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ART IN MYSORE

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In a talk of fifteen hundred words it would only be possible to give one word to one year of the fifteen (and more) centuries of the history of art in Mysore. Selection and compression are therefore necessary; so I shall confine myself to the period with which I have been intimately associated since the year 1924, when I had the happiness of first visiting Mysore City, and became implicated in developments in the collecting of works of art for public exhibition that not only added to the history of art in the State, but of art in India. But before I proceed to summarise the artistic events of the past twenty years, all but a year, let me remind you of the fact that the artistic genius of the people who inhabited the area that became known as Mysore State, erected works of architectural art that have endured through many centuries and taken their place in the records of the immortal creations of human skill. In this connection I shall only remind you that a thousand years ago, Mysore had created an architectural style, the Hoysala style, that is recognised, as one of the supreme achievements of world-art. This achievement is not limited to the particular structure of a building. Along with the ground-plan and the design of the superstructure goes the ornamentation that humanity, from its earliest years, has felt impelled to exercise in order to bridge the gulf between the world of common substance and the world of thought and feeling. In this matter of ornamentation, the temples that the Hoysala genius created ten centuries ago, and that still stand in their unique beauty at Belur and Halebid, are covered with rich stone sculpture that has the fineness and detail of wood-carving. But a feature specially appropriate to our very sketchy reference to the ancient background of art in Mysore is the preservation of four sculptures in Belur temple which show that the ancient classical dance of South India was at the peak of perfect expression at the time when the temple was built. There were other arts, but this mere reference to architecture, sculpture and dance must suffice to indicate that the art of Mysore in the past is with legitimate pride for the present.

changed We turn, then, to what has taken place in art in Mysore in the last two decades; and here I have to confine myself to the art of collecting of examples of the painting. I am not myself a painter (except in words); but two months after my arrival

in India, I became aware of a movement for the revival of painting along indigenous lines, and felt in it a stirring of new life that was likely to show itself in other ways as well. Being by nature an enthusiast for all forms of expression of truth and beauty, I drifted into the unofficial office of advocate of what was then known as the Bengal School of painting and gave exhibitions of the work of the new artists over a number of years in places as far away from my base in South India as Kashmir and Sind, and in many places between not to mention Europe and America.

My first contact with Mysore State was early in 1919 when the Amateur Dramatic Association of Bangalore organised a Festival of the Arts, including an exhibition of the new school of Indian painting. At the request of the association, I approached Dr. Rabindranath Tagore, then at the zenith of world-fame, to come to Bangalore and open the exhibition. Few of those who succeeded in squeezing on to the railway platform when he arrived will forget the tumultuous joy of the occasion. Though patronage of the works of the artists was all but nil, the exhibition brought a new vision and pleasure to those who were responsive to delicate and ideal beauty in painting. Five years later the harvest of much patient sowing began to be reaped.

In 1924, on the way to a vacation in the Nilgiris, I made my first visit to Mysore City. To my surprise and delight I had the honour of an interview with His Highness, the late Maharaja, of hallowed memory. As this necessitated the addition of a day to my call, I took the opportunity of sight-seeing in the beautiful garden-city and its surroundings. A morning on Chamundi Hill led me to the bungalow known as Lalitadri; and there the renaissance in Indian painting, which was never far from my mind, took hold of me. The sight of incongruous paintings on the wall of the three main rooms roused the idea that the bungalow, with the marvellous view of Mysore State that surrounded it, would make a unique centre of Indian art. My imagination hung the three main rooms with examples of the three eras in Indian painting: the early Buddhist era of the Ajanta frescoes, the mediæval era of the Rajput and Mughal miniatures, and the modern era of revived Indian paintings that had begun in Bengal

and promised to extend its influence throughout the country. I made a mental note to mention the idea to His Highness, and also, in great faith, that is said to be capable of moving mountains, but in my case would be content to put a miniature art-gallery on the top of a mountain, to offer to obtain gifts or long loans of paintings by modern artists, and good colour reproductions of works of the older eras.

My interview with His Highness on the second evening of my visit began the making of art-history: my suggestion was graciously accepted, and much interest in it expressed. But an unexpected expansion of the idea of a gallery of Indian art emerged when an official who knew more of the life of the City than I then did, pointed out that the creation of a gallery on the far end of Chamundi Hill would make it accessible only to a few motorists and defeat the intention of bringing the uplifting influence of beauty in painting to the largest possible number of the people. I was asked to look over the Jaganmohan Palace, which had long passed out of use as a royal residence and been used as a store for all kinds of knick-knacks that had served their turn elsewhere. The enormous pillars and high rooms did not appear suitable for small and delicate pictures; also, the palace was already over-crowded. But inspection discovered a series of small adjoining rooms outside the main palace; and these were decided on as the location of the proposed Indian art gallery.

Meanwhile a group of lovers of art decided to have an exhibition of modern Indian paintings in Bangalore Cantonment; and asked me to come and help. My hope for the future gallery went up when His Highness the late Yuvaraja bought four of the best paintings in the exhibition and handed them over to me for the new gallery. By invitation I brought the exhibition to Mysore and set it up in one of the buildings of the University. His Highness the Maharaja was its first visitor. When the exhibition was over, I was asked to send the paintings to the Palace so that His Highness could go through them

leisurely. A catalogue was to accompany them, and an officer suggested that I should mark seven in which I thought His Highness might take a special interest. I put double star to the seven, and a single star to six more which I thought he might like to look at for high artistic qualities. His Highness bought the thirteen and handed them over to me for the gallery. And thus, in the summer of 1924, the Mysore gallery of Indian art, known as the Chitrasala, began with thirty^{seven} original exhibits.

Centres of beauty and idealism have a way of drawing their affinities to them. Good pictures, singly and in groups, from artists in various parts of India as the influence of the revival spread, came to the gallery. Last year, through the sympathetic interest of His Highness Maharaja Sri Jayachamaraja Wadiyar, additional wall-space was provided on the first floor of the Jaganmohan Palace. This was inaugurated by an exhibition, during the Dasara of 1942, of forty of the superb creations of the world-famed Russian artist, Professor Nicholas Roerich and his talented son, Svetoslav Roerich. From this exhibition a number of beautiful paintings of the Himalayas, where the artists have lived for over twenty years, were retained, and make a remarkable room of artistic design and colour for the delight of visitors and the encouragement of artists. Something yet remains to be done to make the gallery complete in its representations of wall painting both in Buddhist and later Hindu times, and of the Rajput and Mughal eras. But even as it now stands, after some rearrangement on which I have been engaged for the past week, the gallery that began with a dozen pictures and much faith twenty years ago, now, through the gracious patronage and encouragement of His Highness the Maharaja and his illustrious predecessor, contains 500 exhibits from the hands of 80 known artists of to-day as well as the unknown artists of previous eras for the edification and enjoyment of the many thousands who visit the gallery annually.

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