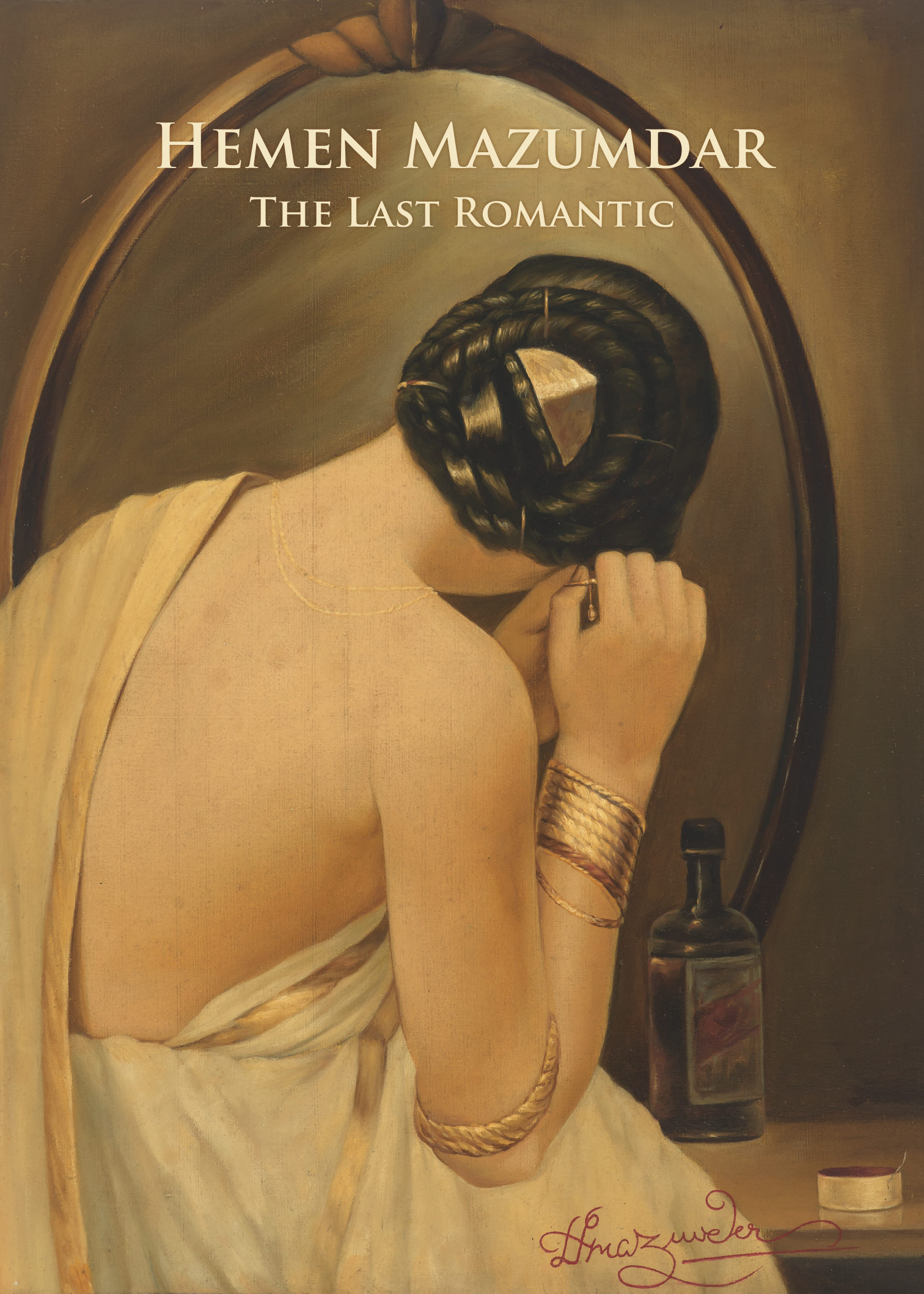


HEMEN MAZUMDAR

THE LAST ROMANTIC



"PRESENCING" IN MAZUMDAR'S ART

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Artworks by their nature are not objective but records of their creation at a given point in time. As archives of history, they are sites of contestation and reverence; beauty and beguilement; and identities and gaze awaiting to provide contemporary culture an opportunity to posthumously re-right history and facilitate the emergence of new readings. Curating exhibitions around private and public collections provide, even for the rarefied of art, a request to pierce through layers of cultural memory. It is an important exercise to provide new contexts and histories to understanding the present. In this regard, even the most radical attempt to study the influence of early 20th century artist such as Hemendranath Mazumdar's (1894-1948) work on contemporary culture would naturally lead to the study of the learning environment he lived in, his methods of composition and, in variably, subject matter.

Mazumdar is a celebrated painter whose works remain desired by museums, galleries and collectors alike. It is not often that a body of work emerges for engagement with the public and this exhibition is a welcome opportunity for reflection and interrogation. Art history provides a critical framework for the consideration of the influence of European art academies' style, method and composition on Mazumdar's work and why it warrants to be collected and appreciated. That the works are weighted in the craft of colonial arts education and philosophy of

the Indian tradition of painting - is worthy of significant deliberation to provide a pier into contemporary culture.

Colonial arts education in British India gave rise to various counterpoints. Whilst the British established arts schools in Madras, Bombay, Calcutta and Lahore as a civilizing force for the general population and development of decorative and applied arts, it gave rise to schools that fuelled aspirations and nationalisms. As studies have shown, artists were not mere purveyors of taught practices and formal pedagogies of their colonial arts education but rather they were aesthetically and critically engaged with their cultural practices and philosophies.¹

Mazumdar's educational environment was heavily framed by the curriculum of European art academies or 'academic art' which were focussed on both a formalised rendering of the human body and an incisive study of socio-cultural realism. Art historian Geeta Kapur records that the emphasis in these curriculum on life-drawing, expressed through sketches and paintings, "formed the academic criteria for and against which subsequent movements in Indian art developed".² The formalism of academic art has undergone, over the decades, fierce critique from artists, art critics and art historians for espousing a romantic and glossed-over myth on everyday life divorced from the true grit of the human condition. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, academic art found a new

1 - See the scholarly writings of Mitter and Viswanathan for detailed analysis of this. Mitter, Partha. *Indian Art*. Oxford Art History Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; Viswanathan, Gauri. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

2 - Kapur, Geeta. "A Stake in Modernity: Brief History of Contemporary Indian Art". In *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, edited by Caroline Turner. Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1993, p.29.

lease through theoretical reconsideration of everyday life. Art was critically appraised outside of the normative formalist/modernist paradigm and located within daily ritualised/realist values of perspective. Academic art was reframed as a potential site of production and circulation of meanings. Where art history and criticism was unkind, art theory and cultural studies embraced. This provides the entry point for the contemporary appreciation of Mazumdar who like many artists of his period were not mere passive purveyors but critical respondents to the received formalism.³

European academic art's sensibility found its aesthetic ally in the works of Travancore's (now Kerala) Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) who brought an uncluttered, yet highly ornamentalised and embellished view of the 'Indian' in colonial India.⁴ Through a powerful rendering of women in various socio-cultural narratives (village belle, goddess, seductress, musician, etc.) his works left an indelible mark on the Indian cultural consciousness permeating through to contemporary culture and media (films, posters, TV serials). It defined how a pantheon of gods should be visually fabled out of dense written scriptures and gave gods a much-needed style guide. Ravi Varma's repetition of subject in various settings and an allegorisation of an orientalist ideal subsequently percolated to other artists. Artists were trained to allegorise the everyday and picture an ideal in the most classical of form. Form, composition and perspective elicited a sombre formality and a distinctive pastel mood. For Mazumdar and his contemporaries, notably Jamini Roy, the human body/being was structurally central to the realism thereby lending to the creation of a fable – albeit flat and false.

Nudity, nakedness and the natural remain an integral study of the human condition in art. From ancient times till today, the human body remains a site of contestation, inscription, celebration and containment. Moreover, human body in art has, over the centuries, transformed from an objectified, medicalised body to a subjective, human body. Unlike the male nude, the female nude has had far reaching impact on art locating the female body within the construct of everyday life: The image of the nude allows for a historical and cultural 'presencing' of the individual: That is, the station or location of the being at a particular moment in time and history. Vast literature over the decades, propelled by critical and theoretical interventions, have adequately demonstrated that visual representation of the female figure does not give voice but can further seek to silence and subjugate. Objective attention can overwhelmingly suffocate.

Archaeologists, ethnographers and historians have long studied the presence of female nude sculptures in the Indian subcontinent since ancient times. Often featured in objective forms of universality, divinity, motherhood and personification of productivity as ancient terracotta and stone sculptures suggests, the transformation of the female figure into subjective forms of ownership (mother, wife, child) has clearly been an exercise of historical conquests, colonisation and modernity.⁵ The critical understanding of this transformation is fundamental in appreciating the socio-cultural 'presencing' of the female 'being' in art. Be it life drawing, painting or sculpture, realism is laden with a definitive perspective of human station in life against mere aesthetics. The representation of Mazumdar art furthers this.

3 - Mitter, Partha. *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde 1922-1947*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

4 - Ibid.

5 - See Sankalia, H. D. "The Nude Goddess or 'Shameless Woman' in Western Asia, India, and South-Eastern Asia". *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1960, pp. 111-123.

The back of women's torso features significantly in Mazumdar works in 'presencing' a being. Through an optical operative of control, gaze, frame, theatricality and documentation, Mazumdar foregrounds the opportunity to further the literal figurative of Ravi Varma's women. *Neelambari* is one such work. Also, referenced as *Lady in Blue and Gold Sari* and *Blue Swari* (Figure 22), this oil on canvas work foregrounds a blue saree-clad woman walking whilst responding to windy elements. Unlike many of his works where the painter's gaze is on the feminine as demure-reflexive or -posed entity, this work documents the movement of a well-heeled woman walking away in the evening. The placement of the lotus on her blouse (which also appears in *Borno Jhankar* – Figure 47) may read, on one level, as a symbol of wealth (unlike the unbloused women) and, on another level, it could be read within an Indian system of the being in its presence: the chakra system. The symbol is located within the range of the Anahata chakra (heart). In the system, the chakra is signified by a lotus and elementally supported by air/wind (gust of wind as the woman attempts to cover herself) and representative of the possibilities of love, compassion and serenity. Here it seems that Ravi Varma's female goddess transfigures into the everyday in Mazumdar's women.

Mazumdar's significance to contemporary culture resides in the possibility of bridging the state of the human condition through presencing. That his model often, was his beloved wife⁶ may have given him the courage to push the boundaries of that which was possible in life-drawing in a private space. But in being public, his body of works give a degree of historical continuity to shared identities and an appreciation of linear and repetitive processes in artworks of his era. Mazumdar, I would argue, has not been adequately considered by art historians unlike his contemporaries. However, collections provide viewers an insight into his artistic practices and supplement our appreciation of our contemporary condition.

6 - For a reference to this fact, see Datta, Meenakshi. "The Popular Art of Jamini Roy: Reminiscences." *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 3/4, 1990, pp. 281–290.