Book Review

The Other Side of Tagore


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It is not an easy task to write about a personality as well-known and complex as Rabindranath Tagore, and it becomes all the more difficult nowadays, when tremendous numbers of works about him have been written, numerous projects dedicated to Tagore have been accomplished and entire research centers that focus on Tagore Studies have been established. In her new book, Rabindranath Tagore: Das Gemalte Werk, Ursula Bickelmann gives us a wonderful example of how one can master this challenge.

As can be seen straight away, Rabindranath Tagore: Das Gemalte Werk is the result of extensive and thorough research. Although the book is not very large in size, it has an impressive bibliography, which can be of interest even for an experienced researcher of Tagore’s life and oeuvre.

versus August Rodin) and ‘Das wahre Bild’ (The True Image). Each chapter is broken down into several subchapters. The introduction to the book is written by the Tagore expert Alokeranjan Dasgupta.

In the first two chapters, Ursula Bickelmann gives a short biography of Tagore and an overview of his artistic style and paintings. She also describes in detail the process of how Tagore became a painter and how he was received in the West. Introductory chapters about Tagore’s life and oeuvre, and especially about Tagore’s transformation from a poet to a painter, quite often tend to be repetitive, and after reading two or three books one seldom discovers anything new. In this case, however, the author finds a way to make this part interesting even for an experienced reader through new citations from well-known works (e.g., My Pictures by Rabindranath Tagore), unexpected opinions of well-known authors (e.g., Romain Rolland) and a fresh way of looking at Tagore’s oeuvre.

It is only natural to give a historical background when analyzing a work of art; as in many cases, historical conceptualization is a key to understanding an oeuvre of an author. In the chapter ‘In Paris, Berlin und bei Romain Rolland’, Ursula Bickelmann gives a detailed picture of the creative crowd who welcomed Tagore in the European capitals, visited his exhibitions, and influenced his work and she describes exhibitions and the reception of his art in France and Germany. Special attention is given to the figures of Albert Einstein and Romain Rolland in the two subchapters ‘Gespräch mit Albert Einstein’ (A dialog with Albert Einstein) and ‘Romain Rolland’.

The forth chapter ‘Die Kunst der Zeichnung’ gives a thorough analysis of Tagore’s style and a detailed description of his creative process (supported with the quotations from Tagore), framed by the historical context. It is important to mention that the author does not look at Tagore, the painter, as a separate figure, but rather presents his works of art in the context of his literary oeuvre and philosophy.

The fifth chapter is of particular interest as it describes artistic links between Tagore and Rodin; this topic has been omitted by research as of now, yet it offers a new frame for the analysis of Tagore’s figure drawings.

The final chapter, ‘Das wahre Bild’, is dedicated to the reception of Tagore’s art in his homeland. Bicklemann elegantly puts the last strokes on the canvas of her book by analysing of his self-portrait and his relation to one of the most prominent artists of his time, Jamini Roy (letters of Tagore to Jamini Roy).

There is no doubt that Rabindranath Tagore was an extremely talented person, even a genius in a certain way. However, one should not forget that being a ‘myriad-minded man’, Tagore is a very complex, at times even contradictory figure. Thus when approaching Tagore’s figure, whether
it be out of personal or academic interest, one should be very careful while forming any opinion or conclusion. One of the many merits of the book *Rabindranath Tagore: Das Gemalte Werk* is that there is no idealization or unnecessary praise of Tagore's figure which quite often can be found in the works dedicated to his life and oeuvre. Bickelmann’s work is a thorough and critical analysis. Done by an experienced researcher, it will be equally interesting for the academia and general public. There are some irregularities in spelling and diacritics which however do not influence the merit of the book.

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