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# Technical aspects of Abanindranath Tagore's wash painting and its Evolution

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## Abstract

*Abanindranath was born in Tagore Family in 1871. He took his early training in art from western artists and simultaneously studied Indian miniature paintings. At the same time, he observed the Japanese wash technique. Later on, a unique wash technique was created which established the modern Indian style, as such he is known as Father of Modern Indian Painting. He studied Indian mythological epic and painted Krishna Lila Series. Later on, painted Omar Khayyam Mughal series, Arabian Nights, Landscape Krishna Mangal and Chandi Mangal etc.*

**Keywords:** *Early Training, Wash Technique, its diversion, beginning of modern era, present status of wash technique.*

## 1. Introduction:

From the dawn of human civilization, expression through art came into existence and can be traced back to the ancient cave paintings and designed earthenware. Two important techniques “Tempera” and “Gouache” came into practice in the ancient period and continued down to modern world.

‘Technique’ & ‘Medium’ are usually related to each other. For difference of ‘Medium’ or what we call ‘vehicle’ one technique is ‘Tempera’ and the other one is ‘Gouache’. Now we deal with a new technique ‘wash’ in painting hardly 125 years old. This technique was initiated by Abanindranath Tagore (image-1) in India in the last decade of 19th century, and is practiced with ‘water colour’ on

paper, silk and cloth. He is also considered as the father of modern Indian painting.

Abanindranath was born in 1871 in Jorasanko Tagore Family. He was the son of Gunendranath Tagore and nephew of Rabindranath Tagore who inspired him to a great extent. Government Art School in Calcutta got Abanindranath as Vice Principal in 1905. He actively executed till 1915 and then he resigned from the post as a result of strong differences of opinion regarding students' discipline with the then Principal Percy Brown.

Abanindranath established Indian Society of Oriental Art in 1907 along with elder brother Gaganendranath and some other art lover, in this art society and in the ‘Bichitra Club’ in the Jorasanko building where many artists got the

privilege of practice of art under supervision of Abanindranath directly. This tradition of wash technique was spread to various part of India by these students.

## 2. Beginning of Art Education:

He took his initial training in Art education under the guidance of Ghilardi from Italy and Charles Palmer from England. His training was in Western style of painting, mostly in oil, pastel and water colour. Some how he felt tired with his work in oil & pastel and was searching for a new way of expression. At that point of time, he received a few Irish illuminations, British water paintings & Mughal Miniatures that helped him most.



**Image 1** A.N Tagore, Self Portrait  
(Image from album)<sup>2</sup>

It should be mentioned here that, the principal of Govt. Art School, E.B. Havell, helped him, and Abanindranath considered him as his 'Guru'. In 1902 Japanese Artist and thinker of high order Mr. Okakura came to India and afterwards Tyken & Hishida two well reputed Japanese painters came here and Abanindranath and his disciples observed the Japanese Technique of Wash process. However, Abanindranath adopted the technique in his own way. Thus, this wash painting initiated by Abanindranath is a synthesis of British water colour system, Japanese wash technique and textural drawing of Mughal Miniature painting.

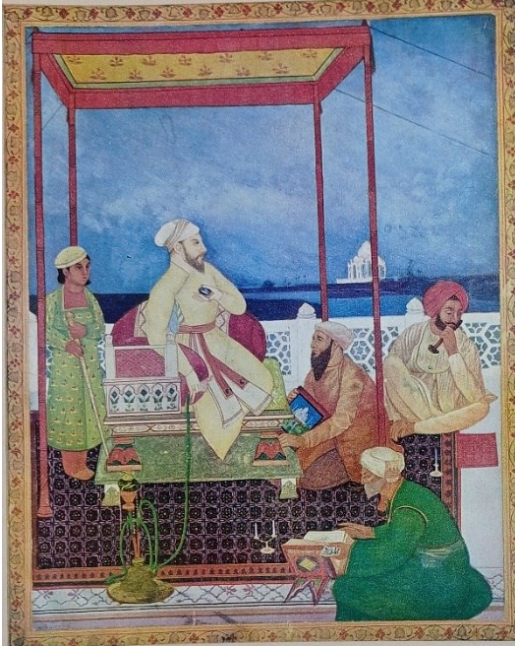
Abanindranath's earliest reproduced works are drawings for a book of poems -Chitrangada.

## 3. Diversion of Art practice of Abanindranath:

Abanindranath's drawings were mostly academic. His schooling was under Western style of Painting mentioned earlier. Considering his time and till date his paintings are unique. It was discussed earlier that Abanindranath's training in Art Education had undergone Western influence. As he was feeling tired of naturalistic pattern of work, it was Rabindranath who advised him to go through Vaishnava literature. And perhaps that was the turning point of his art career. He was deeply moved by the feeling & emotion of Vaishnava Myth rather than ideology of Radha Krishna Leela. He drew a number of paintings known as Radhakrishna series, (image-4) influenced by Rajput/ Mughal pattern, and that was the first approach of modern painting in India. These paintings of Radhakrishna series reflect the attitude, taste of Modern mind of that time. For many other reasons these series of paintings have historical value in modern Indian Art Scene.

Abanindranath studied Mughal (image-2&3) painting thoroughly as well as Western decorative pattern. He internalized his learning and what he produced represents a new form of art of new era. Abanindranath Tagore produced several illustrating series on themes from ancient Hindu epics and literature between 1895 and 1900. Krishna Lila series was first among them executed around 1895. The series when shown to Palmer, advised Abanindranath to proceed with due venture and produce more such similar series. When these paintings were taken to Ghilardi, he highly appreciated the paintings after thorough inspection.

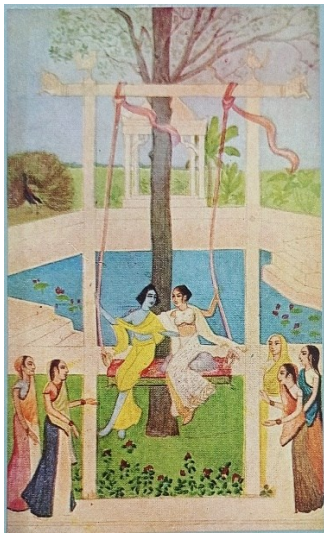
After that a change occurred in his 'Bharat Mata'(image-5) 1905. It was the time that some changes were gradually coming into surface.



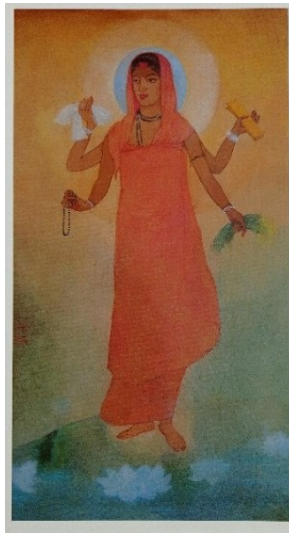
**Image 2** A.N. Tagore, Building of the Taj, 1901  
Collection -RBS (Image from album)<sup>2</sup>



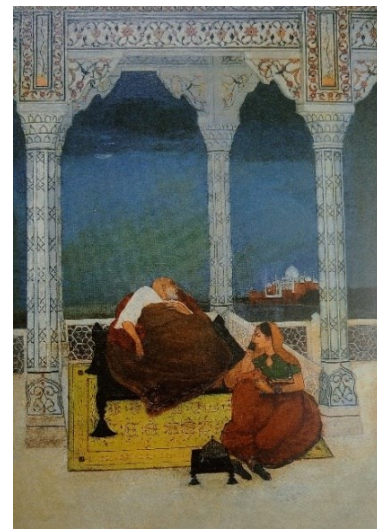
**Image 3** Jehangir celebrating the festival of Aab-Pashi, Mughal painting (Image from album)<sup>11</sup>



**Image 4** A.N. Tagore, On the Swing-Jhulan, 1897, Water colour, Collection-RBS, (Image from album)<sup>2</sup>



**Image 5** A.N. Tagore Bharat Mata, 1905, Wash Technique, (Image from album)<sup>2</sup>



**Image 6** A.N. Tagore, The Passing of Shahjahan, 1902, Oil Colour, Collection -RBS (Image from album)<sup>2</sup>

In 1902 he created a painting in oil but that was in a small format like miniature form 'The Passing of Shahjahan'(image-6) and was awarded in Delhi Darbar and that brought him immense popularity & fame.

By that time Abanindranath attempted his animal series, mythological subjects and at the same time historical subjects and many other common subjects and that was represented in a way that gives us some idea that touches our soul.

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam was the first non-Indian text Abanindranath chose to paint. Based on the poetry by Edward Fitzgerald, he painted the series between 1905 to 1911.

His Arabian Night's series is a magnificent work of art. Based on the Arabian Nights, which is a collection of one thousand and one folk tales of Middle East, Abanindranath Tagore has painted 45 paintings in wash technique, which is highly appreciated. His 'Omar Khayyam'(image-7) series was pleasing but 'Arabian Nights'(image-9) series seems unique. Abanindranath's story telling pattern and arrangements gives us the feeling of 'Bagdad'. These paintings in approach, construction, presentation are the treasure of modern painting.

The human figures in the Omar Khayyam set (1905-11) and the Arabian Nights (1928-30) are both substantial and naturalistic, in spite of the haziness of the wash style. Another notable aspect was his keenness in creating space to contain figural composition either with architectural elements or with landscape. Consciousness about the element of space as a pictorial structure is evident in his paintings.

From the Japanese artists Tyken and Hishida, Abanindranath drew an inspiration to paint landscape. He travelled to different places, Shahzadpur in Bihar, Puri, Mussouri etc and created various landscapes which express

mysterious illusion. Besides he painted on different birds(image-8) and animals. He produced series of work in various subjects. Representation of colour (light) in his painting was very important, at the same time subject and its idea was prominent. "Title" & "idea" both simultaneously was very important in understanding his painting.

He created Mask series on various characters of theatre which took place at Jorasanko Thakurbari. Besides Japanese Masks encouraged him to create Mask series.

Abanindranath attempted, two series of paintings in a very informal way at the last part of his career. One is 'Krishna Mangal' and the other is 'Chandi Mangal'. These two series of paintings had the approach of folk tradition, but differed from folk style, in form & approach and bears the legacy of the master. Abanindranath was an artist, who never stuck to one pattern ever and that is why he was great.

#### **4. Spreading of Wash Technique by Abanindranath:**

His temperament, life style, his individual taste was quite different from his students. He was an important member of 'Jorasanko Thakurbari' (family). In those days all good cultural movements originated from that area (Jorasanko Thakurbari) and Rabindranath was in its centre. Abanindranath practiced this technique in painting at Jorasanko Thakurbari first time and in 1905 in Calcutta Art School. After learning from Govt. School of Art he became main force in 'Indian Society of Oriental Art'. The main centre of Abanindranath's artistic endeavor was Kalabhavan, Shantiniketan from 1919. From here, through his students this technique of painting(wash) spread to places like Lucknow, Jaipur, Lahore, Madras, Karnataka and Andhra where it was established and practiced. However, Kala Bhavan and Kolkata Art School





**Image 7** A.N Tagore, Omar Khayyam, 1905-09, Collection: Santiniketan (Image from album)<sup>2</sup>



**Image 8** A.N Tagore, Peacock, 1916, Collection - RBS (Image from album)<sup>2</sup>



**Image 9** A.N. Tagore, Arabian Nights, Sindbad the Sailor, 1928-30 Collection - RBS (Image from album)<sup>2</sup>

(later Govt. College of Art & Craft) became the main centers.

Now point to be mentioned here is that the original technique developed by Abanindranath underwent many deviations in the hands of his followers and that was obvious.

We should mention the names of Abanindranath's students who established this school of painting in different Art Institutions like –

- I. Nandalal Bose in Kala Bhavan (Shantiniketan).
- II. Ashit Halder - Lucknow.
- III. Shailen Dey - Jaipur.
- IV. Kshitindranath Majumder - Indian Society of Oriental Art, Calcutta.
- V. Samarendranath Gupta - Maho School of Art, Lahore.
- VI. Promode Kumar Chattopadhyay - Andhra Pradesh.
- VII. D. P. Roychowdhury - Madras.
- VIII. V. Kenkatappa - Karnataka.

## 5. Technical aspects of wash painting:

In the field of water colour, the painted paper is soaked in water colour and after drying the pigments are fixed to the superficial area of the paper. If it is dipped in water a part of the pigment is washed out and rest of the pigment remain on the paper. This process is repeated. After the colours are washed the pigments from this surface area become less and thickness of colour reduces and become softer. Now the colour, it's texture and thickness create a mysterious dimension of light and shade. As per requirements of this painting, sometimes water colour and, sometimes thin tint is used on the entire picture. As a result, colour harmony is created in this painting. In these paintings Abanindranath used to try to bring out the unseen essence and go beyond the unknown.

As per requirement he had to wash the paper again and again. So, he had to use good foreign paper. Because of repeated washing of paper, the pigment used to be thin which increased longevity of the painting.

## 6. Anatomy of wash painting:

For the wash painting generally, paper is used as a support. Some other material used like parchment paper which used as a support for wash painting is composed by mostly 100% cotton or linen rag. The surface of water colour paper is very absorbent with little uneven surface.

### (i) Sizing:

At the stage of preparation of the paper initially sizing is to be done. Materials used for sizing in paper are gelatine, starch, glue and gum. Sizing materials along with chalk powder are added during manufacturing process of paper to prevent uncontrolled spreading and bleeding of colour. These materials reduce the porosity of paper.

### (ii) Ground:

The sized water colour paper is itself treated as ground in wash painting. No additional priming layer is applied as in Gauche painting. This is a one of the major differences between gauche and wash painting.

### (iii) Painting layer:

Paint layer is very thin and semi-transparent. It has three or four and more coating of water colour but it is very thin.

### (iv) Protective layer:

Wash paint does not have protective layer. It is the third difference in anatomy of wash and gauche painting.

## 7. Deterioration Factor:

In general water colour painted on paper either its wash or gauche painting. The deterioration of water colour painting is due to two factors. They are-

- A. Intrinsic Factor
- B. Environment factor

### 7.1. Intrinsic Factor

According to anatomy of water colour painting, in general there are three layers –support, ground and paint layer. Intrinsic factor effect on all three layers that deterioration is interrelated with.

#### Deterioration of support:

Weakness in strength of paper is mainly related to presence of short fibre in raw material. Moreover, chemicals used for bleaching of paper pulp cannot be removed completely, hence after a period of time it results in acidity which weaken the paper. The lignin part of cellulose material when not removed completely culminates in acidic character. The cellulose of the paper also undergoes slow chemical changes and damages the paper. Presence of lignin turn the paper brown in colour. It also affects the iron impurities entered into the paper during manufacturing and in due course form brown spots. This is called foxing.

#### Detachment of paint layer:

The detachment of paint layer from support or ground has many causes like insufficient adhesion poor working method and bad quality of binding medium etc. the adhesive properties of the binding medium may deteriorate with time.

### 7.2. Environmental factors:

The environment includes the weather light atmospheric gasses, microorganisms, dust etc. which are present around the painting. The atmospheric air, light, heat, humidity, insect, fungi, human being, natural calamities the damages to control system which control heat and relative humidity. The environmental factor is divided in three divisions. They are

- a. Physical factors-light, humidity, temperature
- b. Biological factors-Fungi, Insect
- c. Chemical Factors-Acidity

## 8. Conclusion:

Abanindranath Tagore came from a very cultural family of Bengal (Jorasanko Thakur Bari) where creative art in various forms was practiced by many members. He is the nephew of Rabindranath Tagore. He was a painter who introduced new style of art which was Indian and along with his disciples; this art was spread all over India. He studied Japanese style, European style of painting and created a new style. He patronized the wash style which unfortunately has lost its importance today.

European training influenced Abanindranath's spontaneous style, however folk influence is evident in the use of outlines in his Chandi mangal series and other contemporary sets. In Abanindranath's early drawing use of cross hatching and an Impressionistic approach to colour and free handling of the pastel in the early pastel portraits is evident, several animal and bird paintings show similar style of execution. Work of Abanindranath exhibits two parallel styles throughout his career as creative artist. Later style of Abanindranath reflects his intrinsic personality rather than influence of external elements.

Today the art institution, Govt. College of Art and Craft, Kolkata continue this wash painting techniques, as there is still an Indian Painting department. But this departmental wash technique is improvised to have modern effect. Another institution, Indian Society of Oriental Art, Kolkata, founded by Abanindranath Tagore, 1907, retains this traditional wash technique.

Wash techniques of Abanindranath Tagore played a great role in new vision of Indian art during colonial period. So, wash technique has a historical value in our Indian art. It should survive in art field with the help of every artist for our posterity.

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