Benodebehari, Leela and Mrinalini
MUKHERJEE

In conversation with the exhibition titled *A Story of South Asian Art: Mrinalini Mukherjee and Her Circle* at the Royal Academy of Art in London (31 October 2025–24 February 2026), we're delighted to present a selection of artworks from private, institutional and the gallery's own collections that highlight the legacy of the renowned Mukherjee family: the acclaimed Santiniketan pedagogue and artist Benodebehari Mukherjee (1904–1980), his wife Leela Mukherjee (1915–2003) and their daughter, the internationally celebrated sculptor Mrinalini Mukherjee (1949–2015).

The practices of these three consummate artists are significant for the way they spoke to and shaped Indian art since the early twentieth century all the way into the twenty-first century – whether it was the making of a contextual modernism in dialogue with international practices, path-breaking experiments with materials via an integrated approach to art and craft, articulations of indigenous identity and, equally, the foregrounding of a powerful feminist contemporary practice.

The Mukherjee legacy begins with Rabindranath Tagore's 1919 dream project of establishing a university at 'Home in the World' (Viswa Bharati) in Santiniketan, set-up in deep conversation with Johannes Itten's Bauhaus enterprise. Benodebehari's initiation into art was steeped in this search for new contexts and languages, for a locally rooted modernism, and his pronounced individual vocabulary was born out of his sensorial experience of the brooding Santiniketan landscape. A prominent teacher of the Santiniketan School of Art, Benodebehari developed an early engagement with his local surroundings that appealed to then unconventional ideas of landscape as a framed view of aesthetic interest while embracing the spread of nature in its entirety. Due to his limited eyesight, nature was both a refuge and a sort of menacing presence for him. Pastoral themes, however, quickly evolved into an intellectual space where his politics and concerted pictorial inquiries came to be revealed. During his time spent in Nepal and Mussoorie in the 1940s and 1950s, Benodebehari observed the character and colours of the changing seasons in the towns and mountains, and of the figures that navigated their way through them, with an erasure of forms, imbued with a consistent animism, taking precedence of over precise definition.

In contrast to this celebrated figure stands his wife and erstwhile student, Leela Mukherjee. Leela was among the early female sculptors in India, educating herself in the art of wood-work by learning from local craftsmen in Nepal, receiving a training that was both indigenous and eclectic, apart from her more formal years at Santiniketan. With a strong influence of folk art, Leela's sculptures, often featuring female figures or animal forms, are focused on the theatre of character as found in the agility of their poses, while maintaining strong and solid physical presences that are intended to be devoid of a psychological or personifying point of view. Her wooden sculptures from the 1970s highlight a craftsmanship that privileged immediacy and spontaneity, possessing an animism that their daughter Mrinalini also felt deeply connected to. Her printmaking and paintings also reference a similar, natural expression, drawing on different art influences, including classical, modern and folk, Indic, Western and African streams. Curious and emboldened by nature, Leela has come to be celebrated as one of India's early women modernists.

Mrinalini Mukherjee's own trajectory took her to Baroda in 1965 to explore a post-colonial quest for identity and language given her relationship with simultaneous visual expressions and inheritances, whether modern, folk, craft or tribal. She arrived on the scene with her monumental sculptures in hemp, ceramics and bronze that inspired awe for their scale and grandeur. They embody an interest in materials that entreat the animism of nature, inspired by the techniques of indigenous practice as well as in dialogue with the post-minimalist artists of the 1960s and 1970s in Europe and America. Based on the principle of growth and efflorescence, the forms that emerge in Mrinalini's work are constantly mutating and transforming hybrid bodies, where the body, the vegetal and the material merge. Much of Mrinalini's oeuvre is centered around exploring the tactility of media while developing an intricate and meaningful relationship with the act of making. Mrinalini's work straddles the vocabulary of the late moderns and early contemporaries, finding abstraction and expressionism as a vehicle in which to communicate the fluidity and folds of the human body. Mrinalini remained keen to develop forms that were natural to the medium, evoking the sensations of colours and textures related to the motifs she had in mind as well as the metaphoric intrusion into other natural forms.

One can read into these practices the complicated and ever-unfolding story of modernism, which sought its resolution in a plethora of visual cultures, offering ways to acknowledge and align sources with resources. With global narratives intervening at different points in their careers, each of their repertoires was subject to the agency of their participation in the dialogue. This grouping together leads us to many crisscrossing connections. We can study their seminal explorations of nature and landscape as complex signifiers of social and subjective identities. We can also explore other trajectories whether around the pedagogic practices that Benodebehari and Leela devoted much of their life to, or the feminist interventions in the essentially male domain of sculpture that Mrinalini and Leela made. Their shared curiosities manifesting in strong and independent visual languages reinforces a subjectivity about art-making and creation, explaining, perhaps, why these artists continue to be culturally and artistically relevant today.