

May 2021



NEWSLETTER

The Arts Society of West Suffolk

Next Zoom Talk : Tuesday 1st June 2021 at 10.45 am Great Railway Stations: Evoking the Spirit of Romance and Adventure Ian Swankie

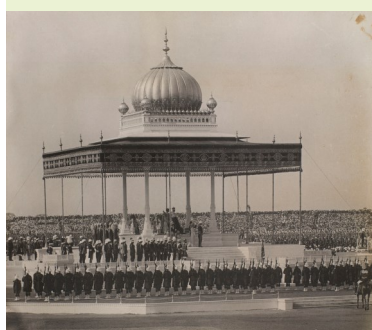
If you think of London St Pancras or New York Grand Central, you imagine romantic journeys. Visiting some of the most evocative and splendid stations in the world, we discover not only the magnificence of architecture and the brilliance of engineering, but also the many artworks within and the depictions of stations in art.

Ian Swankie is a Londoner with a passion for art and architecture. He is an official guide at Tate Modern, Tate Britain, Guildhall Art Gallery and St Paul's Cathedral. He is also a qualified and active freelance London guide. Ian leads a weekly art lecture group in his home town of Richmond. He is a Freeman of the Worshipful Company of Art Scholars, one of the City livery companies.

YOUR COMMITTEE NEEDS YOU!

After three years in the hot seat as our hardworking Chairman, Sue Barrett will be standing down at our next AGM. Sue's energetic and sympathetic leadership of the committee, particularly during this past difficult year, has ensured that, despite all the limitations forced upon us by COVID-19, our society has continued to thrive and we have enjoyed a full and varied lecture programme, albeit virtually. Our Chairman-elect is Tony Callender, who will be relinquishing his present role of Hon Secretary. We are therefore in urgent need of a new Secretary to join our cheerful committee (tea, coffee, cake and conviviality provided at all meetings!). If you are able to help us in this important role or would like more information about it, please contact **Tony on 01379 651259**. Also standing down this year will be Jacky Livens, our Young Arts Member, after an amazing ten years on the committee. Jacky has found this role extremely interesting and rewarding and would be happy to discuss it further with anyone who may be interested in taking over from her. Please contact **Jacky on 01359 242425**. In addition to these key roles, we also need new members on fresh committee, to add new blood to our enthusiastic group. We are delighted to have already had some positive interest and would greatly welcome more. Please contact **Sue Barrett on 01284 700296** if you think this is for you.

WE WOULD LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU!



At the beginning of this month Dr John Stevens presented three inspirational lectures on the theme of The British Empire and Imperial India. Each lecture was accompanied by extremely interesting and informative illustrations. We were also treated to expressive poetry reading and evocative Bengali music. Such was the intensity and wealth of information in the lectures that it has been difficult to provide the usual brief précis for this Newsletter. A lengthier summary is therefore included as Page 2 and 3, which may be of interest. Bengali scroll singing (as briefly heard and described in John's talk) can be heard more fully via the following the link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vj_k_dt3eWU

ADDITIONAL ZOOM TALK

Tuesday 15th June 2021 11 am
Walking Tour of Venice



Venice Registered Tour Guide, **Luisella Romeo**, will take us on a virtual tour of Venice, both along the off-the-beaten track paths and the major attractions of the city.

Luisella was born, raised and studied in Venice, where she gained a degree in Foreign Languages and Literatures. She perceives the labyrinth of Venice as a crossroads of human stories to narrate, and hopes her passion for her job will be apparent as we discover Venice together.



VISITS:

Please note that our visit to **BLETCHLEY PARK** has been re-planned to take place on **Tuesday 12th October 2021**

Recent Special Interest Days' Lectures: The British Empire and Imperial India

The Arts Society of West Suffolk



The British Empire and Imperial India: Images, Architecture and Arts Dr John Stevens

Dr John Stevens is a Research Associate at SOAS, University of London, and a member of the academic staff at the SOAS South Asia Institute. His PhD in History is from University College London. He teaches British Imperial history, Indian history and Bengali language, and is a regular visitor to India and Bangladesh. He publishes widely in the fields of British and Indian history. He lived and worked in India for 15 years and returns frequently.

Images of the British Empire. The Delhi Durbar was an Indian imperial-style mass assembly organised by the British at Coronation Park, Delhi, to mark the succession of an Emperor or Empress of India. In the 1911 Delhi Durbar the newly crowned George V and Queen Mary, were hosted in the grandiose Royal Pavilion. 25,000 people attended with representatives from every Indian state. Great pomp and pageantry belied the reality of Britain holding India by force rather than by consent, as Indian nationalism increased. Britain ruled over a quarter of the population of the world, generally viewing its subjects as inferior. Thomas Jones Barker's 1864 painting entitled 'The Secret of England's Greatness' depicts Queen Victoria handing a Bible to a visiting African ambassador kneeling before her, symbolising the supremacy and ideology of liberal imperialism. Britain is perceived as benefactor, tutor and saviour bringing civilisation to an unenlightened race. During 19C British people became familiar with the image of a kneeling African as a symbol of sinful slavery, illustrated in pottery, publications and coinage. Earlier 18C images of slaves in pleasurable pastimes or having a measure of wealth were imperial fantasies, divorced from reality. Despite supporting the abolition of slavery, the British were reluctant to value Africans as people rather than property. William Hoare's 1733 portrait of



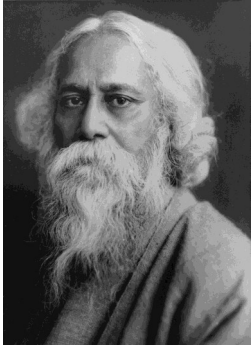
Ayuba Suleiman Diallo was the first to honour a freed black man. Suppression of the 1857 rebellion against British rule, known as the Indian Mutiny, created feelings of patriotism as illustrated in Punch cartoons of the British lion overcoming the Bengal tiger, and Justice slaying the rebellious sepoys. The East India Company was dissolved and a new, more authoritarian and paternalistic form of government was established in the British Raj. Although shocked both by the 1865 uprising and the brutal way it was handled, many British believed that some races should still be kept in subordination. British dominance was celebrated and patriotism feted, as in the image of the Rhodes Colossus striding from Cape Town to Cairo. Nevertheless, by the turn of 20C the empire had weakened, Indian nationalism thrived and the British had to leave India. Ghandi brought about the demise of the empire. The transition to independent India was only achieved by Partition from Pakistan. This resulted in a humanitarian disaster of mass migration as millions of people were forced to move to new homes. Among the remaining legacies of the empire, we have the complex choice of which images we consider appropriate for modern Britain; for example, the statue of Edward Colston as originally displayed in Bristol, or

decorated with cowrie shells in the photograph by Hew Locke, or toppled, defaced and pushed into Bristol Harbour by Black Lives Matter protestors.

Imperial Calcutta: Arts and Architecture. Viewed through Western eyes, Kolkata is generally perceived as the vibrant and colourful 'City of Joy' where optimism, spiritual enlightenment and dire poverty co-exist. Indians view Kolkata as a city of arts, culture and intellect, focusing on a lively and varied culture. Many buildings and streets are named after Mother Theresa, the now sanctified founder of the city's hospices. In 19C Calcutta was the centre of British power and administration in India. The British came to India in 17C not to rule or colonise, but as traders and, even by the time of the British Raj, did not settle in India. Job Charnock, a British East India Company employee, is reputed to be one of the founders of Calcutta, although local authorities deny this. Later, the impressive Writers' Building in the centre of Calcutta became the headquarters of the East India Company. Hindu myth claims that the name of Kalkota and the Kalighat Kali Temple come from the goddess Kali. Although Kalkota now has a large Muslim population, in 19C Hinduism predominated. Magnificent Hindu temples erected at that time included the Dakshineswar Kali Temple, constructed by Rani Rashmoni. She appointed Ramakrishna Paramahansa, an extreme universalist and devout spiritual teacher, as Head Priest. He was the first of a new brand of gurus favoured by the British. In 1901, the British erected the Victoria Memorial, designed with a mixture of British and Mughal elements. Imperial Britain had enormous power in Calcutta, but Christianity had little success. The first overseas cathedral, St Paul's Cathedral was built in Calcutta in 1847, mainly for use by the British. A key development was the establishment of instructional institutions such as the Hindu College in 1817 offering modern, liberal education in English. India was encouraged to embrace Western knowledge and innovation. To this end, Thomas Babington Macaulay stated in 1835, "a single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." He aimed to form "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect". These sentiments were supported by Ram Mohan Roy, the first high caste Indian to visit Britain, where his reputation as a social and religious reformer made him popular. His 1831 portrait by Henry Perronet Briggs epitomised an independent Indian man at the gateway of Western education; an image of British ideology in the first half of 19C. This dream of a liberal and Christian empire leading to self rule was later rejected by Indian nationalists.



Imperial Calcutta: Arts and Architecture. (continued): Blending of Eastern and Western elements was also evident in various art forms. Mr Lebedeff, a Russian, established the Bengali Theatre for British and Bengali audiences in a mixture of languages. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, poet, writer and dramatist, wrote plays in Western format in both English and Hindi. His portrait by Atul Bose clearly shows his affinity with Western culture. The hybridity evident in theatre can also be seen in visual art. A particular form associated with imperial Calcutta was Kalighat scroll painting. Patuas were itinerant villagers who sang as they unrolled their scrolls, describing the painted scenes or events. Kalighat paintings were originally religious paintings produced and sold as souvenirs in temple precincts. The British set up institutions giving Western training in art. The Calcutta School of Art developed unique hybrid art forms, blending Hindi and Christian cultures and images. Secular themes commented on community and society often depicting the middle class or the British. Rudyard Kipling collected and preserved many Kalighat paintings, now held in the V&A Museum. By 20C this form of painting ceased, but scroll painting continues with travelling artists illustrating memorable events. The hybrid city of Calcutta with its mixture of Indian and British gave way to a new generation of independent culture. The Indian Independence Movement was inspired by writer, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, who personified India as a mother goddess. Rabindranath Tagore's poem and music in praise of Mother India, 'I bow to thee, Oh Mother' has now become the national song. He created a new, all encompassing genre of art which transcends national culture and reaches out internationally.



The Art of Rabindranath Tagore. Rabindranath Tagore was the greatest artist of Imperial Calcutta and remains the most famous Bengali artist. His mother tongue was Bengali but he also wrote in English, although this lacks the musicality of Bengali. With a long beard and robes, Tagore looked like a guru and popularised this image. He was a great polymath, social reformer, poet, writer, composer of music and painter. In early 20C he was possibly the greatest artist in the world but is now less well known. Being the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 awarded him global stardom. Tagore was born in Calcutta in 1861 and died there in 1941; his lifetime therefore coincided with the years of the British Raj. He was an international figure drawing on Eastern and Western culture but strongly opposing British rule in India. The 14th of 15 children in a very wealthy and influential Hindi family, he lived in a magnificent house in a culturally stimulating environment. Raised mainly by servants, he was at times lonely and rarely left the house. He was mainly home schooled but read Western science, literature and philosophy, becoming culturally hybrid. He was later sent to a public school in Brighton and began a law degree at University College London before opting instead for independent study of Shakespeare's plays. In 1880 he returned to Bengal without a degree, but soon published

numerous poems, stories and novels and began to be recognised as a gifted writer. During 1890s Tagore was sent manage the family estate in rural West Bengal where he lived on a houseboat and soon developed a sympathy for the Muslim peasantry as well as a love of the countryside, which inspired his painting. In later life, Tagore became a global traveller visiting 30 countries on 5 continents. His prolific artistic work may be divided into four categories: literature, song, painting and poetry.

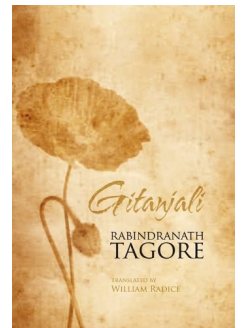
Literature: Tagore wrote books, short stories, plays, novels and novellas. The only standardisation of the Bengali language was by the British, with differing meanings in its spoken and written form. Tagore wrote *The Home and the World*, one of his full length novels, in spoken Bengali. This made it accessible to more people, not only to the educated and high caste as written Bengali would be. Tagore was intent upon inclusivity. His 1910 novel *Gora* has the controversial theme of national identity, of all humans being part of the same family, not defined by birth, and mixed heritage and identity being fully accepted. This political and moral message permeates much of Tagore's literary output.

Song: Tagore developed his own style of music interwoven with Bengali culture and folk music, but also including Western elements. He is the only person to have written the national anthem for two countries: India and Bangladesh. His love songs include *When You Came to Me in Darkness*, which may be heard sung beautifully by Sahana Bajpaie.

Painting: Tagore began painting at the age of 60 producing thousands of works of art, which were exhibited across Europe, Russia and the United States. He found painting difficult but was influenced by primitive painting from many countries. His paintings often depicted imaginary animals, indistinct landscapes and formless people in strange colours. Representations of half remembered shadows of people and places seem to hint at something infinite behind. Although Tagore was untrained as a painter, his paintings are acknowledged to be of an excellent quality.

Poetry: Poetry is the most popular art form in Bengal and Tagore wrote thousands of poems, some of which he put to music. His most famous collection of poems is *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*), which won the 1913 Nobel Prize for Literature. Originally written in Bengali, Tagore wrote an English version whilst recuperating from an illness and during a long journey to England. Intrigued by hearing that Tagore had mislaid and then recovered his poetry notebook on the London underground, W B Yeats asked to read some verses aloud at a literary party that they both attended in London. This reading made a great impression and, when published, the poems won the Nobel Prize. Tagore attained an international reputation as a great artist. His spiritual style addressing big themes such as grief, joy, love, and universalism attracted international appeal.

Tagore's Legacy: Tagore's influence dominates Bengali culture and he is deeply revered in India. Although he is renowned throughout the world, his work is not widely read outside India as Bengali is a difficult language and there have been some poor translations. However, there can be no doubt that, by his ardent promotion of unity, encompassing diversity, for independent India, Tagore made a profound contribution to India's own way in the world, probably even more than Ghandi did.



Reading List:

William Radice's translation from the Bengali version of *Gitanjali*
 William Radice's translations of Tagore's *Selected Poems* and *Selected Short Stories*.
 C A Bayly - *The Birth of the Modern World*.

Bengali scroll singers and their story may be seen by following the link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vj_k_dt3eWU

Sahana Bajpaie can be heard singing the Love Songs of Rabindranath Tagore by following the link:
<https://youtu.be/EM8LVNgqKk?list=RDEM8LVNgqKk>