



Ramkinkar Baij and his Portrait Sculptures

Animesh Mahata

In an interview with art historian Somendranath Bandopadhyay, Ramkinkar shares his thoughts about portraits - "A face has so many features. All of which are valuable from the perspective of character. First, one needs to identify those. Next, they must be forcefully delineated. Underlined, I mean. That's what makes a portrait, copying or emphasising in the wrong places- both are equally dangerous."¹.

Ramkinkar Baij is a pioneering name in Indian art history – the first to deny British academic style of sculpting - who has experimented all his life with sculptural form and built his own style and legacy for the later generations. His portrait sculptures strive towards portraying the inner character rather than facial similitude with experimental medium and form, elevating them to another level altogether. From the dynamic nature of his portrait-sculptures, it is clear that he didn't use static models. And surface treatments were appropriate to the subject – while those of Rabindranath and Abanindranath are rough, the surfaces of Binodini and Ira Vakil are much smoother. After many rounds of cancellation when the portrait reached the final stage, he stopped referring to the models, because he believed that the right balance between the subjectivity and objectivity of experience make the best portraits. Each portrait was for him a different containerization of the artist model interaction, and each encounter-regulated by admiration, intimacy, passion or owe – a particular gradient of inter subjectivity.

Artist K G Subrahmanyam writes - "some portraits of Ramkinkar creates more visual impact than Epstein's. Kinkarda used to say, he has learnt a lot from Epstein and others. That might be.

The last portrait of Rabindranath he made portrayed Rabindranath's nature. Epstein's portrait in comparison looks like a toy. But it's true that Epstein was an artist from another time and exemplary to Ramkinkar. There's another important thing to note about Kinkarda, in the last phase of making a sculpture, he stopped looking at the model and looked at his own mind instead. As long as the model was in front of him, he followed the model intently but at the last phase there were some significant changes. The same happened with Tagore's portrait. The last step infuses it with a new force which was absent in the previous stages and interestingly Rabindranath was not in front of him then."².

Ramkinkar's portrait sculptures – Rabindranath Tagore (Plate17), Abanindranath Tagore (Plate 19), Ganguli Moshai (Plate 10), Madhura Singh (Plate 6), Priti Pandey (Plate 3), Allauddin Khan (Plate 11), Meera Dhar (Plate 1), Kiran Barua (Plate 5), Jaya Appaswami (Plate 14) and Binodini (Plate 13) - strive towards sculptural forms rather than three-dimensional rendering of photographic likeness. The portraits are

structurally bold, shot with living emotions and textured experimentally.

“Ganguli Moshai” (Plate 10) is a portrait-sculpture of the caretaker in Santiniketan Guest House. Alcoholic and depressed, the large eyes are full of unanswered questions, haggard and desiccated with poverty, visible tension in bone and muscle, fat nose, thick lips, and unkempt hair make the face visually interesting.

The portrait-sculpture “Ira Vakil” (Plate 2) effortlessly accomplishes the difficult challenge of capturing the age of the subject with the inquisitive young eyes, soft features, intelligent and dynamic facial expressions, and windswept and unkempt hair. The overall effect is dynamic and lovely.

Sankha Chaudhury tells us about Ramkinkar's portraits - “The two key features in Ramkinkar's work are the rhythmic structure and the concentrated force acquired via portrait-making, through playing with proportions, impressions, and distortions... Ramkinkar used to say – when people get excited while talking – their facial muscles get heightened, and face gets filled up. This is to be captured. And he used to always say the colour of skin and skin quality. He used to say that when faces get lit, they look larger. Face made according to exact proportions look sad. The face should be radiant.”³

Dinkar Kaushik says - “His portraits in sculpture, as also in painting bring to us his deep human understanding. He is able to hold the essence, by shearing off all the unnecessary frills a human character gathers in the process of living. He goes to the core values of a personality.”⁴

The Abanindranath portrait (Plate 19) by Ramkinkar is a great example of the artist's playful experimentation with clay to his heart's content so that the result is a great gravitas and dynamism contained in a rough surface with really tender expression. The same goes for portraits of Priti Pandey (Plate 3), Kiran Barua (Plate 5), Binodini (Plate 13), Meera Dhar (Plate 1), Nilima Barua (Plate 4) and Rekha (Plate 16) – unique soft expressions contained in rough surfaces. On the other hand, Jaya Appaswami (Plate 14) and Dainy Dalani (Plate 9) have a more constructed form along with hardness and softness. The portrait of Sankha Chaudhury's mother (Plate 7) expresses her dry, old countenance successfully. K G Subrahmanyam tells us about Ramkinkar's portraits - “Ganguli Moshai, Preeti Pandey, Mira Dhar, Madhura Singh, Ira Vakil – even Rabindranath – all are seated portraits – which surpass mundane study and go to the realm of unique expressions. Like painted portraits – Rodin, Ramkinkar and Epstein could keep the outer form of the person the same and simultaneously making the inner expressions shine through. Preeti Pandey's eyes have languor and liveliness, Madhura Singh's gaze is mundane and familiar. Ira Vakil's face is made like a Roman Boy. Allauddin Khan's face is full of saintly peace. And Rabindranath's portrait is much discussed. Without doubt, this is one of the best works by Ramkinkar. It captures Rabindranath's gravitas, depth, sensitivity and strength masterfully. From the familiar Tagore visage is has gone to the level of universal beauty. It has become a poetic testimony of the poet's life along with all the sorrow, pain, despair, wisdom, and crisis of faith.”⁵

Almost unanimously acknowledged by art critics as one of his best works, “Portrait of Rabindranath Tagore” (Plate 17) is not bowed down with age but bowed down with grief at the news of sudden loss of C F Andrews. His pensive form bowed down over the table deeply moves Ramkinkar. He comes back home and quickly makes a sketch which later becomes this bronze statue. The surface of the work has been finished with

fragmented, angular planes as if the sculptor has slashed away excess material thus creating an exciting finish. Art Critic Uma Nair writes – “Ramkinkar’s cement bust of poet Rabindranath Tagore is work that at once argues that cement is one of the most genuinely textured and unique materials of artistic media.

The diversity of the material and the textured terrain visible in the furrowed forehead and brows draw attention to the animated expressionist surface-the downward gaze adds to the and temporal and contemplative qualities that speak to us about Ramkinkar’s response to the pictorialism of a portrait.

This bust is not a eulogy, it is an exercise in reverence, it personifies Tagore as Gurudev- the thinker, the poet, the radical, the storyteller and above all the creator of Gitanjali. Look deeper there isn’t any exuberant praise expressed by the sculptor Ramkinkar, who was then at the height of his artistry, but it does reveal to us the primordial role awarded to the human body in his oeuvre, far beyond simple questions of anatomical accuracy. Like Auguste Rodin, who used the body as a vehicle for expression of the impulses of the soul, and passion, Ramkinkar effectively constitutes an inexhaustible source of inspiration in his search for the perfect means of combining ideal human strength with the mystery of nature.

The texturing of Tagore’s beard, the triangular setting amplifies the mix of literary power -as viewers we are compelled to stand in silence in front of it-as if a hushed, devotional interiority – and a classical serenity is what we are invited to ascertain. In this melancholic moody bust we see a modernist approach: to simplify forms and enhance emotional expression without sacrificing a sober classical ideal.

Ramkinkar gives us a magnificently unromantic portrayal, the penetrating eyes looking downward, the lofty brow balanced in a frown, the head stooped. It offers us a vivid panorama of a cultural age, liberal but serious, and an insight into Ramkinkar’s formal strengths. This work personifies qualities of psychological acuteness through intense objectivity of recorded fact; detail modelled in rough surfaces. Ramkinkar was able to give us accentuating individual features that give life and movement to his sculptures; and an energy and exaggerated expressiveness.”⁶

“Poet’s Head” (Plate 18) - another abstract portrait of Tagore by Ramkinkar was made from memory. The grey concrete original is with Delhi Art Gallery and a bronze cast of the same is in NGMA Collection. The replica kept in Sahitya Akademi Delhi has plates with words such as: Infinity, Beauty, Pain, Joy, and Separation. The eyes have balls, and the beard is shaped like a staircase. About which Ramkinkar says, “I used the balls in the place of eyes to express his personality better.”⁷

This path breaking, unique portrait breaks new ground in making symbolic sculptural forms by symbolising his long hair, long beard and nose. About this portrait, Uma Nair has written: “Poet’s Head” - “In this portrait Ramkinkar gives us a gothic elongation derived from German tradition. Working in bronze, playing with repetition and variation, recycling fragments, experimenting with geometric details like a contoured triangular beard becomes a study in contrasting the effects with more formal results in bronze, to create a portrait that is modern, raw, and deeply radical. The abstract head of Tagore is at once angular, aggressive, and thrusting. The exaggeratedly linear head, the globular eye and the nose presents a poet who cut through barriers of caste and creed to give us islands of wisdom and humanism.

Poet Rabindranath Tagore is exemplified as an archetypal image in which his facial features have been abstracted to create a reincarnated portrait. He reconstructs the portrait to give us a deconstruction of the measured image to give us a remote and independent image that celebrates the depth and the aesthetic architectonics of Tagore's persona. This rare yet iconic portrait has reflections of post Renaissance postulates. Ramkinkar gives us a thousand commentaries in a single portrait- the image- the intention- the intensity- he perpetuates myths through the elements of abstraction with a three-dimensional image that has been reversed in perspectival conventions.

It's as if he has undermined solidity and created his own idea of scooped concavities to give us a nose, a brow and a bulbous projection that has essential attributes that keeps us transfixed and guessing. The reconstructed three dimensionality has a consistent logic of lucidity and deep understanding of poetic and lyrical realms. He fuses suggestive fragments and creates composite form that has its own iconic identity that reminds us of the masters of the past and the indentations of antiquity that can be forwarded into the language of modernism. This treasure is an exploration that lays the fountain head of modernist principles created in the insignia of a master.”⁸.

About “Portrait of Allauddin Khan” sculptor K S Radhakrishnan has said: “The first portrait in which Ramkinkar made a conscious effort to move beyond resemblance was perhaps that of Ustad Allauddin Khan, the great maestro who commanded the sculptor's respect. It was done during the maestro's short visit to Santiniketan in 1935, and presumably at Rabindranath's suggestion, conveyed to him through Nandalal, on the eve of Allauddin Khan's departure. Since he was to leave on the same day, Ramkinkar was compelled to finish it quickly, modelling it initially from life in short single sittings, and then completing it from memory. A necessity in this case, it later became a personal method that allowed him to free strict adherence to the physiognomy of the subject and interpret the personality more freely. In this case the saintly lineaments that Allauddin Khan's face assumed when he played the sarod were imprinted over the less expressive visage he presented when he was not playing music.”⁹

Artist Janak Jhankar Narzary tells us about Ramkinkar's portraits - “Ramkinkar learnt the constructive technique of clay modelling from Miss Margarate, and his interest of Rodin, Epstein and Bourdalle gained a strong ground. As a fact Ramkinkar happened to see Epstein's original portrait of Rabindranath Tagore which arrived at Santiniketan in 1927. It had a great impact on the portrait making of Ramkinkar. The constructional technique of clay modelling, the unity of planer structure with other formal aspects became significant in his sculpture. In some of his portraits he stressed on conceptualized form and expression rather than the visual or surficial affinities of the sitters. The rendering of planer forms with broken surfaces and deep under cuts to cast shadow become distinctive character in his portrait sculptures. No doubt his portrait reveals clearer formal and visual aspects and reflects the sculptor's deeper perceptions and analytical approach of representation.

The portrait of Preeti Pandey is modelled with knife and consequently the broad planes dominate the portrait. On the other hand, he modelled expressionistically the portrait of Ganguli Moshai and Abanindranath emphasizing on broken surface treated with fingers and nails combining the knife-modelled textural depths.

The portrait of Madhura Singh was modelled with palm and fingers to create sensuous bulging volume with a textural surface of warmth. His portrait of Tagore of 1940-41, is also expressionistic, distinctive for use of planner forms and textural surface, treated with both knife and fingers. The portrait displayed the inner mood of the poet in his last age, is one of the best of his creation. The poet of 1939, another portrait of Ramkinkar denotes the sculptors' radical approaches, an experiment for creating a new image with metaphorical form and meaning. This is perhaps the first of its kind in the history of modern sculpture in India. The poet is conceived symbolically, featured with a tree-trunk like nose, roots like beard, fruit and flower like eyes, covered with mass of leaves like hair as an analogy to the wise and enlightened creative man. The portrait is constructed using clay plates with a strong sense of form and space inducing dramatic interplay of light and shade. This ambivalent image halfway between man and metaphor but well-constructed and modelled to be a complete form is symbolically expressive."¹⁰

Ramkinkar tell us about him making the Tagore portrait - "When I told Rabindranath that I wanted to sculpt his portrait, he said – 'you know, when they make portraits abroad, they make me sit upright and keep measuring my face with so many instruments. I suffer and feel very uneasy.' Then I assured him that I don't need to take any measurements. You keep doing your work; I will sit on one side and do my work."¹¹

About these two divergent portraits of Rabindranath, Art Historian Sanjay Mallick says: "Poet's Head" is an example of geometric abstraction despite its roots in the actual person evident in the arrangement of the various units of form. Though daringly slashed to a configuration of geometric units – a sphere and a spiral for the eyes, a three-stepped vertical for the beard or cut-open concavities for the skull and eye socket the arrangement of forms ultimately result in an expressionistic vigour which animates the head with a rhythmic vitality. The latter, more identifiably a 'Portrait of Rabindranath Tagore', is an incisive character study complete to the roughly modelled near-Impressionistic surface, with the stress on a majestic stooping posture, the head bent at the shoulders. It has been a persuasive proposition to read into the postural expression of this head the poet's concern with a 'crisis of civilization'. We are told that Ramkinkar did begin that portrait from direct reference of the person but finished it without the model in front of him; such a work process also implies that despite the reference to the actual person, the exercise was certainly not to be confused with a production of naturalistic equivalence."¹²

Art historian R Siva Kumar writes – "Portraits had a very important place in Ramkinkar's work of the thirties and forties. They were no longer a continuation of the Portraits he had done as professional work to support himself, but a genre representing a particular facet of his response to his social milieu. Significantly, the subjects of his portraits were not tribal peasants or subalterns for whom he felt a deep communitarian empathy, but men and women who were closer to him in social status and whom he encountered as individuals.

The portrait as a representational space in which the interpersonal encounters between the artist and his model are explored, is a modern idea. In Ramkinkar's portrait this takes on different forms. Most commonly he sums up his impression of the person in the form of an image that goes beyond likeness. Portraits, he believed, gave ample opportunity for creative expression; they were not only about transcribing the

physiognomy of a face but about giving life to a character.

A portrait that is a mere imitation of appearance, he said, was like a stuffed tiger in the museum. The artist's job was to look at the features of a face from the perspective of character. But the apprehension of the model as a living person and character was not always easy or entirely controlled by the artist alone.

While the apprehension of physiognomy is well within the powers of an artist, that of bringing out the model's persona also depends upon the extent to which the model reveals himself/herself or allows himself/herself to be unravelled. While some models are accessible and pliable, others are more intractable and formidable. And trying to unravel them in a portrait becomes an encounter with the model and the artist engaging with each other like competing players in a game of chess."¹³.



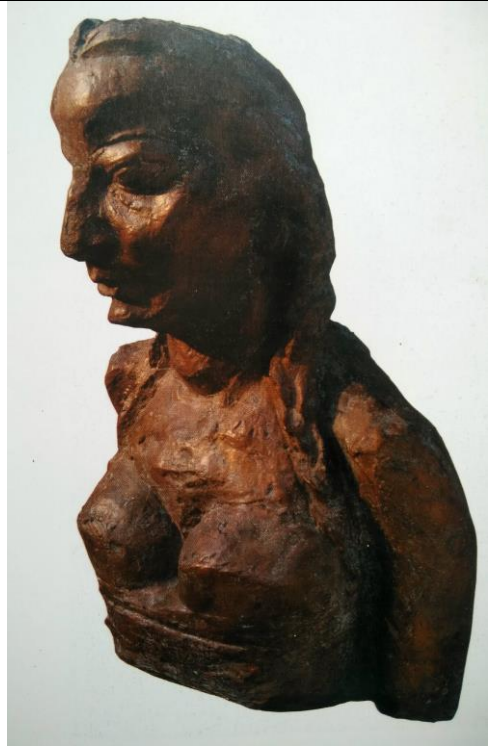


Plate 3: Ramkinkar Baij, Preeti Pandey
51x39.9x27 cm, Bronze



Plate 4: Ramkinkar Baij, Nilima Barua, Cement, NGMA, Delhi



Plate 5: Ramkinkar Baij, Kiran Barua, Plaster, NGMA, Delhi

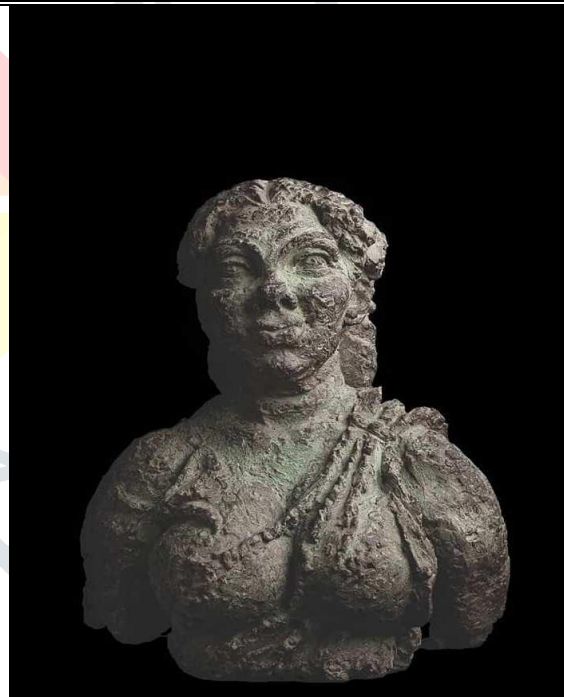


Plate 6: Ramkinkar Baij, Madhura Singha, Cement, NGMA, Delhi

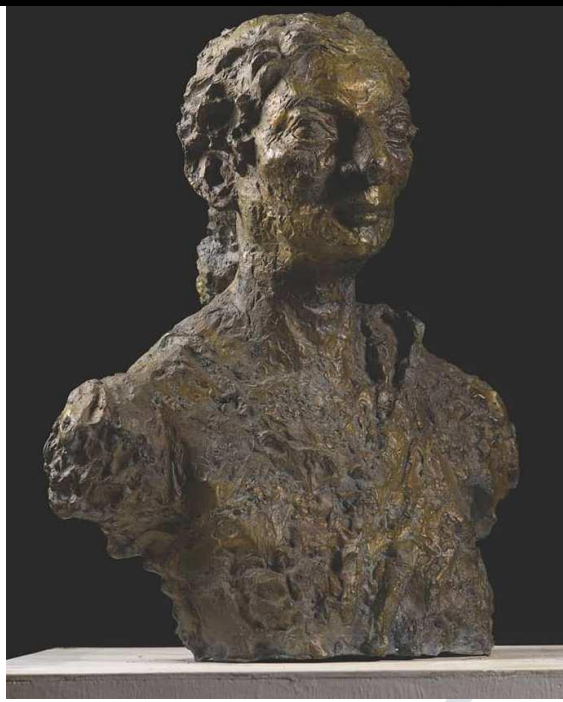


Plate 7: Ramkinkar Baij, Sankha Chaudhury's mother, Bronze, NGMA, Delhi



Plate 8: Ramkinkar Baij, Portrait, Terracotta, 12x10.20x9.30 cm



Plate 9: Ramkinkar Baij, Daniy Dalani, Cement, NGMA, Delhi



Plate 10: Ramkinkar Baij, Ganguli Moshai, 1936



Plate 11: Ramkinkar Baij, Allauddin Khan, Bronze



Plate 12: Ramkinkar Baij, A College Girl, Cement, NGMA, Delhi



Plate 13: Ramkinkar Baij, Binodini, Plaster
42.4x19x22.6 cm, 1948



Plate 14: Ramkinkar Baij, Jaya Appaswami, Cement, NGMA, Delhi



Plate 15: Ramkinkar Baij, Mr. Gandhi (Bajjnath), Plaster, 28x21.5x34 Inch, NGMA, Delhi

Plate 16: Ramkinkar Baij, Rekha, Cement, NGMA, Delhi



Plate 17: Ramkinkar Baij, Rabindranath Tagore, Bronze, 1948, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi

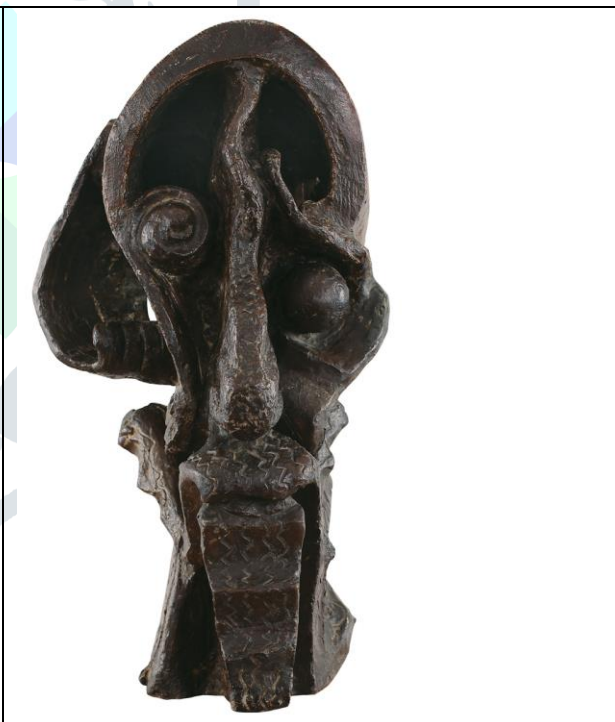


Plate 18: Ramkinkar Baij, Poet's Head, Cement, 1938, Delhi Art Gallery

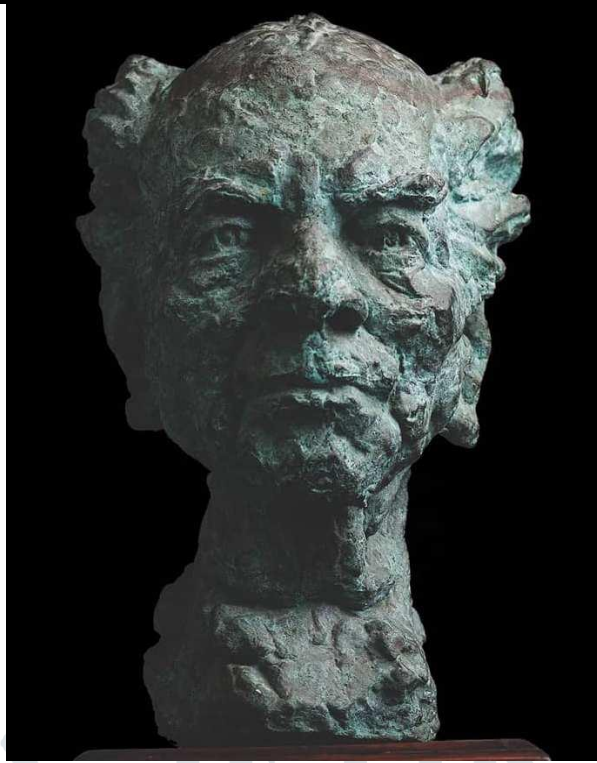
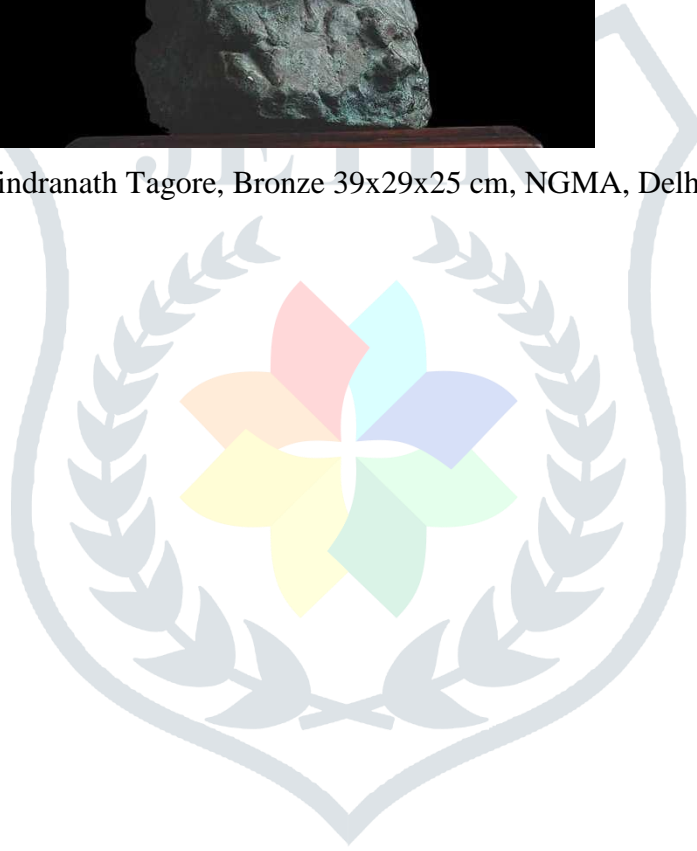


Plate 19: Ramkinkar Baij, Abanindranath Tagore, Bronze 39x29x25 cm, NGMA, Delhi, 1943



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