

The Immersive Journey of "Birbhum Landscape": A Mural by Benode Behari Mukherjee

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Abstract

Background: Art possesses the profound ability to go beyond the limitations of canvas or paper, offering viewers an immersive and transformative experience. Benode Behari Mukherjee, a pioneer of modern Indian art, exemplifies this with his celebrated mural, Birbhum Landscape. Positioned on the ceiling of Kala Bhavana, the renowned art college at Santiniketan, the mural stands as a powerful testament to the integration of space, viewer, and visual narrative [1].

Purpose: The primary objective of this study is to explore the immersive experience facilitated by Birbhum Landscape, highlighting its thematic richness and the unique ways it engages the viewer. The essay aims to underscore the mural's departure from traditional, static modes of viewing, emphasizing its role in encouraging an interactive and contemplative form of artistic engagement.

Methods: This essay employs a qualitative approach, focusing on visual analysis and interpretative observation of Birbhum Landscape. It considers the physical positioning of the mural, the required viewer interaction, and the compositional techniques employed by Mukherjee to invite exploration. Reference is also made to the spatial and cultural context of Santiniketan.

Results: The analysis reveals that Birbhum Landscape offers a multisensory and participatory experience. Unlike conventional artworks meant to be viewed in a single glance, this mural requires physical movement and sustained attention from the viewer. This dynamic engagement allows for a deeper connection with the imagery and themes embedded in the landscape, fostering a personal journey through the artwork's intricate details and layers of meaning.

Conclusions: Benode Behari Mukherjee's Birbhum Landscape exemplifies how mural art can transcend conventional visual experiences, transforming the act of viewing into an immersive journey. Its placement and composition encourage active exploration, granting the viewer the liberty to navigate and interpret the work individually. In doing so, the mural not only redefines artistic interaction but also deepens the bond between viewer and artwork through a uniquely intimate encounter.

Keywords: Compositional placements, Benod Behari Mukherjee, Birbhum Landscape, Immovable Artforms

1. Introduction

The "Birbhum Landscape" by Benod Behari, which graces the ceiling of Kala Bhavana, is a prime example of mural art on an immovable surface. This is the first wall painting by Benod Behari. This magnificent mural is a striking embodiment of his unique style and creative vision. This mural was created during a period of great artistic and social change in India. It was executed in the late 1940s, a time when India was on the brink of independence from British colonial rule and the nation was undergoing a profound transformation. This magnificent mural is a striking embodiment of his unique style and creative vision [2].

This mural stands as a remarkable example of mural art ingeniously placed on an unyielding surface. The artwork seamlessly blends its subject matter with its surrounding environment, offering a captivating glimpse into local life in Bengal's Birbhum District. It portrays the distinct red soil, diverse vegetation and fauna, and the daily activities of village inhabitants around a central pond, providing an authentic representation of rural village life [3].

The "Birbhum Landscape" mural becomes an immersive journey for the audience as the artist transforms the physical constraints of the site into compositional opportunities by offering a progressive and detailed exploration, employing various artistic elements effectively, engaging viewers with the terrain and activities, and instilling a profound sense of belonging [4].

Benod Behari skillfully captured the vibrant essence of rural life, offering visitors the freedom to independently explore its rich details. It transcends traditional mural art by encouraging viewers to actively participate in their discovery, making it a truly exceptional and engaging artistic experience. With the brilliant and thoughtful use of artistic elements and exploration of compositional possibilities triggered by the physical constraints of viewing space, Benod Behari creates an immersive journey for his audience. This immersive experience transcends traditional viewing and allows the audience to actively participate in the artwork's narrative.

1.1 The Significance of the Mural's Interaction with Physical Constraints and the Viewer's Physical Engagement

One of the most remarkable aspects of the "Birbhum Landscape" mural is how Benod Behari Mukherjee ingeniously addresses the physical constraints of its location and transforms them into opportunities for a unique viewer experience. Positioned on a low ceiling, the mural cannot

be fully grasped in a single glance. This mural challenges the conventional way of viewing art as it is positioned just a few feet above the viewer's head, and the mural demands an active and participatory approach. It requires one to stand on the ground and look up in order to discern its components and the breadth of Benod Behari's innovative narrative. The masterful use of placement, color, perspective, lines, shapes, and overall composition by him guides viewers on an immersive mural journey, fostering a deep connection with the depicted landscape and village life [5].

The "Birbhum Landscape" mural is an immersive portrayal of rural life in Birbhum, provincial Bengal with a central village pond and happenings around it depicting the harmonious coexistence of villagers, cattle, birds, and vegetation. This artwork captures the essence of daily life with the rural vitality of the region by showcasing the interplay between humans and nature with intricate details, vibrant colours and skillful rendering [6]. Unlike many conventional artworks, the artist does not dictate the viewer's path, providing a specific focal point or a predetermined sequence in which to explore the piece [7]. In this mural, Benode Behari doesn't create a dominant perspective or directional emphasis, which might have empowered the viewer to decide how they want to engage with the composition. The absence of a dominant point



Figure 1: Birbhum Landscape, Egg Tempera on Ceiling, 253 cm x 606 cm, Kala Bhavana Complex, Santiniketan, 1940

of vision or directional stress grants the viewer complete freedom to enter the composition from any point. There are no prescribed routes or sequences to follow. This lack of constraint allows viewers to chart their own course through the mural, fostering a sense of agency and exploration. As they traverse the composition, viewers are free to choose any plant or tree in detail from a rich variety of identical trees, including Mango, Palm, Jarul, Amaltas, Lotus, and many more. This freedom to select points of focus empowers the viewer to create a personalized narrative within the mural. The artist's meticulous implementation of the mural assures that one must physically interact with the artwork in order to truly appreciate its intricate elements. The viewer must turn their head upward and walk on the floor, constantly



Figure 2: Recent Colour Photograph of part of the Birbhum Landscape, Image captured by Author

shifting their perspective by looking left or right. This physicality transforms the act of viewing into a journey of exploration.

2. The Richness of Thematic Depiction

The mural's color palette adds to its thematic richness. Predominantly composed of intense white, ochre, red, and green hues, it conveys the vividness of the landscape and the rhythms of village life. Benod Behari employs calligraphic strokes using mixed colors or black, further enhancing the mural's visual complexity and texture. Thematically, "Birbhum Landscape" immerses the viewer in the vibrant life and nature of Birbhum, a region in provincial Bengal [8]. At the heart of this mural lies a central pond, a quintessential lifeline for the local populace, particularly during the scorching summer months. This pond serves not only as a source of sustenance but also as a thematic anchor for the entire composition. Benod Behari's choice of this central element reflects his keen sensitivity to the environment and the importance of water in sustaining life [9].

Benod Behari masterfully guides viewers on their journey through "Birbhum Landscape." The mural's placement and composition create a sense of exploration, allowing viewers to choose their own path through the artwork. There is no dominant point of vision or directional stress, granting complete freedom to enter the composition from any point. This freedom allows viewers to engage deeply with the mural, much like a traveler exploring a new landscape. The lack of a prescribed path encourages viewers to take their time, discover new details, and make their own connections within the artwork [10].

Remaining true to his distinctive artistic style, Benod Behari populated the mural with a rich tapestry of subjects. The

mural comes alive with the presence of trees, animals, and depictions of everyday life. It is a vivid portrayal of the rural landscape, where individuals are depicted engaged in conversation, labor, and various forms of social interaction. This attention to detail and the inclusion of these mundane yet essential aspects of rural existence add layers of depth and authenticity to the mural [11].

One of the most remarkable aspects of this mural is its vast scope. It doesn't confine itself to a limited spatial dimension but rather unfolds across a substantial area. This expansive canvas allows Benod Behari to embark on a visual journey that spans the changing seasons of Birbhum's landscape. Each section of the mural captures the evolving hues and moods of the region throughout the year. It is as if the mural itself is a living entity, transitioning through the seasons, much like the real landscape it portrays [12].

Beneath the vibrant colors and intricate details, this mural radiates deep affection and joy. It encapsulates one of the recurring themes in Benod Behari's body of work—the multifaceted essence of life. Through his artistry, he delves into the complexities of existence, exploring the interplay of various elements that define the human experience. The mural is a testament to his ability to capture the profound intricacies of life with a sense of dazzling originality.

3. An Immersive Journey

"Birbhum Landscape," a captivating mural by Benod Behari Mukherjee, offers viewers a unique and immersive journey into the heart of rural Bengal. This mural defies traditional artistic conventions and, in its unconventional placement and intricate details, invites viewers to engage actively with the artwork. In this exploration, we will delve into the techniques, themes, and narrative of "Birbhum Landscape", emphasizing the freedom it gives to viewers to navigate, explore, and connect with its intricate details. Unlike conventional art, "Birbhum Landscape" challenges the viewer's traditional approach. It is positioned on a low ceiling, just a few feet above the viewer's head, and cannot be comprehended at a single glance. Instead, viewers must actively participate by standing on the floor and looking up to fully appreciate the mural's depth and narrative. This unique placement transforms the act of viewing into an immersive journey, a departure from the passive observation often associated with traditional art [13].

This mural stands out because of its ability to engage viewers in a dynamic manner. As one gazes upon it, the perspective and focal points continuously shift. This intentional design encourages viewers to explore different facets of the mural, mirroring the act of physically moving



Figure 3: Parts of the Birbhum Landscape, Image captured by Author

through a real village. It's a departure from static, single-perspective artworks, making it an immersive and interactive experience. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of "Birbhum Landscape" is how it transforms the act of viewing into an immersive journey. With each turn, the viewer encounters new people engaged in various professions, domestic animals going about their routines, and birds engaged in diverse activities. This ever-evolving tapestry of imagery ensures that the mural remains dynamic and engaging, compelling the viewer to explore further [14]. The mural is a testament to Benod Behari's artistry. His

working, or sharing moments of joy, or animals going about their business, the mural captures the essence of everyday existence in Birbhum [16].

4. Conclusion

"Birbhum Landscape" by Benod Behari Mukherjee is a masterpiece of mural art that ingeniously addresses the physical constraints of its location and transforms them into opportunities for a unique viewer experience. Executed on a low ceiling, this mural challenges traditional viewing practices and actively involves the audience. It becomes an immersive journey, allowing viewers to explore its intricate details and themes at their own pace.

The mural's lack of a dominant point of vision or directional stress provides viewers with complete freedom to enter the composition from any point. This absence of prescribed routes encourages a sense of ownership as viewers chart their own course through the artwork. They are free to select and focus on any plant or tree from the multitude depicted, creating a personalized narrative within the mural. Benod Behari's masterful use of placement, color, perspective, lines, shapes, and composition guides viewers on this immersive journey, fostering a deep connection with the depicted landscape and village life. It transforms the passive act of viewing into an active and participatory experience, much like exploring a new landscape. The mural's expansive canvas captures the changing seasons of Birbhum's landscape, adding depth and authenticity to the portrayal of rural life.

This mural radiates affection and joy, encapsulating the complexities of life with dazzling originality. Benod Behari Mukherjee has skillfully captured the vibrant essence of rural life, offering viewers the opportunity to independently explore its rich details. "Birbhum Landscape" transcends traditional mural art, empowering viewers to actively participate in the artwork's narrative. It stands as a testament



Figure 4: Representational graphic image of the Birbhum Landscape Area, Kala Bhavana Boys Hostel, Santiniketan, Image construction by Author

use of vibrant colors breathes life into the scene, evoking the richness of the Birbhum landscape. The perspective and lines guide the viewer's eye, ensuring that no detail is left undiscovered. As viewers navigate the mural's intricate network of images, they encounter new people, different professions, domestic animals, and birds engaged in a myriad of activities [15]. Each turn reveals another layer of life in the village, creating a sense of belonging and understanding. As the viewer gradually moves through the mural, it unfolds like a real-life experience, akin to traveling on one's own feet. Mukherjee's meticulous attention to detail ensures that every corner of the composition is filled with life and vitality. Whether it's people conversing,

to the boundless possibilities of art to immerse, engage, and captivate us in innovative ways. This mural is an invitation to embark on a captivating journey and a testament to the transformative power of art in its ability to engage and inspire.

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It is original and has neither been sent elsewhere nor published anywhere.

Declaration

This research has been conducted ethically, reporting of those involved in this article.

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