I shall not dwell much on the style and quality of Tagore’s paintings. Instead I would like to begin with a passage that Professor K. G. Subramanyan once wrote:

To most of my generation, talking about Tagore does not come easy. Because to us Rabindranath was more than just a person. He was to us a compelling symbol, a symbol of India’s cultural regeneration. For me personally, and I presume for a number of Indian artists, the work of Rabindranath came like a breath of fresh air.¹

If I interpret the passage correctly, what he means here is that, caught between Westernised academic art on the one hand and the Bengal School’s orientalism on the other, young artists felt a sense of liberation in Tagore’s art, which strongly challenged technical competence as a measure of artistic achievement. Others in India, however, whose taste had been formed by the naturalist criteria of colonial art, saw this very lack of competence as a failure to come up to the standards of professional art. However, since Tagore has gradually turned into a national monument, even those who were unsure of what criteria to apply to his paintings nonetheless took shelter behind meaningless platitudes and effusive verbiage.²

If this was the case in India, the situation in the West was altogether different. Scarcely anybody who was born after the First World War can remember ever having read his poems, let alone...
seen his paintings. One hopes that William Radice’s translations and the exhibition in August 1986 have to some extent redressed the balance.³

Today, Tagore is no more than a provincial figure, yet no poet from outside the West had a more glittering reputation than Tagore during the inter-war years. He was truly a legend in his own time—representing Ex Oriente Lux, the Light from the Orient. In the year 1930 a series of highly successful and one may add, highly orchestrated, shows of his paintings took place in Western capitals. Yet, when he died on 7 August 1941, hardly a trace remained in Europe of his once dazzling reputation.⁴ Admittedly it was a year when Europe was engaged in a bitter war to the death. Nevertheless, it may be useful to ask—why was Tagore’s fame so temporary and insubstantial? The question mark at the end of my title is thus meant to suggest the very ambivalence in Western response to Tagore—something we have already learnt from Professor Aronson’s admirable study.⁵

Part of the answer, I submit, lies in the specific character of the age in which Tagore flourished. He believed in and campaigned passionately for universal brotherhood, in an age which still had confidence in universal values, only to be shattered in the First World War, which appeared to have made a mockery of words like humanity, love, harmony and understanding. So, after that war, universalism went into retirement, making way for widespread relativism: it also took Tagore’s reputation with it. To the post-war generation, his voice sounded alien, more concerned with discovering the uniqueness, or shall we say the essential ‘difference’ of each society. But I think it is our loss if we cannot rescue the Tagore ‘baby’, as it were, from the ‘bathwater’ of the previous era. After all, Tagore’s passionate feud against nationalist excesses is still relevant in our day, as even a casual glance at any daily newspaper will make clear. Tagore saw no contradiction between love of one’s own country and belonging to a wider world and this probably is his most valuable message for our generation.⁶

What I want to suggest is that the more than 2000 paintings produced by Tagore in the evening of his life are also, in significant ways, the final flowering of his belief in the universal nature of artistic communication.⁷

But my contention is that while Tagore’s art still has a great deal to offer us, with its explosion of energy and powerful imagination, its very attempts to speak a universal language refer directly to the