Leaves, metal and living worlds

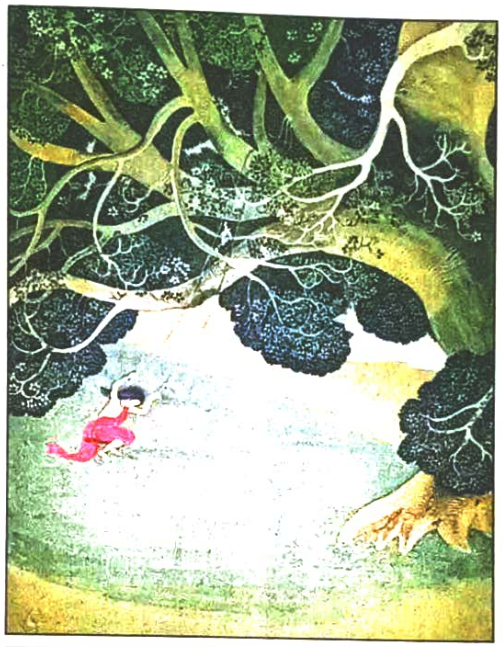
VISUAL ARTS

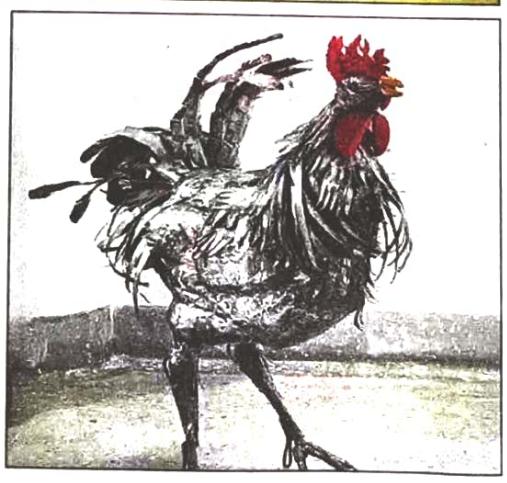
SRIMOYEE BAGCHI

Trees line the paths of our daily lives but their quiet presence is often blurred by habit, until a book, a poem, or a painting restores each leaf, branch and trunk to our gaze. The exhibition, *A Dozen (or So) Ways to Draw a Tree* (on view at the Birla Academy of Art and Culture), does exactly this. A wonderfully eclectic collection of paintings brings together trees imagined across centuries and artistic traditions; it invites viewers to notice their familiar forms afresh and consider how deeply they are rooted in human memory and the shared rhythms of life on earth.

In the miniature paintings, trees lend the landscape a decorative flow while responding to the human dramas unfolding around them. In *Raga Dipak*, variations in foliage and repeated patterns suggest the considered planting of a royal garden. *Rasika Priya* draws the eye towards one glorious tree, its intricately patterned canopy becoming a spectacle in itself. In *Ragini Todi*, trees offer respite to a solitary heroine in the foreground while a dazzling diversity of foliage conceals soldiers — her beloved among them? — fighting in the distance. The trees that shelter her in her loneliness serve as camouflage in the battle.

In Ramendranath Chakravorty's *Swing* (picture, top), a lush canopy shelters the swinging woman within a secluded little world. Leaves emerge in patterns as intricate as embroidery, their decorative richness held within a composition of luminous simplicity. In Kshitindranath Majumdar's *Radha Embracing the Tamal Tree*, the tree seems to return Radha's embrace, its trunk almost human, its branches opening like arms. Their entwined





forms appear suspended midway through a slow, hypnotic dance.

Rabindranath Tagore's tree emerges through squiggles with a childlike freedom, recalling the playful doodling from which his art grew. In Nandalal Bose's work, leaves resolve into patterns, almost like letters of an unfamiliar script, as though prolonged looking had turned foliage into a language. Indra Dugar's tree opens into a starburst of colours, its radiating foliage expressing his feeling for colour harmony. In Gopal Ghose's idyllic landscape, the tree anchors the composition, drawing the surrounding scene into its quiet orbit. His sensitivity to the cadence of nature makes it feel like the living centre of the landscape.

Suhas Roy's mottled painting on glass evokes the mysteries of a dense forest, its depths seeming to recede behind the surface. Manjari Chakravarti's tree has the simplicity of a dream assembled from elementary shapes and colours, while Ramlal Dhar's *Countryside II* opens into a living, breathing glade of brilliant hues. Rashmimala's *The Asian Spider Flower* redirects attention towards humbler growth, questioning the hierarchies through which some plants are cherished and others dismissed as weeds. In Durgabai Vyam's *Tiger Drinking Water*, the tree becomes a spirited presence within a shared world of animal and vegetal life, its animistic vitality finding expression through the rhythmic patterning of her Gond imagery. Mallika Das Sutar's leaf-crowned bust conjures a woodland spirit, carrying the scent of soil and the promise of new growth.

Metal acquires a restless vitality in Kiran Dixit Thacker's *I Had a Dream...* at the Academy of Fine Arts, Calcutta. A disciple of Ramkinkar Baij, Thacker carries forward her teacher's feeling for everyday life and expressive form through her sculptural vocabulary. A cockerel struts on sinewy legs, its breast swelling beneath a cascade of sharply cut feathers (picture, bottom). Elsewhere, a woman holds a child against her body while raising a curved blade; the lattice sweeping behind her makes the metal seem windblown. Thacker builds movement through angular limbs, folded planes and open frameworks, allowing light and empty space to animate her figures while varied gestures give these angular metal bodies the warmth and sociability of a community.