

# COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

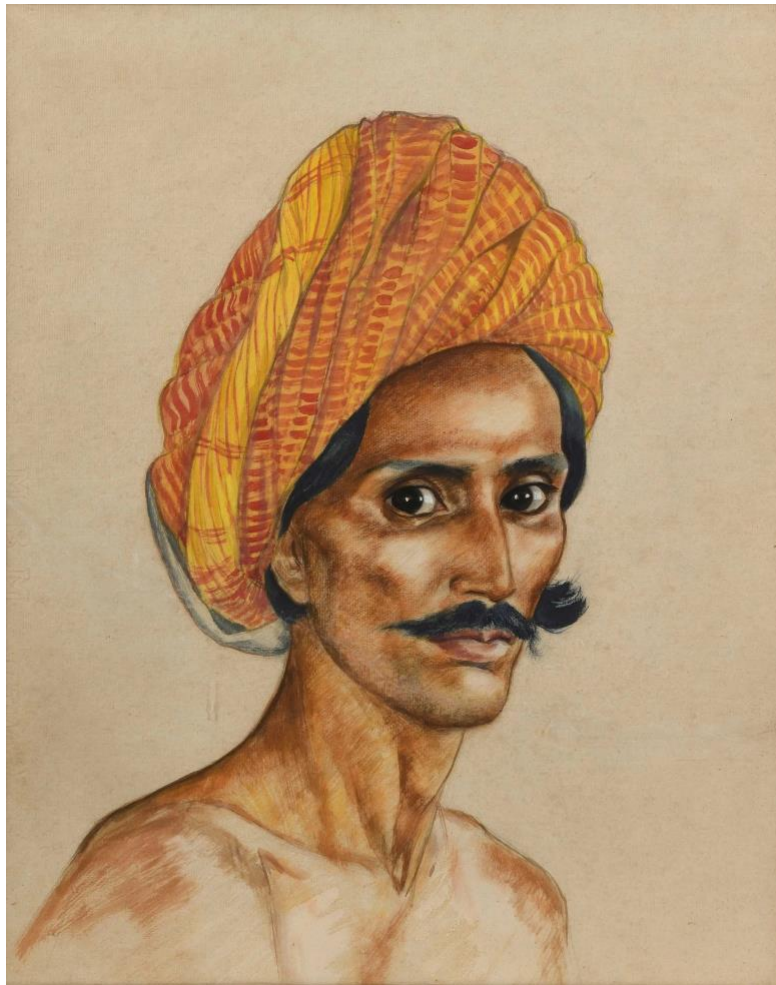
Magda Nachman  
(St Petersburg 1889 – 1951 Bombay)

*Portrait of a man in a turban*

Old label on the reverse: *Magda Nachman / Bombay 1936*

Pastel and watercolour on paper

47.5 x 39 cm.



This arresting image of a finely-featured man in a turban is a rare work by the fascinating Magda Nachman (fig. 1). A Russian-born Jewish artist, Nachman occupied a front-row seat for some of the most earth-shattering events of the first half of the twentieth century. Her tumultuous life took her from Tsarist St Petersburg to Bolshevik Moscow, and then to Weimar Berlin, where the rise of Nazism led to her departure for Bombay, with her Indian husband, the communist leader M.P.T. Acharya. Driven around the globe by the politics of her time, the indomitable Nachman is little-known today as the majority of her works are largely inaccessible to the wider world, with most known works housed in Russian state museums or in private, primarily Indian, collections. This portrait, her earliest known Indian picture, represents the first time that a work by Nachman has appeared on the international market and it will hopefully go some way in introducing her life and work to the wider audience it deserves.



Fig. 1, Magda Nachman, 1922



Fig. 2, Magda Nachman (centre with bow tie) with other pupils at the Zvantseva academy, 1913

Nachman was born in July 1889 in Pavlovsk, a suburb of the Russian imperial capital St Petersburg, into a cultured and affluent family. Her father, Maximilian, was Jewish, originally from Riga. Antisemitism was rife in the Russian Empire of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with restrictive legislation adopted against the Jews. Despite quotas which restricted the number of Jews from specialising in law, Maximilian managed to graduate from the law faculty of St Petersburg University, thereby giving him the right to live in the capital. He worked as a legal advisor to the German embassy, as well as to the Nobel Brother's Petroleum Production Company. Nachman's mother, Klara von Roeder, was a Lutheran Baltic German from the minor nobility.

Nachman and her siblings were brought up in the Lutheran tradition, perhaps in part in recognition of the hostilities Jews faced at the time. After graduating in 1906 with high

marks from the Annenschule, founded in 1736 to educate the children of the German population of the city, Nachman began attending classes at the Mutual Aid Society of Russian Artists. Here she met other aspiring artists who nicknamed the beautiful yet modest and unassuming young woman 'Her Quietness'. From 1907 to 1913 Nachman studied at the Zvantseva Art Academy (fig. 2), the most progressive art school in Russia at the time, which counted March Chagall as amongst its alumni. Here Nachman took classes with Kuzma Petrov-Vokdkin, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky and Leon Bakst, with the latter two having a notable impact on the young artist's subsequent style.

Nachman started to exhibit regularly from 1910 onwards, first in St Petersburg and then in Moscow, where she moved in 1916. However, a year later, the Russian Revolution and Civil War derailed her career and engendered great difficulties for the young artist. Being unable to support herself in Moscow, where there was no work, she spent several months with her sister near Vladimir, working as a bookkeeper in a forestry office, and covering railroad cars with propaganda posters. By 1919 she had moved to the village of Ust'-Dolyssy, working on stage and costume design for the Village People's Theatre, and painting portraits of the villagers in exchange for food. By the end of 1920 funding for the theatre had ended, and Nachman returned to Moscow.

The upheavals of the Revolution, the ruinous Soviet artistic policies and the destructions of World War II ensure that very little of Magda's work from her early years survive. The only known canvas from this time is *Peasant Woman* (fig. 3), a felicitous survival. Purchased by a collector in 1916, *Peasant Woman* entered the State Museum in Kazan in 1920, before being condemned twenty-six years later by the Soviet authorities as a product of formalism. Antithetical to the Russian people and to the goals of Social Realism, the painting was thus ordered to be destroyed. Thankfully, one of Kazan's curators, Sagadar Ishmuratova, risking her freedom, rolled Nachman's canvas up, along with several other works, and hid them. In the 1960s, shortly before her death, she revealed what she had done to a young curator, who continued to keep them hidden until the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the dangers of harbouring forbidden art had passed.



Fig. 3, Magda Nachman, *Peasant Woman*, 1916, oil on canvas, Kazan State Museum, Russia

Back in Moscow Nachman met M.P.T. Acharya, a prominent figure in the Indian national liberation movement, who had arrived in Bolshevik Russia searching for ideological partners in to help in the struggle for Indian independence. They married in 1920, moving to Berlin two years later, a city which already had by then a substantial Russian emigré population of nearly 300,000, one-quarter of whom were Jewish. Nachman persevered with her artistic activities in Germany, having to support both herself and her husband, who by this point was under surveillance by the British intelligence service. He was considered by the British to be a dangerous Indian nationalist involved in subversive activities, although by this point Acharya, disillusioned with Soviet Russia, had transformed from a militant fighter to a pacifist and self-described anarchist.

Despite the continuing hardships, Nachman did managed to participate in a few groups shows and undertake one successful solo exhibition in 1928, which was positively reviewed by the writer Vladimir Nabokov, who praised her use of colour. Nachman would befriend Nabokov and his wife Véra, portraying them in pastels a few years later. Beginning in 1928, Nachman produced illustrations for several issues of the *Jüdischer Jugenkalender* and indeed in Berlin she participated more actively in Jewish society than she had done in Russia, where she was little affected by her father's religion.

Following Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in 1933, Germany became unsafe for the half-Jewish artist and her dark-skinned Tamil husband, and they looked to flee Germany. In January of 1934, the couple received British passports, which enabled them to leave Berlin for Switzerland, where Nachman's older sister Adele lived with her family. The following year, Acharya was granted disposition to return to British India, subject to his renunciation of subversive activities. This he agreed to, sailing from Genoa to Madras. Nachman remained in Switzerland for another year, before following her husband to Indian in 1936.



Fig. 4, Magda Nachman, *The Mirror*, oil on canvas, location unknown

Nachman had left a difficult life in Europe for a difficult life in Bombay. According to a friend in India, the dancer Hilde Holger, 'Magda was poor her whole life and never earned enough to live on'. Soon after arriving in Bombay, Nachman became a member of the Bombay Art Society (BAS) and began exhibiting regularly, up to her death in 1951, and it is through the



black and white images of the BAS catalogues that much of Nachman's Indian work is known (fig. 4). A versatile artist, Nachman worked in oils, pastels, coloured pencil and charcoal, painting landscapes, still lives and portraits, as well as designing theatre costumes. In her 15 years in India, Nachman left an important mark on the Bombay art scene, befriending and mentoring many young Indian artists. Although 'conservative in her own style of work, she welcomed and encouraged those who went in search of horizons new'.<sup>1</sup>

The present work is an excellent example of Nachman's portraiture and is the earliest known work from her Indian period, executed the year she arrived in Bombay. It's possible that the sitter was known to Nachman and may well be the figure at the left in a group portrait exhibited at the BAS in 1945 (fig. 5). Either way, the pastel is notable for both its quality and the striking features of the sitter, perhaps a labourer or a street vendor. As stated in the review of Nachman's posthumous exhibition of 1951, the artist, who had suffered from persecution herself, 'instinctively understood those who stand by the roadside when life passes by and she painted them not so much with pity but with a feeling for the tragic condition and dignity of the simple poor. Her sympathy with human nature made her a good observer of type and a portraitist of a very special human kind.'<sup>2</sup>

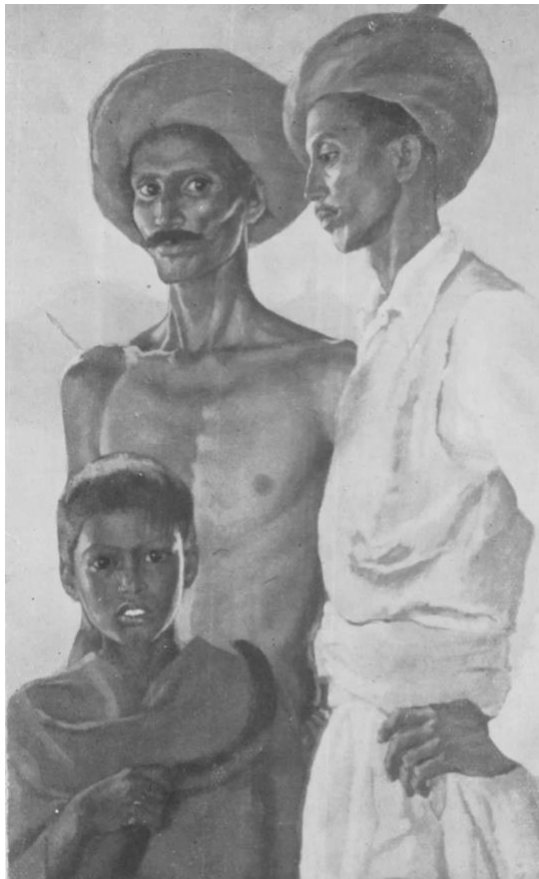


Fig. 5, Magda Nachman, *Two men and a young boy*, 1945, oil on canvas, location unknown

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<sup>1</sup> *The Times of India*, February 13, 1951.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*