

London ready for Leonardo

The National Gallery's Leonardo exhibition is being touted as some kind of celebrity death-match, thanks to the inclusion of a rarely seen masterpiece: will history be made and a new Most Famous Leonardo Painting be crowned?

Forget the Olympics and tuition fee demos. If reports are to be believed, the National Gallery's Leonardo exhibition is going to generate the sort of collective mania that will take riot police and water cannons to contain.

Remember Monet at the Royal Academy a few years back? Remember what a complete Mongolian goatpoke it was, with those lines of mooching, slack-mouthed waterlily-fanciers backed halfway up the street? Well, this will be worse. I blame Dan Brown, who — despite apparently thinking Da Vinci was his

surname — has convinced millions that Leonardo's work is the key to the greatest evil secret ever.

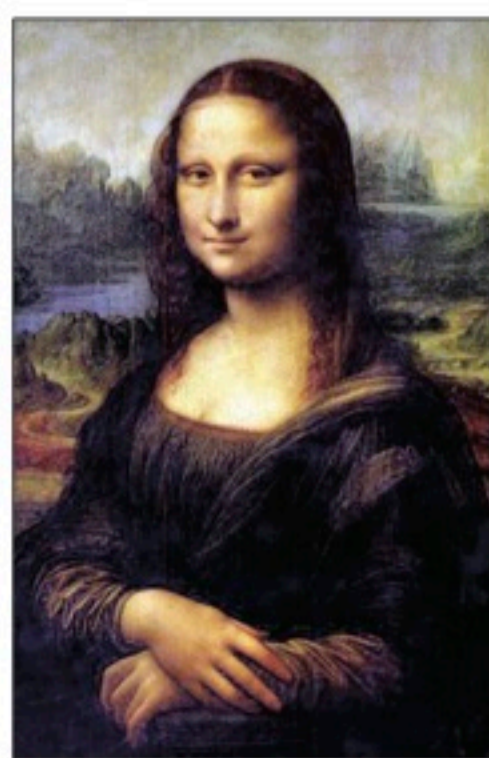
The National Gallery has already announced that to prevent "gallery rage", it will issue only 180 tickets for each half-hour slot, rather than the 230 its licence allows. This will cost it GBP10,000 a day in potential revenue, but will greatly reduce the risk of anyone being assassinated by a 9ft-tall albino assassin from Opus Dei.

Well, good, obviously. Had a way with a brush did that Leonardo. But it does show up how blockbusterish the museum culture now is. These days, we report fine art shows like prize-fights. They are stories told in statistics: visitor numbers, speed at which tickets sell out, number of paintings never before displayed together, cost of insurance measured in GDPs of medium-

sized African countries, etc.

The pre-show hype for the November exhibition really goes to town in this respect. Rather than announce something as boring as a gallery full of nice pictures folk might like to see, it is also being touted as some kind of celebrity death-match, thanks to the inclusion of a rarely seen masterpiece: will history be made and a new Most Famous Leonardo Painting be crowned?

In the red corner, the defending champion: weighing in, according to the insurance valuation, at a cool half-a-billion pounds, boasting a look of quiet confidence and that enigmatic smile, it's... the Mona Lisa! And in the blue corner, the challenger! From Krakow, Poland, she's lean and hungry, 10 years younger, half the square footage and a good few quid less to insure. She has man's hands and a weird hairnet. She



Move over Mona Lisa?

has a giant, bald stoat and she's not afraid to use it. It's... Lady With an Ermine!

According to her trainer, Count Adam Zamoyski (the art historian whose Polish family foundation owns the painting), Cecilia Gallerani, as she is also known, has travelled 800 miles against

doctor's (well, conservator's) orders for this shot at the title. The count's already trash-talking the other side. He says his Cecilia is "unquestionably" better and "will replace the Mona Lisa as the icon for Leonardo. As simple as that." Mona Lisa, in other words, is going down. The Times, media partners for the show, has launched an online poll; so far, dismayingly for the incumbent, nearly four in five prefer Cecilia.

It's probably not quite how Ruskin would have approached the presentation of two masterworks, but I find this candid vulgarity appealing. Why not try it with other artists? A five-round icon-off between soup cans and Marilyn for pre-eminence in the Warhol canon, say; or a quick scrap in the basement of the Tate between Turner's *Rain, Steam and Speed* and *The Fighting Temeraire*. Postmodern, too, to make iconic-ness, the art-historical equivalent of celebrity, the important issue.

As for the pictures in contention, I'm leaning towards the

four-out-of-five in the poll. OK, Leonardo's definitely made more of an effort with colouring in the background on the Mona Lisa, and Cecilia has done that annoying thing that blights all my holiday snaps: looking away at just the wrong moment. Then there's that hand and the thing she's cuddling; it takes a while to clock that Lady With an Ermine isn't so titled because she's wearing fur. It's an actual bleeding ermine, wearing its own fur coat, and very ugly it is, too. Who'd have their picture taken cuddling a stoat?

But there's a bit of torque in the composition that the Mona Lisa lacks. Give the painting a really good, close look and you'll see she really does have the very breath of life in her. You find yourself absorbed by the curves of cheek, shoulder, jaw and neck-lace angling off from her chin. You see a sitter, maybe 16 years old, just distracted by a noise, caught in a living moment more than five centuries ago. And you find yourself awestruck.

Guardian News Service

the spectator Sam Leith

New and improved Tagore

Rabindranath was not just pen and ink but, as Sayandeb Chowdhury finds out from a set of new exhibitions, regular endorser of indigenous enterprise and a great believer in the potential of the moving images

One problem with the traditional appraisal of Rabindranath Tagore, in which the Bengali community, the chief beneficiary of the great man's infinite genius, has usually regaled, is that such a disposition obliterates larger spheres of reception and cognition. Tagore, who divided his life almost equally between the 19th and 20th century, was perpetually, as a man and an artist, in love with the various pulls and pushes of modernity, a fact he relished as much as he often derided.

This is not to say that he abhorred modernity. Not at all. He in fact embraced it with all warmth but did so with a philosopher's dilemma and an intellectual's alacrity. Modernity, on its part often enjoyed his graceful hospitality. The meeting points of the two are hence signposts for our own collective engagement with various aspects of modernity. Tagore, for example, singularly embraced photography, endorsed the phonograph and was endearingly intrigued by motion pictures. And even rudimentary historical knowledge would report that all three became in due course, major areas of engagement for the Bengali intellectual elite.

What and how Tagore did is a story that is currently on display at the ICSSR Rabindranath Tagore Centre in Calcutta. As part of the sesquicentennial celebrations of his birth, the Centre has put up on view five exhibitions on Tagore, among which two, *Tagore in Advertisements* and the *Philatelic Exhibition of Tagore* deserve mention for their expansive collection, though given the detailing, it is impossible to make place for both in the scope of a single article. In the third exhibition, *Tagore &*

Kantha, Kantha expert Shamlu Dudgeja has put together a sweet little exhibition of Kantha samples, which carry embroidered motifs on the works of Tagore. *Tagore and Cinema* is a relatively well traveled area of debate and discussion but this one comes with interesting details while the last one on *Tagore's Pilgrimages to the East* is full of the minutes of his visits to countries of East Asia, a fact which is perhaps less acknowledged that his eventful visits to the West.

It is unusual to associate the heavy-bearded, long-robed, monastic looking Tagore with canvassing of soaps, hair oil, harmoniums, record players, insurance, printing and stationary etc, not to speak of books, journals, publications etc, but he did all of it. As per the booklet that accompanies the exhibition, conceptualised by Arun Kumar Roy (who is the curator of this exhibition as well as the one on *Tagore and Cinema*), Tagore featured in close to hundred advertisements between 1889 and his death in 1941. And he did so often with a line or two composed specially for the product he was to advertise. On one side this ensures the making of a rare gallery of indigenous everyday/household/entertainment stuff that the average late 19th early 20th century Calcutta would make use of. On the other hand, Tagore's attendance in and attention to these advertisements offers a kind of meta-narrative of the growth of advertising in India itself, the language, the coinage, the imagery, the desperation of competition and of course the ancestry of celebrity endorsement. Surely MSD or SRK is but part of a legacy.

Saying that much we must take note that the kindred spirit that Tagore was,

large part of his involvement with advertisements was to do with the promotion of Indian goods, as against those imported by the British. "I am grateful to Basak Factory for giving me a chance to sample Radium Snow during a performance of a play at Calcutta recently. All my actors and actresses have sampled the Snow and have been very impressed by the product" — Rabindranath Tagore. The above is a regular specimen of what Tagore is said to have considered a duty. Though never the blind patriot, Tagore perhaps reserved his ambivalence towards bare-fisted nationalism for his writings and had instead been generous towards enterprises which were struggling to be part of an economy that would buttress the local industry rather than allow the revenue to be shipped outside, as the British companies would inevitably do. So he appeared in one advert after another to convince the Calcutta elite, used largely to European goods and services, to make allowances for indigenous companies.

Like Radium, he had praised SriGhrita — the ghee company, Jalajoga — the sweetmeat makers, Inkmakers Kajal Kali, the lkmik cooker, Napiere paint works, paper merchants Bholonath Dutta, The Indian Photo Engraving Company, Godrej soap, Dwarkin's Harmonium, H Bose's famous Kuntaleen hair oil and Dil Khosh perfume etc. But he is also seen to have written a line to endorse Bournvita, by no means an Indian company. But why should that be a criteria always.

Tagore also wrote letters and recommendation appraising books, journals and individuals, a good sample of the last being one Amarkrishna Ghosh, who was to take part in the Reserve Bank of India elections with Tagore's letter of

kind approval of his person! Most ads featuring the Poet were published in *Probasi*, *Basumati*, *Calcutta Municipal Gazette*, *Bhandar*, *Shonibar Chithi*, *Sadhana*, *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, *Desh*, *Kheyali*, *Sahana*, *Deepali*, *Banglar Katha*, *Modern Review* etc as well as in newspapers like *Anandabazaar Patrika*, which had the largest number of Tagore adverts, *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, *The Statesman* and *Advance*.

Tagore and Cinema lays out the posters of the films based on his works. It also details, in text, Tagore's personal engagement with moving images, a technological breakthrough which given his clairvoyance and insight into the modern mind, he would consider as inevitable, as say, the coming of the airplanes. What perhaps is subliminal to the exhibition is Tagore's meditation on the visual as a medium and whether it is displace to centrality of the written text in the years to come. Tagore took time to formulate his thoughts of the moving images but from the earliest days endorsed it as an invention with great potential. It is perhaps more than a coincidence that his Nobel Prize came in the same year, in 1913, when India's first feature, Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* debuted. The same year Tagore wrote a letter of recommendation for one DN Ganguly to help him study cinema abroad. Then, since 1917, when Nitin Bose first caught the Poet on camera at Santiniketan to Tagore's directing *Natir Puja* in 1932 for New Theatres, Tagore's many engagements with cinema's budding talent and technology is impressive, to say the least. It included his controversial interview on actress Mary Picford in London, adap-

tation of *Man Bhanjan* for cinema by Nareish Chandra Mitra in 1923, the film *Sriniketan* based on Tagore's views on rural development, his writing the script of a film called *Giribala* for Modhu Bose in 1929 and his acting in *Tapati*, a film directed by DN Ganguly, the same man he had helped study abroad. The film was shot for only 8 reels when Tagore had to leave for Europe, but the 8-reel film is lost to the world. He has been associated with almost the entire generation of Calcutta's early film fraternity, which included, apart from those mentioned Satu Sen, BN Sirkar, Himanshu Ray, Debika Dani, Kanan Debi and a whole lot of others. He had also baptised the cinema hall Rupabani. His long association found fruition in directing *Natir Puja*, though the original was damaged in a fire at the New Theatres years later.

In the meantime Tagore visited the filmmaking fraternity in the US and Germany and in USSR, he found himself, among other greats, on the sets of Sergei Eisenstein's iconic *Battleship Pottemkin*. While on the sets of the Eisenstein's classic, Tagore is said to have repeatedly opened and closed his fist in excitement while observing the shooting of the famous Odessa steps scene!

Such details lead to other half of the exhibition, which enlists the various interpretations and adaptations of Tagore's on celluloid, much of which is widely known.

The best rewards from such exhibitions is to emerge with the knowledge that at least some individuals in Calcutta and elsewhere are taking keen interest in archiving what is obviously great specimens of everyday history. That's at least a good place to begin resisting our endemic forgetfulness.

Memorabilia

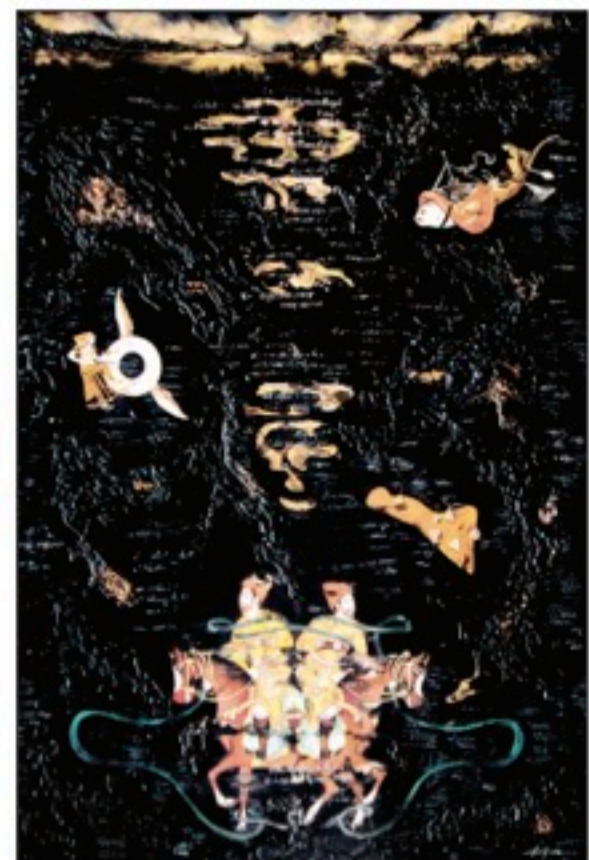


Clockwise from top left: Tagore's *Chitrangada* stitched on a *Kantha*; Clipping of Tagore endorsing Dwarkin's Harmonium; Poster of *Kshudita Pashan*, the Tapan Sinha film based on Tagore's short story



From text to imagery

Nine artists — Abhijit Gupta, Aditya Basak, Chandra Bhattacharjee, Chhatrapati Dutta, Prabhat Basu, Probir Gupta, Rajesh Deb, Sekhar Roy and Sourav Jana came together for the exhibition *Tales from Tagore*, till recently on view at Aakriti Art Gallery. As Nanak Ganguly writes, here the artists' space, is based on "the poet's rich oeuvre in purely temporal terms, rather by reference to any particular cultural style, an intellectual climate, a reversion to the past or the sway of his brilliant legacy through a visual text that would include their own interpretation of his short stories and their experience of reading Rabindranath." The result is an intriguing and meaning-laden series of paintings, not uniform but never unrewarding, that refer to the narratives (*Totakahini*, *Golpo*, *Tyag*, *Guptadhan*, *Gecho Baba*, *Kshudita Pashan*, *Balai*, *Ekratri*, *Sampatti Samarpon*, *Monihara*, *Ghare Baire*) or to the meta-narratives of pain and anguish, loss and death, fear and loathing. SC



Left to right: Chhatrapati Dutta's *Superimposed Realities* based on *Ghare Baire*; Probir Gupta's intricate installation *China Arthritis* at Tiananmen; Aditya Basak's *Kshudita Pashan II*