



## The Arts Films

One part of Jamini Roy belonged to the city. The other could feel one with tribal and folk forms. His work was a life-long struggle to balance these contrary pulls. A retrospective of his art is to open in Bombay on October 2.

by YASHODHARA DALMIA

FROM landscapes of city streets to groups of Santhals dancing, is a long jump and one which many Indian artists have taken with drastic ease. But for the late Bengali artist, Jamini Roy, it was a conscious returning 'home', a struggle to find a form in which he could express himself.

For many who have only had occasional glimpses of Jamini Roy as a collector's piece, a retrospective of his works, to be exhibited in Bombay this week, will provide a fruitful study of the evolution of the artist. The first and most comprehensive exhibition of its kind, the paintings are from his family collection, from the West Bengal museum and from private collectors in Bombay and Calcutta.

Jamini Roy began painting at the age of 16, during the turn of the century in the Government Art School in Calcutta, where his father sent him from his village in Bankura district. There he underwent all the rigours and disciplines of the western artistic tradition. He began painting commissioned portraits of fashionable patrons, but soon realised that he was painting with mastery what he was seeing, not what he was feeling.

### Just Pretty Pictures

In his search for an indigenous form, he turned towards the Bengal School and produced pretty pictures with weak lines and sentimental colouring. It was obvious that this was not his metaphor and very soon he forsook it and fled to his native village.

Here, he once again came in contact with artisans in his father's (a petty landowner) house and was fascinated by the people who

Painted the *pats*. The *Jadua pats*, as they are called, are scrolls painted with mythological and folk themes and the artists sing as they unfold the *pats*. The organic connection between spirit and form at once appealed to him. Jamini Roy learnt from the *pat* painters, the secret of the rounded line, the expressive contour enclosing in it the human form in one vital sweep. And this was to remain his motif for the human form as the only satisfactory means of expressing it. His source of inspiration, however, was not only the *pats*, but decorative designs from the *kanthas* (embroidered quilts) and *alpana* (floor decorations).

### Palette Of 7 Colours

It was also the spirit of the times, a part of nationalism, to look for an Indian identity. The Bengal School in doing this, showed more affinity with the West and in the wash technique drew its inspiration from the Chinese and the Japanese. Jamini Roy's nationalism led him to search for indigenous forms and techniques. He reduced his palette to seven colours which he prepared with local earths crushed in tamarind glue or in the white of the egg. For the grays, he used the mud of the rivers, the vermilion from the *sindur* used by women, blue was simple indigo and white was lime. For black he employed the black of soot. And he used cow-dung to prepare the canvas.

Many of his creations during this period dealt with rural themes like 'Ram, Lakshman and Sita' or 'Boatmen' or 'Krishna With Cows'. It was close to the folk idiom, but the freshness and simplicity captured in symbolic form by the folk painters, does not quite enter these works. Instead, there is a kind of self-consciousness, an attempt at

merging with the forms, which seems forced. In many of his works there is a freezing of the forms unlike the folk paintings where there is a fine counter-balance between rigidity and movement. At places he becomes heavy-handed without the lightness of touch which makes the village drawings almost whimsical. But some of his best works like 'Boatmen' retain a fine balance between

playfulness, seriousness of intent and a dream-like awareness of reality.

One part of Jamini Roy belonged to the city, where he had lived and inadvertently picked up many of its ways. It was not easy to renounce this for it exercised an unknown restraint to free expression. In my view, it is only with his paintings of women, that he is able to resolve the push and pull of opposing forces. He titles them quite simply, 'Woman', 'Seated Woman', 'Three Women'. The forms are unashamedly sensuous and the curved lines billow out, sometimes a single stroke completing the entire figure. One gets the feeling that wherever you touch them they will curve. And because they are sensuous, the women are devoid of any sentimentality. Dressed in simple, even rustic, cloth which befit a chaste Indian

man, many of these paintings are, in their expression, a way of saying many things quite well. In his and humour about women, he is influenced by the famous Kalighat paintings done in the bazars of Calcutta which show an apparent simplicity juxtaposed by clever social satires.

### Integrity Of Vision

His other works where he is able to achieve an integrity of vision are those of village folk around him. He painted the Bauls, the Pauris, Santhals and Mallas. In depicting the Santhals, for instance, the vertical, graceful lines soaked in rich colours bring out the lyrical and aesthetic quality of their lives which give rise to a feeling of latent vigour. The two qualities are inexorably connected and flow from each other.

Many have hailed Jamini Roy's later period as one of greater maturity and skill. The paintings done during this period have religious themes, some astonishingly different like 'The Last Supper' or

'Christ and Joseph'. The figures remain Indian with their elongated eyes. But here they assume an iconic rigidity within the space divided into cubes. The effect is reminiscent of stained glass windows in churches, which is why it was considered 'Byzantine', a marvelous overlapping of the orient and the occident. But the impression one gets is that the two remain separated. The cubist division of space and the Hindu motifs refuse to merge. And the effect is almost repelling in its rigidity.

### A Search For Roots

One of Jamini Roy's earliest critics and friends was Shahid Suhrawardy, who praised the essential Indianness of his work. This he pointed out was evident in the quality of timelessness in his work. "His pursuit, so undauntedly followed, has been after pure form".

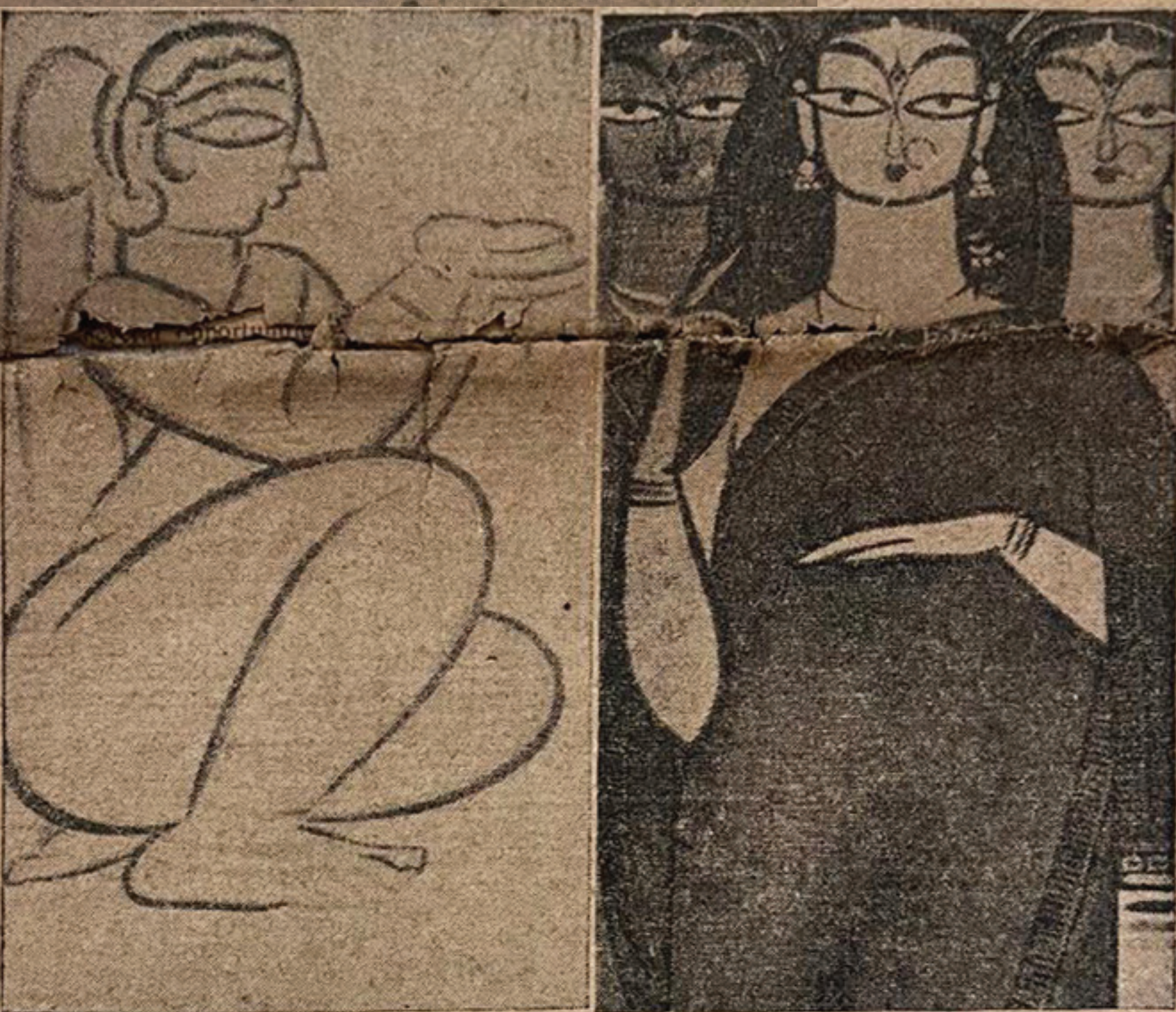
Our day has been so deeply obsessed with the fundamental problems of art. His work is totally empty of any topical or illustrative content.

This, however, is to miss the point of Jamini Roy. For in his attempts to search for the roots of his existence, he was the first contemporary painter. Many others were to follow suit. The abstractions of his forms are not those which speak of a 'pure spirit' detached from any material reality. Rather it was an attempt in discovering an Indian sensibility, a commonness of feeling which alone could synthesize the chaos of the external world. It is for this reason that any representative painting of Jamini Roy will have clear lines, bright colours. If it was particularized it was to formulate a sensibility which alone could unite the flux. A new school was developing of which Jamini Roy was the first harbinger. It was the school of making wholes out of constantly dividing worlds.



Discovering an Indian sensibility: 'Family', by Jamini Roy.

# The Many Faces Of Jamini Roy



'Woman', a line drawing by the artist. (Right) 'Three Sisters'.