

'An Indian Renaissance' and the rise of global modernism: William Rothenstein in India, 1910–11

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IN THE AUTUMN of 1910, the influential English artist William Rothenstein made what he called a 'pilgrimage' to draw and paint both the ancient temples and the rapidly modernising urban centres of India.¹ His journey took him across the Subcontinent by train, boat and bullock-cart, from the industrial powerhouse of Bombay to the remote cave temples at Ajanta; and from Benares, the oldest continually inhabited city in the world, to the vast metropolitan prospect of Calcutta. During the course of this journey, he observed 'an Indian Renaissance' in full swing among the country's younger generation of artists. European painterly conventions, their validity reinforced by the educational apparatus of colonialism, had remained fashionable throughout Asia for most of the nineteenth century. A new spirit of political nationalism in India coupled with the growing military and economic influence of Japan and a widespread disillusionment with Western civilisation meant, however, that the 1900s witnessed a profound and general resurgence of Asian cultural awareness. Rothenstein had already seen this awareness spread to Europe, where his friends Jacob Epstein and Eric Gill had employed the aesthetics and techniques of Indian stone carving in the production of London's first modernist sculptures.² Rothenstein was active in promoting such works of art from the Subcontinent in the city, and had co-founded Britain's India Society in early 1910 mainly for that purpose. On the Subcontinent itself, however, the artistic 'Renaissance' was based not on sculpture but on traditional approaches to painting, and it was the two-thousand-year-old Buddhist frescos at Ajanta that finally drew Rothenstein there later in the year.

Another member of the India Society, Christiana Herringham, had been involved in copying the elaborate murals at the Ajanta site for the past four years, and was quick to convince Rothenstein to view the originals himself. She was a recognised expert on Italian fresco materials and techniques who had translated into English Cennini's quattrocento manual on the subject in 1899.³ Her husband, Wilmot Herringham (knighted 1914), had organised a holiday in India over the winter of 1906; and Laurence Binyon, an authority on Asian art at the British Museum, convinced her to visit Ajanta in order to assess the current condition of its own paintings.⁴ On her return, Mrs Herringham showed Binyon a 'sketch of some colossal figures' she had

examined at the site, and the curator, impressed by what he saw, encouraged her to arrange 'a more fully organized expedition which could undertake a complete record'. In 1909, therefore, she was on her way back with a team of students from the Calcutta Government School of Art including the young Nandalal Bose, who was later to be recognised as one of India's greatest modernist painters. A fully equipped camp, and logistical support for the project, were provided by the Nizam of Hyderabad – the Moslem notable upon whose domain the site was then located.⁵

Two earlier attempts to copy the frescos had ended in catastrophe. Owing to the various invasions and political upheavals that characterised northern Indian history between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, Ajanta had been forgotten, only coming to light again when a lost hunting party chanced upon it in 1819.⁶ Twenty-five years later, Robert Gill, a trained artist and a major in the Madras Army, was given responsibility for the preservation and reproduction of the murals by the colonial government. Although well intentioned, Gill's conservation attempts ultimately caused more problems than they solved. 'When I made my copies of the paintings', he reported later, 'the whole of them were carefully cleaned, washed and varnished'.⁷ Mrs Herringham had cause to lament the Major's methods when she began her own work at the caves in 1909. 'This varnish is now dirty or yellow', she wrote in this Magazine when she got back, 'and has seriously spoiled the pictures'.⁸ Gill's twenty-seven facsimiles of the frescos, painstakingly rendered in oil over a period of eighteen years, were a lot more successful. Unfortunately, however, when all except five were exhibited at the Crystal Palace at Sydenham, they were incinerated in the fire of 1866.

Something uncannily similar happened to the next set of copies, which was created by John Griffiths and his students from the Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy School of Art in Bombay during the late 1870s and early 1880s. The party found conditions at Ajanta more challenging than had the experienced soldier Gill, and progress was slow. 'Not only were all the students much discouraged by the small remuneration they received and the hardships and privations they had to undergo', noted Griffiths's superior at the school, G.W. Terry, in 1873, 'but all were prostrated by fever, from which they are still suffering: in fact some of them are still seriously ill'. In a typical attempt at acquisition,

The author wishes to thank Emily White for her invaluable help with Rothenstein's uncatalogued letters at Tate archive, London (hereafter cited as TGA), almost all of which are cited for the first time in this article. Thanks also to Philip Athill at Abbott and Holder, London, for his generous assistance on Rothenstein's Indian drawings and for allowing permission for their reproduction; to Sue Breakell at Tate, Divia Patel at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and Partha Mitter for his kind encouragement. For further details of William Rothenstein's visit to India, 1910–11, see W. Rothenstein: *Men and Memoirs. Recollections of William Rothenstein, 1900–1922*, London 1932, ch.28, pp.228–55; and R. Speaight: *William Rothenstein*, London 1962, ch.11, pp.230–44.

¹ Rothenstein to Alice Rothenstein, 30th October 1910; TGA.

² See R. Arrowsmith: 'Jacob Epstein – The Indian Connection', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 150 (2008), pp.742–48.

³ C. Cennini: *Il Libro dell'Arte o Trattato della Pittura*, Florence (probably early 15th century), transl. C.J. Herringham: *The Book of the Art of Cennino Cennini – A Contemporary Practical Treatise on Quattrocento Painting*, London 1899.

⁴ W. Herringham: 'The Expedition', in A.H. Fox Strangways, ed.: *Ajanta Frescoes*, Oxford 1915.

⁵ C.J. Herringham: 'The Frescoes of Ajanta', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 87 (1910), p.137.



22. Photograph of the interior of Cave I at Ajanta, by Victor Goloubew. 1910. From 'Documents pour servir à l'étude d'Ajanta: les peintures de la première grotte', *Ars Asiatica* 10 (November 1927).

Terry proposed scraping the frescos from the cave walls and sending them to join the Elgin Marbles at the British Museum, 'where all the antiquarian and artistic world could see them'.⁹ Fortunately, however, the colonial government was not prepared to fund such an expensive – not to mention half-baked – project, and Griffiths was sent back to Ajanta to continue copying. Unfortunately again, shortly after the finished paintings had been put on show at the South Kensington Museum in 1885, a fire broke out which reduced the majority of them to ashes.¹⁰

The winter of 1910 was to be Christiana Herringham's longest and best-organised season of work on a third set of copies, and when she departed for Bombay from the port of Marseille, Rothenstein accompanied her. After following the standard passenger route via the Suez Canal, Port Sudan and Aden, the pair arrived at the luxurious Taj Mahal Hotel on the Bombay seafront at the end of October. There Rothenstein met the Russian aristocrat and orientalist Victor Goloubew, who was also heading for Ajanta to take photographs of the caves. The publication of these was delayed by the outbreak of the First World War, but they eventually filled a dedicated edition of the French periodical *Ars Asiatica*.¹¹ 'Goloubew would amuse you greatly', Rothenstein wrote to his wife, Alice, 'he is a real dear, frightfully nervous about himself, & carrying a whole surgery about with him & cases full of antitoxins against every known disease or possible mishap'.¹² The Taj Mahal Hotel itself had been opened by the millionaire industrialist Jamsetji Tata, possibly as an antidote to the provincialism of the city's other top establishment – the British-owned Watson's Hotel – which operated a racist door policy well into the twentieth century. The Taj immediately became popular among the



23. Copy of a painting in Cave XVII at Ajanta depicting a scene from the Sibi Jataka, by Christiana Herringham and Dorothy Larcher. 1910–11. Tempera. (Lost).

haute monde of Europe and Asia alike and, by the time of Rothenstein's and Christiana Herringham's visit, was playing host to an international elite. Similarly eclectic were the preferences of the hotel's architect, Sitaram Khanderao Vaidya, who combined Indian, Moorish, Chinese and Florentine elements. 'After all the sights of the street', Rothenstein told Alice after examining the Taj's façade, 'we came back to this curious hotel, half Eastern and half Western again'.¹³ Later in his trip he had cause to note comparably transcultural tendencies in the work of contemporary Indian painters.

Rothenstein's first visit to a rock-cut temple convinced him that the techniques and aesthetics of Indian art offered Western artists a way out of the moribund academic traditions of Europe. The venue for this realisation was the Gharapuri caves on the island of Elephanta, a Hindu temple complex created during the Silhara dynasty between the ninth and thirteenth centuries AD. The site is famous not for paintings but for its sculpture, which Rothenstein had only previously been able to examine in photographs. 'No photographs can give any idea of the sacredness, the monumental beauty of these cave temples', he wrote to Alice:

Once inside one just wants to cry. It seems so useless talking of the sense of reverence and awe that rushes into every vein of one's body and seems to flood one's heart. I can't tell you how perfectly wonderful the sculpture is. You see when it is photographed it is artificially lighted up. You have to see the figures emerging from the flanks of the temple, wrapped in shadow and awful in their force and energy [. . .] people who belittle Indian sculpture talk of things of which they know nothing. I have not been to Egypt, Greece or China, but I find it difficult to conceive that if I had I should think less of these caves of Elephanta.¹⁴

⁶ A.H. Fox Strangways: 'Note on Previous Copyings of the Frescoes', in *idem*, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.15.

⁷ R. Gill cited in W. Tweedie: Memorandum no.198 to the Secretary of State to the Government of India Home Department, 24th April 1873; London, British Library Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections (hereafter cited as APAC), X63.

⁸ Herringham, *op. cit.* (note 5).

⁹ G.W. Terry, Superintendent of the Sir J.J. School of Art, memorandum to the Chief Secretary to the Government, Bombay, 5th December 1873; APAC, X63.

¹⁰ One of Gill's remaining five paintings was also destroyed in this fire. The Victoria

and Albert Museum (formerly the South Kensington Museum) now holds the only four remaining Gill pieces and 153 canvases by Griffiths and his students; see D. Patel: 'Copying Ajanta: A Rediscovery of Some Nineteenth-Century Paintings', *South Asian Studies* 23 (2006), p.39.

¹¹ V. Goloubew: 'Documents pour servir à l'étude d'Ajanta: les peintures de la première grotte', *Ars Asiatica* 10 (November 1927).

¹² Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 30th October 1910; TGA.

¹³ Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 28th October 1910; TGA.

¹⁴ Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 30th October 1910; TGA.



24. Copy of a painting in Cave XVII at Ajanta depicting a palace scene, by Nandalal Bose. 1910–11. Watercolour. (Lost).



25. Copy of a painting in Cave I at Ajanta depicting a bodhisattva, by Syad Ahmad and Muhammad Faizl ud Din. 1910–11. Watercolour. (Lost).

A short time later, he laid out the perceived relevance of such directly carved statuary to contemporary European practice in a letter to Gill and Epstein that has not previously been published. ‘I doubt you have ever conceived what rock sculpture is; that it should have existed in India centuries ago in order to inspire you

both was quite obviously preordained and foreseen [. . .] I really think you had better come here, if only for a month. It seems to me the one place a sculptor should come to’.¹⁵ Such notions of global aesthetic exchange carried increasing weight with Rothenstein as he journeyed across the Subcontinent.

The geographical realities that lay behind Ajanta’s lengthy period of disappearance from history were soon brought home to Rothenstein in no uncertain terms. After disembarking at Jalgaon, an obscure railway stop on the Calcutta line about two hundred miles from Bombay, it took eight hours by bullock-cart and pony to reach the camp, with the caves themselves still four miles’ drive beyond. ‘And such a drive it is!’, Rothenstein wrote to Alice the following day. ‘The heavy rains here have broken up the road, and why the cart wasn’t broken to pieces long before we got there is a mystery to me, such joltings and break neck obstacles you never experienced I think. It took us two hours to do the four miles, and we had to ford the river four times, twice by partly wading through the water’.¹⁶ Goloubew’s photograph of Cave I (Fig.22), taken just a week later, gives an idea of the way the caves looked, while Wilmot Herringham’s written description is the most evocative of the site as a whole:

[The caves] are cut in the wide concave sweep of precipitous hillside, so that the entrance of the first faces the black mouth of the last, at a distance of some 500 yards. Between the columns of many of the temples are hung great nests of wild bees, which must be carefully humoured to prevent dangerous hostilities, and in the deep recesses gibbering bats crawl sliding along the rock cornices, unaware that the concentrated stench of their centuries of occupation is their most formidable defence against man’s intrusion [. . .] In the rains the river becomes a mighty torrent, but in winter it dwindles to a stream with a few pools in it. Green parrots fly across it in the sunshine; monkeys, boars, and an occasional panther haunt it [. . .] It is a wild and beautiful place.¹⁷

The caves were not really caves at all, but a series of meditation chambers and accommodation halls cut from the rock between the second century BC and the sixth century AD. In its heyday, the complex was home to an extensive monastic community, of which the artists themselves were probably ordained members. Many of the paintings represent scenes from the *Jatakas* – picturesque narratives of Gautama Buddha’s previous incarnations, and would have been valuable as pedagogic aids. Given this monastic context, it was the preoccupation of many of the paintings with worldly natural and social scenes, not to mention frequent depictions of the semi-nude male and female form, which most disconcerted Edwardian observers (Fig.23). Laurence Binyon’s first reaction on seeing images such as the palace scene from Cave XVII copied by Nandalal Bose (Fig.24) was to compare them unfavourably with their Chinese equivalents. ‘The artists of Ajanta are far less at home in the supernatural atmosphere, where spiritual beings seem to float of their own essence’, wrote the curator, ‘than in the world of men and women, of animals, red earth, green plants, the sunshine and the

¹⁵ Rothenstein to Gill, 26th November 1910; TGA.

¹⁶ Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 1st November 1910; TGA.

¹⁷ Herringham, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.16.

¹⁸ L. Binyon: ‘The Place of the Ajanta Paintings in Eastern Art’, in Fox Strangways,

op. cit. (note 4), p.21.

¹⁹ Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 1st November 1910; TGA.

²⁰ W. Rothenstein: ‘The Importance of the Ajanta Paintings in the History of Art’, in Fox Strangways, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp.22–23.



26. *Morning at Benares*, by William Rothenstein. 1911. Canvas, 89 by 124.5 cm. (Present whereabouts unknown).



27. Copy of a painting in Cave XVII at Ajanta depicting female devotees, by Nandalal Bose. 1910–11. Watercolour. (Lost).

shadows'.¹⁸ Rothenstein also had some problems coming to grips with the frescos, but discovered in the end that it was mainly a matter of wrestling with his own preconceptions about sacred art. 'Grow on you they certainly do', he told Alice, 'and the more one looks the more one can see of them'.¹⁹ Just as he had seen a way forward for Western sculptors in the rock carvings of Elephanta, Rothenstein soon began to speculate on the possibilities held out by Ajanta for a rejuvenation both of European and Asian painting. 'There is still enough left in these paintings to inspire a whole generation of Indian and European artists', he wrote later, 'and to point the way to a more intelligent patronage of the arts'.²⁰

Rothenstein's attempts to channel the inspiration of Ajanta into his own paintings of Indian subjects did not, unfortunately, fulfil these high expectations. 'The life in the streets is too full to attempt', he wrote to Alice from Jodhpur not long after leaving Christiana Herringham's camp. 'Every moment there are things so noble in gesture, so marvellous in colour and form, that one wants to lay one's head on a pillow and give up the game'.²¹ He waited until he reached Benares, the holy city of Shiva, before he attempted such a crowd scene. His choice of motif was the 'procession of pilgrims, monks, [and] ascetics' thronging the city's riverside shrines, a choice of subject doubtless encouraged by the work he had examined with Mrs Herringham.²² Due to the intense heat, he painted *en plein air* only during the morning

hours, sheltered beneath an umbrella 'at least ten feet across [. . .] made of plaited fibre'.²³ In the afternoons he either sketched individual figures or polished his three canvases in a nearby studio provided by the local Maharaja.²⁴ One of these canvases, *Morning at Benares* (Fig. 26), is a view of individual figures on the riverfront painted in Rothenstein's characteristic landscape style, which combines the fascination for reflected light of a Corot or a Velázquez with the 'architectural sense and squareness of proportions and design' he had learned from Goya.²⁵ 'My large picture has been, is still, a most hungry child & requires all my time', he told Alice a month into his Benares regime. 'The sun is already too powerful to work after 11 o'clock now – I start at 7 so get four hours of it. Of course it is a very hot place where I work, as I get the reflections from the river & the steps & walls of the ghats'.²⁶ Despite the number of hours invested in these three paintings, however, Rothenstein was deeply dissatisfied with the final results. 'I work with the regularity of a clock', he complained in late January, 'but what I have done I know nothing about, except in the case of the drawings, some of which I think are not bad'.²⁷

Rothenstein's preference for his drawings seems to have stemmed mainly from the failure of his paintings of Benares to incorporate any sense of Indian aesthetics as he had understood them from the caves at Ajanta. His subsequent writings about the frescos identify the depiction of 'psychological character' in

²¹ Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 13th November 1910; TGA.

²² Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 22nd December 1910; TGA.

²³ Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 24th January 1910; TGA.

²⁴ A boat was also provided for Rothenstein so that he would not have to paint on

the crowded ghats. S.C. Sen Roy to Rothenstein, 15th December 1910; TGA.

²⁵ W. Rothenstein: *Goya*, London 1900, p.12.

²⁶ Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 24th January 1910; TGA.

²⁷ Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 23rd January 1911; TGA.



28. *Young Hindu woman*, by William Rothenstein. 1911. Pencil, 30 by 26 cm. (Abbott and Holder, London).

‘the delineation of human and animal forms’ as their key success, especially when these are set against ‘the ordered pattern of the spiritual realities of the universe’.²⁸ Nandalal Bose’s extraordinary renditions of the Ajanta work, along with the scenes copied by his fellow students, demonstrate the subtlety and range of mood and emotion shown in the faces of the female figures in particular (Figs.25 and 27). Rothenstein’s drawing of a smiling young Hindu woman (Fig.28) on the ghats of Benares captures exactly such close and intimate ‘psychological character’ very much more effectively than do his paintings of the city, which are detached and over-formal by comparison. The way in which the models for such drawings were searched out suggests that Rothenstein looked for the other key element he had ascribed to the aesthetics of Ajanta – the ‘ordered pattern of the spiritual realities of the universe’ – at the city’s temples and shrines. ‘I paint all morning, and usually draw in the afternoon’, he told Alice, ‘sitting on the steps of a little

temple, where the priests are friendly, and beg alms of sittings from passers by’.²⁹

Another drawing made during Rothenstein’s stay at Benares includes a man gathering actual alms from passers by, and gives further clues to Rothenstein’s methods with regard to drawing Indian subjects (Fig.29). The shaved head and one-piece robe of the second figure – on the right of the alms-gatherer – identifies the man as a *bhikku*, or ordained Buddhist monk, and there is a possibility that Rothenstein drew it at Sarnath, just a few miles north of the city. This site – the famous deer park where Gautama Buddha preached his first sermon after achieving enlightenment – is one of the four most significant places of pilgrimage for Buddhists. Although it is not specifically mentioned in Rothenstein’s letters from India, the place would have offered a contemporary view of religious practices featured in the Ajanta frescos and other familiar Asian works of art, and is unlikely to have been omitted from his itinerary. Again the sketch is a characterful portrayal of the figure rather than a formalised hieratic image: the monk is shown not in a state of meditation but preparing to meditate, and is shifting his weight in order to get into the *ardha padmasana* – usually called the ‘half-lotus posture’ in English – one of the sitting positions appropriate to such practice. The monk’s facial expression remains detached and dignified while the hands assist in pushing his legs, somewhat awkwardly, into the correct configuration. Once again it is the ‘psychological character’ of an individual viewed within a religious context that has captured Rothenstein’s attention.

By the time he left Benares, Rothenstein had realised that painting individual figures would have permitted more satisfying experiments with Indian aesthetics than had been possible in his cityscapes. ‘If I could have stayed on here I would have tried to do a figure picture’, he wrote to Alice at the end of January, ‘but going to fresh places this will be impossible I fear, and I must be content with my drawings’.³⁰ His sudden decision to abandon the city of Shiva had been brought about by the unfortunate combination of a minor stomach infection and a newspaper article about contagious diseases. ‘I knew there was some plague here’, he told Alice, ‘but I felt when I read what I saw in the paper that I have not quite the right to take any risk of this kind with four small children, so I made arrangements to leave & had my first day’s work since my attack and my last at Benares today’. The article was probably about the devastating epidemic of pneumonic plague that by January of 1911 had already accounted for fifty thousand deaths across China, Mongolia and eastern Russia, and the widely anticipated possibility that this would spread to India. Whatever the exact contents of the article, it justified Rothenstein’s departure for the reassuringly modern cityscape of Calcutta, a location that had witnessed comparatively few historical outbreaks of plague in comparison with endemic areas such as Benares. ‘I paid my farewell to the Ganges here to-day and I felt sad as I was rowed up the stream for the last time’, Rothenstein wrote in his final letter from the city of Shiva. ‘I saw all the things I should have painted and felt how little I had used the privilege of being in such a place’.³¹

²⁸ Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 13th November 1910; TGA.

²⁹ Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 23rd January 1911, quoted in Speaight, *op. cit.* (acknowledgement above), p.242.

³⁰ Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 30th January 1911; TGA.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Tagore to Rothenstein, 16th November 1910 (Tagore’s underlining); APAC,

It had been Abanindranath Tagore, an innovative painter of the Bengal School and Vice Principal of the city's main art college, who had originally suggested the idea of visiting India's cultural capital the previous November. 'Do visit Calcutta', his letter urges Rothenstein, 'many members of our art society are really anxious to meet you and get your advice regarding the working of this art movement of ours [. . .] All of us are expecting to meet you, we have heard of you from so many friends in England that I am sure you will be quite at ease in this wretched metropolis!'³² Abanindranath's underlining in the first section of this invitation is highly significant. What he and his students were interested in was Rothenstein's advice as an organiser and networker – the kind of advice that had propelled Epstein from obscurity to wide notoriety. What they were emphatically *not* interested in was his advice as a technician and stylist of fine art. Given the rather conservative European approaches to aesthetics that had already compromised Rothenstein's attempts to get to grips with the Benares waterfront, it is not difficult to understand why this was so. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Western standards of beauty dependent on pictorial illusionism, vanishing-point perspective and volumetric shading had been popularised and imposed by the colonial authorities in India. Although artists of the previous generation – such as the Keralan master Ravi Varma – had been successful in embracing such methods, Abanindranath felt that it was time for a change.

Abanindranath's idea was to detach the carriage of contemporary Indian art from the European train to which it had become hitched, and to find an alternative engine to pull it. In other words, for a 'Renaissance' to be possible, a substitute classical basis was needed to replace that of Greece. The critic Tapati Guha-Thakurta has shown that the Ajanta frescos had figured in Abanindranath's thinking from an early stage. His sketchbooks from the *fin de siècle* contain many illustrations based on the images there, and the 1901 watercolour *Buddha and Sujata*, now in Calcutta's Indian Museum, shows flower and tree details that are unmistakably derived from the caves.³³ Such works still retain evidence of a lingering 'European' concern with illusory mass and depth, however, and he was obliged to turn to another period of Indian history for a stronger corrective. By the time Rothenstein arrived in Calcutta, Abanindranath had been experimenting for several years with approaches derived from the miniaturist style that had flourished at the courts of the Mughal Emperors Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Such works render architecture diagrammatically in flattened perspective, use bright primary and secondary colours with minimal shading, and invariably present human faces in strict profile regardless of the position of the trunk and arms. The pointed contrast of such techniques with those employed by Varma and his contemporaries was doubtless one of their main attractions for Abanindranath.

Rothenstein's own drawings from Calcutta demonstrate a strong interest in Abanindranath's work, and a willingness to conduct his own experiments with Mughal conventions. Having decided before leaving Benares to concentrate on figures, and on drawing rather than painting, he was keen to start work in



29. Detail of *Seated figures*, by William Rothenstein. 1911. Pencil, 30 by 26 cm. (Abbott and Holder, London).



30. *Woman offering puja*, by William Rothenstein. 1911. Pencil, 30 by 26 cm. (Abbott and Holder, London).

Calcutta as soon as possible. 'I have been to the art school and was welcomed by Tagore, a really charming creature', he wrote to Alice the same day he had arrived in Calcutta; 'they are going to get models for me and let me draw in the school'.³⁴ After four days of working alongside Abanindranath and his students, he noted that 'the Indian artists seem to like my drawings very much and to be surprised to find them so much more like their own than they expected'.³⁵ Rothenstein's depiction of a Hindu female offering *puja* (Fig. 30) certainly echoes the simple, reserved piety that characterises Abanindranath's contemporary watercolours of Indian women, but it is a drawing of a male figure that confirms the connection between the two artists – Rothenstein's *Young man in a turban* (Fig. 32), drawn at the Calcutta Government School of Art in 1911, alongside Abanindranath's lithograph *The traveller and the lotus* of 1901 (Fig. 31). Despite the orientation of the shoulders and body towards the picture plane, Abanindranath gives the young man's head in profile, resulting in a slightly awkward neck position which is familiar to students of Mughal painting. Although Rothenstein's *Young man in a turban* retains the pictorial illusionism that Abanindranath's

MSS Eur B213 no.1.

³³ T. Guha-Thakurta: *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art – Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal c.1850–1920*, Cambridge 1992, pp.235–41.

³⁴ Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 1st February 1911; TGA.

³⁵ Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 5th February 1911; TGA.



31. *The traveller and the lotus*, by Abanindranath Tagore. 1901. Chromolithograph, 25 by 19 cm. (Private collection).

watercolour has attempted to throw off, the same feature is clearly present, and the Mughal influence is palpable in the dress and overall style of the figure.

The transcultural implications of much of Abanindranath's work have been ignored by most critics in favour of its perceived importance to the cause of Indian nationalism. The fact that Mughal conventions of painting had initially been imported from Persia tended to be glossed over by contemporary critics such as Ananda Coomaraswamy, who preferred to dwell on its 'indigenous element';³⁶ while the Irish-born Hindu activist Sister Nivedita also emphasised the local characteristics of the miniatures and their direct links back to those of Ajanta and forward to those of Abanindranath.³⁷ Such a tendency has not disappeared in more recent writing on the Bengal school,³⁸ but the most vital element of such works to an understanding of modernism as a global phenomenon is their tendency to function independently of such provincial limitations.

Like his famous uncle, Rabindranath Tagore – not to mention Christiana Herringham and Ananda Coomaraswamy – Abanindranath belonged to an intellectual elite with strong cosmopolitan sympathies. His *Tissarakshita, Queen of Asoka* (Fig. 33), painted in the year of Rothenstein's visit, contains very clear references to Ajanta in the facial details and costume of the figure depicted, as well as in the Buddhist theme of the work. It would appear on the

³⁶ 'I find the indigenous element in this [Mughal] art even larger than I surmised, and the Persian element very much smaller. People have a mania for thinking that everything comes from somewhere else than where you find it. I am beginning to see that the best things are always well rooted in the soil'; A. Coomaraswamy to Rothenstein, 10th October 1910; Harvard, Houghton Library, quoted in M. Lago, ed.: *Letters of William Rothenstein and Rabindranath Tagore 1911–1941*, Cambridge MA 1972, p.31.



32. *Young man in a turban*, by William Rothenstein. 1911. Pencil, 30 by 26 cm. (Abbott and Holder, London).

surface to represent a revivalist cultural initiative which repudiates foreign influence and values local, traditional conventions. In fact, European, Indian and Japanese techniques, styles and aesthetic preoccupations coalesce in the work, refuting any notion of cultural insularity. The art historian Ratan Parimoo has detected the influence of Aubrey Beardsley in Abanindranath's works of this period, gleaned from internationally available publications such as *The Yellow Book* and the illustrated edition of Wilde's *Salome*.³⁹ Tissarakshita – a young queen of the Buddhist monarch Asoka who destroyed the sacred Bodhi tree and blinded the king's son out of lust and spite – certainly fits into the role of the femme fatale, an ubiquitous trope of European *fin-de-siècle* culture which is here 'quoted' in a fresh context. Rothenstein was quick to detect an influence from quite a different direction during his visit, describing the artists of the Bengal School as 'too much influenced by the weaker sentimental side of Japanese art'.⁴⁰

That a Japanese connection did exist is readily documented. The great cultural historian Kakuzo Okakura was a familiar face in Calcutta, drafting his seminal text on pan-Asianism, *The Ideals*

³⁷ Sister Nivedita: review of E.B. Havell's *Indian Sculpture and Painting* (Part Three), *The Modern Review* (December 1909), pp.582–83. Nivedita was an Anglo-Irish author, originally named Margaret Elizabeth Noble, who had become a follower of the Hindu teacher Swami Vivekananda in the mid-1890s; see B. Foxe: *Long Journey Home – A Biography of Margaret Noble*, London 1975.

³⁸ For the definitive account, see P. Mitter: *Art and nationalism in colonial India 1850–1922*, Cambridge 1994. Also, Guha-Thakurta, *op. cit.* (note 33); and



33. *Tissarakshita, Queen of Asoka*, by Abanindranath Tagore. 1911. Watercolour, 30 by 26 cm. (Royal Collection, Windsor).

of the East, while staying at Abanindranath's home in 1901.⁴¹ His two students, the painters Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso, visited the following year; and the 'wash' technique of *Tissarakshita* was probably derived directly from watching Taikan at work, as the art historian Partha Mitter has suggested.⁴² Such exchange of method and motif was far from one-sided, however. The modernist artist Mukul Dey, then a student of Abanindranath's, stayed with the Japanese artist in Tokyo in 1916 and was fascinated to examine a painting that reminded him 'of the beautiful girls of life-size – with flower hair dressing of the type of Ajanta cave paintings'. Observing the Japanese painter's technique, Dey further noted that 'it resembled that which was employed in our ancient wall paintings of Ajanta, Bagh and other places'.⁴³

In contrast to the uninhibited exchange of Japanese and Indian artistic concepts visible in the work of Taikan, Rothenstein's final contribution to the 'Indian Renaissance' would, paradoxically, appear in the form of literature rather than visual art. By the time he wound up his Indian sojourn with a brief trip to the Himalayas, his interest in Indian painting other than the Ajanta frescos had faded considerably. 'The sculpture & architecture



34. *Tibetan monk*, by William Rothenstein. 1911. Pencil, 30 by 26 cm. (Abbott and Holder, London).

are the really important things, the painting doesn't really matter very much', he wrote to Alice, 'only you mustn't say I said so – of course I don't mean Ajanta'.⁴⁴ His subsequent drawing of a Tibetan Buddhist monk in Darjeeling (Fig. 34) eschews the flattened perspective of the Calcutta experiments in favour of a pronounced sculptural emphasis on volume and solidity; the eyes of the figure meeting those of the viewer with an equivalent curiosity – psychology again, set against the background of religion. Experiments with Mughal aesthetics had not been the only product of Rothenstein's stay in Calcutta, however. It had also led to the establishment of a friendship with Abanindranath's uncle, Rabindranath Tagore, that ushered in an *annus mirabilis* of international cultural exchange the following year. Rothenstein arranged for the publication via the India Society of the Bengali poet's *Gitanjali* volume of verse in English, which was to lead directly to an international appreciation of his work and the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. He also introduced Rabindranath to W.B. Yeats and, moreover, to Ezra Pound, whose experiments that same year with Asian verse forms firmly established transcultural exchange as one of the key characteristics of modernist literature.

R. Parimoo, ed.: *The Art of Ajanta – New Perspectives*, New Delhi 1991, esp. R. Chattopadhyay: 'The Artistic Discovery of Ajanta and the Nationalist Artist in Bengal', I, pp.42–51.

³⁹ R. Parimoo: *The Paintings of the Three Tagores – Abanindranath, Gaganendranath, Rabindranath – Chronology and Comparative Study*, Baroda 1973, p.80.

⁴⁰ Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 5th February 1911; TGA.

⁴¹ K. Okakura: *The Ideals of the East – with Special Reference to the Arts of Japan*,

London 1903. Rabindranath's son, Rathindranath Tagore, in his memoir of his father, mentions that Okakura first visited in the 1890s but the exact date is not given; *idem*: *On the Edges of Time*, Calcutta 1958, p.68.

⁴² Parimoo, *op. cit.* (note 39), p.59; and Mitter, *op. cit.* (note 38), pp.290–94.

⁴³ M. Dey: unpublished essay entitled 'Yokoyama Taikan as I Knew Him', 19th May 1958; Santiniketan, Mukul Dey Archive.

⁴⁴ Rothenstein to A. Rothenstein, 1st February 1911; TGA.