

Gobardhan Ash

(b. Bengal, India. 1907 – 1996)

The reclusive genius of Gobardhan Ash, one of India's finest artists, was developed when the artist was a young boy of 10. Then, Ash painted his first portrait of an Indian deity using a self-made goat-hair paint brush, thus beginning his lifelong love affair with art.

Ash pursued his artistic interest at the Fine Arts Government College of Arts in Calcutta in 1926-1930 and Madras in 1932. However, on both occasions, he was unable to fit in with the conservative and institutional modes of learning. Disillusioned with the limits and constraints faced, Ash withdrew into a private introspective world where he explored his own mode of artistic expression.

It was also in art school that the artist grew to dislike aesthetic theories, especially those which presented preconceived notions of how an artist ought to render his subjects. To Ash, beauty is defined subjectively: "If we look at nature in the open, we do not see individual objects each with its own colour but rather a bright medley of tints which blend in our eyes and our minds".

Regarded as a pioneer of modern Indian art, Gobardhan Ash's contribution at the time when India witnessed the advent of Western modernism is significant and colossal. At a time when it was the convention to paint divinities and exotic female figures on their way to the temple, Ash pursued a different style, preferring to paint farmers toiling in fields - workers engaged in hard labour to earn a living. This was to set a new trend of socio-realistic art in India. Painted in this style is one of Ash's most important series of works - the 1943 *Famine Series*, a haunting watercolour series documenting the horrors of the Bengal famine.

Throughout his life, Ash held numerous solo and group exhibitions in India. The reclusive artist was renowned to avoid public exposure as it left him with little time for introspection. Still, the 1930s-1950s were some of his most prolific artistic years, with Ash exhibiting alongside other famous Indian masters such as Rabindranath Tagore, Hussain, Souza and Bakre. Travels abroad were rare; in fact his only overseas exhibition was held in Singapore in 1948.

Ash passionately pursued a career in art – painting in gouache, pastel and watercolour - until his death in 1996. As a tribute to the quiet master artist in his later years, a film about Gobardhan Ash was made by Indian film director Nabyendu Chatterjee. Called 'Bleeding in the Sun', it was completed in the year of Ash's passing.

*Freedom of Art is the Freedom of a Nation,
and Art is the best medium for spiritual freedom.
The beauty of Life and the love of beauty for beauty's sake is
the Alpha and the Omega of Art.*

– Gobardhan Ash

BIOGRAPHY

1907 Born, Bergampur, Bengal, India (1907-1996)
1926 - 1930 Fine Arts Government College of Arts, Calcutta
1932 Government School of Arts and Crafts, Madras
1946 Chief artist, Indian Institute of Art and Industry, Calcutta
1953 senior teacher at the Indian Art School of Calcutta
1956 Founded Fine Art Mission of Begumpur

AWARDS

1935 First Prize, Madras Fine Art Society,
Silver Medal, AIFACS, New Delhi
1937 Academy of Fine Art, Calcutta
1945 Silver Medal, Progressive Writers and
Artists Association, Calcutta
1985 Abanindra Award, Government of West
Bengal.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

1948 *Singapore Indian Art Exhibition,*
Singapore
1950 *The Progressive Art Group,* Bombay
1982 Solo exhibition, Calcutta
1998 *Gobardhan Ash, A Restrospective,* Gajah
Gallery, Singapore