

# Jamini Roy's Art: Modernity, Politics and Reception

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*"Although it is with Matisse that his [Jamini Roy's] nature of art can be compared, from one perspective, the diversified richness of his development finds parallel only in Picasso..."<sup>1</sup> (Bishnu Dey)*

*"Jamini Roy's neo-folk painting had no valid lore to back itself with, its intentions were apparently confined to aesthetic parallelism. So it never rose to any degree of authenticity; it never had the earthiness and verve (or the sly humour) of its close prototypes, whether those of Kalighat or Puri; its linear and formal conventions – the almond-shaped eyes, the dead pan looks, the phlegmatic lines were terribly formulaistic."<sup>2</sup> (K.G.Subramanyan)*

Jamini Roy's re-imagination of the folk art, his appropriation of pictorial idioms from other cultures and his "strategic" mode of producing paintings are the issues of seminal importance in the perception of modernity in Indian art. This paper seeks to probe into the diverse responses to the artist, thereby problematizing the notions of modernity, tradition, and the validation of the marginal folk culture in a colonial reality.

The critical reception of Jamini Roy (1887-1972) and his art oscillates between two extreme poles of profound admiration and wholesome disregard, as is apparent from the above quotes. The first group of critics sought to canonize Roy as an artist, who, all through his life, painstakingly tried to define the notion of modernity in the scenario of Indian art from an entirely new dimension, while the later group adhered to their critique of Roy's formalistic infertility, stressing his insignificance as an Indian artist of the twentieth century.

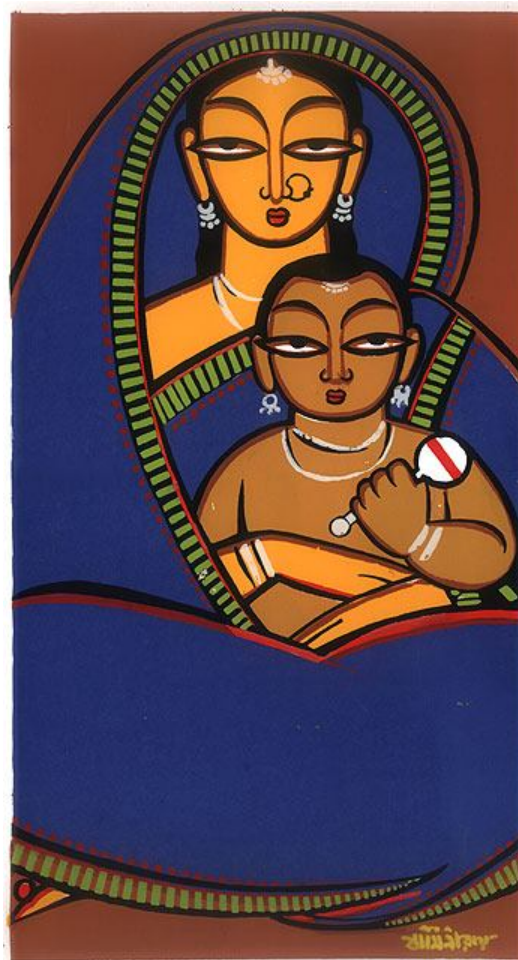


In one of his essays, Robin Mondal trenchantly disapproves the relevance of Roy. Mondal's points of attack are threefold. First, Mondal holds that Jamini Roy's debt to folk art was so direct and unmediated that his uniqueness is put to question. The breach between blind appropriation and insightful assimilation rendered his art "restrictively frigid".<sup>3</sup> Secondly, although Roy's attainment of unprecedented fame and recognition in his contemporary time is rarely seen, it is this mass admiration and the lure of financial

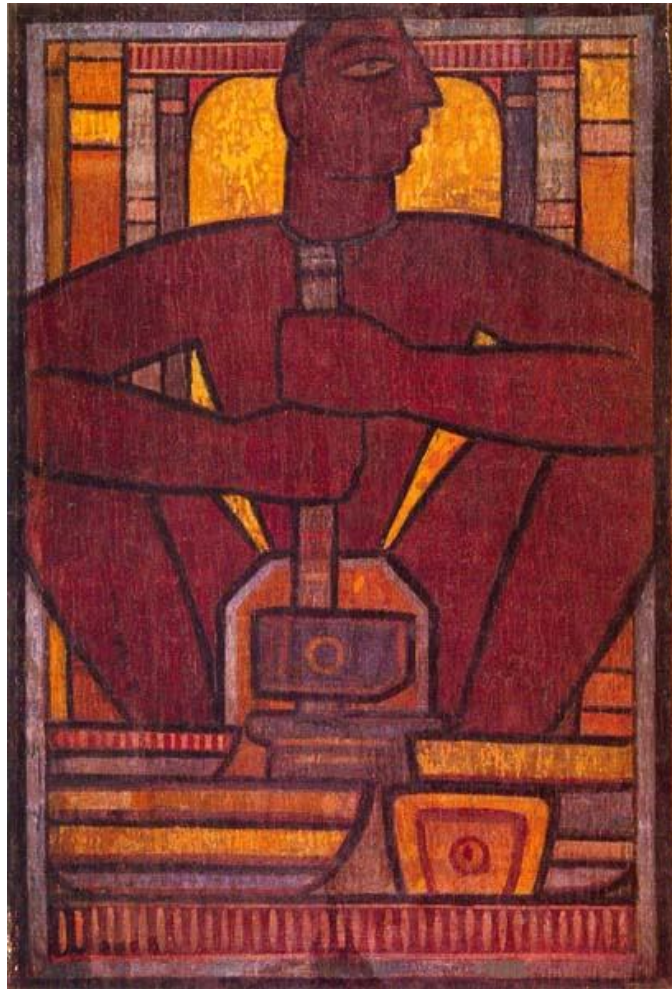
stability, that compelled him to repeat the simplified structural pattern of his works *ad nauseam*.<sup>4</sup> Thirdly, according to Mondal, Jamini Roy's art was alienated from his contemporary historical reality altogether. Despite being situated in a world of socio-political turbulence, Roy's "painting reality" never encountered any kind of conflict, which could have directed the artist to explore novel horizons. Rather, Roy's artistic vision was "deeply immersed in a complacent existence. In this respect of accepting the wavelessness he is very close to the Bengal School."<sup>5</sup>

The hyperbolically malign stance of Robin Mondal vis-à-vis Roy elicits some of the seminal issues regarding art, the re-imagination and appropriation of folk art, artistic mode of production and the artist's social responsibility. What exactly was Roy trying to communicate with his viewers? How could he establish a unique approach to Indian art different altogether from that of the Bengal School and made it popular single handedly? Was his artistic vision a politicized one or whether he conjured up the folk idiom only to dehistoricize it? Interspersed with these questions are the notions of modernity and tradition. By contextualizing Jamini Roy in his contemporary history, this paper tries to probe into such questions by problematizing the varied responses to the painter regarding the question of art and modernity.

It would be useful for us to briefly chalk out the time and the condition of art, in which Jamini Roy worked. Ratnabali Chatterjee views that during this period, the middleclass intelligentsia was oscillating between two extremes: "a colonial hangover and a feeling of nationalism bordering on chauvinism."<sup>6</sup> The works of Roy provided three possible way-outs to this intellectual stasis. The incorporation of folk tradition revived the lost cultural bond, that somehow worked as an antidote to the prevalent colonial hangover. The bold lines of Roy's paintings were compared with the contemporary European artists like Leger, resulting in the expansion of outlook of Indian art in the realm of the international during the late 1930s. Thirdly, for the young artists Roy's art offered a "rescue route from the stylistic conventions of the Bengal School, which acted as a constraint on the depiction of contemporary events—the war and the famine." Further, "Jamini Roy offered after a long time a backbone of drawing and an anatomical framework to Indian art."<sup>7</sup>



Jamini Roy was born and lived for a number of years at Beliatore, a village in the Bankura district, which had a rich tradition of terracotta sculptures and folk art. Bishnu Dey holds that this isolated, idyllic backdrop contributed in Roy's search of the life in art and the dream of attaining self-completeness in the social life. "This is the memory that did not let him forget the fakely constructed bourgeois space of Calcutta, and its fascination with morbid western naturalism in art, although it reached an indisputable height of success in his hand."<sup>8</sup>



As a child Roy's first encounter with the Santals here left a permanent impression in his art. He received his formal training at the Government Art College in the then Calcutta, where he got rigorous training in the European mode of art. But soon, he became dissatisfied with the limitation of expression that this mode presupposes. His search for alternative artistic forms began. Roy's reputation as one of the best portrait painters and his brief but fascinating post-impressionist period did not thwart this search. He was called to the school run by the Oriental Society of Art. Here also he was quite discontent:

The reason why I want to discard European painting is not because I wish to be "Swadeshi" or Indian but because even the best European artists including Raphael drew forms like Mary carrying infant Jesus standing among clouds in the sky, but with the use of light and shade made to appear like a full human being— how is this possible?<sup>9</sup>

The illusion of the European naturalist art tradition was thus thoroughly discarded by Roy. In spite of his close acquaintance with Abanindranath, he could not but critique the art of the Bengal School. Roy was critical of the soft lines and paleness of this school, which was disseminated as "Indian art" from an essentialist / generalized stance. He found support of his personal views in the paintings of Rabindranath Tagore:

While observing the man painted by Rabindranath, I do not feel that it will droop for a moment, or swing with the wind. I clearly see that the man has weight and a strong backbone. That Rabindranath's painting is powerful, is because of this power of the bone, and for his ability to create rhythm. I think Rabindranath wants to protest against the lack that had been increasing in the paintings of our country for the past two-hundred years, since the Rajput dynasty to the present...his protest is against everything including the entire tradition of the sophisticated Indian art, and the orientalist art.<sup>10</sup>



In 1923, while reading Rabindranath's essay "Tapoban", that advocated the restitution of India's rural heritage and critiqued the naive imitation of Western civilization, Roy had a realization: "Today I have read what was there in my mind. Just before eight months I realised this."<sup>11</sup> Thus his personal search of artistic form gets related to the dialogic discourses of colonialism and those that countered it. At this point of time his familiarity with Sunayani Devi's paintings and with Kalighat *pata* reshaped his artistic perception. The influence of Kalighat *pata* was soon to be discarded by him, since he found that the Kalighat artists were alienated from their traditional rural ideal, as they had moved to Calcutta to serve an urban population. Roy turned back to the villages of Bengal in search of the "traditional" *pata* paintings. The terracotta-reliefs of his native village also introduced in his works the simplified, thick outlines, providing

his art with such a verve that was unseen at that time. Roy tried to incorporate the immensely expressive power of the village artisans by emphasizing the "lines at the expense of colours, using black outlines painted with a brush on white paper. He forsook oils for tempera and concentrated on primary colours."<sup>12</sup> This yearning for formalistic simplicity also took him to the wooden puppets of Bankura and later to child-art. He was a collector of paintings made by children and took great interest in them: "not because of my affection for them, but because they are vitally important for me."<sup>13</sup>

Roy tried to transcreate the folk idiom to communicate in a symbolic, yet recognizable language that possessed universal validity. The technical virtuosity of his academic training combined with his newly acquired simplistic formalism enhanced the volume, the rhythm, the decorative clarity and monumentality in his work.<sup>14</sup> Even his mode of artistic production also transformed significantly. Abandoning the medium of oil, he started to use the seven basic colours made from organic matters such as rock-dust, tamarind seeds, mercury powder, lamp black etc., and painted with them on his canvas of home-made fabric. The enormous unreality of the metropolitan Calcutta, laden with hypocrisy and a non-spiritualistic world-view (finding its apt expression through the Western naturalistic convention of art) could be easily juxtaposed by him against the down-to-earth honesty of the folk artist. This honesty, according to Jamini Roy, was the most essential thing for a painter's artistic integrity. Partha Mitter holds that Roy's idea of transforming the homely sphere of North Calcutta into a permanent exhibition was no less than a "political manifesto."<sup>15</sup> The exhibition space was converted into a traditional Bengali environment. Shanta Devi, who saw the exhibition held:

The artist gives evidence of consummate stage management, embellishing three rooms with his paintings emulating village *pats*...Actual village *pats* are on display in an adjacent room...Little lamps are lit and incense burnt. Floors are covered in traditional Bengali *alpona* patterns. In this room decorated in a Bengali style indigenous seats take the place of chairs, which are of European origin.<sup>16</sup>

In an extreme phase of nationalism in India, that was essentialist by its nature, Roy's persistent emphasis on the local was, according to Partha Mitter, a well-thought ideological move to counter the onslaught of colonialist capitalism.

Critics like Ratnabali Chatterjee, although deduce some conclusions, that are entirely opposite to what Mitter holds regarding Jamini Roy's transcreation of folk art. She finds that the dynamism with which *Saheb Pata* and *Santhal Bidroha Pata* writes back to the new problem of colonialism, is lacking in Jamini Roy's "conditioning" of the form. The ironic depiction of contemporary city-life, that we find in *Kalighat Pata* has also been intentionally erased from Roy's picture frame.<sup>17</sup> Roy creates a series of binaries vis-à-vis the urban and the rural values and morality. As has been discussed earlier, his conservative approach regarding the *Kalighat patuas* actually delinked him from his own times:

The *Patuas* who came to Calcutta moved from the ethics of their vocation. They were rural people, their themes were also rural. When they came to the town, they expressed the ideals of urban life and they fell from their vocation (*swadharna*).<sup>18</sup>

Unable to grasp the inherent dynamism within tradition, his paintings turned out to be static, where the pattern of narration was broken altogether. There was no referentiality that could be time specific, and the notion of time itself attained a fixation on the frame. The adopted form was diluted into mere decorative mannerism, through which the stereotyping of folk art was achieved. In his attempt of subduing the chaotic with his

sense of artistic ordering, was Jamini Roy ultimately catering to the increasing demand of such “popular” stereotypes among his metropolitan admirers? Did the peripheral folk art turn into a culturally conditioned commodity in his canvas, appropriating ultimately the colonial grid against which his village and tribal subjects were made visible and normalized as the authentic members of the pre-modern India? Regarding the popular stereotype of woman in Roy’s paintings Ratnabali Chatterjee holds:

The concept of the unchangeable village society was still popular among both the Marxists and the liberals...The artist and his patrons located it in Beliatore. It reinforced the notion that woman’s place was at home. It denied the torments and insecurities, that resulted from a woman’s total dependence on a male-dominated society. Yet paradoxically this was put forward as the symbol of general security shutting war, famine and death.<sup>19</sup>

The importance of the local in Roy’s work, which Mitter observes as posing resistance against the grand discourse of nationalism, is to Chatterjee yet another generalized topos, where truncated stereotypes are created to feed the metropolitan centre. Ashok Mitra, too in this respect holds, “He has no hesitation to regard the life and the Bengal that have permanently disappeared and will never return, as truth.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, Roy’s false perception regarding tradition led him to abandon the socio-political basis of modernity.

Interestingly, despite his dehistoricized perception, among Roy’s admirers were some eminent Marxists and intellectuals of Bengal like Bishnu Dey, Sudhindranath Dutta respectively, who were also the leading avant-garde poets writing in Bengali. Roy’s championing of the popular art (which had a social basic, as it was created in a mode of communitarian participation, thereby subverting the capitalist notion of the lone genius), was hailed by this group of intellectuals. A debate was generated by this group regarding the role of folk art and that of the artist in the modern class-society, in which Jamini Roy was posed as a model in the centre. In his essay “Lokashilpa O Babusamaj” Bishnu Dey observes:

We, the unfortunate inheritors of chaos and exploitation of a number of centuries can still save ourselves by participating in the reawakening of our indigenous mass. The folk culture will get a new life in the mass culture.<sup>21</sup>

In another essay Dey observes that Jamini Roy has not only emancipated our art, but he also has modified the urban way of seeing by making us perceive through the eyes of the marginal people.<sup>22</sup> Discarding the immense subversive potential in the works of the folk artisans, Dey admiringly appropriates the way in which Jamini Roy artistically manoeuvres rural art into the urban middle-class Marxist thought:

He is an extremely capable selector: a conscientious artist. His taste has not for a moment abandoned his brush. On the other hand, the folk artists are craftsmen by habit. Devoid of conscience, it is natural for them not to possess the degree of good taste that Roy has.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note that Dey prefers the conditioned form of art, rather than the raw. This disregard for the art of the mass indicates the intellectual elitism, in which the Marxist thinking of this phase of Bengali politics was restricted. Jamini Roy's art not only provided them with a model to follow, but it also participated tacitly in the politics of "modernization" and "reality" to be expressed in art. The aristocratic / exclusivist bourgeois art that the Marxists perceived as "unreal" was thus substituted by the art of Jamini Roy with all its peripheral associations, yet tampered by a sophisticated artistry. Robin Mondal holds that the support of these intellectuals was influential in giving Roy the acceptability to the wider section of art lovers. Foreigners like John Irwin, Mary Milford, Maie Casey came to visit Roy primarily as the friends of these intellectuals and from the 1940s, Roy's international reputation began to grow. In 1945, Roy's first exhibition in the foreign was held at the Arcade Gallery in London, which was inaugurated by the novelist E. M. Forster. An attempt was made by these foreigners to appropriate Jamini Roy's obsession with pure form into the prevalent discourse of modernism. Mary Milford's essay "A Modern Primitive" in the influential literary magazine *Horizon* introduced him to the modernist intellectual milieu in London.

Interestingly, Partha Mitter finds an indigenized version of the notion of primitivism in Jamini Roy and goes on to perceive a "structural affinity" between Roy and the German expressionists / primitivists like Carl Einstein and Oskar Schlemmer. Modernism is generally perceived as an ahistorical phenomenon. Yet the Western avant-garde has been historically situated with its own set of conventions. Mitter observes that, in contextualizing Roy, to the modernist enterprise we cannot just add him to an existing narrative of modern art forgetting Roy's regional specificities. He perceives Roy's contemporary Calcutta as a hybrid metropolis, which as a locus of colonial modernity, experienced a hybrid intellectual encounter "underpinned by a dialogic relation between the colonial language, and the modernized vernacular."<sup>24</sup> The opening up of the window to the West, according to Mitter, was instrumental in giving rise to a globally "imagined community" based on print capitalism. Its membership being anonymous, there was no need for direct communication between one another. But still the members of the community shared a corpus of ideas regarding modernity.

The Bengali intelligentsia admirably demonstrates the negotiation of the wider cosmopolitan modernity through the print medium. To explain this community's critical engagement with modern thought, I put forward the notion of "virtual cosmopolis" here. This was a hybrid city of imagination, which engendered elective affinities between the elites of the centre and the periphery on the level of intellectual creativity.<sup>25</sup>

Mitter feels that on an intellectual level virtual cosmopolitanism enables the periphery to contribute to the project of modernity in Jamini Roy's empowering concept of primitivism. It is in this manner, that the resistance to urban industrial capitalism and the ideology of progress: the two cornerstones of the colonial empire, is articulated through the very ambiguities, instabilities, and fractures within primitivism itself.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the notion of ahistoricity that we perceive in Roy's art appears to Mitter as a

counter-modern strategy against the notion of teleological certainty that modernity provides.

His [Roy's] world-view consisted in restoring through his art the pre-colonial community that had been severed from national life during the Raj, causing the alienation of the urban elite from its cultural roots...His communitarian primitivism...[is] an iteration of "critical modernity."<sup>27</sup>

Mitter emphasizes the importance of a coherent mythological tradition revived by Roy through his paintings. It is through the revival of this pre-colonial, sacred world view that Roy could generate a synchronic critique of the nationalist grand narrative. The sacred Byzantine art attracted Roy for this reason. He even tried to adopt the texture of the Byzantine mosaic in the Bengali folk medium, when he painted Christ on a palm-leaf-mat. But his famous series of painting depicting Christian icons was not direct imitation. Rather, he was assimilating the motif of Christ's Western iconography within his own pictorial idiom by giving Christ the face of a Santhal peasant. In doing so, he was building a bridge between traditions by highlighting the underlying humanity of the motif. Ratnabali Chatterjee, however, views:

In the paintings of Jamini Roy, the myths undergo a change, they become private myths, divorced from the economic order which supported them. The artist however made no conscious efforts to rework the myths, to reflect or sustain the anti-colonial struggle; the major task then confronting the Indian bourgeoisie.<sup>28</sup>

The non-naturalist treatment of subject, the importance of symbols and myths to restore the collective urban conscience from crisis, close acquaintance with the communitarian folk cultures and the emphasis on political heterogeneity are, according to Mitter, some areas where the ideology of the German primitivists and that of Jamini Roy converge to create structural affinities in a virtually global community.<sup>29</sup> But there are points of difference too.

While Western primitivists aimed at merging art with life in a disavowal of the aesthetics of autonomy, they never ceased to believe in the unique quality of aesthetic experience. Roy sought to erase it, deliberately seeking to subvert the distinction between individual and collaborative contribution in a work of art.<sup>30</sup>

Mitter holds that in Roy's artistic perception traditional village art was a collective aesthetic experience, opposed to the individualist aesthetics of urban colonial art. Roy tried to subvert the later by producing paintings, that were done in collaboration with his son. The so called artist's studio was converted into a workshop, where on the finished paintings Roy used to put his own signature; whether they were primarily done by his son did not ever matter to him and sometimes he even left them unsigned.<sup>31</sup> Referring to Walter Benjamin's notion of the decline of "aura" in the modern milieu Mitter holds:

Roy's objective of making the signature meaningless was his playful way of subverting what Walter Benjamin calls the aura of a masterpiece. In addition, he



turned his studio into a workshop to produce his works cheaply. This was art for the community, cheaply produced and anonymous, inexpensive enough to be afforded by the humblest.<sup>32</sup>

Thus Roy sought to dismantle the attribute of uniqueness in colonial art by making the signature insignificant and reproducing paintings cheaply in a rapid succession. He was severely criticized for this mode of production, as is explicit from the remark of Venkatachalam:

This I know is very much used against him. He is strongly condemned for this mechanical craftsmanship, for this soulless repetition of an original idea for the sake of money and popularity. Truth to tell, there is something to be said in favour of this criticism.<sup>33</sup>

Geeta Kapur, however, problematizes Mitter's perception regarding Roy's attempt to demystify and subvert the notion of the colonial high art. While Roy tries to make signature meaningless, it is his synthetic signature style that sustains legitimizing a middle-class sensibility.<sup>34</sup> The process of canonization, that started during his lifetime was further strengthened within five years after his death. The price of his paintings was doubled.<sup>35</sup> Jamini Roy was appropriated as a brand in the market of art, whose paintings, divested of any politicized aesthetics, remained merely as the remnants of a lost cultural ethos, the imprint of which made the paintings "auratic". The hunt for the "original" Jamini Roy still goes on among the connoisseurs.

Jamini Roy, the person, thus emerges as a site laden with various mystifying anecdotes, that operates as a focal point in which many pertinent voices regarding Indian art is vocalized. "The Jamini Roy phenomenon" thus seeks to problematize the notions of tradition, modernity, indigenous art, artist's social commitment, and the complex encounter between the centre and the periphery.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Bishnu Dey, "Jamini Roy", in Dhruva Kumar Mukhopadhyay, ed. *Bishnu Dey Prabandha Sangraha*, Vol.1 (Kolkata: Dey's, 1997), p. 117. Translations are mine.
- <sup>2</sup> K.G.Subramanyan, "The Indian Art Tradition and the Modern Indian Artist", in *Visva-Bharati Fellowship Lecture* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1978), p. 5.
- <sup>3</sup> Robin Mondal, "Jamini Roy", in *Shilpabhavana* (Kolkata: Banishilpa, 2007), pp. 181-182. Translation is mine.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.182.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.182. Translations are mine.
- <sup>6</sup> Ratnabali Chatterjee, "'The Original Jamini Roy': A Study in the Consumerism of Art", in *Social Scientist* 15.1 (January, 1987), p. 5.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- <sup>8</sup> Dey, "Jamini Roy", p. 117. Translations are mine.
- <sup>9</sup> As quoted in Chatterjee, p. 7.
- <sup>10</sup> Dey, "Srijukto Jamini Rayer Rabindrakatha", in Mukhopadhyay, Vol. 2 (Kolkata: Dey's, 1998), p. 107. Translations are mine.
- <sup>11</sup> Dey, "Bideshir Chokhe Jamini Roy O Tar Chhobi", in *Ibid.*, p. 114. Translations are mine.
- <sup>12</sup> Partha Mitter, "Jamini Roy and Art for the Community", in *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922-1947* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), p. 106.
- <sup>13</sup> As quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- <sup>16</sup> Shanta Devi, "Shilpi Srijukta Jamini Ranjan Rayer Pradarshani", in *Prabasi* 1 (April, 1932), p. 25. Translations are done by Partha Mitter.
- <sup>17</sup> Chatterjee, pp. 11-12.
- <sup>18</sup> As quoted in Chatterjee, p. 11.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- <sup>20</sup> Ashok Mitra, *Bharater Chittrakala*, Vol. 2 (Kolkata: Ananda, 1996), p. 136. Translations are mine.
- <sup>21</sup> Dey, "Lokashilpa O Babusamaj", in Mukhopadhyay, Vol. 1, p. 227. Translations are mine.
- <sup>22</sup> Dey, "Jamini Roy", p. 122.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119. Translations are mine.
- <sup>24</sup> Mitter, "Interventions: Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery", in *The Art Bulletin* 90.4 (December, 2008), p. 541.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 542.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 543.

<sup>27</sup> Mitter, "Jamini Roy and Art for the Community", p. 114.

<sup>28</sup> Chatterjee, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> Mitter, "Jamini Roy and Art for the Community", pp. 117-119.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> G. Venkatachalam, *Contemporary Indian Painters* (Bombay: The National books, 1927), p. 91.

<sup>34</sup> Geeta Kapur, "Jamini Roy", In *Six Indian Painters*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1982), p. 22.

<sup>35</sup> Chatterjee, p. 17.

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