

# The World in a Single Nest: Following the Way of Tagore

*рис. 7.2*

25 Jun—

23 Aug 2026—

GES-2



*The World in a Single Nest* is a joint project between GES-2 House of Culture and the Rabindra Bhavana Museum at Visva-Bharati University in West Bengal. The exhibition offers a new perspective on one of the most significant figures in Indian culture: the poet, writer, composer, thinker, public figure, and artist, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941).

In 1913, Tagore was the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature for his collection of poems *Gitanjali* (“Sacred Songs”), and two of Tagore’s poems went on to become the national anthems of India and Bangladesh. However, Tagore’s significance is measured not only by his rich and diverse creative legacy. He is also remembered for his social activism, which played an important role in the cultural and political revival of India as it moved towards independence.

Visva-Bharati University, founded in 1921 in Santiniketan, Bengal, is the most complete and enduring embodiment of Tagore’s ideas. It is also the focal point of the exhibition at GES-2. Tagore considered the university to be his greatest achievement. In a letter to his friend and colleague Mahatma Gandhi, he likened it to “a vessel which is carrying

the cargo of my life's best treasure." The educational system at Visva-Bharati offered an amalgam of education, artistic expression, support for the rural population, local traditions, and agriculture, pursuing a synthesis of Eastern and Western science.

The university included the Kala Bhavana art school, which combined crafts with agriculture in a holistic vision of man and nature, bringing together artists, scientists, and ordinary farmers, and engaging in dialogue with the traditions and contemporary trends of many countries. Some of the most significant artists of Indian modernism—Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij, and K. G. Subramanyan—taught and worked in Santiniketan at Tagore's invitation.

At the age of 67, Rabindranath Tagore himself turned to visual art. Tagore the artist, to whom this exhibition is dedicated, left behind more than 2500 paintings and graphic works, most of which are kept in his former home in Santiniketan, which is now a museum dedicated to his legacy. The works are displayed at GES-2 on two opposite walls of the exhibition hall and grouped according to the thematic division adopted by Indian researchers of the master's work.

Tagore's art was the embodiment of Indian modernism, which, as in Europe and Russia, began with an avant-garde rejection of the canons (for colonial India, these were the canons of Western academicism, as cultivated in Britain through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). Tagore's modernism was simultaneously rooted in the ancient artistic traditions of his home region and open to dialogue with the art of both East and West.

The desire for internationalism was also reflected in numerous journeys, which Tagore undertook between 1912 and 1932, including a visit to the USSR. The GES-2 project includes a display of archival materials related to the exhibition of Tagore's works, which was held at the Museum of New Western Art in Moscow in 1930.

Many of Tagore's ideas, expressed in his journalistic writings, essays, and speeches, sound very modern. His views on such seemingly diverse phenomena as pedagogy and art education, internationalism, collective creativity, nature and agriculture form a coherent philosophy. These themes became the leitmotifs of the exhibition *The World in a Single Nest*, and they are echoed in the works of contemporary artists from different countries. Engaging in dialogue with Tagore's philosophical and political reflections on, for example, ecology or globalisation, these works show that he remains a highly relevant social thinker even today.

# About Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore came from a wealthy and influential Bengali family of landowners and reformers, where Hindu, Muslim, and European traditions were equally respected. Raised with ideals of openness towards the world and towards all kinds of knowledge, Tagore learned to view the collision of different outlooks not as a threat, but as a source of strength. The future poet grew up in a home where art and spirituality were a natural part of everyday life. He realised from a young age that education was not just about lessons and books: much could also be learned from gardens, from music, and from conversation with other people.

Tagore spent his youth in spiritual searches and travels between East and West. He was sent to study in Britain. However, it was not so much English university education as the encounter with a different culture, which had the biggest impact on the young man. Tagore returned to Bengal without completing his studies and devoted the next decade to literature and music. Later, the task of managing the family estate gave him an intimate understanding of the life of the Indian peasantry—their poverty, the rhythm of their labour, and their potential for harmonious community living. By encountering a different culture and then immersing himself in his own, Tagore reached the conclusion that no tradition has a monopoly on truth and that a person can only be truly free by remaining receptive and open to a multitude of different voices.

In his mature years, Tagore made his name not only as a poet and writer, but also as an artist, philosopher, teacher, and composer. He published over fifty collections of poetry, including *Gitanjali* ("Sacred Songs"), which won Tagore the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, making him the first Indian writer to achieve international fame. His novels, plays, and short stories, exploring issues of identity, tradition, and modernisation, created new forms in Indian literature and are acknowledged classics of the Bengali Renaissance. Tagore's paintings are remarkable for their unique visual language. For Tagore, art was never merely decorative: like education, it was inextricably linked to social processes and to life itself.

The university which Tagore created in Santiniketan, a district in his home region of West Bengal, occupies a special place in his legacy. From its beginnings as a school in 1901, the institution developed under Tagore's guidance and became Vishva-Bharati

University in 1921. Its Sanskrit motto, *Yatra visvam bhavatyekanidam* (“Where the whole world finds a home in one nest”), has been borrowed as the title for the exhibition at GES-2 House of Culture.

Learning at Vishva-Bharati University was not limited to books: students mastered the handling of natural materials, studied traditional crafts, and took part in agricultural work. Art was a part of their everyday life, and the learning environment combined nature with culture and personal freedom with social responsibility.

Tagore's life was in constant motion. In 1912, he again visited England where he made *Gitanjali* known to a broader audience. In 1916–1917, he lectured in Japan and the United States, and subsequently travelled throughout Europe, meeting along the way with Romain Rolland, Albert Einstein, and Bernard Shaw. In 1930, Tagore visited the USSR, where he praised the new education system but also called attention to alarming signs of the suppression of freedom. For Tagore, each journey to a foreign country was not only a cultural mission, but also a lesson in another culture, an opportunity to hear its unique voice. Tagore's ideal was a world that “has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls” (*Gitanjali*: 35) and where the values of different peoples do not exclude but complement each other.

Tagore also played an important role in the twentieth-century history of India. He backed the anti-colonial movement but did not support the use of violence, believing that true independence sprang from spiritual and cultural liberation. He maintained a friendship and debate with Mahatma Gandhi that spanned many years: they respected each other but disagreed on certain points—Tagore criticised Gandhi's policy of non-cooperation and argued that India should be open to the world, rather than closed off in its own traditions. For Tagore, social activism was a continuation of his educational and creative work: he avoided slogans and sought to create conditions whereby each person could find dignity and freedom.

In the last decades of his life, Tagore spoke with increasing urgency of a crisis in civilisation, offering an original view on the specifically twentieth-century problems that preoccupied philosophers and other thinkers. For Tagore, the crisis was not so much that of a confrontation between nations or ideologies as a rift between man and machine, human personality and organisation, culture and the inhuman logic of power. Progress, for Tagore, is measured not by the

invention of new devices to make daily life more convenient, but by the growth of the human personality. His call for humane development remains one of his most relevant legacies today.

## Tagore the Artist

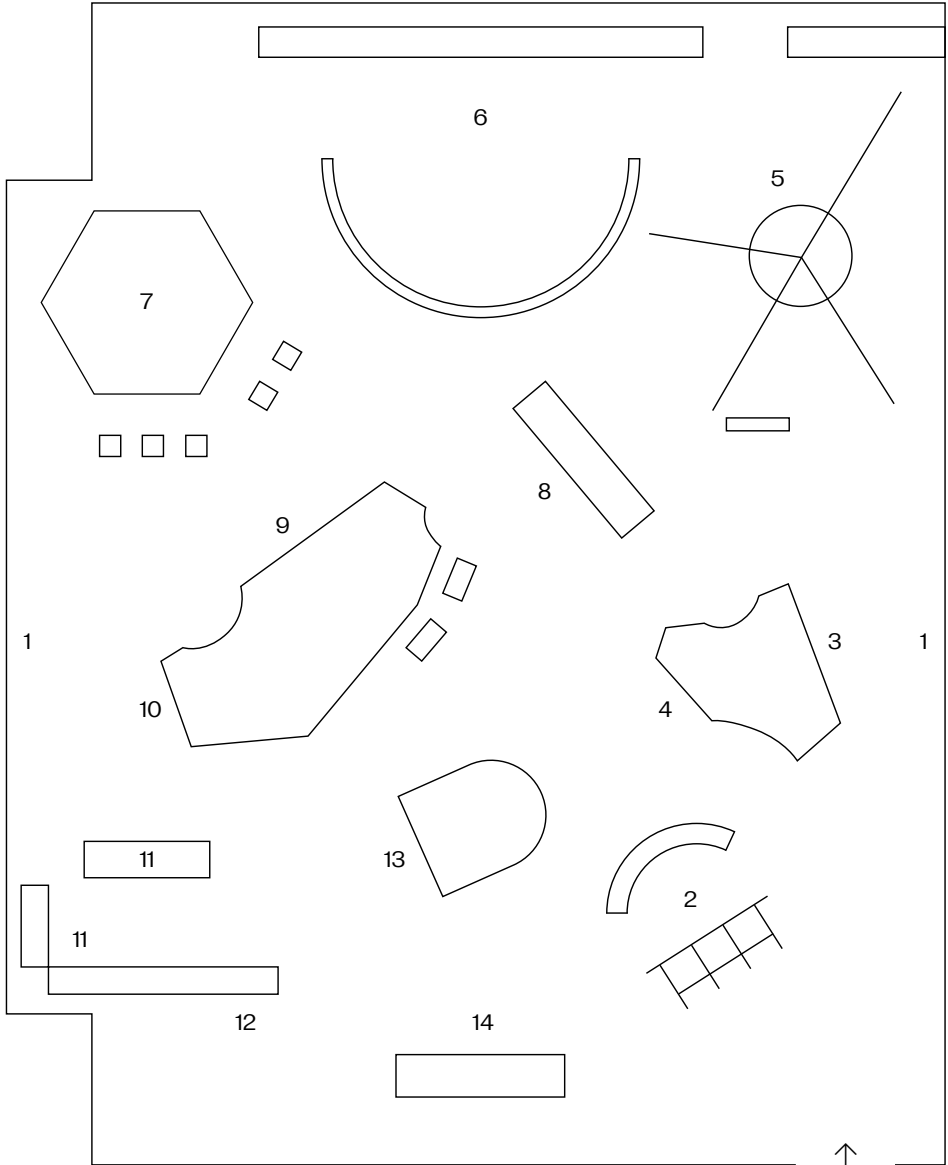
Tagore was self-taught in the visual arts. He took up painting at the age of 67, having already made his name as a poet. Tagore said that his poems were born from the description of images that took shape in his imagination, while his paintings arose spontaneously and intuitively: he did not know, when he reached for a pencil, pen or brush, what image would appear on the paper. Each work was created momentarily, taking no more than an hour to complete without preliminary sketches.

Tagore used artwork on the margins of his poetry manuscripts, interweaving ornaments and images around words or entire blocks of text, long before he started to produce stand-alone works. Such ornamentation is particularly prominent in *Purabi* (1925), where the images are a mix of geometric and organic forms, as would be the case in Tagore's later art.

Tagore made his first paintings in 1928, and over the next thirteen years he created more than 2500 works on paper in ink, watercolour, or pastel in a style reminiscent of traditional Chinese or Japanese art (he referred to all of them as "paintings"). His motifs vary from semi-fantastic animals and birds, ornaments, individual portraits and mask portraits, to expressive multi-figure scenes, landscapes (more ideal than real, conveying the spiritual origins of nature), and flowers. Tagore sought to capture the essence of things, emphasising line, emotion, colour, or gesture. True to his striving for philosophical generalisation, he did not date or name his productions. The result is a single body of work, where independent motifs and open interpretations are intertwined without any deliberate connection to the author's biography or intention.

Tagore's art is directly linked to the emergence of Indian modernism, which accompanied India's struggle for independence and implied the search for a new, original artistic language that would be adequate to the modern world. Combining abstraction with figurative representation, Tagore's works

broke with the colonial tradition of academic realism. Elements of Indian art coexist with echoes of Western trends (expressionism, primitivism, art nouveau), and the result belongs to both national and Western traditions. The Indian art historian and specialist in Tagore's legacy R. Shiva Kumar coined the term "contextual modernism" to describe the work of Tagore and of others who worked alongside him in Santiniketan, emphasising their programmatic combination of local with international.



- 1. Rabindranath Tagore
- 2. Ulyana Podkorytova
- 3. Raqs Media Collective
- 4. Abhishek Chakraborty
- 5. Sanchayan Ghosh

- 6. The Otolith Group
- 7. GABAA
- 8. Ruma Choudhury
- 9. Samit Das
- 10. Sangita Maity

- 11. Prasanta Sahu
- 12. Ivan Novikov
- 13. Liza Neklessa
- 14. Archival exhibition

# Nature

Abhishek Chakraborty  
From the series *Resurgence*,  
2025

Ruma Choudhury  
*Ajay River*, 2023–2024

GABAA  
*জমির সোয়া তিন দিক*

(*Jomir soa tin dik*), 2025

Sanchayan Ghosh  
*Tree Study, Santiniketan*,  
2007/2025

Sangita Maity  
*River Diversion*, 2024

Liza Neklessa  
*Branches of Poetry, Space  
of Imagery*, 2025

Ivan Novikov  
From the *Öland Series*, 2023

Rabindranath Tagore saw the world as a unified whole with nature at its core, permeating all spheres of life and creativity. In contrast with Western approaches, where nature was usually contrasted with human endeavour, Tagore believed that all practical and theoretical activities should be deeply rooted in the natural world.

This creed was fully reflected in the educational programme of Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan. The university used open-air classrooms—spaces marked out by stone slabs around one or several trees, where students studied all year round, weather permitting. The purpose of education for Tagore was to find a balance between a person's inner world and the surrounding reality, and learning in the natural environment was one way of achieving that balance. Tagore believed that study in the open air enabled students to develop in harmony with natural cycles—the alternation of day and night, and the changing of the seasons.

The physical architecture of the university blurred the boundaries between individuals and between people and nature, connecting microcosm and macrocosm. Along with the open-air classrooms, Tagore used eco-friendly mudbrick houses without a threshold, connecting indoors and outdoors. Around the edge of the campus, university buildings rubbed up against the homes of ordinary country people. All these features together emphasise the special status of nature at Visva-Bharati: not merely an environment, but an integral part of existence; not merely an object of study and use, but a helper and companion to people.

Focus on the natural world extends to features of the university curriculum. Art departments at Visva-Bharati make extensive use of natural materials and traditional crafts. Unlike the Western tradition, where art education is more often based on studio practices and uses man-made materials, nature is not alienated from the process of artistic production, but is included in it at the practical level, sometimes even becoming a full-fledged co-author of art works.

Finally, respect for nature is maintained in many of the traditions and rituals of Visva-Bharati, some of which were invented by Tagore himself. One example is the Vriksharopana tree planting festival, an expression of appreciation and care for nature, where the collective planting of seedlings is accompanied by music and rituals. The song, which is traditionally performed during the Vriksharopana procession, will celebrate its centenary in 2025.

# Agriculture

Sangita Maity  
*River Diversion*, 2024

Ivan Novikov  
From the *Öland Series*, 2023

The Otolith Group  
*O Horizon*, 2018

Prasanta Sahu  
*The Drumstick Tree and  
Other Stories*, 2022–2025  
*Mapping Craters II*,  
2021–2022

India in Tagore's time was still a predominantly agrarian country, with almost three-quarters of the population engaged in farming. Agriculture and land management were built into the structure of Visva-Bharati University just as they were built into the life of the region where the university was located.

Experiments to improve soil and agricultural practices were carried out in harmony with nature and in pursuit of specific goals, from cultivation of plants for food to the production of art materials, creation of medicines, changing of the landscape, and the advancement of the region's people.

In 1863, Rabindranath Tagore's father, Debendranath Tagore, acquired eight hectares of land where he created an ashram, or spiritual retreat, which he called "Santiniketan" (Bengali for "house of peace"). At the time when it was acquired, the land around the ashram was far from being the oasis that Santiniketan has become today. It was Debendranath who began the work of improvement. Infertile soil was removed and replaced with imported high-quality soil, a garden was laid out, and systematic landscaping began. Flowers bloomed and trees grew. By opening a school and then a university in Santiniketan at the beginning of the twentieth century, Rabindranath Tagore continued his father's work, but in a new way: what grew there were not only trees, but also human talents.

The commitment of the university to the land was confirmed in 1922, when Tagore opened the Institute of Rural Reconstruction in the neighbouring town of Sriniketan. Students of the new Institute learnt not only agronomy and crafts, but also practices of cooperation and mutual assistance, first aid, and the skills of knowledge transfer to both adults and children. New crops were grown on an experimental farm, sowing techniques were demonstrated, and in 1928, a plan was developed to introduce more progressive agricultural technologies in neighbouring villages. The Institute worked to help villagers solve problems on their own initiative using innovative agricultural practices and crafts, and through cooperation between individual households and entire communities. The Institute continues its work today and remains an important part of Visva-Bharati University.

Distinctions of caste and category did not apply when it came to agricultural work in Santiniketan: local children and schoolchildren, university students and teachers, artists and craftsmen, and ordinary villagers

worked side by side. This tradition continues today, for example, in various training courses organised by the university for local farmers, housewives, and young people. Constant interaction with local communities and involvement in their lives is part of the university's philosophy.

## Versatility

Samit Das  
*In Search of Frozen Music*,  
2006–2025

Liza Neklessa  
*Branches of Poetry, Space  
of Imagery*, 2025

Ulyana Podkorytova  
*A Voice Is a Wave*, 2025

The defining feature of Rabindranath Tagore's personality was the breadth of his knowledge and his contribution to many different spheres of human culture, from poetry and prose to music, painting, architecture, philosophy, and social causes. Like the thinkers of the Renaissance and in the spirit of what today is called multidisciplinary, Tagore was a versatile creator who combined art, science, and social practice. Tagore embedded this commitment to comprehensive knowledge in the structure of Visva-Bharati, transforming it into a space of educational universalism.

The curriculum at Visva-Bharati is unique. Although students were enrolled in specific schools—philosophy, art, music—the university was designed so that formal divisions did not interfere with cultural exchange: classes were held in the open air, courses in specific subjects were accompanied by practical trainings from other fields, and collective celebrations and creative projects brought together representatives of different disciplines.

Life on the campus was built around the idea of community. All students, regardless of their faculty, were invited to participate in theatrical productions, musical evenings, and seasonal celebrations. In neighbouring Sriniketan, they took part in rural programmes, helping with agronomy experiments, learning crafts, and supporting educational initiatives for local residents. The university was, and still is, more than an academic space; it is a living laboratory of the interaction between art, science, and society.

The heart of Tagore's system was a philosophy, by which the ideal of a “universal person” did not depend solely on the development of utilitarian skills, but also on the creation of a holistic personality, sensitive to beauty, to the suffering of people and to universal spiritual values. Tagore viewed education as a way to expand the self and to move beyond narrow professional identity. His own multifaceted personality was reflected in the structure of the university that he founded, where life and study were inseparable, and where art and science came together in the service of people and of the world.

# Pedagogy

Samit Das  
*In Search of Frozen Music*,  
2006–2025

GABAA  
*জমির সোয়া তিন দিক*  
(*Jomir soa tin dik*), 2025

Sanchayan Ghosh  
*Tree Study, Santiniketan*,  
2007/2025

After taking over management of his family estate in Santiniketan, Rabindranath Tagore made it the centre of his educational project. First, in 1901, he opened a school, then in 1919, he created the Kala Bhavana art school, and in 1921, Visva-Bharati University came into being.

Comparing educational institutions to seeds, which grow into trees, Tagore believed that the goal of education was to nurture well-rounded, independent-minded individuals who would be active in public life and become pillars of India's future. This was to be achieved on the ancient Indian model of "tapovana", or forest school, where students and teachers lived together in a small community, and where mentors imparted knowledge not through lectures or rote learning, but through conversation and through questions and answers, encouraging debate and argumentation. Knowledge at Santiniketan was not an abstract concept, but something rooted in the place itself, in the land and community, bonding students with local people and implying personal responsibility on the part of both groups. Unlike colonial schools, where lessons were only in English, teaching at Tagore's university was also in the Bengali language. Native culture and history were studied alongside world culture and history.

Visva-Bharati University was not just an educational experiment, but the most complete embodiment of Tagore's ideas about history, social structure, culture, human nature, and its connection to the world. The central principle of the university programme was the inseparable link, mediated by art, between education, nature, and community life.

The concept of art, which was applied at Kala Bhavana art school on the initiative of Tagore, of the school director Nandalal Bose, and of other artists, assumed a close connection between creativity and life. Art was made into a part of the daily round, through joint theatre productions, monumental art in public spaces, and efforts to revive Indian craft traditions, in stark contrast with British colonial education, which tended to despise traditional arts and crafts.

Students studied lithography, lacquer painting, leatherwork, batik, and embroidery in workshops at the Institute of Rural Reconstruction, set up by Tagore in neighbouring Sriniketan. Outputs included furniture and design objects, book illustrations, as well as murals, mosaics, and sculptures for public spaces. In Tagore's educational project, the acquisition of knowledge and

the development of critical thinking were inseparable from creative self-expression. Art served as a connecting thread between education, work, nature, and life.

## Collective Creativity

GABAA  
জমির সোয়া তিন দিক  
(*Jomir soa tin dik*), 2025

The Otolith Group  
*O Horizon*, 2018

Ulyana Podkorytova  
*A Voice Is a Wave*, 2025

Raqs Media Collective  
*The Translator's Silence*,  
2017/2025

As noted by R. Shiva Kumar, Santiniketan was more than an educational project. It was an experiment in establishing a community where artistic creativity would play a leading role. For Tagore, art was not only a means of self-expression for individuals. It was a means to share feelings and thoughts with other people and to experience a sense of community and interconnectedness.

Traditional crafts, as a paradigm of collective self-expression, were an important part of the university curriculum, bringing together artists, artisans, and the local people who preserved and passed on craft traditions. Murals and mosaics on the façades of buildings in and around the university campus were another form of collective endeavour. Created by teachers and students of the Kala Bhavana art school, these works turned Santiniketan into a veritable open-air art gallery. Collective artistic practice was also apparent in regular theatrical, musical, and dance performances that Tagore encouraged among university students and teachers.

On an even larger scale, the university organised festivals and seasonal celebrations, which are still popular today. Similar to collective theatrical productions, the festivals were joint efforts by many people, combining poetry, music, dance, and decorative art. They were closely linked to nature and the changing seasons, celebrating their beauty and spiritual meaning, and reflecting the main principle of Tagore's philosophy—the fusion of art, nature, community, and labour. The seasonal festivals became universal celebrations, to which local people contributed alongside students and teachers, creating costumes and decorations, composing and performing songs, and devising scripts and choreography. Such events included the Basanta Utsav spring festival, when people dressed in yellow and orange to symbolise the coming of spring, the Poush Mela festival celebrating the harvest, when students and local artisans sold their wares at a fair, and the annual Vriksharopan tree-planting festival. These secular festivals were at once rooted in Bengali folk traditions and distinct from them, creating a new cultural environment and new traditions. Their main focus was not the spectacle, but collective involvement that overcame boundaries between

participants and spectators, setting aside the caste and religious divisions of Indian society so that people could experience their bond through joint creativity.

# Internationalism

The Otolith Group  
*O Horizon*, 2018

Ulyana Podkorytova  
*A Voice Is a Wave*, 2025

Raqs Media Collective  
*The Translator's Silence*,  
2017/2025

In a letter to Mahatma Gandhi in 1940, Rabindranath Tagore described Visva-Bharati University as “national in its immediate aspect” but “international in its spirit”. These formulations were definitive of the institution and found expression in the university’s unofficial motto, borrowed from ancient Vedic texts: “The world in a single nest”. Tagore conceived Santiniketan as a meeting place for different cultures, where they could engage in dialogue and mutual exchange, realising their shared humanity. Tagore believed that openness contributes to the creative impulse and the vitality of culture, that it is valuable not only for art, but also for political, economic, and social life. In Tagore’s view, openness has to become the basic principle of each person’s education and worldview.

Tagore’s internationalist vision developed over time, beginning with his support for the Swadeshi movement, which called for liberation from colonial dependence through a boycott of imported goods and the reinforcement of domestic production. At that time, Tagore was close to the Bengal School of Art, which emerged in Calcutta at the start of the twentieth century and proclaimed a new national style based on ancient traditions as a counterweight to Western trends and as a contribution to India’s struggle for independence. Tagore moved gradually towards the principles of pan-Asian cultural synthesis and then finally to an innovative and radically modern understanding of art and culture, which combined eastern traditions with openness to other cultures and affirmed hybridity and mutual influence as a global value.

Tagore’s internationalism was opposed to the black-and-white logic of imperialism and nationalism, and largely in tune with the global artistic avant-garde of the early twentieth century. In 1922, he helped the Austrian art historian Stella Kramrisch to organise an exhibition in Calcutta of work by artists of the German Bauhaus school. Alongside his associates in Santiniketan, Tagore forged a movement, which the art historian R. Shiva Kumar has called “contextual modernism”, combining a desire for innovation and expansion with

a deep-rooted attachment to local culture and tradition, based on local communities. Tagore's internationalism remains as relevant today as ever.

**The World in a Single Nest: Following the Way of Tagore**

Exhibition  
25 Jun—23 Aug 2026  
→ Gallery C2  
12+

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**The exhibition is organised in collaboration with**

Rabindra Bhavana Museum  
at Visva-Bharati University



**and**

Birla Academy of Art  
and Culture  
Emami Art  
Pushkin State Museum  
of Fine Arts  
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**In cooperation with**

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**Design development**

SLOVO

**Special thanks**

to Tatyana Dubyanskaya for  
her expert consultations

**Exhibition partner**



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