

Jamini Roy and the Revival of Indian Folk Art

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Abstract

This research is based on Jamini Roy and the Revival of Indian Folk Art. Jamini Roy was a major figure in modern Indian art. Jamini Roy moved away from Western academic painting early in his career. He chose to follow Indian folk traditions instead. He drew strong ideas from Kalighat painting and rural Bengal art. His goal was clear. He wanted art that felt simple and close to everyday people.

Roy developed a style that was easy to recognize. He used bold lines, flat colors, and simple shapes. His figures often looked calm and direct. He painted themes from village life, folk tales, and religious stories. Common subjects included farmers, women, animals, and scenes from the Ramayana and Krishna legends. His work stayed rooted in Indian culture.

He also changed the way art was made and shared. Roy used natural colors and simple materials. He painted on cloth, wood, and other low-cost surfaces. This helped him keep his work affordable. At that time, many artists in India followed Western styles. These styles were often seen as more skilled or modern. Roy challenged this idea through his work. He showed that Indian folk art had its own strength and beauty. He proved that local traditions could stand on their own. His art gave value to forms that were once ignored.

Jamini Roy's influence can still be seen today. Many artists look to his work for guidance. They study his use of line, color, and theme. His approach shows that simple forms can carry deep meaning. His work remains important in the study of modern Indian art.

Keywords

Jamini Roy, Indian folk art, Kalighat painting, Bengal art, modern Indian art, cultural identity, traditional art, revival.



Introduction

Jamini Roy played a key role in bringing Indian folk art back into focus. At a time when many artists followed Western styles, he chose a different path. He turned to local traditions and made them central to his work. Jamini Roy was one of the key figures in modern Indian art. He was born in 1887 in a small village in Bengal. His early life was shaped by rural surroundings, local crafts, and simple living. These early experiences stayed with him and later influenced his work in strong ways.

He moved to Calcutta to study art at the Government School of Art. At that time, the school followed Western academic methods.

Students were trained in realism, oil painting, and detailed portrait work. Roy learned these skills well and showed strong control in his early paintings. His work from this period reflects careful observation and technical ability. But over time, he began to feel that this style did not represent Indian life or culture in a true way.

Roy started to question the value of Western styles in Indian art. He felt that copying European methods made Indian art lose its own identity. He wanted to create something that was rooted in Indian traditions. This led him to explore local art forms. He studied Kalighat paintings, which were popular in Bengal during the nineteenth century. These paintings were made for common people and used bold lines, flat colors, and simple shapes. They often showed scenes from daily life and religious stories.

He also looked at village crafts, temple decorations, and folk patterns. He saw beauty in their simplicity and directness. These forms were not concerned with realism or fine detail. Instead, they focused on strong expression and clear design. He began to move away from Western techniques. He stopped using oil paints and heavy shading. He developed a new style based on folk traditions. His work became simpler and more direct. He used thick, bold outlines to define forms. He filled them with flat areas of color. His figures were often stylized, with large eyes and calm expressions. This gave his paintings a distinct and recognizable look.

Roy chose subjects that reflected Indian life and belief. He painted scenes of village women, farmers, and musicians. He also painted animals like cats, cows, and birds. Many of his works show mother and child figures. These images carry a sense of warmth and care. He also painted religious themes. Stories of Krishna, Radha, and episodes from the Ramayana appear often in his work. These subjects connected his art to both daily life and spiritual ideas.

Roy's approach was different from many artists of his time. During the early twentieth century, Western art was seen as modern and superior. Many Indian artists followed those methods to gain recognition. Roy took a different path. He rejected the idea that Western style was the only standard. He showed that Indian folk art had its own strength and value. His work helped bring respect back to local traditions that had been overlooked.

By using folk styles and local themes, he supported a sense of cultural pride. His art became part of a wider movement that valued Indian roots and traditions.

Over time, Roy gained recognition for his unique style. His work was appreciated both in India and abroad. Critics and viewers admired the clarity and strength of his paintings. Yet he remained committed to his simple approach. He continued to create art that was direct, honest, and rooted in tradition.

Jamini Roy's contribution to Indian art is deep and lasting. He helped revive interest in folk traditions and gave them a new place in modern art. He proved that art can be both simple and meaningful. His work stands as a bridge between past traditions and modern expression. Today, he is remembered as an artist who stayed true to his roots and changed the direction of Indian art.

In the early twentieth century, Western academic art was seen as the standard in India. Artists were trained in realism, oil painting, and detailed technique. Roy learned these methods but later felt they did not reflect Indian life. He believed Indian art should come from its own culture and traditions. This belief led him to study folk art forms from Bengal.

Through his work, Roy gave new respect to Indian folk traditions. He showed that these forms had value and depth. He challenged the idea that Western art was superior. His paintings proved that simple styles could carry strong meaning.

His work became part of a larger cultural movement in India. This was a time when people were searching for identity and pride in their heritage. Roy's art supported this effort by drawing from local roots. He helped people see beauty in their own traditions.

Jamini Roy's role in the revival of Indian folk art is lasting. He did not just copy folk styles. He reworked them into a modern form. His work built a bridge between tradition and modern art. Today, he is remembered as an artist who brought folk art into the center of Indian art history.

Early experiments with Kalighat paintings

Jamini Roy began to explore Kalighat painting during a turning point in his career. After training in Western academic art, he felt a gap between that style and Indian life. He started looking for forms that felt more local and direct. This search led him to Kalighat paintings from Bengal.

Kalighat paintings were known for their bold lines and flat colors. They showed simple figures with clear shapes. The themes came from daily life, social scenes, and religious stories. These works were made quickly for common people. They were direct and easy to understand. Roy saw strength in this simplicity. In his early experiments, Roy studied these features closely. He began to reduce detail in his own work. He moved away from shading and depth. Instead, he focused on strong outlines and flat areas of color. His figures became more stylized. He simplified faces and forms while keeping clear expression.

He also tested new materials during this phase. He moved away from oil paints and canvas. He used natural pigments and simple surfaces like cloth and board. This matched the spirit of Kalighat artists, who worked with basic tools and low-cost materials.

Themes in His Art

Jamini Roy focused on themes that were simple, familiar, and rooted in Indian life. His work reflects both daily experience and deeper cultural ideas.

One major theme in his art is rural life. He painted farmers, village women, and local workers. These figures appear calm and steady. They show the rhythm of everyday life in villages. His aim was to keep these scenes honest and easy to relate to.

Religious subjects also appear often in his work. He painted stories of Krishna, Radha, and scenes from the Ramayana. These images were not detailed or complex. He presented them in a simple way so that people could understand them easily. His religious paintings carry a sense of peace and devotion. Another key theme is the mother and child. He created many versions of this subject. These works show care, warmth, and protection. The figures are simple, yet they express strong emotion. This theme connects with both personal feeling and cultural values.

Animals are also common in his art. He painted cats, cows, horses, and birds. These animals are not realistic. They are stylized with bold lines and clear shapes. They often appear playful and lively. This adds a sense of charm to his work.

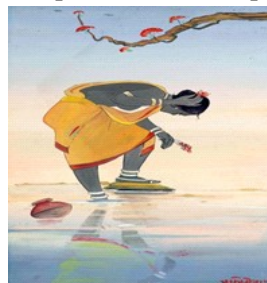
Folk stories and cultural symbols form another theme. He drew from local tales and traditions. His art reflects the beliefs and customs of the people. This helped keep folk culture alive through visual form.

Painting Style and Techniques

Jamini Roy's art style is typically referred to as "Neo-Bengali" art style and later evolved into a "Folk Art-Inspired Modernism" or "Traditional Revivalism". This style is also sometimes referred to as "Indian Primitivism" characterized by its linear, decorative and colorful elements drawing heavily on local art forms such as the Rural Patachitra, Kalighat Pat, Clay Figurines & Terracotta Temple Sculptures of Vishnupur.



Dual Cats with one Crayfish



Santal Girl

By the mid-1920s, his style became more refined, characterized by controlled brushwork and in some series, monochromatic palettes. During this period, he abandoned conventional artistic practices and began creating works on self-prepared surfaces, including cloth, wood and lime-coated mats. He also transitioned to using natural pigments derived from earthen and vegetable sources, aligning his materials with the traditional techniques that inspired him. Jamini Roy drew inspiration from predecessors such as Abanindranath Tagore and Raja Ravi Varma, adopting rhythmic outlines, structured patterns, and vibrant colors. His distinctive artistic approach gained widespread recognition and by the 1940s, his works had become highly sought after, particularly in Bengal and Europe.



Gopini by Jamini Roy



Krishna with Gopis

Jamini Roy gained widespread recognition by developing a distinctive artistic language, which he referred to as the 'Flat Technique.' Moving away from commercially available tube colors, he meticulously prepared his own pigments using natural materials, drawing inspiration from the traditional methods of village patuas (folk artists). Like the patua painters of Bengal, he relied on indigenous materials such as lampblack, chalk powder, leaves, and creepers, employing a palette of seven fundamental colors: Indian red, yellow ochre, cadmium green, vermillion, grey, blue and white.



Three Pujarins



Santal Mother and Child

Jamini Roy frequently sketched his compositions beforehand, refining the design before applying color. He often created multiple iterations of the same subject, making subtle adjustments to composition and color balance in each version. Unlike traditional Western paintings, where signatures are placed in the corner, he integrated his signature in Bengali script as a seamless design element within the composition, further reinforcing his distinctive artistic identity.

Collections and Commissions Jamini Roy built his career in a way that was different from many artists of his time. He did not depend much on large official commissions. Instead, he focused on creating work that people could buy easily. This choice shaped both his collections and the way his art spread.



Roy preferred to sell his paintings directly from his studio. Visitors could come, see his work, and buy it at a fair price. He kept his materials simple and his process steady. This helped him produce many works without making them too costly. His aim was clear. He wanted art to reach ordinary people, not just rich collectors or institutions.

Some of his works are part of the collection at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi. They are also found in the Indian Museum in Kolkata. These institutions help preserve and display his art for a wider audience. His paintings are also held in private collections in India and abroad.

Roy did receive some commissions, but they were limited. When he accepted them, he stayed true to his style. He did not change his method to suit outside demands. This kept his work consistent and honest. Even in commissioned pieces, he used the same bold lines, flat colors, and simple forms.

Jamini Roy's work continues to be valued in both public and private collections. His choice to keep art simple and affordable helped his work reach a wide audience. This remains an important part of his legacy.

Exhibitions



Jamini Roy did not rely much on formal exhibitions in the early part of his career. He preferred to show and sell his work from his own home in Calcutta. Visitors, collectors, and students would come to his studio to see his paintings. This made his art more personal and easier to access.

In the beginning, Roy did take part in group exhibitions. These were often held in art societies in Calcutta. His early works, which followed Western style, were shown in these spaces. But after he changed his style, his work stood out. His folk-based approach was very different from what others were doing at that time.

Later, his work was also shown outside India. International exhibitions helped bring him wider attention. Art critics and collectors from other countries took interest in his paintings. They saw his work as a strong example of modern art rooted in tradition.

Today, his paintings are still displayed in major art institutions. Exhibitions of his work continue to take place in India and abroad. They show how his simple style carries deep meaning and cultural value.

Roy's approach to exhibitions reflects his larger idea about art. He believed art should be close to people, not limited to formal spaces. Even so, exhibitions played a role in spreading his work and building his reputation over time.

Awards and Honours

Jamini Roy received recognition for his work, though he did not seek fame or awards. His focus stayed on art and its connection with people. Still, his contribution to Indian art was widely respected.

One of his most important honours was the Padma Bhushan, given by the Government of India in 1955. This award is one of the highest civilian honours in the country. It recognized his role in shaping modern Indian art and his effort to revive folk traditions.

He was also valued by critics, writers, and fellow artists. Many saw him as a pioneer who changed the direction of Indian art. His shift from Western style to folk-based art was seen as bold and important.

After his death, his legacy continued to grow. Retrospective exhibitions were held in his honour. Art historians studied his work and wrote about his ideas. His paintings became an important part of Indian art history.

These honours reflect the impact of his work. He showed that simple forms and local traditions could have deep meaning. His contribution remains important in the study of modern Indian art.

- 1967 Awarded honorary D. Litt. Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata
- 1956 Elected Fellow, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi
- 1955 Awarded Padma Bhushan, Government of India

- 1935 Awarded Viceroy's Gold Medal for 'Mother Helping the Child to Cross the Pool'



Jamini Roy's art was an art of quiet resistance that assimilated so seamlessly into the folk and craft traditions of Bengal that it did not cause any discernible ripples among the prevalent artistic mood. All around him, art was being nurtured, questioned, uprooted—it was, after all, a period when nationalist feelings ran high and a search for an indigenous lexicon was paramount—but Jamini Roy's ability to look to tradition for a modern approach, though revolutionary, was instinctively natural and organic. It was art that everyone understood and wanted to take home. No wonder Jamini Babu became a household name in his native Calcutta and went on to be honoured as one of the pre-eminent National Treasure artists of the country whose art has the greatest acceptance of any known Indian modernist.

Despite his amazing popularity, exhibitions on Jamini Roy have been inexplicably rare—an anomaly 'Living Traditions & the Art of Jamini Roy' hopes to remove with this intimate exhibition that includes his extensive range of subjects that he would frequently revisit. 'His work is built on solid ground, open and without pretense... based on universals of form which are understood by all who know art, whether from the East or the West... the art of Jamini Roy serves the living Bengal,' wrote Stella Kramrisch, an admirer of his work. Of course, as we now know, the art of Jamini Roy serves the entire living world.

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