



Connected Histories - Exhibiting, Collecting and Pedagogy in late 19th Century Calcutta

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Abstract

The essay is an attempt to reevaluate and analyse the defining but connected histories of the colonial period in Indian art and pedagogy. The flowering of the nomenclatures like 'academic art' or 'fine arts', 'exhibition' and 'collection' that is so imbibed in the art practices of India, is a consequence of cross border power play, that has permanently reshaped the profession of Indian art practice and reconfirmed its global stage towards modernity. The essay maps certain key events in the colonial history of exhibition and collection to demonstrate the determining structure on art pedagogy in India, which is followed till date within art institutions. This essay is, for now, put together as an opening argument, in hope for a larger discourse on art pedagogic history.

Keywords: art pedagogy, colonial art history, museums

This paper is an attempt to study art pedagogic history, that has evolved through a complex and conflicted social, cultural and bureaucratic application of the British colonial administration in India - to locate the tendencies in art pedagogy that shaped the field of art practise in twentieth century India. Beyond the scope of styles that developed in the art of the subcontinent, nineteenth century system of art practices and fundamental nomenclatures, evolved through external influence of the West. The colonial cultural intervention in India, had generated categories of accumulated artistic styles (like Company Painting and British



traveller artists and eventually Academic Realism), that was driven by western principles and technique-oriented devices, as opposed to the regional art traditions and iconography that evolved through ancient and medieval India. The occidental construction of art categories, epistemological translation of art-objects or architectural elements from its social and functional position to museum specimens, propagating the tradition of crafts to a revenue generating industry are all primarily the consequences of institutionalising and disciplining artistic practices. However, the case study of Indian art pedagogy has ceased to enter the broader syllabi of art history in India, as the foundational premise of the discipline is established through descriptive and analytical study of stylistic traits in artistic formats, than the evolving social tendencies that led to cultural phenomenon like exhibition history, practices of collection and accumulation and systems of training and manufacturing artistic ideals, which led to the notion of ‘academic’ in Indian art.

In the discussion of premodern cultural and artistic influences in shaping Indian art, I am looking at the periphery of transition, that shaped the aspiration of ‘modern’ in Indian art. This paper will look through two distinct but intertwined scheme of praxis – collection, and exhibition, that formulated the footing of art education, through the singular event of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations of 1851. Arindam Dutta in his outstanding and field-defining book ‘Bureaucracy of Beauty: Design in the Age of its Global Reproducibility’ has made an in-depth study of the Great Exhibition and the Department of Science and Arts, as a consequence. He explored through the book, how the DSA exerted a powerful influence on the growth of museums, design schools, and architecture throughout the British Empire and India.

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I will briefly review the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations of 1851 and The Calcutta International Exhibition of 1883-84, to establish a model system of art circulation from the maker(manufacturers/artisans) - to exhibitions- to the formation of an institution, as a germinating point in Britain. Parts of the profits from the Great Exhibition were distributed by the Commissioner of the Great Exhibition for educational purposes. That donation funded the creation of Department of Science and Art and South Kensington Museum, which in current date has been reformed as the Royal College of Art and the Victoria & Albert Museum. Apart from the profit money, what directly boosted the creation of these institutions, were the art and craft objects that were at display in the Great Exhibition. To quote from the observation of Owen Jones in the Catalogue of the Museum of Ornamental Art, Department of Science and Art “ In examining the collection of Articles purchased from the Great Exhibition, for the purpose of the Department of Practical Art, the attention of the student and enquiring visitor is more particularly directed to the ‘Indian Portion’, the most important, both from the variety and beauty of the articles themselves and as furnishing most valuable hints for arriving at a true knowledge of those principles which should regulate the employment both of ornamental and colour in Decorative Art. They are the works of people who are still as faithful to their arts as to their religion, habits and modes of thoughts which inspired it;”. He concludes his observation on the Indian examples with “The temporary exhibition of the Indian and other Eastern Collection in the Great Exhibition, was a boon to all those European artists who had an opportunity of studying them, and let us trust that the foresight of the Government, which has secured to us a portion of those collections as permanent objects of study, will lead to still higher results.” These lines are from the introductory essay of the DSA annual report of 1853, which cements the perspective of British ideas in collecting Indian art specimens and building educational specifics from it.

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The annual report of DSA, categorically prescribes the methodology and principles of specified skills in Indian craft making, that should be adapted and observed in their training school. It further records that “the objects of the Museum are three folds. Some specimen are included which, as the collection increases are intended to illustrate the history of various manufactures, - some for extreme skill of manufacturers or workmanship, whilst others are intended to present to the manufacturer and to the public choice example of what science and art have accomplished in manufactures of all kinds, and this not so much with a view of the works being copied or imitated, as to show the perfection and beauty in art are not matters of caprice or dependent upon the fancy of the beholder any more than perfection and beauty in nature.” As the colonial knowledge for understanding the cultural specimens from India broadened through the perspective of object and acquiring abilities, industrial minded reformers, sought enterprising opportunities in maximising resource and skill. The remarks quoted above gives us a very laconic view of the inaugural British opinion about art and education about India. The intention of citing the role of DSA limits itself to the scope of setting a prelude to the history of colonial art education in India. It brings to the fore a comparable system of art instructions that was put to action for largely mechanical purposes. After the Great Exhibition of 1851, the Museum of Manufactures was established at Marlborough House. It became the nucleus of the South Kensington Museum and acquired a number of objects from non-European cultures, chosen as items of exemplary design. As recorded in the Victoria and Albert Museum website “Nearly a quarter of the £5000 budget allocated by the Government was eventually spent on Indian objects from the exhibition, and of these Indian textiles were very well represented, accounting for nearly half of the 139 items purchased from the display... In 1875, the India Museum was moved to a site in South Kensington. Four years later, after much debate, the ownership of most of the India Museum



collections was transferred to the South Kensington Museum, renamed Victoria and Albert in 1899. By this time, the joint collections were considered to be neither systematic nor properly representative of Indian applied art; the concept of Indian 'fine art' was not considered seriously until the early 20th century”.

As we look in more closely to the curriculum of colonial Indian art schools of the past hundred and fifty years, we witness a range of methodological classifications like ornamental and figure drawing, model casting, wood engraving, lithography, oil painting, life study, pottery, textile designing and photography. In the centenary publication of Govt Art College, Calcutta, Jogesh Chandra Bagal accounts for Sir Auther W. Buller, acting Chief Justice of Supreme Court during late 1850s, “(he) referred to the natural aesthetic taste of the Indians and expected that given a little opportunity, the students of the school would soon be able to give sufficient proof of their natural taste and the love for arts and crafts and revive the glory of their country – the land of KutubMinar, Taj Mahal and the Muslin.” It is evident from such colonial observations, that the British Empire was keen to create an imagery that would stand as the idea of India. Their interest in and therefore promotion of Indian craft in various international exhibitions created the concept of ‘ornamental’ in Indian Art practices. This paper engages in analysing how these artefacts travelled through exhibitions to private and museum collections to become the repertoire of Indian art. I would like to install the scenario, when a cultural tradition is represented by its objects displayed on a platform, disengaged from its everyday space; the object gains an analytical gaze. The object lives a life of a specimen that abides to the notions of identity. This is precisely what colonialism did to the art and artefacts of India. Specimens were collected from across the Indian map and were displayed in international exhibitions, to construct an imagery of India to the audiences



of the west, to establish the idea of not ‘everyday objects’, and therefore the desirability to collect.

Suggesting the embryonic idea of art as representation, I put forward a case study of art circulation through multiple channels of Imperial bodies in determining pedagogic propaganda, which was at play in colonial art education. The conceptual framework for this argument stems from the observation that the colonizers persisted in making craft in India, a cultural agenda in asserting the country’s national character. It also aided the British refusal to recognise and validate Indian fine art practices. The British academic art administration very perspicaciously devised the hierarchical structure of finer art and crafts training through institutional pedagogic systems in India. The history of craft propagation in exhibitions, collections in museums and therefore subject diversion in art schools is a central idea in understanding the conflicting methods of Indian art education. This point of the argument will also allow the argument to confront the evolving pedagogic principles in Indian art institutions.

When the concept of exhibition and cultural exchange was taking shape in greater formats, in the wake of the Great Exhibition of 1851, the cultures of art circulation, art collection or relocation gained interest in the field of art and craft manufacturing, dominantly on the colonial map. Among the many ambitious exhibitions that followed in India, the Nagpur Exhibition of Art, Manufacturers and Produce in 1866, the Calcutta Exhibition of the Indian Art Manufactures in 1882, Jaipur Exhibition in 1883, along with the Calcutta International Exhibition in 1883-84, hold a significant position within the discourse of exhibition cultures. I position the Calcutta International Exhibition of 1883-84 as a pivotal point, as this event in Indian history, defend the scope of understanding the colonial impetus in framing the visual



and cultural productivity in India and establish the desirability for the colony. Art objects that come from various art institutions, private collectors and manufactures to a defined exhibition space and then further travels to various other museum and private collections and art institutions, as objects of desirability and specimens of knowledge, builds the plot for Indian Art History through the colonial filter. This story of circulation and symbolism, maps the body of Indian art, that is museum worthy to create knowledge base for the art institutional discourse.

Primary resource material like the catalogue The Calcutta International Exhibition and its Official Report publication provide descriptive detailed accounts of the exhibition. This was India's own Great Exhibition, a more home-grown edition of an international exhibition of a complex scale. The historical exhibition is also very vital as it was the first time, the populace in India witnessed coming together of nations from across the globe, with their inventory of industrial examples, raw products, food products, agricultural goods, specimens of ethnography, archaeology and natural history, objects of personal use like toiletries, apparels etc, along with fine arts and liberal art examples. It has been noted in the Official Report of the Calcutta International Exhibition, that "(the exhibition) was the first attempt made in India to hold an exhibition of international character. Exhibitions on a smaller scale had been held in various parts of India, but these were generally of a local character; and where their scope was purely provincial, no attempts were made to include in them specimens of other than Indian arts and manufactures. For the improvement of Indian art, these exhibitions were not without considerable value, but they necessarily did not embrace the other important objects of an exhibition – the bringing of distant countries into closer commercial union with India and the development of new branches in the industry. This could only be done by the



means of an exhibition on a much larger scale than any previously attempted in India.” Clearly, the driving intention was to open up the market in India for larger exchange in functional and cultural goods with the objective of cross cultural orientation. The exhibition, on a broad scale, also educated the design of display, motives of collection and the tools of knowledge accumulation in India. Essentially, the objective of any exhibition is tied to three interests – display of authority over a subject, establishing the trends of the time and ensuring development in the field. The Calcutta International Exhibition mapped the past, present and future to generate potential in India, it had brought together the vision of regional, national and international within the experience of colonialism. However, what is more immediate to the demand of this paper, the Calcutta International Exhibition sketched a route for art circulation through the institutions of art in the country.

It is noted in the Centenary volume of the Indian Museum, that in 1882, the Government of India enquired from the Trustees of the museum, whether accommodation could be provided in the museum building for certain economic products. “The Trustees regretted their inability to accommodate such a collection, but expressed their readiness to favour an extension of the museum building for the purpose suggested”. But before this proposal was taken to effect, the Calcutta International Exhibition was held, in and around the museum premise. In the Resolution issued by the Lieutenant-Governor towards the exhibition on 16th January 1883, it mentions that the proposed exhibition should be held partly in the Indian Museum, of which, a portion will be set free for the purpose and partly in large annexes. Arrangements were made by the PWD for those temporary constructions adjoining the museum, which was formerly occupied by the offices of Bengal Secretariat. But the report also states that much difficulty was found in allotting space in many cases, owing to bulk applications and “it was



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difficult to refuse without causing disappointment and loss to intending exhibitors and impairing the international character of the exhibition”. In this context, Official Exhibition Report from the Australian colony of Victoria, records, “Over 300 applications for space were received, the number of separate exhibits amounting in aggregate to 2,346, a number considerably in excess of that forwarded to any previous exhibition outside the colony.” The official report holds a very descriptive account of the layout of the exhibition space to the distribution of galleries to the categorised display of the objects. It shows that the main entrance to the Exhibition was through a wooden foot-bridge over the Chowringhee road into the museum, opening up to the portico of the museum. This space was largely used for the opening and closing ceremony of the event and the two large galleries on the east and south side of the ground floor were vacated by the Trustees to make space for the British courts. The permanent display of archaeology, natural history and science of the Indian Museum added to the attraction of the exhibition. The physical involvement of the Indian Museum allowed linking itself to a more volatile method of collection and display. The institution became an indispensable part in executing an international exhibition of an ambitious scale and contributed to the public (democratic) discourse of display and gaze. But the capacity of the museum was not limited to being a centre piece venue of the exhibition but a more active facilitator in the post exhibition scenario. In 1884, after the exhibition had been concluded, the Industrial collection which had been brought to the museum for the exhibition purpose, under the designation of Bengal Economic Museum and had been housed in the temporary sheds on the site that is now occupied by the school of art (GCAC) was amalgamated with the Indian Museum. In 1887, the Economic and the Art Section was set up under direct control of the Govt of Bengal and was placed under the supervision of T N Mukherjee, the first assistant curator in charge of the museum. The establishment of the new section made



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Government consider the need of additional space, which was already on the table before the Calcutta International Exhibition. The result was, in 1888, the construction of the wing in Sudder Street commenced and the Art Gallery was open to public from 1892. It is important to take into account the involvement of T N Mukherjee, as an employee of the museum, chronicling the specimens of raw produce exhibited in the Calcutta International Exhibition. The collection included thousands of samples of food grains and was executed so satisfactorily that he was asked to prepare a general report on all the product of India that was displayed in the exhibition. This extensive study then became an index for manufactures, businessmen, exhibition commissioners, and artists. On such accounts, it is imaginable that the journey of art and objects from display to collection creates a body of knowledge for inspiring cultural consciousness and skill development.

Nonetheless, the Calcutta International Exhibition was a larger design with the classification of provinces, counties and other British colonies and the exhibits were categorised in sections, like, Section A being Fine Arts, followed by Educational and Application of Liberal Arts, Health, Furniture and other Objects for the use of decoration, Fabrics including apparels and toilet requisites, Raw Products, Machinery goods, Food Products, Agriculture and Horticulture and concluding with Ethnology, Archaeology and Natural History section. For the interest of the paper, I would briefly discuss the formation of the provincial courts, which were designed to display the distinguishing characters of the states and by extension the variety of art and artefact produced from a nation. It is also noteworthy that the exhibition had a separate Indian Court and then demarcated regional courts. The Official Catalogue of the exhibition mentions that it has only been able to document only some of the state exhibit inventory like for Calcutta, Bombay, India, Fine Art and Jewellery, and Straits Settlement



Court. The rest of the provinces in India did not update the exhibition commission with their list of exhibits and therefore it goes unpublished in the catalogue. The Calcutta gathers together examples like ‘Models dressed in court costumes’ from Old court house, photographs, views and portraits, oil paintings from Bourne and Shepherd, paintings, lithographs, picture books from J N Mookherjee, Playing Cards with designs of Hindu gods and goddesses, christmascards, maps, menu Cards, six oil coloured plaques with views of Calcutta and neighbourhood etc from W. Newman & Co, under the Fine Arts Section. Section B, being the category of Education and Application of Liberal Arts displays exhibits like Bibles and other Christian books in Oriental Language from the Bible Society, Millboards, pasteboards cards and fancy boxes from De Negri & Co, Ivory work from RamchandHazarimal; Stationery, printing material and book binding from T Smith and variants of that nature. The significance of India court was its architecture, which was an exhibit in itself. The entrance to the court was a realistic copy of the Gwalior Gateway, which demanded attention and awe for the spectators. The collection of the Indian court was of analogous nature to that of Calcutta court, but certainly put together from various parts of the country. This brief view is to give us a sense of how everyday objects and objects of artistic merit, displayed together, under regional categories, educates the process of viewing for the mass and how some objects from such exhibitions reinvent a different life as categories for collection and joins the discourse of art education.

I now move on to the second case study of this paper, where I make my argument on how the British administration’s continued venture in the ‘exhibitionary’ aspect of cultural propagation, consequentially altered the nature of art practices in India and made an everlasting impact on the disciplinary transformations that followed in the twentieth century,



through the story of the Art Gallery of the Indian Museum. The intention of the argument is to track the institutional role in shaping the intellectual factors of Indian art and artists, that revived from an orthodox pedagogic and administrative system. The initiating moment of the story tracks back to the spring of 1876, when the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, with the support of the Viceroy Lord Northbrook, established an Art Gallery within the premise of the Calcutta Art School, which was then housed in Bowbazar street. There was a twofold objective towards establishing the Art Gallery, as recorded by J.C. Bagal, “1. To interest the general public in art and 2. To provide additional instruction trough example in the various branches of art for the pupils of the art school”. The art gallery was introduced with a collection of art works that was gifted by lord Northbrook, which comprised of European examples of art, few original and largely copies, to strengthen and further refine academic aspirations of the art students and synthesise the ideals of western taste and aesthetics among the native population. In the report of the Department of Public Instructions for the 1876-77, it is accounted – “The object of the institution was to give the native youth of India an idea of men and things in Europe both present and past, not that they might learn to produce feeble imitations of European art, but rather that they might study European methods of imitation and apply them to the representation of natural scenery, architectural monuments, ethnical varieties and national costumes, in their own country”. This colonial tendency towards academic art training, clearly demonstrates that generations of artists where entering an unaccustomed structure of cultural knowledge that was abruptly implanted on them, only to expand and amplify western influence on a “lesser” civilisation. The canons of western philosophy that continued to inseminate the cultural and artistic psyche of India for decades, have shaped the fundamental pedagogic distinctions in Indian art practices. The nomenclatures like ‘still life’, ‘life study’, ‘light and shade’, ‘realism’, ‘naturalism’,



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‘picturesque’ etc., entered the idiom of art in India, and we find examples of such nature in the class works of art students. At this stage in the chapter, I look closely into the reorganisation of object collection and the evolution of very complex negotiations of categorical divisions like Economic, Artware or Industrial Sections in the Indian Museum and their chronological flow, as it demonstrates the process of classifying future fields of studies and references. Within the scope of this piece, I am limiting my focus only to the Government project of establishing the Art Gallery within the art school, that instigated renewed manners of art viewing and public communication, directly with the practice. The format, method, subject, and purpose of art was drastically changing and so was the social reciprocation in the field of art. In 1892, when the Calcutta Art School, relocated to its current address on Chowranghee, adjacent to the Indian Museum on its one side and the Asiatic Society on the other, the consolidated impact of three institutions dominated the cultural landscape in Bengal. The influence of the projected academic standards on art, through these institutional apparatuses was receiving recognition, appreciation and award in various provincial art exhibition across the country. However, E.B. Havell joins the Calcutta Art School as its Principal, in 1896 which brings the most defining shift in art pedagogic interest and institutional orientation. Havell was one of the strongest advocates and an educationist in reviving the relevance of Indian art tradition, and vehemently criticising the methods of the British art administrative system. His position as the Principal of the Art School and the Superintendent of the Government Art Gallery in the museum, provided him with the authority to re-establish the core objective of these institutions The Indian Museum, with its plans of expansion in 1905, decides to create a separate Art Section, by amalgamating the Art Gallery and the collection of the Government Art School. Prior to this, in the formative years of the museum, the ‘Art’ section was composed as the ‘Economic and



Art Section' under the disciplinary categories of the museum. Henceforth, the combined collection of the Art School with that of the Indian Museum, became a comprehensive repository of 'Art' in Bengal. This wing of the museum was put in charge directly under the supervision of the Principal of the School of Art, binding both the institution's commitment in framing the knowledge repository for studies in art and cultural responsiveness. In 1906, Havell writes a report, titled "The Philosophic Basis of Indian Fine Art and the Relation of Indian Fine Art to University Education", which was based on the study of recent acquisitions by the Government Art Gallery, where he asserts, "it is necessary that both the State and the University must abandon their old attitude towards art education, for, if my reasoning is sound and Indian art students need not look to Europe or European methods for the higher branches of art instruction...". This very report strongly supports the argument that Havell reshaped and revised the art collection by selling the European examples of art that was donated by Lord Northbrook and with that fund, purchased diverse examples of traditional Indian art. In 1911, the amalgamated collection of the Government Art Gallery and the Artware court of the Indian Museum, took shape as the Art Section of the museum.

Beyond the opportunity of multiplicity and overlaps of influences in the making of Indian art, this paper intends to re-establish the influencing patterns of administrative history and cultural propagation that shaped the discipline of Fine Arts in India, that is practiced till date. The story of Indian art education, is weaved through a unique pattern of local and borrowed, national and international, ideal and less desirable, and of conflict and confluence. The 'method and material' oriented specialisations as departments and 'stylistic (and regional) tendencies' as categories, that has been established through more than a century now, is the crux of art pedagogy, practised in India. Therefore it is necessary to consider and trackback



what these institutional histories has inscribed within the psyche of our art educational authorities that propagate cultural hegemony over artistic merit.



Fig. 1

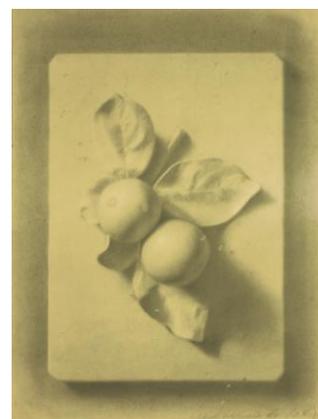


Fig.2

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Fig.3



Fig.4

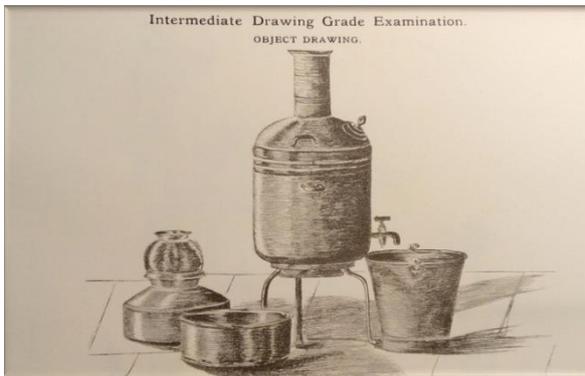


Fig. 5

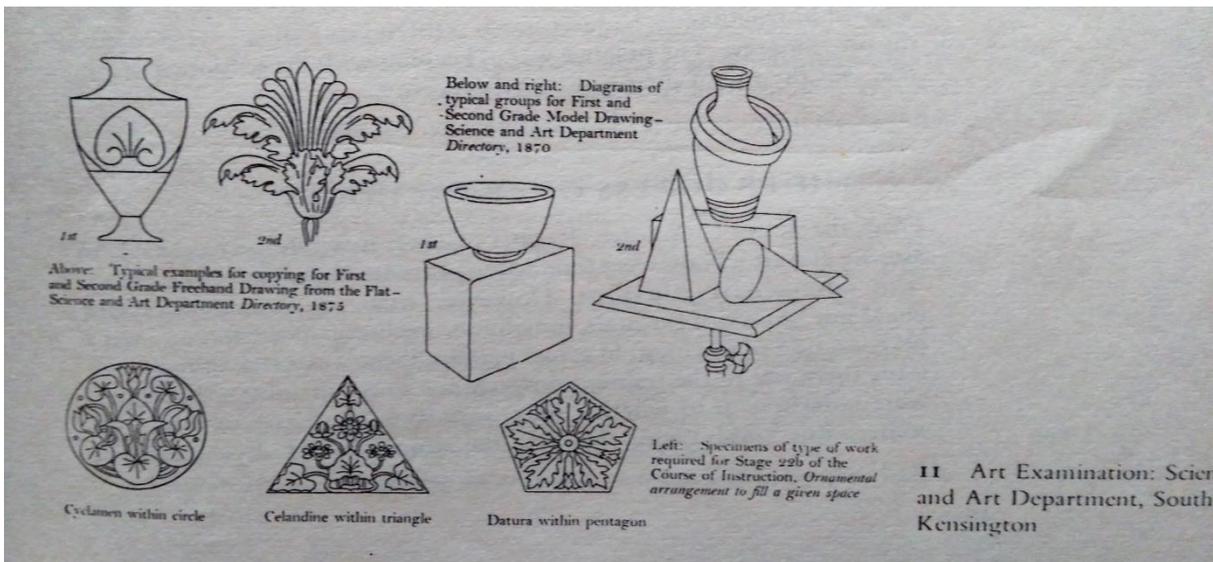


Fig.6

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Fig.7



Fig. 8



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Fig.8A

Details of Images –

A.C Chowdhury. Copies of European Painting, 30x22 cm. 1888. Govt. College of Art and Craft, Calcutta. Image Courtesy- Jadunath Bhavan Museum and Resource Centre.

1. Mr. Hart. Still Life (fruit). Pencil Study. 24x31.7 cm. 1878. Govt College of Art and Craft, Calcutta. Image Courtesy - Jadunath Bhavan Museum and Resource Centre.
2. McNeven, J., The Indian Pavillion, Souvenir of the Great Exhibition, William Simpson (lithographer), Ackermann & Co. (publisher), 1851, V&A. Image Courtesy – Victoria and Albert Museum Archive
3. Henry Pidgeon; Francis Bedford (lithographer). Group of Crystal Vases and Indian Jewellery. Image Courtesy- Matthew Digby Wyatt, *The Industrial Arts of the Nineteenth Century; A Series of Illustrations from the Choicest Specimens Produced by Every Nation, at the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry 1851*, Vol I



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5. Samples of Drawing Examinations. Third Report, Science and Arts Department, South Kensington. London, 1856.
6. Radha. Still Life. Lithograph, 24 x 32 cm. 1923 College of Art and Craft, Calcutta. Image Courtesy- Jadunath Bhavan Museum and Resource Centre
7. Calcutta International Exhibition – Ground View, 1883-84. Image Courtesy - NCA Archives, Lahore
8A) Calcutta International Exhibition – Display View, 1883-84. Image Courtesy – Jadughar: 200 Years of Indian Museum, Soumitra Das. Indian Museum, Calcutta 2014

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