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Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum

Indian Folk Art

Thu 20 Jul -- Tue 12 Sep 2000 Asia Gallery

Special Section: Indian Folk Art

There are said to be more than 800 languages and dialects in India. As many tribes or ethnic groups exist in the vast land of India. Moreover, there are uncountable folk arts based on Hinduism and the numerous myths, legends, religions or beliefs in each region. India is a treasure house of folk art. In this small exhibition, representative folk arts are exhibited; Kalighat paintings used for prayer and souvenir, Tantra paintings started from plates in the holy scriptures, Mithila paintings and Walri paintings made on walls and floors of each household at festivals/ rituals.

Rickshaw painting from Bangladesh is also shown as a reference. Bangladesh was founded in 1971 in so called East Bengal neighbouring to West Bengal State of India (the state capital is Calcutta). In this area, language, custom, belief and ritual are the same as those of West Bengal State and the common folk art can also be seen. However, there are no Rickshaw paintings seen in Calcutta and other places in India. The flamboyant decoration on Rickshaw is only seen in Bangladesh, especially in Dhaka.

I Kalighat Paintings

Kalighat Painting means the religious painting and genre paintings sold at the pavement leading to Kalighat Temple in Calcutta. The god enshrined in the Kalighat Temple is the goddess Kali, the consort of Siva, the god of destruction. Ever since its foundation in 1809, it has been a centre of Hindu belief in Bengal. So many people visit the temple still now.

The style of painting is named after the temple. It was originally mass produced at the site for prayer or souvenir. Most of the subject matters were derived from Hindu gods and goddesses like Kali in this exhibition. Among those, Ganesha, the god of abundance, must be familiar to the Japanese as well. Apart from these gods and goddesses, there are various motifs such as sensual women, a cat having fish in its mouth, a caricature such as a British who became a dog. In any case, those paintings are full of dreams of the public for richness, or severe criticism against colonization.

This simple painting was supported by the people in Bengal. However, in the early 20th century, the new technology like photography and prints took it over and the new posters of the gods and the beauties became more popular. Although the Kalighat paintings declined because of the appearance of the new technology, the true value of it was recognised when Jamini Roy (1887-1972, a representative modern artist in India) created a new style modern painting in a simple way finding a source in the Kalighat painting. In this way, the Kalighat paintings which was once forgotten got to receive high reputation as a representative folk art in Bengal area. (It is not produced today any more.)

II Tantra Painting

Tantra is one of the references of highly sophisticated philosophical theory of Hinduism. It has been long succeeded as a practice book for spiritual enlightenment. It is the visualisation of the philosophy and theory of Tantra or plates in books. There is a wide range of paintings in Tantra painting from abstract and symbolic iconographies to figurative depictions of the sensual gods and goddesses. Many of them symbolise human beings and the universe consisted of integration of masculinity and femininity (therefore, the abstract iconographies often symbolises male and female genitals). One of the source of Indian abstract paintings is sought in this simple appearances of this Tantra painting.