

## RATAN DEVI: INDIAN SINGER

THE following exquisite prose poem by the celebrated Rajut singer, Sri Paramahansa Tat, who is now in New York, was inspired by the charming and distinguished lady who crowns the existence of the great Buddhist scholar and art critic, Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, and who is at present singing in New York while her husband is lecturing on Indian Art and other matters. He is a member of the old warrior or Kahatriya caste, a Tamil of high rank and dignity, and a cousin of the Solicitor-General of Ceylon, the Honorable P. Ramamathan. His lady, Ratan Devi, has created a vogue for Indian songs which she executes with utter naturalness and a most convincing charm. Bernard Shaw, W. B. Yeats and Sir Rabinranath Tagore have acclaimed her as the Isis revealer of the soul of India. If India be the tongue of Asia, surely Ratan Devi is the tongue of India! Her success in New York has been serpent-swift.

I WALKED through Manhattan in the snow. Then I came into a dim-lit room, a room of Rembrandt shadows, where rose and gold were veiled so deeply that they were felt, not seen. I sat down in the old position of Siddhasana, mindful of the days when, as a holy beggar, I meditated without the gates of Madura.

Then I became aware of a white face, of the lotus face of Bhavani, or so it seemed, that distilled itself like a strange perfume through the gloom. It was beautiful, almost terrible by reason of its beauty, but calm and strong. Yet it was soft as the full moon upon the Nilgherries, and pale and sweet as honey in a secret bower.

Under the ray of the champak flower that was her face the Indian jumble dawned about

me. Great banyans writhed like serpents in mysterious shrines. Suddenly the fierce and



Ratan Devi, Singer of Indian Songs

subtle scent of nargis smote me, and I knew that she was singing.

Through the boughs of the great tree under which I was huddled I could grasp the stars. One by one they budded from the breast of the velvet-footed night, the great cat that stalks the deer of day through the glades of Eternity. And then I saw that the tree was the Bo-Tree, whereunder Buddha sat in the great Hour of his emancipation.

The song was over.

Stunned by the intensity of the vision, I saw but a still ocean, waveless and tideless Shoreless it lay beneath the sun—and almost I sensed the Dhatu of Nibbana from afar.

AND then she sang again. Love, like a king-cobra, struck his ruby fangs into my pale heart. Never had such glory fashioned itself in me. I took wing—, And then,— Time passed . . . perhaps . . . who knows? And she sang again.

The voice was frail as a tear and strong as space. The flowers, the fireflies, the very rocks became song. The elements were refined and enraptured into music. All things declared their nature; they were eternal, they were beauty, they were love. Nothing fades. Spring, not winter, is the truth of Life; yet only through winter is spring made perfect. Death is but the handmaiden who braids the tresses of her lady Life. Fainter and fainter, yet ever more persistent grew the drone of the music.

Life . . . life . . .

I walked through Manhattan in the snow.

## WHAT IS A WORK OF ART, AND WHY, AND WHEN?

BY FREDERICK JAMES GREGG

MEN of science are agreed that it is more difficult, in the majority of cases, to discover that a problem exists than it is to find a solution of it. In other words, a definite statement of a riddle is the first necessary step in the direction of guessing the answer.

Here then are three riddles: What is a work of art? Why is it a work of art? When is it a work of art?

It must be admitted frankly that the first and second questions—which slightly overlap—will probably never be answered. There is no such thing as an *absolute* work of art; that is to say, there is no such thing as a work of art, existing in time and space independently of some mind to which it appeals.

A work of art is such because somebody thinks it so. Somebody must be *affected*. From the wood carving of a Congo Negroid—influenced and stimulated by the Mediterranean blood in his veins—to a painting by Rembrandt or Cézanne; from a chorus by Euripides to a great line by Walt Whitman; from the Oration at the Tomb to Lincoln's Gettysburg Speech, where would the artist be without his spectator, or hearer?

Suppose that a painter made a picture and never showed it to anybody. If he reacted to it himself—purely as a work of art—it would be a work of art. But suppose that, after a while, he lost faith in it; suppose that it ceased to affect him; then it is clear that it would no longer be a work of art. For without one single being to react to it, it would be a dead, an

inert thing. This is obvious even if there is involved in it the dangerous conclusion that a thing may be a work of art at one time and not at another.

But suppose that, after our artist tires of his picture, somebody comes along, sees the picture, and experiences the artist's original reaction or thrill. Then the status of the painting immediately becomes changed again. This process might go on indefinitely. It makes no difference whether one mind or a thousand minds are involved, except that the greater the number of reacting minds the greater the chance of the reaction continuing indefinitely; the greater the chance, in short, of the thing continuing to be a work of art.

BUT it is necessary to insist that the number of those who admire the painting has nothing to do with the case. As long as there is *one* mind which reacts to the thing *absolutely*, it is and must be a work of art.

But here is another point. The reaction of B. added to that of A. often affects a third person, C., who experiences no true reaction of his own. If I feel that Shelley is a real poet, it is not very important to me that Swinburne and George Moore thought him to be such. But if I had no conviction on the subject, it would be important for me that not only did Swinburne think that Shelley was a real poet, but that George Moore did too. The reason is plain. I might decide that as Swinburne and George Moore were highly intelligent critics, and so generally considered, I should ac-

cept them at once and unequivocally as authorities. The opinions of most persons, on works of art, is based on some purely external evidence like this.

But some critic will say that reaction is no true test because some people react to what is *bad* art just as others do to what is good. But let us consider what happens in the run of cases.

The average man will like a portrait because it is a good likeness; or he will admire a landscape because it reminds him of some place that he has seen; or covet a piece of statuary because it is anatomically correct; or buy something because it is by an old master whose work is scarce and very expensive; or by a new master whose work is fashionable—and also expensive. In all of these cases it is clear that the reaction is not to the thing, as a *work of art*, but to some adventitious quality in it—likeness, realism, correctness, rarity, fashionableness, or what not. This quality, whatever it is, has nothing whatever to do with the object as a *work of art*.

A FEW examples will make this clear. A vulgar person sees a painting of a dollar bill on a barn door and admires it. But why? Not because he thinks it is a work of art (which it is not) but because it creates in him the actual belief that it is a dollar bill. A woman sees and admires the Dresden Madonna. Why? As a work of art, which it is? Not at all, but because it stimulates in her the sense of "mother love." (Continued on page 124)