

Jamini Roy & Somnath Hore: Figuration in the Bengal School

November 1 – December 1, 2012

Press Preview & Reception: Thursday, November 1, 6:00pm – 8:00pm

35 Great Jones St., New York NY 10012

AICON GALLERY is pleased to present **Jamini Roy & Somnath Hore: Figuration in the Bengal School**, an exhibition exploring the extremes of representation and artistic vision within India's **Bengal School of Art**. Based primarily in Kolkata and Santiniketan, the Bengal School was an artistic movement and painting tradition founded at the turn of the 19th century, which spread throughout India during the British Raj of the early 20th century. Originally an avant-garde and nationalist movement in reaction to previous academic styles, the Bengal School was led by **Abanindranath Tagore** (Indian, 1871-1951) and sought to modernize Moghul and Rajput styles, to counter the influence of Western art traditions. Along with his brother **Gaganendranath Tagore** (Indian, 1867-1938) and pupil **Nandalal Bose** (India, 1882-1966), these artists represented the early modernists of India. The Bengal School was often associated with

Indian nationalism (*swadeshi*) as an official Indian art style, but also found support from British art institutions under the epithet of the Indian Society of Oriental Art (founded in 1907 by the Tagore brothers). From the 1920s onward, prominent Bengal School artists embarked on widely divergent, often aesthetically polarized paths. However, figuration remained the central focus for those at the forefront of the movement's modernist evolution. Some embraced images of tranquility and nature, of myth and mysticism, depicting playful folk scenes during turbulent sociopolitical times, while others portrayed the darker forces of humanity, exploring famine, spiritual torment and violent conflict. **Jamini Roy** and **Somnath Hore** are perhaps, respectively, the most prominent representatives of these two opposing aesthetic forces, the former influencing the latter, and both leaving their indelible marks upon the future of modern Indian art.



Jamini Roy, *Untitled (Three Figures)*, Tempera and cloth on board,
17.5 x 33 in.

Jamini Roy (Bengali, 1887-1972) is one of India's most celebrated and iconic modern artists, particularly admired for creating playful works in a neo-folk style that brought solace to viewers during a turbulent time in Indian history. Born in the remote village of Bankura in West Bengal, an area rich with folk art traditions, Roy expressed early interest in the arts by spending time with local potters and artisans. In 1903, at the age of sixteen, he enrolled in the Government School of Art at Kolkata. He began his career painting in the post-impressionistic genre of landscapes and portraits, keeping in line with his British academic training. In his twenties, Roy earned his living through commissioned portraiture, but his artistic passion drew him to the fresh mannerisms of the Bengal School, and the experimental landscapes of post-Impressionists like Cézanne and Van Gogh.

By 1925, Roy was exploring Kalighat *pata* painting, a popular style of bazaar painting deriving its name from the temple in Kolkata. It is characterized by the robust curvature of figures in an earthy and satirical style, developed in response to the sudden prosperity of Kolkata during the 19th century trade with the East India Company. Kalighat *patas* are highly stylized, thus lacking perspective, and generally are pen and ink drawings with flat, bright planes of color. While deities are often depicted, they appear in the same de-romanticized style as humans. Roy shaped his new visual language on the source of this folk tradition, substituting the conventions of 'high art' for the rustic pictorial language of *patas*, such as the surface level, flattened planes and limited vantage point. Gradually, Roy achieved his signature style of painting, evolving over time with reference to Egyptian murals, Byzantine mosaics and Jain miniatures, in addition to the terracotta sculptures of Vishnupur temple, and the previously discussed rural art of Kalighat *patas*.

Jamini Roy's paintings possess an immediate and rare vitality, with their strength and popularity owed to the vividness of expression in his conceptual clarity and linear simplicity. By successfully bridging the gap of cultures in rural Bengal and colonial Kolkata, Roy provided a broader basis into the art of modern India, with his enrichment of ethnic substances through a nostalgic folk lyricism.



Somnath Hore, *Untitled (Rust Series 9)*, Watercolor and crayon on paper, 11 x 14 in.

Somnath Hore (Indian, 1921-2006) was one of the pioneers of the 20th century modern art movement in India, who profoundly influenced a generation of artists through his practice and politics. He learned printmaking techniques, namely lithography and intaglio, at the Government College of Art and Craft in Kolkata (1957).

Hore is widely regarded as the foremost Indian print-maker and sculptor of the 20th century, his work influenced by two formative sociopolitical events: the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 (illustrations for the Communist Party paper *Jannayuddha*, "People's War"), and the "Tebhaga" peasant movement of 1946. His early artistic influences included the robust style of German printmaker Käthe Kollwitz, as well as the Austrian Expressionists. Beginning with a humanistic figurative style, his work evolved over time into a more simplified style of near total abstraction. The anguished human body has always been reflected in Hore's figuration. His sculpture is not far removed from his work on paper, however

the mark of his work is more starkly manifest. Heightened by torn and textured surfaces, rough planes with holes and fissures, subtle modeling with shifts and exposed channels, all make for exciting tactile and visual appeal in his range of medium.

Hore produced a very limited body of work, much of which is now in public collections including that of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. Another important collection is housed at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. Throughout his career, he would return to the idea of the wound as a fissure that would not heal. This was made manifest in his white-on-white *Wounds* series (circa 1970s) constructed from paper pulp. In this series, Hore explores his reaction to the War of Independence in Bangladesh (1971), following the cataclysm of the 1940s, especially the Bengal Famine of 1943, which shaped and molded his artistic consciousness. In the *Wounds* series, Hore achieved a unique brand of abstraction to convey the horrors of war, in a manner that is almost serene, exemplified by ethereal and simplified white surfaces, further punctuated by scar-like disruptions in the hand-made paper cast. The series is all the more remarkable given its timing forty years ago in Santiniketan, India. The works on exhibition are being shown for the first time in the United States.

Up until his death in 2006 at the age of 86, Hore produced politically charged art in a variety of mediums, including linocut, woodblock print, etching and wax sculpture, in addition to the pulp-print technique he himself developed. Somnath Hore often expressed concern for mankind's inhumanity and blatant disregard of morals, and his originality in technique and language led to innovations in his media, casting him, along with painters like **Ganesh Pyne**, as a central figure in the darker strain of artists that emerged from the Bengal School.

Please contact Amy <[@Aicongallery.com](mailto:amy@aicongallery.com)> for more information.