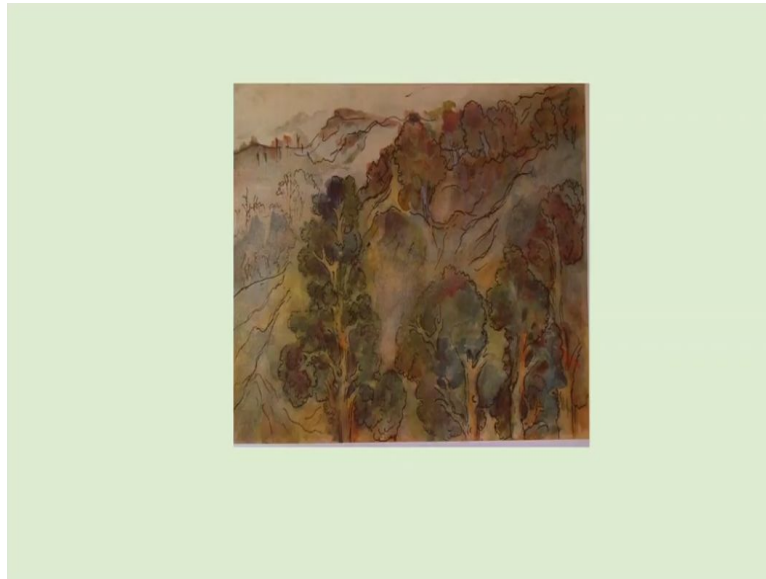




But yes, the composition and arrangement may look differed from its original natural setting. So, whether natural elements or human figures, or a social gathering like this from Benares Ghat, Benode Behari was essentially looking at the possibilities of deriving a pictorial style from what he was looking at.

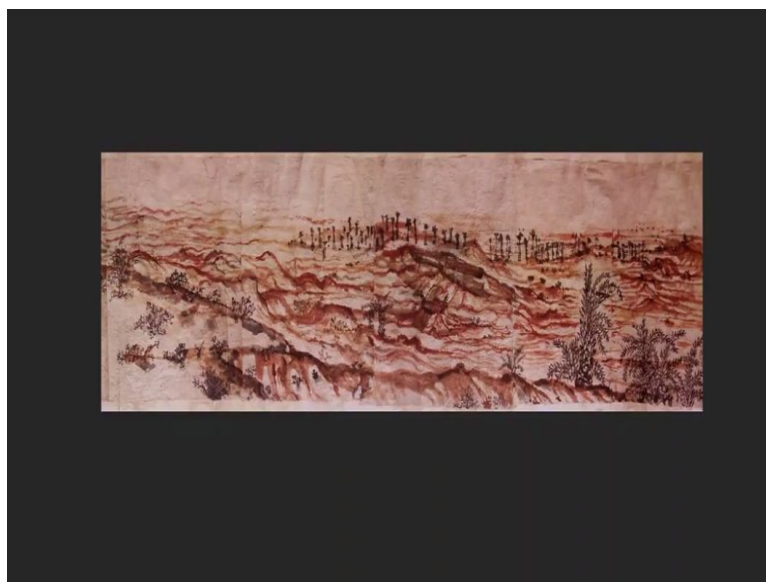
So, from the point of view of his observation, and Nandalal, as well, whatever you are looking at, whenever you choose a subject matter from around you, actually you have a responsibility rather to derive a suitable art language from that observation. So observation is not just for subject matters, observation, as far as Santiniketan artists were concerned was also for art language, you observe to get your subject matter and you also observe to get your appropriate art language, the visual idiom.

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And that is one of the reasons why when Benode Behari was doing the earlier painting based on Benares, near the river, he was doing it in a particular way, but when he was looking at, let us see this landscape in Missouri, a hill station, he is doing slightly differently. So, the art language shifts, changes, according to the scenery and the subject matter and the natural environment that you are drawing or painting or representing and also, according to the different stylistic strategy that you are employing.

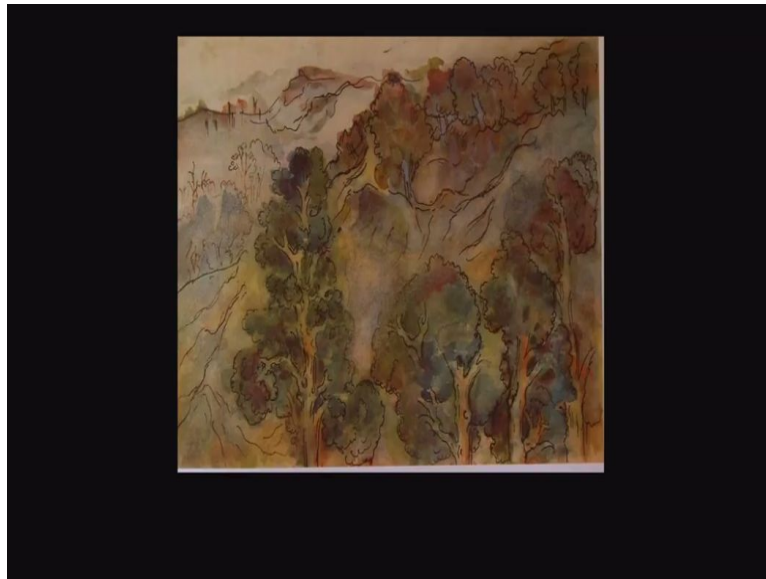
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So therefore, here you see, when he was doing his vast landscape of what we call Khoai locally, which is nothing but undulated, parched barren lands, with few tufts of grass, and maybe trees. So when Benode Behari was doing these kinds of paintings, obviously, he was looking at the character of the land. And at the same time, they were also most of these artists Benode Behari, Nandalal Bose and many others were also deriving their ideas, pictorial ideas from East Asian art traditions, namely Chinese art.

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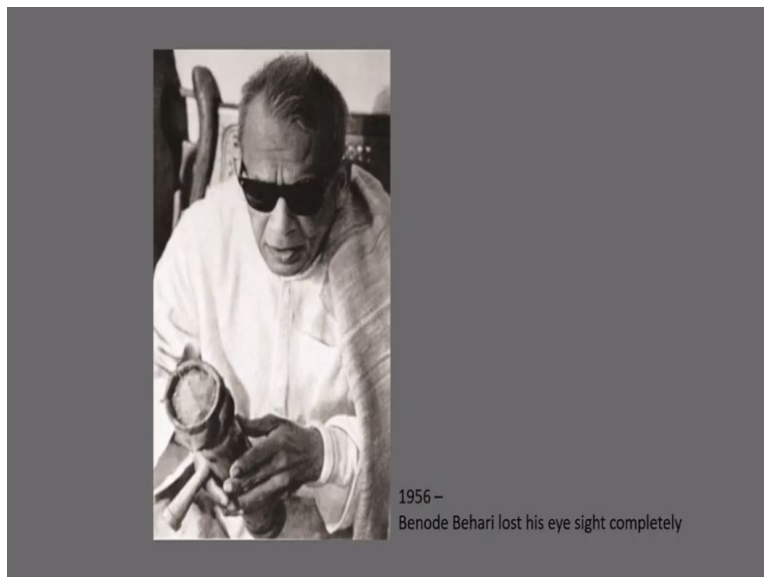
So for them, for both Nandalal and Benode Behari it was very important that you look at nature, you look for the suitable art language. But for ideas, you may also, you should feel free to look at the art examples, art traditions of China, Japan, and many other countries.

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So this whole idea of configuring certain elements in a given space is not either completely based on reality, nor completely based on your imagination. So they were striking a middle chord somewhere, which happened to become aesthetically very, very rich.

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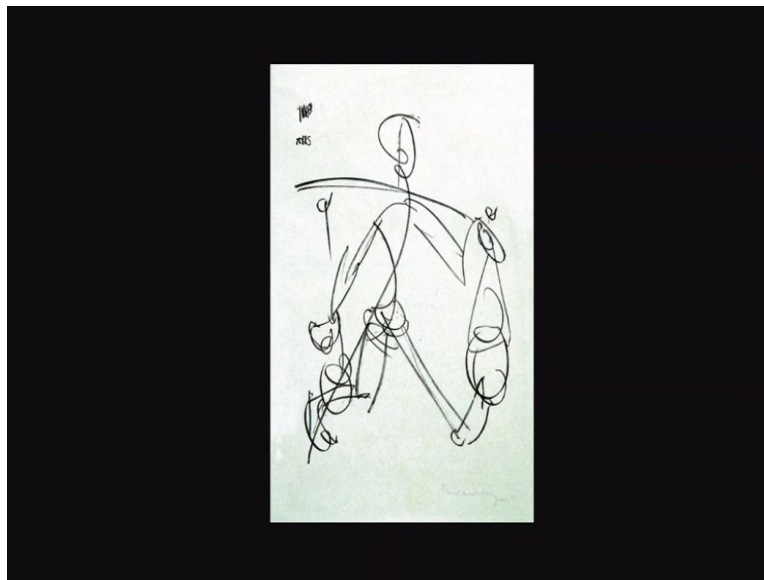
Now, unfortunately, 1956 Benode Behari lost his eyesight completely.

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But he kept on doing his work. He never stopped doing the sketches. And these are the sketches he did when he actually went blind.

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I am showing you these works also, to emphasize the fact that if you have a certain practice within you, you have a certain understanding of art language within you then, even when Benode Behari was blind not only could he do those line drawings, but he could also do these very, very colorful collage drawings. Of course, somebody must have assisted him to tell him which was red, which was blue, which was black, but he cut all the shapes and he also arranged them from a certain conception mentally, because by then he was not able to see.

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And Benode Behari did several such collages after he lost his eyesight. Now, beside the context of Santiniketan when you look at these individual artists, be it Nandalal or Rani Chanda or Ramendranath Chakravorty, now Benode Behari. In the next class we shall look at the paintings of and the sculptures of Ramkinkar Baij. Also look at the paintings of Rabindranath Tagore. We shall see that though there was and still is certainly a place called Santiniketan, but to use the term Santiniketan School could be very misleading, given the fact that all these artists are very, very individualistic. We shall come back to this notion of Santiniketan as a School of Art, and how far it is tenable in our next lecture, which is dedicated to Ramkinkar and Rabindranath Tagore. Thank you.