

Published Date:	18 Jun 2023	Publication:	The Sunday Standard [New Delhi]
Journalist:	Soumitra Das	Page No:	3
MAV/CCM:	321,030/178.35	Circulation:	43,000



Scrolling Through Santiniketan



1

The rugged topography of an unspoilt Santiniketan in West Bengal's Bolpur district unfolds before the viewer's eyes as one takes in the shifting scenes of a 44 ft-long and six-inch-wide scroll that Benodebehari Mukherjee (1904-1980) painted in the early 1920s. He belonged to the first batch of students of Kala Bhavana, the school of arts that Rabindranath Tagore set up in

Benodebehari Mukherjee's canvas, on show for the first time, conveys the solitude and serenity of the land

By SOUMITRA DAS

Santiniketan in 1919. This newly discovered work on cheap paper strengthened with backing of Japanese kozo paper, is on display for the first time along with digital reproductions of other scrolls the artist painted at the ongoing exhibition titled, *Scenes from Santiniketan: Benodebehari's Handscrolls*. It is on at Emami Art, Kolkata Centre for Creativity till June 20.

As a nature lover, Mukherjee—who was born blind in one eye and was severely myopic in the other—had chosen the format favoured by Chinese and Japanese masters as it was suitable for conveying

the solitude and serenity of Santiniketan's flat and barren landscape, whose horizon seemed to fade into infinity. Among his favourites was Japanese master Sesshu Toya (1420-1506). Mukherjee's brushwork was in the realistic tradition of China. The scroll was initially in the possession of his friend Sudhir Ranjan Khashtgir, a Kala Bhavana student, says Rakesh Sahni, director of Gallery Rasa, which acquired the work from a collector. R Siva Kumar, noted art historian, who curated this exhibition, writes in Gallery Rasa's double-volume publication on this new discovery: "This

Using watercolour and black ink, he painted a grove with dark luxuriant foliage and serpentine aerial roots dangling from above

curated walkthrough has also been a journey in stages from a space shaped by human intent to barrenness sculpted by the elements, as well as a journey through several seasons, starting with summer and transiting to late autumn and winter..."

The scroll, without a wooden stave or roller, opens with words: Scenes from Santiniketan by Binode Mukherjee 1924. It was either painted that year or soon thereafter. The artist rarely spelt his name

thus. Using watercolours and black ink, he painted a grove with dark luxuriant foliage and serpentine aerial roots dangling from above. Sitting in the distance, deep inside this leafy grotto is a tiny, isolated figure—possibly the reclusive artist himself, going by his self-portraits in seclusion. This, says Siva Kumar, is possibly Chhatimtala of yore at a time when Rabindranath's Uttarayan was being built. The ashram for students and teachers like Nandalal Bose with its thatched huts extended to the horizon. Clumps of tall trees stand around this scene of desolation that shifts leftwards in Chinese scroll fashion. There are wide open spaces between the various scenes to indicate transition. The scroll shows the school area of Santiniketan as viewed from the first floor veranda or terrace of the old library (present-day Patha Bhavana office), where Kala Bhavana was then located. The octagonal structure

called Dwarik, where Kala Bhavana was located before it moved westward, can be seen at the extreme of this segment.

The viewer's eye travels leftward as it crosses the land dotted with scrub. One arrives on the neck of a vast forest of the tall deciduous sal trees, when the black ink gradually turns brown. On a slender branch a lonely bulbul warbles while flocks of other birds peek around for food. One then enters a village, date palm trees with knobby trunks standing on its peripheries, and bullock carts negotiating the undulating pathways. Some men have collected date palm juice. A woman is engaged in her chores. There is a group of women with pitchers balanced on their heads filled with water from the Kopai river. Cattle graze on the harvested field. In the monsoon, the paddy field turns green. As the season changes, the land becomes stark. Palm trees stand like sentinel here. The scroll ends with the canyon-like terrain of the *khoai*, totally isolated from human habitation. This is nature's domain.



NEMAI-GHOSH

(Clockwise from left) Benodebehari Mukherjee; the 44 ft-long and six-inch-wide scroll; close-up of vignettes from the scroll

