

**International Seminar
MYSORE MODERNITY, ARTISTIC NATIONALISM & THE ART OF K.
VENKATAPPA
25, 26, 27 November 2016
NGMA and Venkatappa Art Gallery
Bangalore**

Notes

K Venkatappa (1886-1965) is a seminal figure in early modern Indian art. In Karnataka, he is the first modern artist in the region. However, besides some essays and monographs on him mentioned below in the bibliography, there has been no proper critical evaluation or major art historical study on him and his context. He is only a minor figure in the dominant art history of the country, which to my mind is the history of the Gangetic plain. By studying a figure - who is both national in spirit while choosing to work in the region; cosmopolitan, and yet rooted in a context; rooted, yet fighting tooth and nail every inch of way to maintain his artistic independence and integrity, (both within feudal patronage as well as the market) - we hope to make more complex the history of early modern art, and therefore, of early modernity in India.

The princely state of Mysore, (along with Baroda) was seen as a "model " and a "modern state" under the reign of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV (1894- 1940) . Sayaji Rao Gaekwad III of Baroda and Krishna Raja Wodeyar attacked Imperial claims to modernity and claimed it for themselves with 'good governance', by aggressively pursuing it through economic and social reforms and western education. Sayaji Rao observes that ideas of any origin can be modified in the Indian milieu to become distinctly Indian in nature. Mysore and Baroda, as princely states, thought of themselves as 'real Indian territories' and manipulated British ideas to reproduce them on nationalistic lines. Mysore started its reforms in the early 20th century and in the 1920s, was lauded as the most progressive state by both the British and the Nationalists. "Concepts of modernity which emerged out of Enlightenment rationalism and the new found faith in scientific processes, were premised upon the notion that all societies in the world were progressing in one direction, and that this progress was towards some form of industrial democratic capitalism." Sir M. Vishweshwarayya, Dewan of Mysore, sets up several industries and dams under a Swadeshi plan. The king funds the establishment of the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, ,promoted by J N Tata of Bombay, in 1909, inviting C V Raman to head it , which made Bangalore the science capital of India. The Mysore University is established in 1917 as a modern 'counter' to the 'old-fashioned', 'backward' and colonial Madras University, thereby asserting the right of Indians to control knowledge production. (The right to knowledge was central to the colonial project as expressed by Macaulay and Maine.) In the act of decolonizing the University, the instrument of modernization, the Mysore Maharaja decolonizes modernity itself, so producing an 'Indian modern'. The princely states, which represented the 'fossilized past' to the British by which they defined their own modern-ness, undermined colonialism by becoming sites of 'native modernity'. (from Manu Bhagwan, Sovereign States, OUP)

The seminar will see Venkatappa as an archetypal figure of early modernism in India. An eccentric and colourful character, his life embodies many interesting dilemmas and contradictions of great interest to us today. Venkatappa offers a lens through which the history of early modernism (artistic form) and modernity (sociological phenomenon) can be critically revisited. We see this as an important art historical and archival initiative. This is also the first major and international seminar on any artist or on the modern period in Karnataka, and the first ever seminar on Venkatappa.

Venkatappa has a fascinating biography where he moves from being an artisan painter in the employ of the king to becoming a nationalist cosmopolitan modern artist. The seminar will look at the modernizing history of the progressive Mysore State; his artisanal background as a descendent of the Chitrakara community of traditional palace painters, and his early studies in the Chamarajendra Technical Institute in Mysore in the Western academic style. It will explore the trajectory of his journey to the Madras College of Art where he meets E B Havell, and then to the capital of 'Artistic Nationalism', Calcutta, where he goes to study at the Calcutta School of Art under Abanindranath Tagore, on a scholarship by the Maharaja. He spends several years there (from 1909 to 1916) and becomes one of the earliest students of Abanindranath Tagore, at the time when Tagore was exploring certain ideas of a Swadeshi and Pan-Asian art both in his writings and his art practice. In the context of the nationalist reinterpretation of traditional aesthetics, Venkatappa is assigned a key role; he is appreciated for his fine skills, which come from his traditional artisanal background, and is asked to do the illustrations along with Nandalal Bose for Abanindranath's treatise on Indian aesthetics – Shadanga - or the Six Limbs of Indian Art. (These paintings are in the Venkatappa Art Gallery in Bangalore). During those years, he also goes to Ajanta with Nandalal Bose and others to help Lady Herringham copy the Ajanta frescoes. Ajanta is an important marker on the nationalist art map of India, seen as one of the lodestones of our grand tradition.

Venkatappa comes back to Mysore more of a Bengali cosmopolitan artist than a Mysorean. No wonder he is always at odds with his contemporary artists. He hardly mentions them in his diaries. Instead, he thinks of himself as an independent intellectual artist and cultivates the company of intellectuals: philosophers like M Hiriyanna and S Radhakrishnan, the Orientalist scholars, and writers like Kuvempu, who all taught in Mysore University, and has interesting conversations with physicist C V Raman in Bangalore. Perhaps this exposure to scientific ideas may have led him to move away from the idealism of the Bengal style and an empirical study of nature, attested by his landscape paintings from this period. Yet, he has his own dilemmas and contradictions in his work, which fluctuates between various styles and ideas, western and orientalist, romantic and magic realist.

Venkatappa's paintings were predominantly in watercolor, in contrast to a popular movement in the Mysore court towards oils following the Ravi Varma influence. Ravi Varma had come to Mysore on the invitation of the Maharaja, for several short periods in 1902, 1903, 1904 and 1905. Patronage of art was also a sign of modernity, as well as a support for native culture to flourish. Ravi Varma was given the "Gun House" a sprawling hotel near the palace for his studio and treated as a royal guest, and provided with his own kitchen, staff and assistants. K. Venkatappa was a young boy in these years. There is no mention of Ravi Varma in Venkatappa's copious diaries it seems, but critic G. Venkatachalam writes that Venkatappa had seen Ravi Varma working in the palace as a young boy.

Venkatappa was an eccentric, "distancing himself from Abanindranath Tagore and his other students by retreating to the Mysore court, but also resisting his position as a simple court artisan by rejecting commissions that constrained his style and did not match his expected compensation; rejecting salaried positions tying him to the palace or other institutions and painting in a modern style." He "made a self-conscious attempt to assume the position of a distracted genius, indifferent to the mundane world of praise and profit." This, "along with his interest in studying the veena – when he largely abandoned painting, kept him at a distance from the art world until his discovery by James Cousins in the 1920s".

Venkatappa's Ooty watercolours of 1926 are some of his finest works, appreciated by Mahatma Gandhi when he visited Mysore, which he lauded later in his journal Young India.

Venkatappa even started an art school in 1926 in Bangalore after which he refused to sell his work. Yet, soon after, he accepted an invitation to create a series of plaster of Paris bas-reliefs for the Mysore Palace. But after the death of Krishna Raja Wodeyar who had given him the commission, the new king Jayachamarajendra terminated the order in 1940. Furious, Venkatappa moved to Bangalore and started litigation against the king for his payments. The set of bas-reliefs done in a heavily muscular Western style, never went to the palace and are now in the Venkatappa Art Gallery in Bangalore.

Venkatappa has a history of litigation sparing neither his neighbours, the press nor the king. He was a purist who jealously guarded his art and his reputation. Extremely touchy, he was an austere bachelor and stickler for rules. On the other hand, his diaries reveal that he saw three Hollywood films a week, which also indicates that he rather revelled in "low" pleasures! When teased about his bachelorhood he replies that "he is wedded to his art, and art is a jealous mistress". No romantic female interest seems to be mentioned in the diaries, and it could be suspected that he was a believer in Ramakrishna as he spent many evenings wandering in Dakshinapuram in his Calcutta days, besides other religious sites in North India. Always a rebel, his life has many piquant resonances raising many questions for us today, not only about his biography, but even on the early history of modernity and modernism in India.

Why a Seminar on Venkatappa is relevant today

The lost history of Venkatappa is in a sense, a lost history of early modernism in Karnataka and a lost chapter, or gap, in the history of Indian art. This strange emptiness, this lack of substance, creates a vacuum in our thoughts. His history is peculiarly fragmented. While he appears as an artistic player as a student of Abanindranath Tagore in the scholarly works of Partha Mitter, R Sivakumar and Tapati Guha Thakurta in reference to the Bengal school and early Nationalist art, his biography by S K Ramachandra Rao, the edited diaries by KV Subramanyam in Kannada, and Janaki Nair's path breaking work concentrate on his Mysore avatar. There is not much work in connecting the different phases of his life. His Bengal and Mysore avatars hardly meet. There is no research, or even a wikipedia entry for instance on the important Chamarajendra Technical Institute where he studied, which produced many leading artists and institution builders of the state. There is no substantial scholarly research on 20th century Karnataka art. It is all very hazy. The only publications available for study are monographs of individual artists brought out by the Akademis, which treat each artist as an island, and are indeed, superficial hagiographies.

For artists in Karnataka, it is as if we sprang up from nothingness to jump into the national art scene in the 1980s. Modern art history appears to be always located elsewhere.

This gap, this vacuum, even has consequences in government policies and the public imagination. Our situation is to be seen against the backdrop of the large body of critical writing and publications on modern Kannada literature. There, movements and figures from the 19th century onwards have been published, studied and debated, to form a rich tapestry and legacy for students to study, for the public to read, and writers to be inspired by, (or rebel against). It is as if visual art, in spite of the vibrant art scene in the state for many decades, does not exist in the popular imagination. So the culture of the state becomes a lopsidedly literary culture, politically charged with the needs of the linguistic state, which has its dangers in language nationalism and parochialism. The modern visual arts in Karnataka, whether art or architecture, (or in fact, even music and dance) are barely thought about as they are not based on the state language, and this results in government neglect of institutions and patronage in policy and practice and lack of understanding of the visual.

Research, archiving and documentation are important means to bring these histories to the fore.

The seminar will attempt, precisely, to create this rich tapestry of research, debate and discourse about the art and life of Venkatappa, situating him in the currents of his time. It will look at the modernizing policies of the progressive Mysore government, their patronage of art, the palace artists, the Chamarajendra Technical Institute where the artist first studied, the influence of Ravi Varma (and Venkatappa's rejection of it) and the several British artists who were around in that area for a hundred years, and the artist's teachers and contemporaries. It will have papers on Indian artistic nationalism and the Bengal Renaissance, looking at the period of Venkatappa's stay, and trace its deep influence and his re-negotiation of it later. The seminar will study the different bodies of Venkatappa's work, their materials, their aesthetic innovations and flaws and contradictions. Venkatappa's eccentricities, austerities and interests will be looked at. It will study his influence- on future generations. This seminar will be the first major attempt to seriously historicize Karnataka modern art - focusing on the figure of K Venkatappa -engaging the early modern period via our current location in history.

This is indeed a historical moment to have a seminar on Venkatappa, when Karnataka artists have been protesting against the state government's unprecedented move to give away in adoption the Venkatappa Art Gallery - with its valuable collections of Karnataka modern art (built around Venkatappa's work donated by his family) and its democratic open galleries – to the family trust of an art dealer to rebuild and house his personal collection. Artistic heritage is seen as mere tourism, as a product to be marketed, to be administered by the businessmen and marketing consultants who form these "expert" panels set up by the government. Artists who create the art are treated with utter contempt. It is a crisis of our times. It is time that art making be seen as central to any society, and a greater critical interest in our artistic and intellectual heritage as well as contemporary work is developed, as a rich resource for our understanding of life, and for a future vision.

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