

From Prayer Rooms to Parlours : The Legacy of Bengal's Popular Prints

The history of printmaking in Bengal is not just the story of an art form—it is the story of images that travelled across spaces, shaping how people saw themselves and their world. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, chromolithographs and oleographs from Kolkata's print studios adorned middle-class prayer rooms and parlours. These prints were more than decorations; they were objects of devotion, contemplation, and social aspiration.

At the heart of this exhibition is the collection of Sanjeet Chowdhury, whose passion for popular prints has preserved an essential chapter of Bengal's visual history. Inspired by childhood encounters with his uncle's collection, Chowdhury did not merely accumulate images—he studied their origins, techniques, and iconography. His efforts have ensured that these ephemeral objects are archived, studied, and exhibited.

Bengal's print industry evolved from indigenous traditions like Battala woodcuts and Kalighat pats. Battala prints, primarily woodcut relief prints, were created for a semi-literate urban audience and merged visual storytelling with texts on mythology, social satire, and current events. Though considered rough in execution but rich in narrative, they paved the way for art-school-trained printmakers whose chromolithographs later defined Bengal's visual culture and are featured in this exhibition.

In 1878, five artists trained at the Government College of Art & Craft—Annada Bagchi, Nabakumar Biswas, Phanibhushan Sen, Krishna Chandra Pal, and Jogendranath Mukhopadhyay—founded the Calcutta Art Studio, pioneering a new visual culture. Soon after, studios such as Kansaripara Art Studio, Chorbagan Art Studio, and Imperial Art Cottage produced prints that moved seamlessly between the prayer room and the parlour.

Initially focusing on portraits and religious imagery, these studios created naturalistic depictions of Hindu deities. Manasa Devi (Imperial Art Cottage), for instance, exemplifies how print culture reinforced religious devotion. This striking image of the goddess of snakes, once found in countless Bengali homes, was not just an artwork—it was a sacred object, often adorned with flowers and bael leaves. Similarly, Sri Sri Gaur Nitai and Radha-Krishna (Shital Chandra Bandopadhyay) blurred the line between artistry and devotion, transforming domestic interiors into sites of ritual. The accessibility of such prints allowed for the democratisation of religious imagery, enabling middle-class households to own devotional objects once reserved for temples or aristocratic patrons.

Often through mythology these prints engaged with moral dilemmas, family duty, and political intrigue. Manthara and Kaikeyi (Bamapada Banerjee) captures the moment of persuasion that leads to Rama's exile, an image laden with themes of manipulation, destiny, and consequence. This narrative of power and exile resonated with audiences navigating colonial rule, where images of kings and queens took on allegorical weight.

Popular theatre also shaped lithographic storytelling. Works like *One of Sri Krishna's Miracles* (Bamapada Banerjee, 1926) and *Arjuna and Urvashi* (B.P. Banerjee, early 1900s) mirrored contemporary stage productions' dramatic compositions, gestures, and lighting. Though rooted in local traditions, these prints bore the mark of European academic realism. Artists trained in British colonial art schools adopted techniques like single-point perspective, chiaroscuro, and neoclassical figuration. Madan Bhasma (Chorbagan Art Studio), depicting the destruction of Madan by Shiva, exemplifies this fusion—Hindu mythology rendered with theatrical realism. The influence of Renaissance religious art is evident, but the prints remained distinctly Bengali, incorporating local landscapes, architecture, and textiles.

This Western influence led to a new model for Indian iconography, where Hindu deities were depicted with soft modelling, exaggerated anatomy, and heightened theatrical lighting. Bamapada Banerjee, whose prints predated even Ravi Varma's oleographs, played a crucial role in this transformation. Having studied under Karl Becker, a visiting German artist, Banerjee infused European academic realism into Indian mythology. His works, alongside those of Calcutta Art Studio, helped establish a hybridised visual vocabulary, where Victorian interiors, Corinthian columns, and draped curtains coexisted with Hindu gods and epic narratives.

Yet these prints extended beyond sacred spaces. The same presses that created religious imagery also reflected Bengal's changing social landscape. By the early 20th century, a new genre of lithographic prints emerged, depicting *Sundaris* or 'beautiful women'. In genteel parlours, *Pramada-Sundari* (Chorbagan Art Studio) or *Manisa* (playing the Violin) and *Nalini* (playing the Tabla) (Kansaripara Art Studio) exemplified the *babu-bibi* genre, portraying elegant women who embodied both aspiration and anxiety in colonial Bengal. This tension between virtue and transgression, tradition and change, is further reflected in *Radha's Ordeal* (Bamapada Banerjee), which reimagines a moment from Krishna's life with a heightened sense of theatrical drama, mirroring the moral anxieties of the time. These Western-influenced lithographs formed a separate genre, replacing *Kalighat pats* with a refined, academic realism that catered to the tastes of the Bengali *bhadralok*.

By the mid-20th century, offset printing and photography rendered lithographs obsolete, gradually pushing them out of Bengali homes. Yet their significance endures. Prints of *Vidyasagar*, *Vivekananda*, and *Netaji*—also included in this exhibition—remind us that print culture was not merely decorative but vital to shaping public memory and nationalist sentiment.

More than a historical overview, this exhibition invites us to reconsider the role of popular prints in Bengal's artistic and social landscape. Once dismissed as ephemera, they now stand as enduring witnesses to a world that lives on through memory and the power of the image.