

# the India magazine

of her people and culture

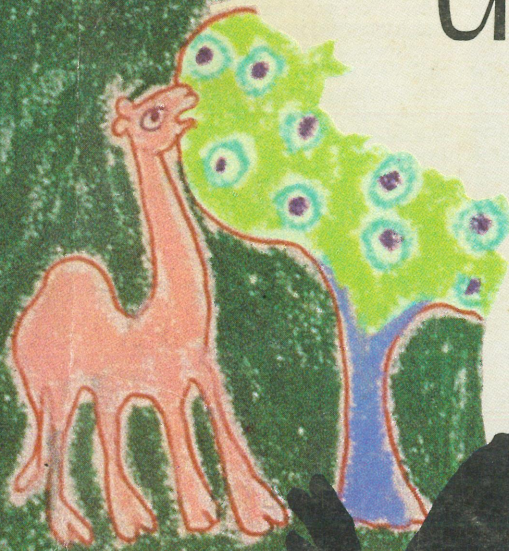
volume ten

November 1990

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SATYAJIT RAY

## Film-maker as artist



Khajuraho  
Asiatic Lions  
Ancient Trade





# Contents

Volume 10 number 12 November 1990

- 4 Passages
- 80 Comment
- 82 Talking to...
- 84 Preserving ceramics
- 85 Events
- 90 Exhibition Review
- 92 Books



Cover: Credit titles for *Sonar Kella* by Satyajit Ray  
Photograph: Dolly Narang  
Illustration: Dhir

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## Next month...

Our annual on cinema



## PORTFOLIO

### *Rustic Tableaux*

N. Thiagarajan

6



In our portfolio of photographs this month, well known photographer N Thiagarajan presents a visual panorama of rural India, where man and animal, young and old coexist in perfect harmony

## SATYAJIT RAY

### *Film-maker as artist*

Paritosh Sen

18



On view at the Village Gallery, Hauz Khas Village, New Delhi, is an exciting exhibition which portrays another dimension of Satyajit Ray's multifaceted personality. Paritosh Sen, a renowned painter and art historian, on Ray, the consummate artist

## KHAJURAHO

### *Celebrating a Celestial Wedding*

Shobita Punja

34



Shobita Punja is presently doing her post doctoral research on the Puranas and the interpretation of Candella art at Khajuraho. Quoting from ancient texts, her article questions the erotic quality of the sculptures

## THE ASIATIC LION

### *A Return to the Throne?*

Vivek Menon

46



Vivek Menon, writer, photographer and research scholar with the Bombay Natural History Society, follows the trail of the lions at Gir, where recent census reports prove that their population is increasing

## ANCIENT TRADE

### *The Roman Connection*

Sunil Gupta

58



Sunil Gupta, curatorial associate at Allahabad Museum, visited the site of Arikamedu where on-going excavations are in the process of reconstructing the story of India's ancient trade with Imperial Rome

## BIOSPHERE RESERVES

### *Living in Harmony with Nature*

Pallava Bagla and Subhadra Menon

70



Botanists Pallava Bagla and Subhadra Menon discuss the feasibility of biosphere reserves which conceives of environmental protection as a cohesive whole, to ensure a perfect balance between man, nature and tradition





P. 191



**SATYAJIT RAY**

# Film-maker as artist

The ongoing exhibition of Ray's sketches in Delhi, shows us a different facet of the master film-maker. The small and simple works done by pen and brush have all the spontaneity and vigour of something impeccably visualised and bear the stamp of a born lyricist

**WRITTEN BY PARITOSH SEN  
COURTESY VILLAGE GALLERY  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY: DOLLY NARANG**







PREVIOUS PAGE:  
Illustration for Sandesh, the  
popular children's magazine

FACING PAGE:  
Sandesh covers

THIS PAGE:  
Illustrations for Sandesh

It was the summer of 1945. I was holding my third one man show and my first in Calcutta. On the third day of the exhibition, Prithwish Neogy, a brilliant scholar, now heading the Department of Asiatic Art at the Honolulu University, entered the exhibition hall accompanied by an extraordinarily tall and swarthy young man. I had known Prithwish earlier. The latter was introduced to me as Satyajit Ray. I was vaguely aware of him as the only son of the late Sukumar Ray, the creator of nonsense rhymes and humorous prose remarkable for their originality of vision, sharp intellect and imaginative power. Satyajit was also known as the grandson of Upendra Kishore Roy Choudhury, one of the inventors of half-tone blockmaking, a pioneering creator of a sizeable body of children's literature and founder of the well known children's magazine, *Sandesh*, and a painter of no mean talent either.

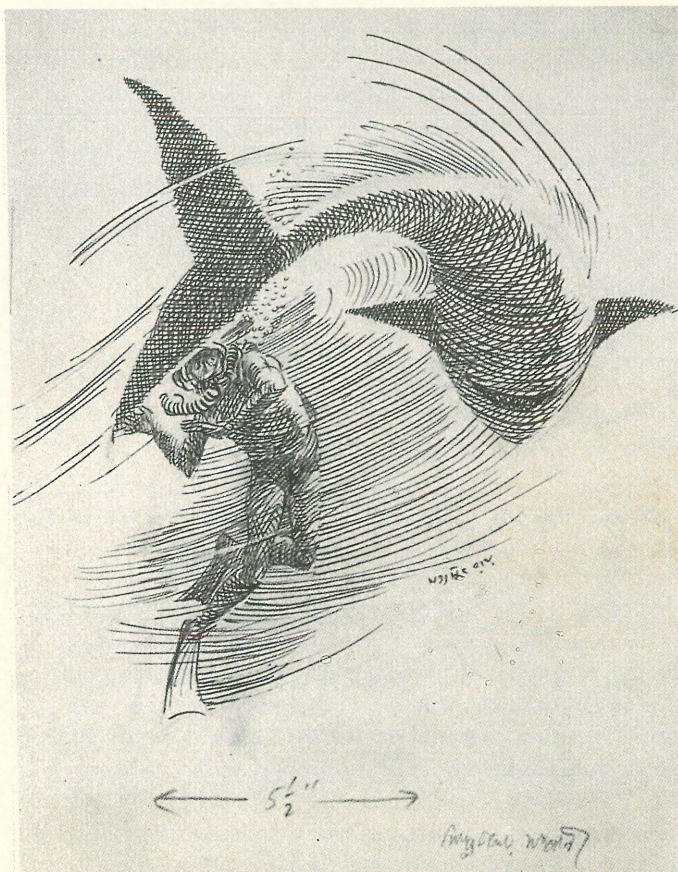




Satyajit was then doing a course in painting at Santiniketan under the very able guidance of Benode Behari Mukherjee, a great artist and an equally great teacher. Besides, Ray had also the unique opportunity of coming in close contact with Nandalal Bose, the guru of both Benode Behari and Ram Kinkar, undoubtedly the foremost sculptor of contemporary India.

Earlier he had received the blessings and affection of Rabindranath Tagore. Although he did not complete the art course at Santiniketan, the experience of being surrounded by these great artists and the unique rural setting of the Santhal Parganas as portrayed by these artists and the poet, enabled Ray to appreciate nature in all its diverse and glorious manifestations and opened his eyes to the mysteries of creation.

This experience helped him to formulate his ideas about the visual world and to unlock the doors of visual perception. Added to this was his study and understanding of classical and folk art, dance and music of our country. The magnificent collection of books in the Santiniketan library on world art and literature also helped him to widen his horizon. It was here that he read whatever books were available on the art of cinema. The seeds of a future design artist and a film-maker were simultaneously sown here.





Having lost his father early in life, the need for earning a livelihood assumed enough importance to make him leave Santiniketan prematurely and look for a job in the field of advertising art, better known in modern parlance as graphic design. A talent is bound to make its presence felt sooner or later whatever be the chosen field. As Tagore said in one of his early verses, *Flowers in bloom may remain hidden by the leaves but can they hide their fragrance?*

Satyajit Ray was appointed by the then DJ Keymer agency, now known as Clarion Advertising Services Ltd, as a visualiser-cum- designer, often executing the finished design or an entire campaign himself.

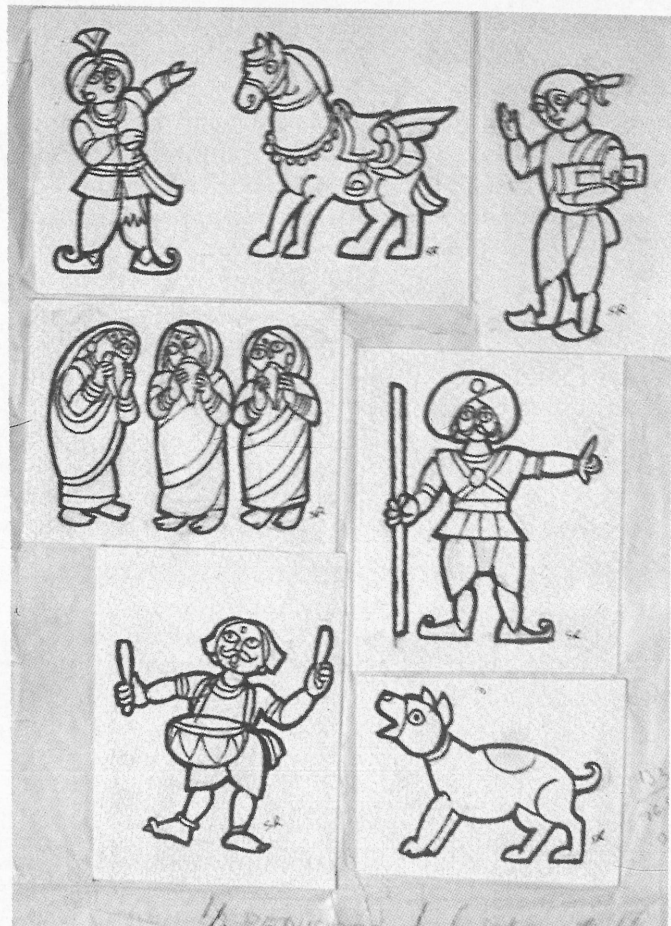
Together with two of his contemporaries, OC Ganguli and Annada Munshi, Ray was trying to evolve certain concepts not only in illustrations but also in typography which would give their design an overall Indian look. One recalls those highly distinctive newspaper and magazine ads, the magnificent calendars, posters, cinema slides and what not of the late forties and fifties not without certain nostalgia. I think some of the works of these three artists were even published in Penrose Annual and elsewhere. Here it may be worthwhile to bear in mind that the style evolved by these three artists made a welcome departure from the dull academicism and the stereotypes being practised by most of the advertising agencies of those times. The freshness and vigour displayed in their approach was readily appreciated both by their employers and their clients. Ray was particularly strong in the difficult area of figure drawing, an area in which many graphic designers are found singularly wanting.



*Illustrations for Sandesh, the magazine revived by Ray about two decades ago*



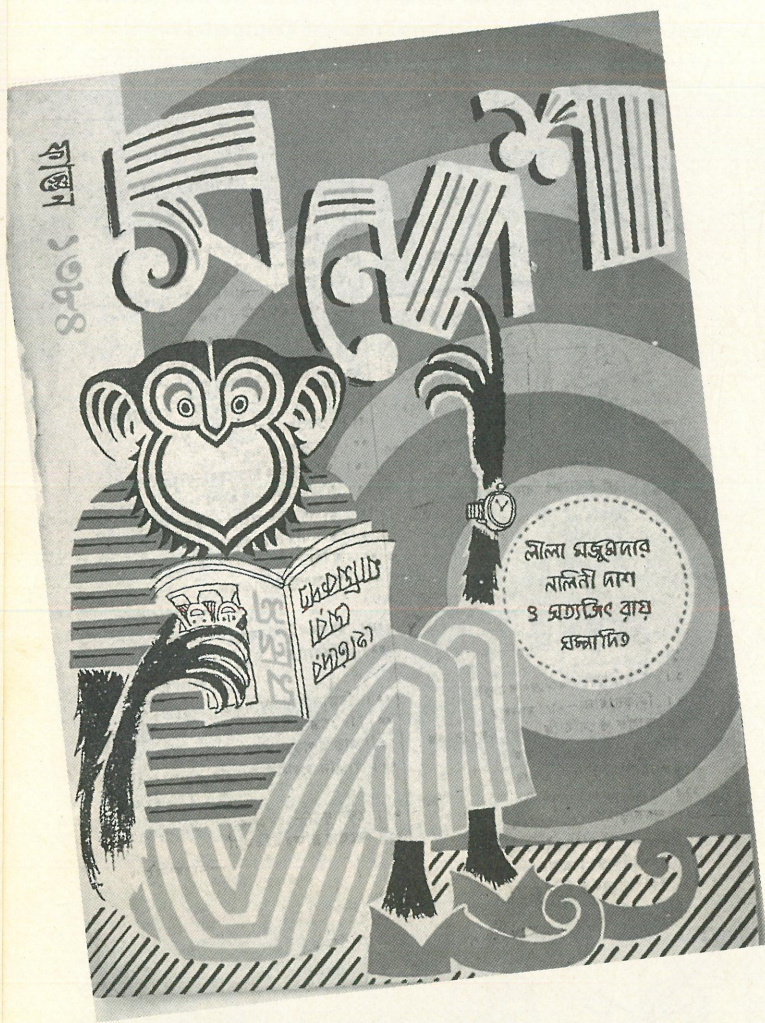




Although he was soon to move away from commercial art to embrace his new found love of film-making he would continue to remain as an illustrator of the first order as would be evident from his emergence as a story-teller in the two popular genres of detective and science fiction. Not many outside Bengal know that Ray's literary output is in no way less than that of his cinema and that most of his books have already run into thirty to thirty five editions. He has not only been illustrating his own stories but over the years he has been designing the covers of his grandfather's once defunct children's magazine *Sandesh* which was revived by him nearly two decades ago and which also carried many illustrations by him.

In my opinion his most cherished field is calligraphy whether that be of the pen or brush variety. This art he imbibed from his guru Benode Behari Mukherjee. Over the years he had also been studying the art of typography with the scrutinising eye of a highly creative calligrapher. The result has been a series of innovations in both Bengali and English lettering evolved for posters, banners and book covers. These very original works gave a tremendous fillip to graphic designs in general and book, magazine and record covers, in particular, especially in Bengal.





The books Ray designed for the now defunct Signet Press of Calcutta way back in the early fifties set new trends and were considered as models for book production both in terms of page layout, typography and jacket design, the last being his chosen field where, as I said earlier, his innovations have known no bounds. The cover of the well-known literary magazine *Ekshan* which he has been designing for many years, to give only one instance, bears ample testimony to his apparently playful but significant experiments with the forms of three Bengali letters which constitute the name of the magazine. The wide variety of his inventiveness is one of his great achievements in the field of cover design.

Then there are the posters, banners and slides he designed for his own films. These too were eye-openers and instant trend-setters. Who can ever forget the huge banners and billboards of the Apu trilogy put up at important street junctions of Calcutta. Their freshness of ideas, design concepts and calligraphy were not to be missed even by men and women in the street. Simultaneously with his creative outburst in the art of cinema, his creativity in graphic design reached new heights. What was remarkable was the fact that Ray eminently succeeded in investing all these works with a highly distinctive Indian flavour derived from his awareness of our folk traditions (especially nineteenth century Bengali book illustrations and woodcut prints of decorative lettering) both in their lineal vigour and simplicity as well as in ornamentation. One of the most outstanding examples of this approach was the publicity material he designed for *Devi*. The underlying theme of the title expresses itself forcefully both in the highly imaginative design of the lettering and the

THIS PAGE,  
ABOVE:  
*Sandesh* cover

BELOW:  
*Illustration for Sandesh*

FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE:  
*Design for the chessboard in Shatranj Ke Khilari*

*Cover design for the well known literary magazine Ekshan*

*Board for knife throwing, designed for Hirak Rajer Desh*





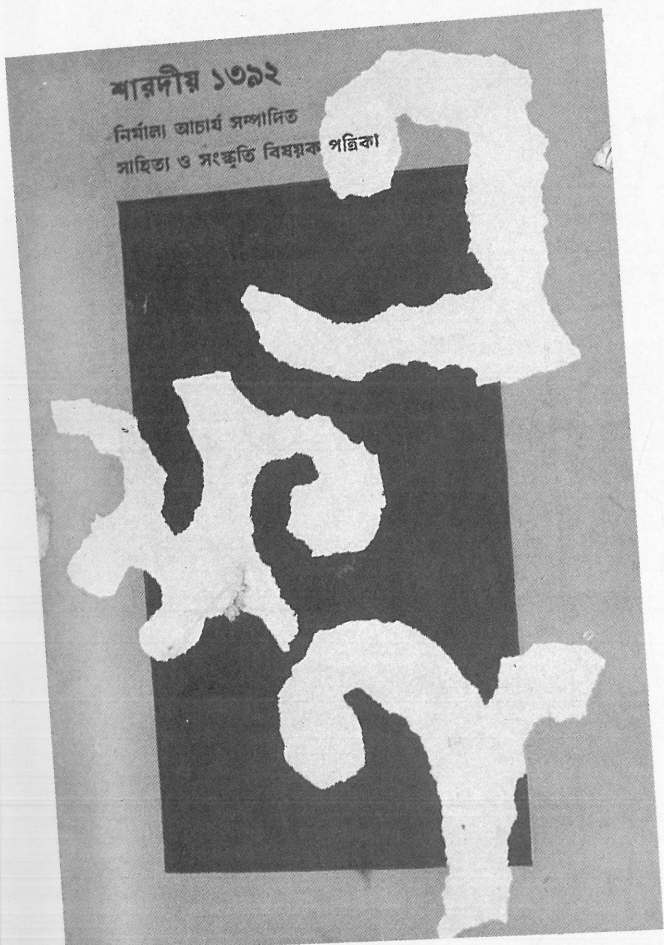
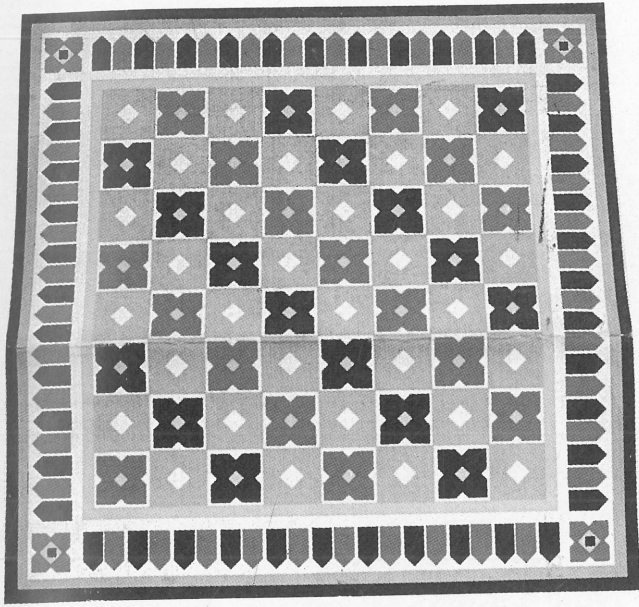


image. Their fusion is perfect. Not many graphic designer's have been as type conscious as Ray. He personifies the printing designer's gospel 'type can talk'. That a letter or a printing type can have immense communicative power and is capable of expressing a whole range of human emotions was known to Ray from the very beginning of his career.

In the enormous range of Roman printing types there are many in the humanist tradition in their simple aesthetic charm, warmth of feeling as well as in their highly elegant but delicate anatomical details. There are also those which are severe, powerful and cold but nonetheless highly attractive in their own ways.

It is often overlooked by most readers that a letter's structure and anatomy can be reminiscent of things in the visible world, both natural and man-made. Some can have the gentle rhythm of the rise and fall of a female form, others may have the majestic look of a well designed edifice, just to give only two similes.

Ray not only bore all these considerations in mind but used his calligraphic knowledge, skill and innovative power to their full advantage when he designed the three printing types called Ray Roman, Daphnis and Bizarre for



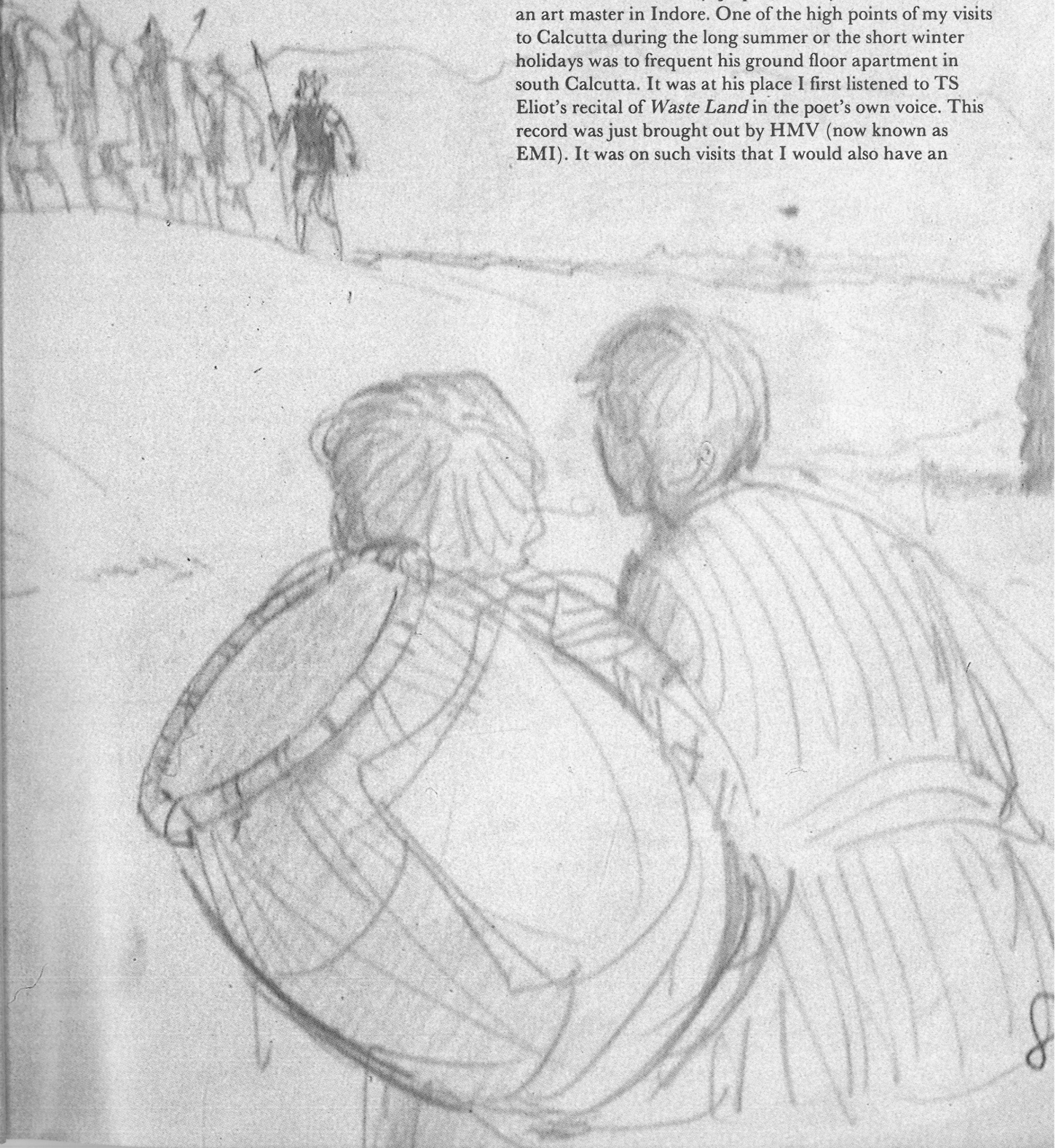


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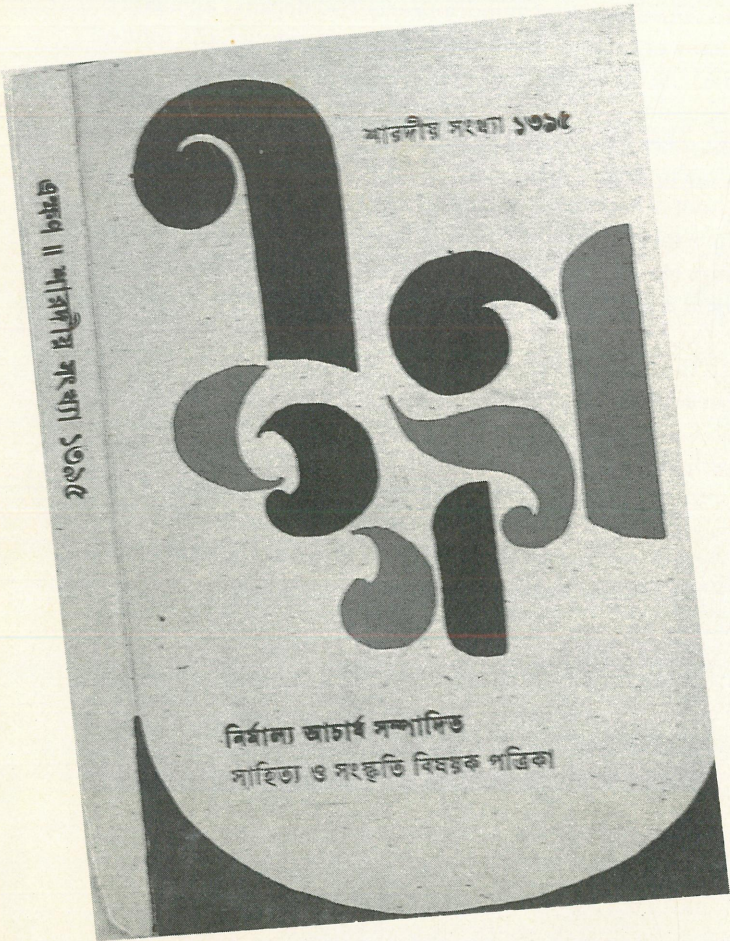


an American type foundry nearly two decades ago. Not many of us know the infinite patience, rigours, discipline and the endless process of trial and error involved in designing a whole series of a printing type. That, in spite of his other demanding preoccupations, he found enough time to design three complete sets of types bear ample proof of his diligence and perseverance and his passionate love for the world of types. Those of us who have known him over the past decades profoundly admire the fact that he is a workaholic in the best sense of the term.

In the forties I met Satyajit periodically when I worked as an art master in Indore. One of the high points of my visits to Calcutta during the long summer or the short winter holidays was to frequent his ground floor apartment in south Calcutta. It was at his place I first listened to TS Eliot's recital of *Waste Land* in the poet's own voice. This record was just brought out by HMV (now known as EMI). It was on such visits that I would also have an







opportunity to listen to his latest collection of Western classical music. And it was on one such occasion that I first heard him toying with the idea of making a film based on Rabindranath Tagore's novel, *Home and the World*, a project which was abandoned soon after and was finally realised nearly four decades later. It was not before I returned home in 1954 after a five years' stint in Paris that I came to know of his intense involvement with the making of *Pather Panchali*.

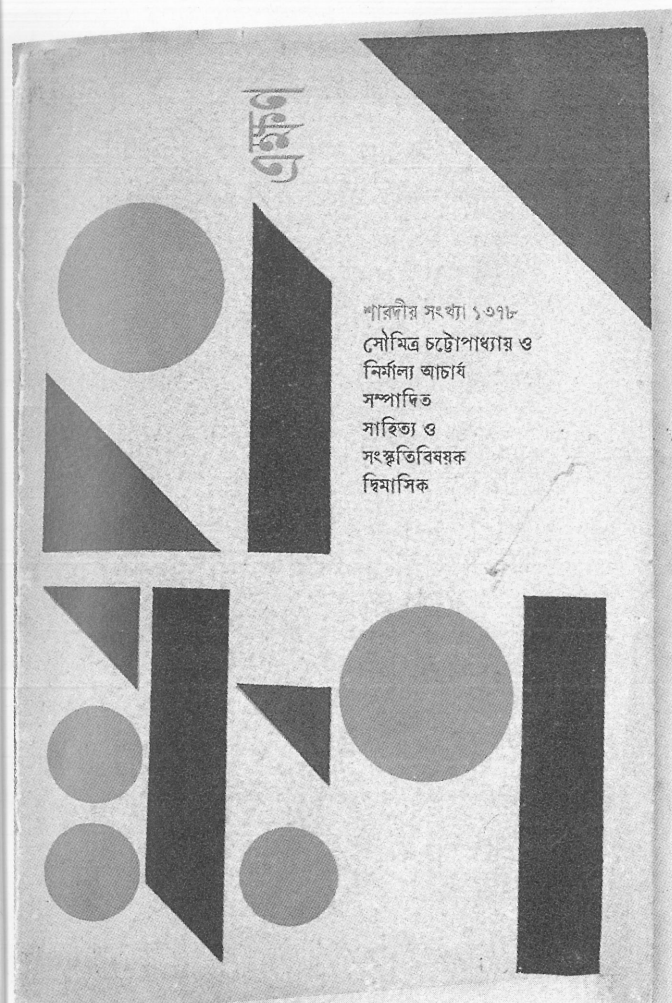
I vividly remember to this day the excitement with which he described it to me and invited me to a screening of the rushes. He brought out all the sketches and doodles he made along with side notes in Bengali not only of the dresses and props and characters in the script but also very quick yet masterly sketches of the frames of each of the sequences and camera movements. I remember asking him why he thought it necessary to make such careful preparations before shooting. To this his quick but significant reply was 'One of the foremost but very difficult things in filmmaking is to determine the placement of the camera.' He was equally quick to point out that this is only the first part of shooting a film. The other being that it has to be constantly borne in mind that one is shooting a movie and not stills. Those of us who have watched him in action know only too well that although there are always professional cameramen present in his unit, in reality he becomes the cameraman himself.

The visual richness of a film is as important to him as a

ARM OF THRONE (HALLA)







PREVIOUS PAGE:

*Composition of a shot for the film Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne*

FACING PAGE, ABOVE:

*Jacket design for Ekshan*

BELOW:

*Set design for the film Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne*

THIS PAGE:

*Jacket designs for Ekshan*

story well told, the one being inseparable from the other. This is the most distinctive feature of his artistic achievements in all his films. Ray is a lyricist of the highest order. From his first film *Pather Panchali* to his latest *Shakha Prashakha* (Branches of a Tree), this lyrical bend binds all his films together in the form of an oeuvre and finds full fruition in his most recent work. Some of the imperceptibly slow camera movements in this film are sheer poetry. Although not yet released, I had the opportunity of seeing it twice, and apart from anything else, I, as a painter, was bowled over by its visual richness and its consummate technical finesse. I have reasons to say this. Whenever I see a movie I try to see it through the lens of the camera and having witnessed many film shootings of some of Ray's films, it has become a habit with me to follow the movements with great fascination. Thus it helps me greatly to enjoy watching a film from the aesthetic and technical points of view.

I am sure that in order to achieve maximum artistic quality, Ray finds the preliminary exercises made primarily in pen and ink very useful. The linear treatment of these sketches, the unorthodox positioning on paper and an apparent insouciance, in my eyes, are the products of a highly creative mind and are designed to meet the needs of a fastidious aesthete.

Among his sketches, one comes across portraits of many of the characters in his films in various moods and postures. These could easily be rated as some of his best works. Only someone with consummate skill can bring out the full characterisation in postage-stamp format with utmost economy and clarity. The lines which define the contours and other details of the figures are free flowing, sure and firm, the result of years of practice, both with the pen and the brush. Only some artists in world cinema, like Eisenstein, Kurosawa, Fellini and a few others have been so gifted