

शंशंवत्
Maharathi:
the eternal dharma

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Director General's Note

This exhibition seeks to render to the public eye a panoramic view of the complete oeuvre of Upendra-Maharathi and lay open to the scrutiny of the discerning mind, the whole gamut of Maharathi's creative genius. In the annals of Indian art many great savants and virtuosos have left an indelible mark. Maharathi holds a special place in the midst of this exclusive pantheon, insofar as he personified the soul of India in all its vastness and diversity. He was beholden not to a particular style, or even a medium of artistic expression for that matter. Nor was his vision limited to a particular era, religion or a school of philosophy. His canvas was broad and upon it, he captured the many folds and creases of the contours of India's unique character, history and thought. He beheld India *Sub specie aeternitatis* (under the aspect of eternity) and hence the christening of this exhibition, "Shashwat; The Eternal Seeker". As you walk through these halls and peruse through the many works put up, you will see vistas of Indian life, both contemporary and historical, spring to view. The great colossuses of India history are depicted. Gandhi in his many moods is captured and so is Buddha in all his divinity. The torment of Yashodhara, the fury of Hanuman, the devotion of Parvati, the tandava of Shiva and many more such breathtaking depictions are seen, capturing the many themes that intertwine together and thereby constitut-

ing the multi-threaded character of India.

The portrait of the artist as a young man begins with the ancient land of Kalinga. Upon this fateful ground of Ashoka's Hamartia, so steeped in tradition and culture, the soul of the young artist took shape. From these humble origins, when Maharathi stepped into the hallowed portals of the Government School of art in Kolkata, his artistic sensibilities were forged under the tutelage of such masterful blacksmiths of art as Sir Percy Brown and MukulDey. In a period spanning 6 years between 1925- 1931, Maharathi specialized in various western and Indian techniques of art, craft and architecture. He mastered the European style of portrait making, wash, tempera style of painting, etching, lithograph, wood craft, pottery, weaving as well as other mediums. He was greatly inspired by Abanindranath Tagore and other painters of the Bengal School. It is said, "Even in the heydays of Bengal School of painting, Maharathi had few equals in achieving a soft but transparent effect in water colour."

He was inspired by Buddha's message of compassion and his two years stay in Japan, where he had gone in 1954 as a UNESCO representative, deepened his sense of meditation and identification with Buddha's way of life.

Dharmaraksha 1975 Tempera on silk 30.8 x 36.8 cm
Acc. No. 14011

Cover (Front and Back image) Lord Buddha's Sermon in Sarnath 1940 Watercolour
79 x 52.5 cm Courtesy: Patna Museum



Ashvaghosa 1945 Tempera on silk 42 x 35.5 cm
Acc. No. 14014

A true virtuoso, Maharathi's litany of achievements is long and impressive. A most stupendous oeuvre of paintings, around 900 of which is in NGMA's possession; architectural masterpieces such as the iconic Vishwa Shanti Stupa at Rajgir and NavNalandaMahavihar at Nalanda; his trysts with destiny, when he drew up the masterful series called the 'Glories of India' for the Ramgarh Congress of 1940; the symphony in stone depicting the life of Lord Buddha in stone relief, empanelled in MahabodhiMahavihara, a World heritage site; his seminal contributions in the field of handicraft, where he single-handedly revived the moribund folk-craft traditions of Bihar, the list goes on and on.

The special Independence Day commemorative volume, "Gateway of Liberty" of 1948 had the paintings of Maharathi alongside three greats of his times, Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose. During the Golden Jubilee year of India's independence in the year 1996, National Gallery of Modern Art, Jaipur House, New Delhi acquired his collective works and a special exhibition was put up.

Maharathi was also amongst the first cultural bridges of Modern India to Japan. The peace pagoda at Gotemba, Japan at the foothills of Mount Fuji, and its Sanchi style gate, is again based on the designs of UpendraMaharathi. Built as a beacon of peace on a land, which lived through the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this is third most visited peace park in the Japan.

Such is the multi-faceted genius of Maharathi, that no exhibition can ever do justice to the sheer breadth of his creative playground. A humble attempt has been made though, in this direction, by the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. Through this exhibition on Maharathi's works, we recognize and celebrate the distinguished contributions that he made and also attempt to resurrect his persona through his many personal memorabilia.

Maharathi drew heavily from the well-spring of India's rich architectural legacy, as exemplified by such monuments like the meditative caves and chaityas of Ajanta. The Shikhar style mammoth installation at the entrance seeks to evoke this legacy. As one walks up to the newly renovated Jaipur House, where Maharathi's complete and unrivalled artistic glories are showcased, in to the elegant Shikhar style entrance with a pagoda inset and then onwards to the main hall and to the series of chambers where the artistic treasures reside, it is the spiritual journey of the artist that one hopes to vicariously relive, who like the seeker of truth steps in to the Shikhar of a temple and through the Mandapa, journeys to the Garbagriha, the sanctum sanctorum, where his spiritual quest for the Eternal Truth is finally quenched.

Adwaita Charan Garanayak
Director General
National Gallery of Modern Art



Penance of Parvati Tempera 70.5 x 48.5 cm Collection: Artist's Family
(Mahashweta Maharathi, Patna)

Director Note

As the Director of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, it gives me immense pleasure to organise the exhibition *Shashwat - Maharathi: The Eternal Seeker*. It forms a part of the major exhibitions at NGMA Delhi showcasing more than 300 exceptional works of Upendra Maharathi's diverse mediums. Upendra Maharathi (1908-1981) was a creative genius and a man of many talents, who was a painter, architect, freedom fighter, a champion of Indian folk and traditions and much more.

This exhibition is curated in-house and I wish to acknowledge the generous support that NGMA received from the family of the artist. Apart from a sizeable representation from the repository of NGMA, many works of art have been loaned. On behalf of NGMA, I wish to thank Mahashweta Maharathi, daughter of the artist who has helped us create this exhibition by weaving his artistic and creative journey. I extend our heartfelt thanks to Patna Museum, Raj Bhawan Patna, Vishwa Shanti Stupa Rajgir, Shree Baidyanath Ayurved Bhawan Patna, Upendra Maharathi Institute of Industrial Design Patna and the family of the artist for lending works of art from their prestigious collection for the said

exhibition. Special thanks to renowned Gandhian Dr. Razi Ahmed for providing a close understanding about the artist's oeuvre. I also acknowledge and thank the Government of Bihar and Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee for their extensive support. Special thanks to the weavers and craftsperson at Baswan bigha Nalanda for keeping the Bawan Buti (motifs) and handloom and handicrafts tradition initiated by Upendra Maharathi still alive in Bihar.

I extend our gratitude to Prof. (Dr.) Manvi Seth, Dean (Academic) and Head of the Department, National Museum Institute and the team for producing a comprehensive documentary film that has documented the imprints of Upendra Maharathi spread all across Bihar.

I thank the Ministry of Culture, Government of India and the Advisory Committee of NGMA Delhi for their unstinted support. I acknowledge the sincere efforts of the entire NGMA Team in the successful realisation of this expansive exhibition.

Ritu Sharma

Director
National Gallery of Modern Art
New Delhi



Mahatma Gandhi Oil on canvas 30 x 40 inches
Courtesy: Raj Bhawan, Patna

MAHARATHI AND THE MAHATMA

With the Freedom of India came the great responsibility of nation building. Mahatma Gandhi's call to arm for India's resurrection echoed through the length and breadth of the country. This drew a large section of the creative minds ; architects , artists, industrialists , social workers from all sections of the society, towards contributing their might for the achievement of this goal.

One of them was the artist called Upendra Maharathi. In the early 1930s he came to Bihar and carved a niche for himself. As a true nation builder, he chose the untrodden path of developing the aesthetics of various handicraft and handloom traditions of Bihar. He worked closely with the craftsmen of Bihar and rejuvenated almost twenty two craft traditions. The textile designs with Buddhist and Mauryan motifs which were drawn by Maharathi for the weavers of Nalanda, are still known amongst them as " Maharathi design".

A nationalist to the core, Maharathi became closely associated with freedom fighters of the time. His first association with Gandhi perhaps came at the Ramgarh Congress in 1940. Maharathi

turned the entire Pandal complex of Congress sessions in to a magical display of various handicrafts traditions of India. He painted a series of paintings for the " Ramgarh Congress" on the Glorious past of India , which are considered amongst his finest and are in the proud possession of the Patna Museum. The proximity with the Mahatma in the Ramgarh Congress afforded Maharathi a vantage point, whence he sketched Gandhi in his varying moods. While Ramgarh Congress afforded him his glimpse of the Mahatma and inspired a series of paintings and sketches of Gandhi, the germs of Gandhian thought were already planted in the mind.

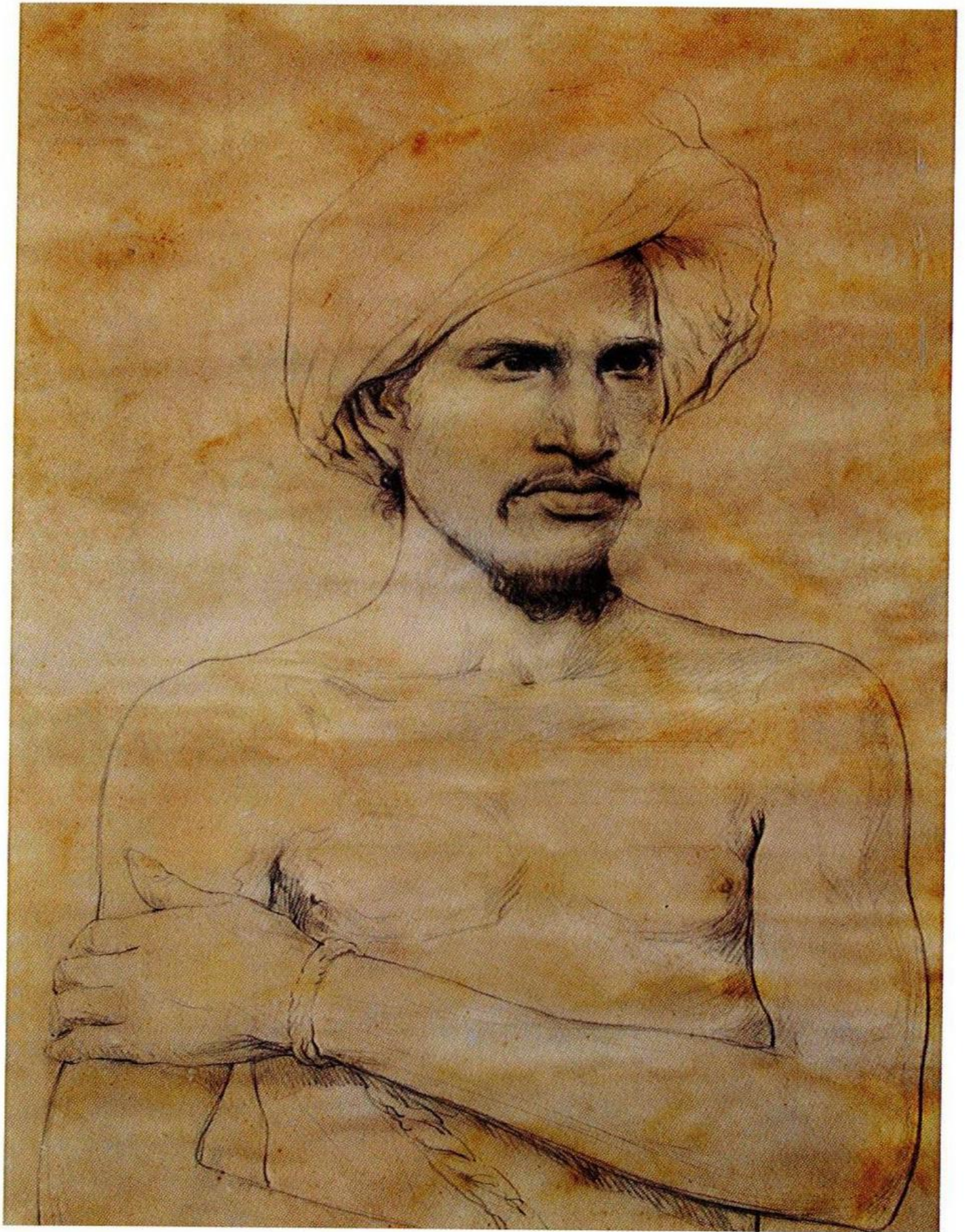
His outlook had been so deeply colored by Gandhi's personality as to make of him a Gandhian by faith and as well as reason. The Gandhian path was to him a discovery of the way of the Buddha. That is why in some of his paintings of Gandhi, and in designing certain Gandhian motifs, Maharathi did not hesitate to adopt traditional forms and colors. If Gandhi's face appears suffused with a divine glow in his picture, it is not an act of idolatry, but a continuity of faith in the perennial values expressed in the message of Buddha and Gandhi.

In the words of Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya, “ Gandhi to Maharathi, was the Buddha image in flesh and blood, to whom he was inevitably attracted. He has drawn him in many ways and moods. The ultimate expression of all his love, regard and devotion for this living Buddha is laid bare in one of Maharathi’s masterpieces called “The Bloody Sunset”. The mise en scene is the assassination of The Mahatma. The depiction is symbolic yet real. There is both rage and grief in this tragic end; the sun which glowed for a while and lit Upendra Maharathi’s world, spreading light and glory, inspiration and hope had set, in a spurt of blood, leaving torrents of disorder and destruction. It is a magnificent, grand canvas which unfolds complete scene of disaster, leaving an unspecified, shattering void. The body frame below is but a show in this devastation.”

A central tenet Of Gandhi’s call for ‘ Swaraj’ was the emphasis on ‘ Swadeshi’. Independence was as much about breaking the shackles of foreign rule as it was about economic self sufficiency. Inspired by Gandhi, Maharathi’s unshakable faith in “ Swadeshi”, strengthened his conviction that it is essential for the progress of the country to develop handicrafts as a form of art, which would serve utilitarian practical purposes as well. In this Maharathi was

drawing upon the age old conception of art in India. In contra- distinction to the west, art in India was not an entity separate from the quotidian affairs of life, patronized by Kings and wealthy merchants to satisfy aesthetic yearnings. Rather every artifact of daily use was suffused by the artistic nous of the artisans of ancient India. To resuscitate rural economy, Maharathi believed that folk arts of India must be revived. It was towards this end that he established an “ Institute of Industrial Designs “, to reinvent the traditional craft designs. It was later named after him. He is also credited with the revival of the dying Mithila art, known as Madhubani painting.

Maharathi’s artistic expression drew inspiration from the whole continuum of India’s glorious antiquity. He painted extensively on historical themes, depicted vignettes from Buddha’s life and exhaustively churned out Gandhi’s portraits and sketches. There is a famous picture of Martin Luther King with a portrait of Gandhi in the background. That portrait is by none other than Maharathi. A stone panel depicting the life of Buddha, empaneled in Mahabodhi Mahavihar, a world heritage site, is a magnificent piece of art and is based on a 100 ft scroll on the same theme by Maharathi. Maharathi’s most



Birsa Munda 1940 Pencil Sketch on paper 75 x 50.2 cm Courtesy: Patna Museum



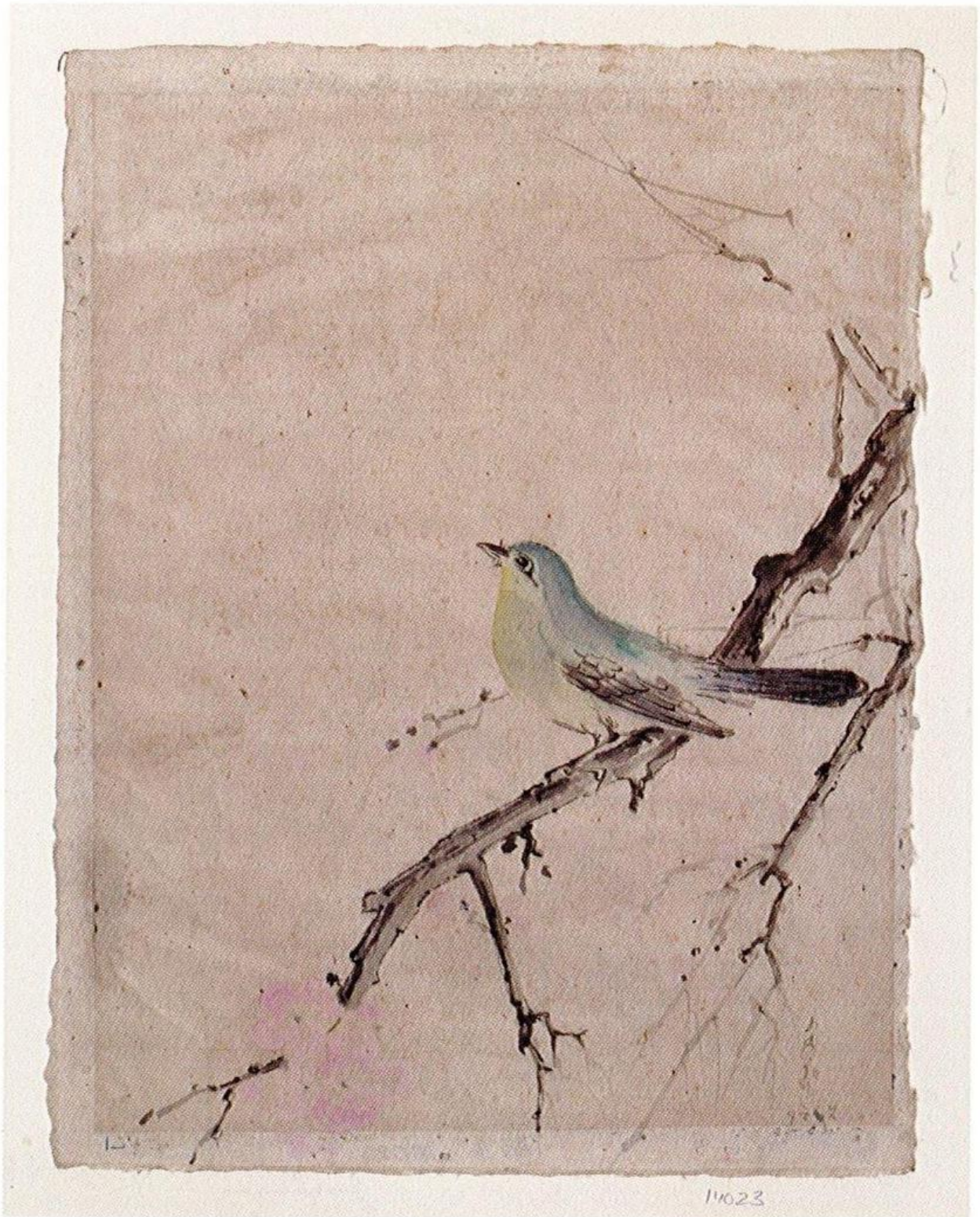
Royal Court of Samudragupta 1940 Watercolour, wash 78 x 51 cm
Courtesy: Patna Museum

noted architectural contribution is the iconic Rajgir Peace Pagoda, which was designed by him and built by famous Japanese Saint and associate of Mahatma Gandhi, Fujii Guruji.

An aptly christened work called “The Fate of three great men” by Maharathi that depicts Buddha, Jesus and Gandhi, evokes the parallels in the lives of these three personalities who, each in their own unique way, worked towards the salvation of mankind. It is to Maharathi’s credit that by depicting Gandhi in such exalted company, he evoked the global and

timeless nature of the message of non-violence, which was not just a weapon to fight the tyranny of imperial rule, but an entirely new paradigm given to a world riven by conflicts and destruction. Maharathi, and many other like him, internalized Gandhi’s message and played an invaluable role in laying the foundation of Modern India.

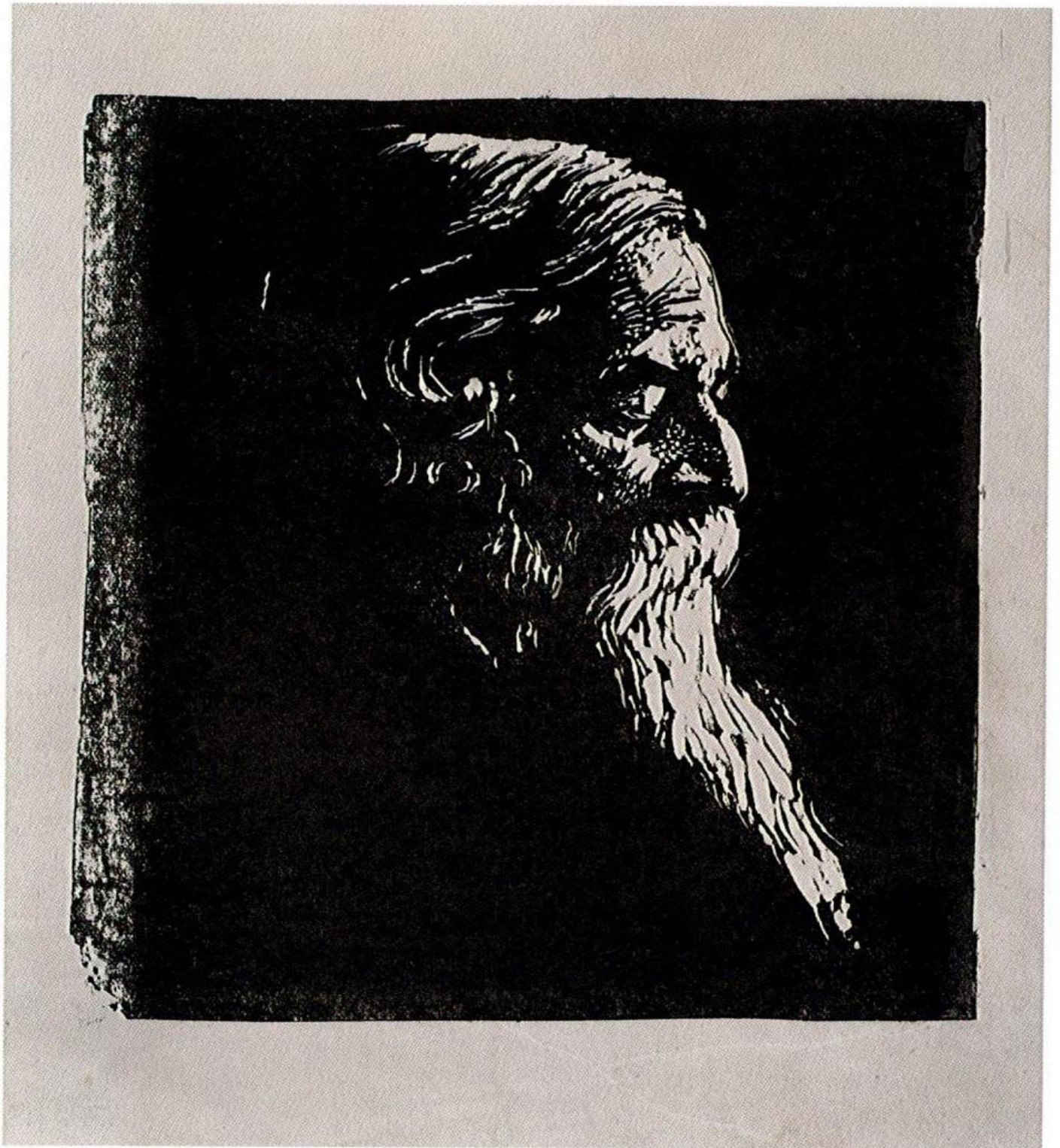
Mahashweta Maharathi
Patna, Bihar



Bird Watercolour on paper 35.5 x 25.4 cm Acc. No. 14023



Labour Women of Jaipur Watercolour on paper 17.7 x 12.7 cm Acc. No. 14039



R. N. Tagore : Graphic Print on paper 15x17cm Acc. No. 14096-1/4



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