

# Kalighat Paintings

## in the J. u. E. von Portheim-Stiftung, Heidelberg \*

### INTRODUCTION

During a visit to the Museum of the J. u. E. von Portheim-Stiftung in Heidelberg, my attention was drawn to a small collection of Kalighat paintings. This collection of eighteen very beautiful examples of this singular "school", was presumably created in the second half of the nineteenth century. Regrettably, nothing is known concerning the exact origin of the paintings. It is believed that they were purchased in Calcutta by Mr. V. Goldschmidt, the founder of the von Portheim-Stiftung, during a journey to India around 1897.

The eighteen pictures are executed on comparatively large sheets of paper (about 22 × 16 cm.). Along the lower edge, most of them bear inscriptions in English, describing the scenes represented. The colours are very well preserved, bright and powerful. The paintings of the von Portheim Collection are painted in watercolours as are the majority of Kalighat pictures.

### THE KALIGHAT "SCHOOL"

The name Kalighat is derived from the large Kali Temple, which formerly lay outside of Calcutta in a swampy region, but is now surrounded by the modern city. Village artists, the patuas, established themselves around the temple in about 1830, and continued to be active there for about a century. According to legend, Shiva passed over this locality with the body of his wife, Sati, in his arms. The Goddess had slain herself after her husband had

been insulted by her father, Daksha. The female organs of Sati are said to have fallen to the earth at the place where the Kali Temple now stands. Thus the spot was, and still is, especially sacred. There are 51 such holy places in India, where pieces of Sati's body reportedly fell to the ground.

The cult of Kali, that is, the goddess Sati in her more terrible aspect, is found throughout India, and the above-mentioned Kali temple in Calcutta became one of the most important places of pilgrimage. Many merchants, farmers, and artisans established themselves near the sanctuary where they carried out their trade. Not only did the production and sale of necessities (such as clothes, food and travel accessories) for the numerous visitors who came annually from all parts of India, flourish, but a kind of tourist and souvenir industry was also able to develop. Dolls, toys and similar objects, as well as the pictures known today as Kalighat Paintings, were produced and offered for sale by the patuas, who had worked as painters and toy-makers in their own villages. These objects were then bought by the pilgrims who took them back to their homes as souvenirs of their visit to the sanctuary.

The pictures had to fulfill several conditions: they had to be cheap, since a majority of the pilgrims could not be expected to pay a high price, and, perhaps more important, they had to be made quickly. These two main conditions, among other things, determined production and style. The pictures were made on paper, for in the preceding years, among other industries in Calcutta, a paper industry had come into being. The industrial paper was cheaper, thinner, and finer than the usual paper made by hand.

In order to speed up the production process, any decoration of the background space was dispensed with, a feature that is unique in Indian tradition. It

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\* I am greatly indebted to the kindness of Mr. Walter Böhning, Curator of the J. u. E. von Portheim-Stiftung for granting me access to the material, to Mrs. Linda F. Dietz for undertaking the tiresome job of translating the German text into English, and to Miss Ingeborg Klinger for making the pictures for this article.

is a most unusual experience in the contemplation of Indian pictorial art, to find oneself before forms which are painted simply on a white or a one-coloured background. Only in later examples of this art form does one find the first attempts to enliven the background with flower-borders or through a scene suggesting a landscape or a building.

The foreign influences, such as fine paper, format, watercolours, and simplicity of composition, which were expressed in the above-mentioned developments, can most likely be traced to the presence of the English and the Europeans in general. The English, who lived in Calcutta in the nineteenth century had come into contact with the native painters, who had settled in the area of the temple. This contact began through the construction of a road, "Broad Street", which joined the city centre with the suburb Kalighat.

Some of the Europeans were enthusiastic amateur painters, and it is likely that they were observed at work by the local painters. These Europeans not only often went out into the vicinity of the city or into the suburbs in search of genre-scenes or landscapes, but they also used mainly watercolours. Probably this was one of the ways through which the European influence came into Kalighat painting. Furthermore they were influenced through the so-called "natural history drawings", which came into existence at the end of the eighteenth century under English supervision. These drawings, which depicted flowers and animals of India, were painted with watercolours on quite large sheets of paper, the proportions of which completely diverged from those of the local paper. The painters of these pictures, who originally came from the Moghul studios or the Courts of Murshidabad, Awadh or Patna, where a school strongly influenced by European prototypes was already in existence, were retrained in European taste by the English.

Furthermore, the high death rate of the European residents resulted in fairly frequent auctions of their household effects. In this way some paintings may have fallen into the hands of the natives, bringing about a continual and gradual influence. In addition to the format of the pictures and the technique of watercolour, the native painters attempted to take over the shading technique of the European prototypes. However, they did not fully understand this technique, for the Kalighat painters, as a matter of principle, provided each contour line with a darker shading.

Next to the European influences, the native pictorial art, especially that of the above-mentioned

patuas, played the most important role in Kalighat painting. The patuas painted their pictures not only on cloth rolls but also on hand-made paper. These paintings on cloth rolls, which treated mainly religious themes, had not incorporated any of the traditions of Indian miniature painting.

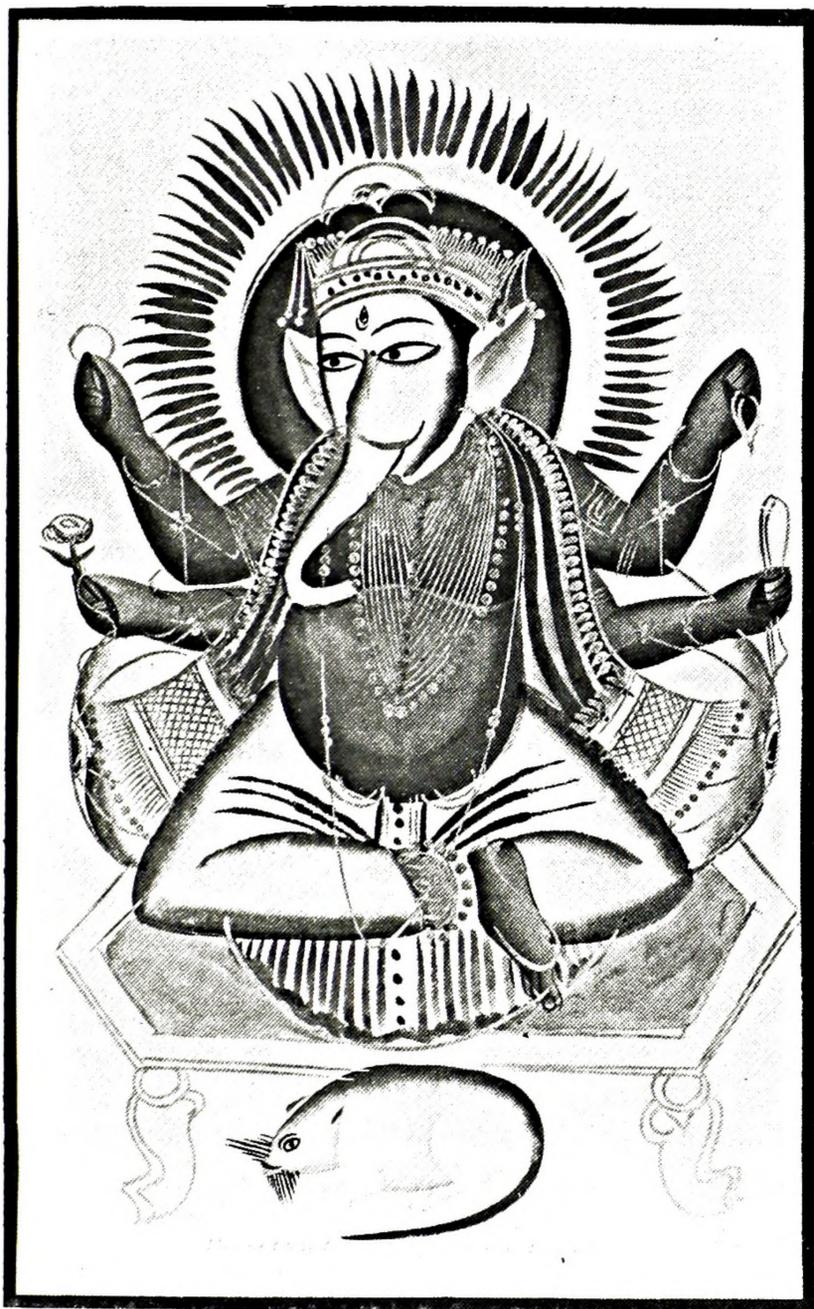
The figures are splendidly lively and expressive. They are painted with loud, bright colours. There is neither shading, nor any attempt at the plastic formation of figures. The drama of the situation and the feeling of the characters were communicated to the viewer through the colour, clothing, and gestures of the represented figures, and through the figure as a whole. The facial expression did not have much significance. The directness, the power of expression, and the vitality, which we can see in Kalighat painting derived from the native tradition of the patua caste. The representation of people followed to a certain extent the traditional Indian canon: the female figures were represented voluptuously, almost enticing in their fullness of figure. Often they appear with a force typical of Bengal and with such massive presence, that they seem to displace all other figures. In contrast to them the men frequently seem shy and grotesque in their impotence. This predominance of women in the Bengali imagination corresponds to the concept of the Goddess, tempting and gracious on the one hand (as Parvati), and devouring and murdering on the other hand (as Kali). However, in Kalighat painting these attributes of women were often caricatured and became the object of biting satirical drawings, paintings, and commentaries. There are many such themes, for example, men in animal form being led on a line or being beaten by women. Whereas the representation of the women, simultaneously loved, feared, and hated, corresponds more or less to the classical canon of Indian female representation; the classical male ideal of the hero with wide shoulders and narrow waist cannot be found. The only male figures not subjected to this predominance of the female (i.e. of the Goddess) are the representations of the English. From the beginning, the Europeans had aroused the curiosity of the Indians, being frequently portrayed on foot, in a coach, on horseback, etc. They were generally drawn as very large and imposing figures with blue eyes staring out from under their hats, while around them the normal local life continued. At the same time those Indians, who had been "Europeanised", began to wear European hair-styles, carried umbrellas, and briefcases, and even wore European clothing, and as such they became the targets of contemporary satire. In the paintings, women, who

had tried to “emancipate” themselves, were beaten up by their weak husbands. In addition, proverbial sayings were illustrated, frequently with contemporary historical reference and scandals, love affairs, courtesans, procurers, and the courtesans’ customers were caricatured in a manner which today still captivates and fascinates the spectator.

In time, the whole life of Calcutta with its vices, political parties, different occupations, and social levels, came to be portrayed. With unencumbered freedom and unusual expressiveness, the artists produced these paintings, while at the same time, as their main occupation, they produced pictures of divinities.

## CATALOGUE

### (a) Religiously inspired pictures



#### 1. Ganesha

Inscription: “The God Gunesh always represented as an elephant.”

Date: ca. 1870/80

Ganesha, (here written as “Gunesh” on account of the phonetic transcription of the Bengali pronunciation) is the god who is called upon before any undertaking. He protects all people, especially students and all who carry on intellectual occupations. He is also called “King of the Obstacles”, because he has the power, both to remove as well as to erect obstacles. The name

Ganesha derives from the fact that he is not only the son of Shiva but also the Lord of the Ganas, Shiva’s ghostly hordes. In the picture Ganesha is portrayed sitting on a hexagonal throne. In his four hands he bears his typical attributes: in his upper left hand a sweet (since he very much likes to eat sweets), in his lower left a flower, in his lower right a book, and in his upper right the rosary. Under the throne his riding animal, the mouse, can be seen.

Similar picture: W. G. Archer, *Kalighat Paintings*, 1971, plate 49.



#### 2. Brahma

No inscription

Date: ca. 1860

On a throne sits the four-headed Brahma. The attributes, which are found in his hands, are indicated very hastily as practically always in Kalighat painting. Here are the attributes that are comparatively easy to recognize: a book (the holy Vedas) in his upper right hand, the lotus flower in his lower right, the offering-spoon in his lower left, while the upper left hand appears to be empty. The riding animal of the god, the goose, can be seen under the throne.



3. The five-headed Shiva as an ascetic and lord of musicians.

Inscription: "One of the varieties of Mahadeo."

Date: 1865/70

Besides his terrible aspect, the god Shiva has a series of more peaceful aspects. The picture in question shows him as the lord of musicians, sitting on a hexagonal throne. He has five faces and four arms in which he carries various instruments, for example, the sand-glass drum ("Damaru") which is the musical instrument typical of the god. The drum determines the rhythm of the time of life and of death. In addition, we can recognize the Tanpur

vina, a stringed instrument, and the Tabla, a form of drum, which he bears upon his lap and upon which he is beating. In his upper left hand he holds a drinking horn, as Shiva is very fond of liquor or intoxicating drinks. Various cobras, also typical of this god, adorn his head-dress and his throat. The skin of a tiger, symbolic of his ascetic existence, serves as his clothing.

Similar picture: P. Rawson, *Indian Painting*, 1961, p. 153.



4. Shiva and the goddess Annapurna.

Inscription: "Mahadeo with a cobra on his head-piece and Parbuttee."

Date: 1860/65

Shiva, (also known as Mahadeva or in Bengali, Mahadeo), represented as an ascetic with snakes in his hair and around his neck and with the skin of a tiger as a loin-cloth, is receiving rice offered by the goddess Annapurna, whose name means "Full of Food". Annapurna is sitting on a European chair and holding her typical attribute, the ladle, in her hand. Through this, the identification of the goddess is unequivocal. Thus the reference in the inscription to Parbuttee (a phonetic transcription of the Bengali pronunciation of the name Parvati) is not correct.



5. Shiva and Parvati on the bull Nandi.  
 Inscription: "Mahādeo and Parbuttee seated  
 on the Blue Bull."  
 Date: ca. 1870

The god Shiva and his wife Parvati are sitting on their riding animal, the bull Nandi. As in the other examples, Shiva is represented as an ascetic. In the above picture the classical criteria of the iconometry were observed, the size of the goddess is approximately half the size of Shiva. It was and is common not only in the pictures of gods but also in portraits to indicate the hierarchy through the relative sizes of the figures represented. In this case the painter was especially anxious to emphasize the god Shiva as the main figure of this group.



6. Parvati and Ganesh  
 Inscription: "Parbuttee and Infant Ganesh."  
 Date: ca. 1870

The ten-armed goddess is sitting on a hexagonal throne with the young Ganesh on her lap. In her hands the typical attributes of the fear-causing goddess can be seen. These are in contradiction to her peaceful attitude towards Ganesh. The representation shows, in very expressive terms, both of the aspects of this goddess — the fear-causing "Durga" and peaceable "Parvati".

Shakti is the female principle without which, according to the Shakta teaching, nothing can originate since without Shakti (strength) the male part is powerless. Shakti, the female energy, was worshipped as an independent goddess. In this picture (as also in numbers 7, 8 and 9) Shakti is portrayed mainly in her frightening aspects as the all-mighty destroyer.

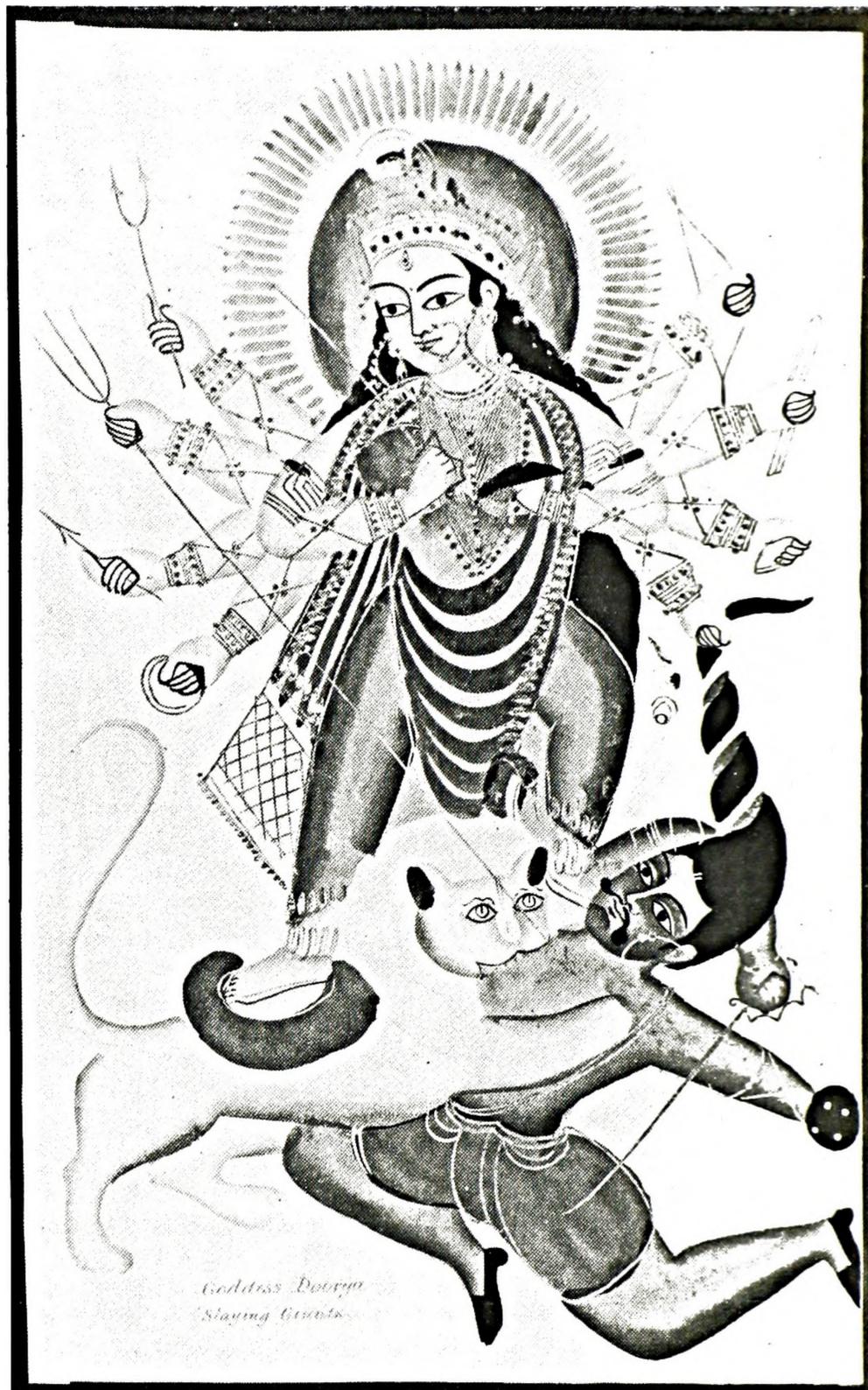


7. Durga

Inscription: "The Goddess Doorga and Lion."

Date: ca. 1870

The goddess Durga is shown on a lion, her riding animal. She carries in her four hands (starting with the upper left), a noose, an arrow, a bow, and an unidentifiable object. Under the paws of the lion lies an elephant's head, presumably the symbolization of one of the demons slain by her.

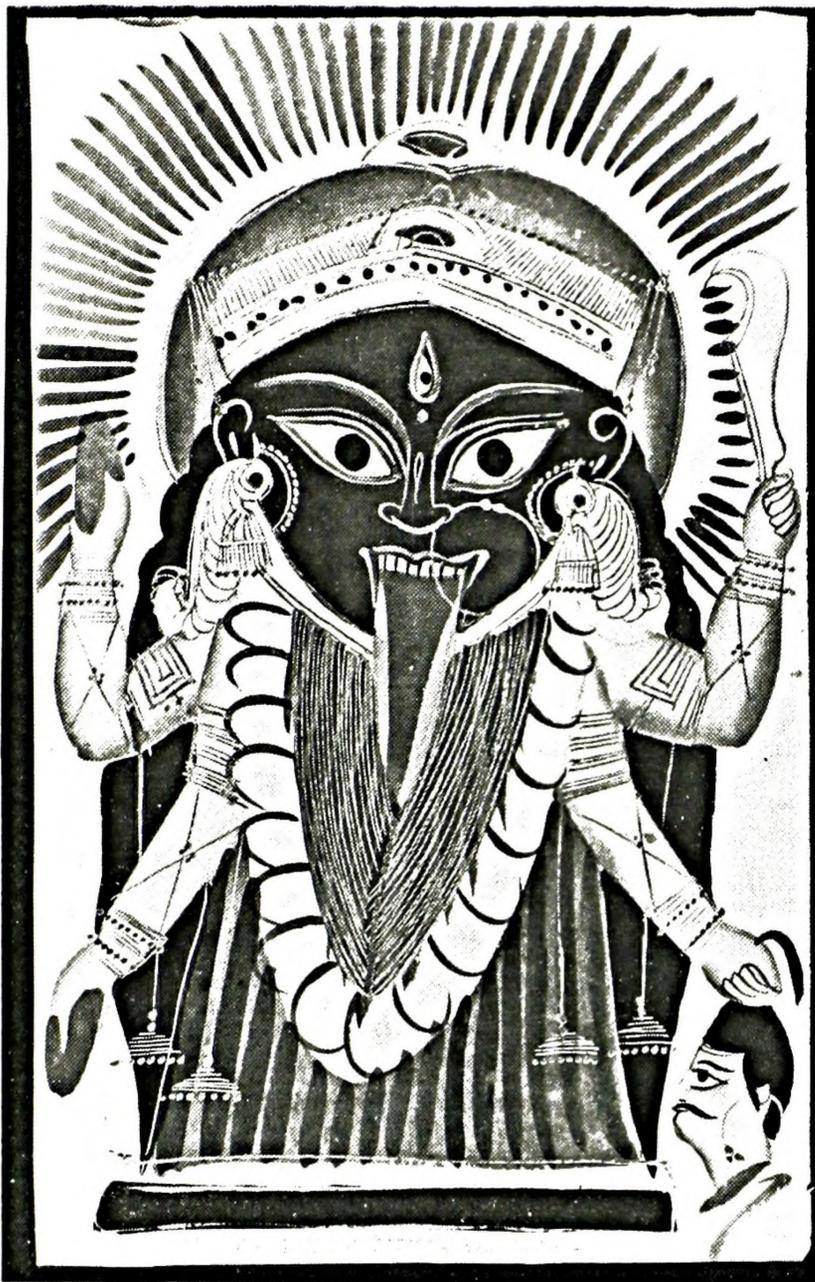


8. Durga and Mahishasura

Inscription: "Doorga slaying Giants."

Date: ca. 1870

Durga, with ten arms and many weapons is standing on her riding animal, the lion, and is slaying the demon "Mahishasura". Although the demon in this illustration does not have the typical buffalo's head, the scene must be identified as the slaying of Mahishasura, on the basis of classical iconography. The position and the portrayal of the goddess are typical. The shoes of the demon are interesting, being unquestionably inspired by the European prototypes.



9. Kali.

Inscription: "Kali, one of the forms of the Goddess Doorga holding a Giant's head. Kali or Doorga is the Goddess of Thugs and Murderers."

Date: ca. 1860/65

The picture shows a representation of Kali, typical for Kalighat painting. The goddess is portrayed very schematically, a black mask-like, three-eyed face, protruding tongue, and a chain around her neck consisting of human heads, which are very sketchily portrayed, the faces of the victims being completely absent. In her left hands she holds the sacrificial knife and the head of a victim. The other pair of hands show two known hand positions ("Mudras"): abhaya, "fear not" (upper hand), and varada, "the giving of a boon" (lower hand). This kind of schematization of a picture, an almost geometric simplification and an avoidance of naturalism is rare in Kalighat painting and is thus of special interest. In India there are several gods in whose depiction realism is intentionally dispensed with. As far as I have been able to observe, these gods are, the above-mentioned

Kali, the Jagannath triad of Orissa and Sri Nathji of Nathdwara (Rajasthan). In these three cases (the arms, for example, are fixed directly under the head), the depictions call to mind the old tribal divinities whose forms often resemble posts. These characteristics were probably taken over into Hindu iconography almost unchanged and are an indication of the "primitive" origin of the divinities.

The thugs were a sect who practised ritual murder by strangulation of the victims, and used to roam on Indian highways searching for prey. They were outlawed and then eliminated by the British by the end of the nineteenth century.

Similar pictures: W. G. Archer, *Kalighat Paintings*, 1971, plate 16.  
*Tantra*, Stuttgarter Ausstellung (Stuttgart), 1972/73, p. 17, p. 19.

For further information: Col. Meadows Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug*, London, 1873.



10. Narasimha Avatara

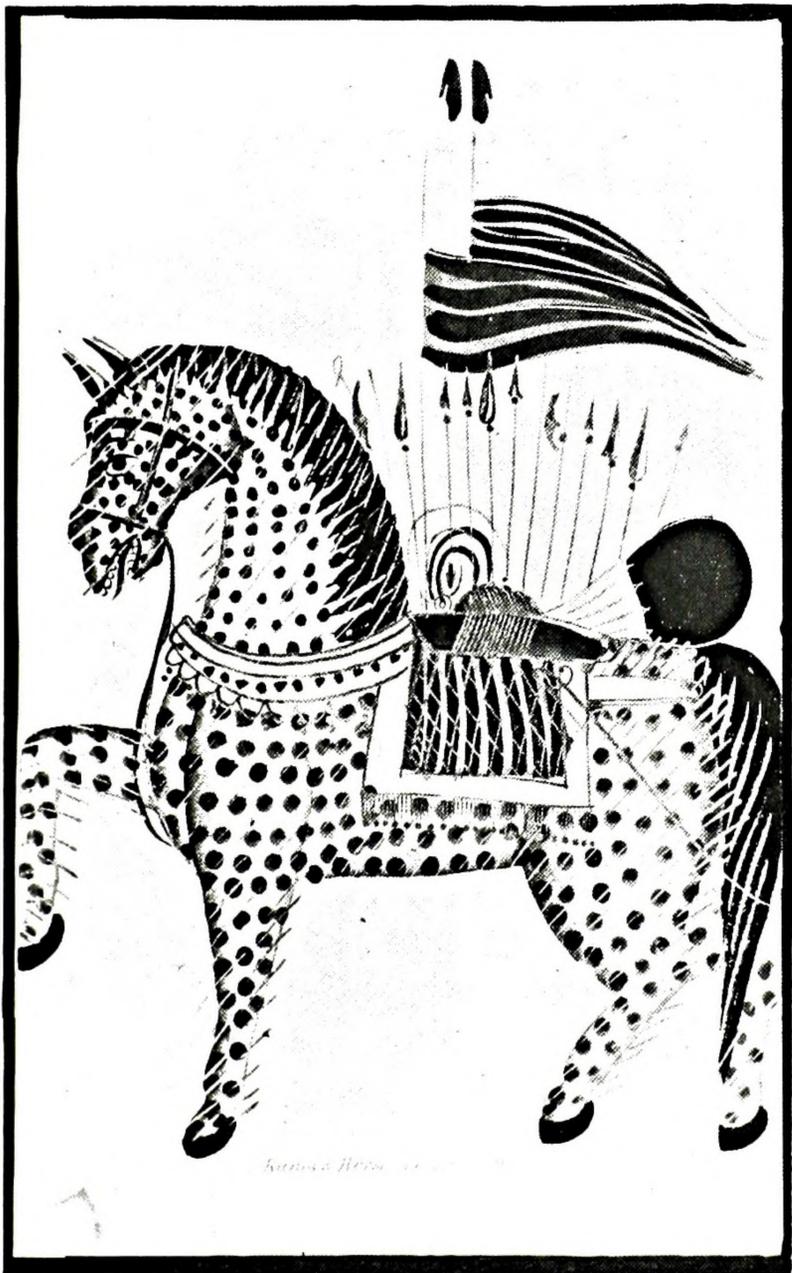
Inscription: "Narsinha."

Date: ca. 1850/60

This picture shows Vishnu as a man-lion while slaying the demon Hiranyakashipu. The legend states that the demon Hiranyakashipu was a staunch follower of the god Shiva and hence prohibited his son Prahlada from worshipping Vishnu. One day Hiranyakashipu called to him in anger: "If Vishnu really is powerful then he should come forth out of his pillar." At that moment the column opened and the god Vishnu stepped forth as the man-lion ("Narasimha"), threw himself upon the demon and tore out his bowels.

This theme is common in Indian art. The figure of Vishnu, otherwise almost always represented in the form of a lion, has here become a fictitious animal. The horse-like face is a typical characteristic of Kalighat painting. The red thread-like stripes which the god holds in his upper pair of hands, are the entrails of the slain demon.

Similar example: W. G. Archer, *Kalighat Paintings*, 1971, plate 4.

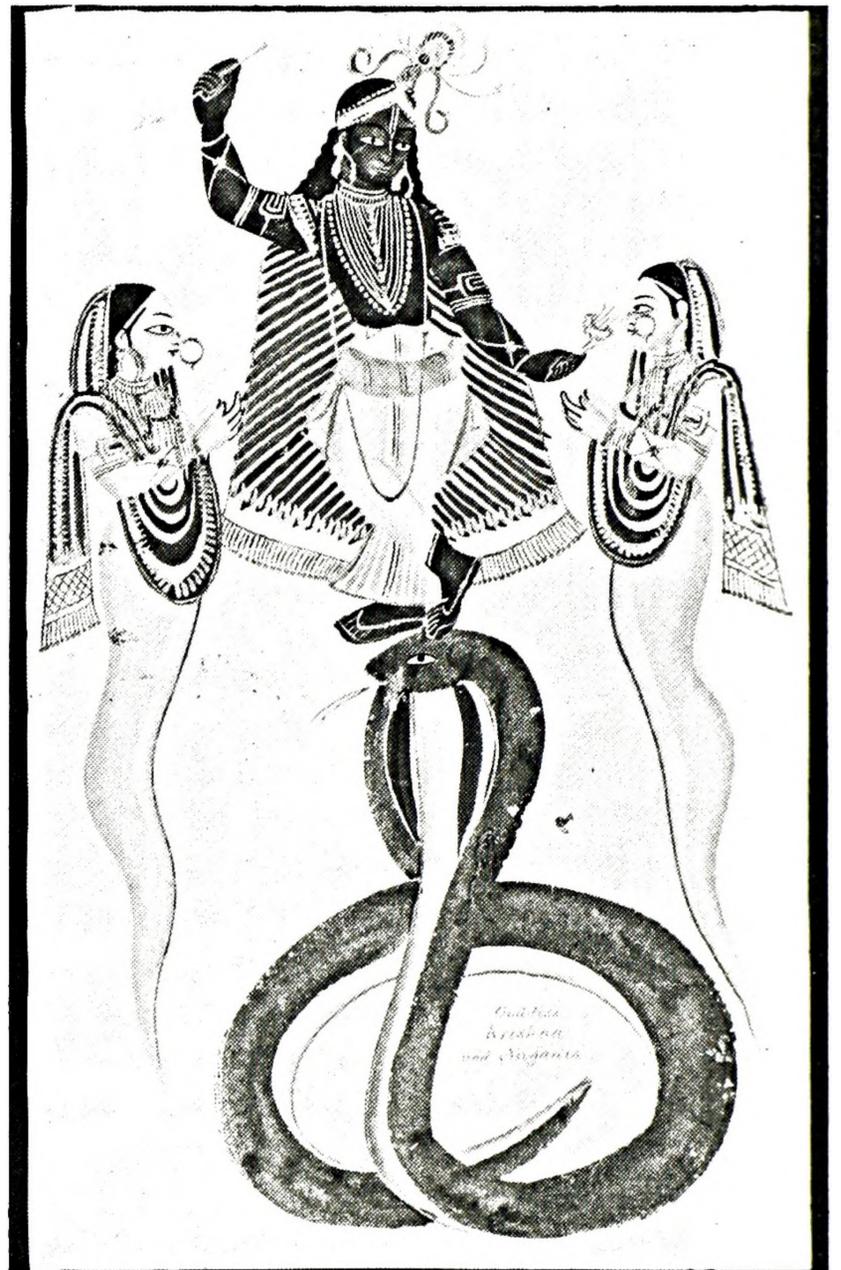


11. Kalki Avatara (?)

Inscription: "Rama's Horse clothed in Mail."

Date: ca. 1850/60

This is an unusual picture difficult to identify. Presumably we are dealing here with a representation of the future incarnation (Avatara) of the god Vishnu as Kalki at the end of our age. The many weapons, which can be seen behind the horse, point to this conclusion, since Kalki is generally portrayed as an armoured knight on a horse or in the immediate vicinity of a horse.



12. Krishna dancing on the snake Kalya.

Inscription: "Goddess Krishna and Naginis."

Date: ca. 1850

The picture shows one of the heroic deeds which Krishna accomplished in his youth. A poisonous snake lived in a part of the Jumna, a river, along whose banks the young Krishna played. With his poison the snake had corrupted the life-giving waters, even the surroundings where the shepherds, the playmates of the youthful Krishna, pastured their cows. Then Krishna decided to eliminate the snake and, after a long underwater battle, he defeated it. He danced on the snake's head while playing the flute, one of his attributes. The snake's wives, the Naginis, came to Krishna and asked for compassion for their husband.

The picture is unique in its depth of feeling and in the fluidity of the brush strokes. The inscription shows several inaccuracies. We are dealing here with a god, not a goddess, and with Naginis, not "Naganis" (the snakewomen).



13. Krishna and Balarama.

Inscription: "Krishna and Mahadeo in a Figure."

Date: ca. 1850/60

The picture clearly shows Krishna and his brother Balarama. Since Krishna was born out of a black hair of Vishnu and Balarama out of a white one, they had the blue (Indians make no distinction between dark blue and black) and white skin colour respectively. Both wear the typical peacock-feather crown on their heads. The horn-like form which Balarama, being fond of wine, carries in his hand, his drinking vessel, is particularly relevant for the identification of the figure. As is customary in classical Indian tradition, both gods are standing on a lotus flower. The person who inscribed the picture, obviously had been misled by Balarama's white colour, since Shiva (= Mahadeva, Mahadeo)

is also white. In view of the fact that Vishnu (dark) and Shiva (white) can appear together in one icon in classical Indian iconography, such an error is explainable.

Similar example (without tree): W. G. Archer, *Kalighat Paintings*, 1971, plate 9.

Similar example (with tree): W. G. Archer, *Bazaar Paintings of Calcutta*, 1953, plate 19.



14. Krishna and Radha.

Inscription: "Krishna and Radha."

Date: ca. 1850/60

Krishna is sitting on a stool under a tree which symbolizes the luxuriant Vrindavan forest on the banks of the Jumna river where the god spent his childhood and youth. His feet are being massaged by his beloved, the shepherd-girl Radha. The massaging of the feet is among the duties of a woman towards her husband or lover.

In this picture also, Radha wears the peacock-feather crown typical for Krishna representations. It seems to be a characteristic of the Kalighat

“school” to represent all three gods, Krishna, Balarama, and Radha with such a crown, while according to classical iconography, only Krishna or, at the most, also Balarama, should be allowed to wear such a head-dress.

Similar example: W. G. Archer, *Kalighat Paintings*, 1971, plate 7.

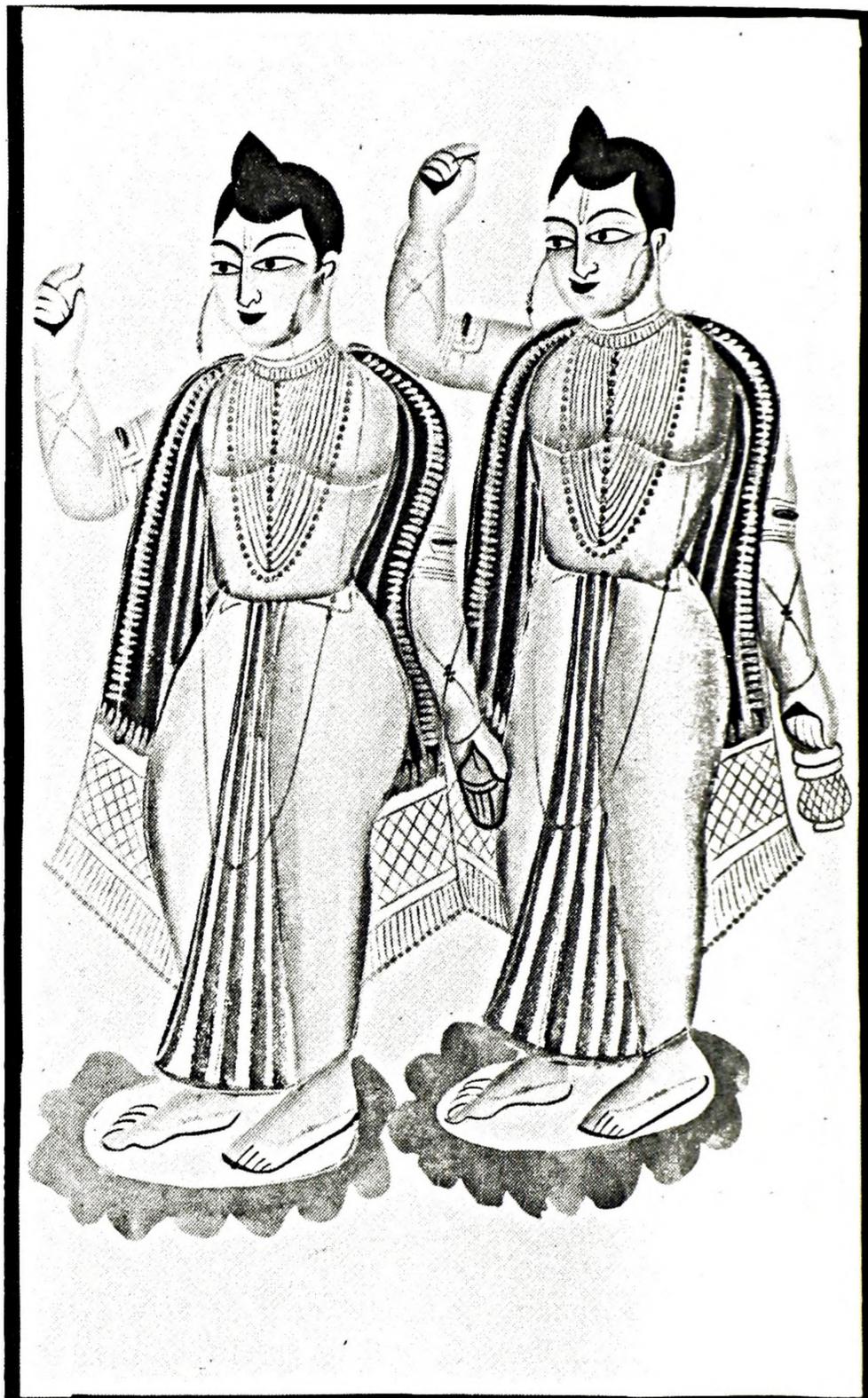


15. Balarama.

Inscription: “A variety of Mahadeo.”

Date: ca. 1850/60

Balarama is standing on a lotus flower with a rose and a drinking horn in his hands. The person who inscribed the picture succumbed to the same mistake as above, doubtlessly confused by the light skin colour of the figure.



16. Gaur and Nitai

No Inscription

Date: ca. 1860

Gaur and Nitai were pupils of the famous mystic and poet Chaitanya (in the sixteenth century). Both saints were well known in Bengal and are occasionally represented in Kalighat painting. Their clothing is appropriate to that of ascetics. Nitai who was always merry and who sang, can be recognized through the water vessel.

Similar example: Hartnoll and Eyre Ltd., *Catalogue Kalighat 20*, 1971, Item 64.

(b) "Secular" pictures



17. Courtesan

Inscription: "A Female of Bengal seated on a European chair smoking a Hooka."

Date: ca. 1875/80

Generally, portraiture of women was avoided in Indian painting. It was very bad form for a woman to let herself be portrayed. The female portraits which have been handed down to us from classical times, are generally "ideal portraits" of a princess, queen, or a distinguished lady. Of course there were also exceptions, but as a rule women could not pose as models for portraits. The Kalighat painters offer us a series of female representations, and whether or not these are really portraits or not is difficult to say. The pictures are known as "courtesan pictures". This example portraying a lady sitting on a European chair and smoking a water-pipe, presumably belongs to this group.



18. A Leaf from the series of the "Tarakeshwar Murder Case."

Inscription: "Native idea of a European Jailor superintending a native Prisoner watering the Jail Garden."

Date: ca. 1873/30 (?)

This picture belongs to a series illustrating the Tarakeshwar scandal and murder. This affair was a sensation in Calcutta and caused great excitement. A man had murdered his wife, because she had a love affair with a priest (the "Mahant") of the Shiva Temple in Tarakeshwar, a suburb of Calcutta. The whole family more or less approved of the Mahant and the wife herself seemed to have had nothing against such a relationship. Her husband lived and worked in Calcutta, while she lived with her family in Tarakeshwar. He learned of the relationship by chance. The murder took place on May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1873 and shortly thereafter the husband

as well as the Mahant were convicted. The husband was sentenced to deportation since the death penalty was excluded for the reason that he was not considered to have been in full possession of his faculties at the time of the deed. The Mahant was sentenced for adultery. This was a sensational event in the society of the time. The story was portrayed carefully with all details so that whole picture series were created on the theme of the Tarakeshwar murder, as well as several theatre productions.

The picture here shows the small Mahant, as he waters a conspicuously large and luxurious rose while being supervised by a huge English guard. This flower had, for the Kalighat painter, an abundance of hidden meaning, as the rose is considered to be the essence of sensuality. Often

one notices, especially in the "courtesan pictures", how the lady plays with a rose, or how elegant men go to visit courtesans with a rose in their hand. In this picture the allusion to the Mahant's past is clear.

Similar example: W. G. Archer, *Kalighat Paintings*, 1971, plate 40.

A detailed description of the Tarakeshwar Murder: W. G. Archer, *Kalighat Paintings*, 1971, pp. 12-15.

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