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AN  
ARTISTIC DECADE  
IN  
SOUTH INDIA

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A REPORT

PRESENTED ON SEPTEMBER 25, 1945 AT  
THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE  
FOUNDING AND THE SRI CHITRALAYAM,  
TRIVANDRUM, HIS HIGHNESS THE  
MAHARAJA OF KAPURTHALA PRESIDING

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## AN ARTISTIC DECADE IN SOUTH INDIA

J. H. COUSINS

WHEN His Highness Sri Chitra Thirunal took up the Rulership of Travancore in 1931, the State, like the rest of India outside a few large cities such as Calcutta, Bombay and Mysore, suffered from the lack of centres in which special achievements of the Indian genius in arts and crafts could be enjoyed by the people, and studied by the section of them who responded to the impulse to create and appreciate beautiful and skilful things either for aesthetical pleasure or for use.

A movement for the revival of Indian painting along traditional lines, though with new ways of looking at things and graphically representing them, had begun in Bengal at the opening of the century, and had received cordial recognition by art-lovers in exhibitions in Paris and London just before the outbreak of war in 1914. Before long the movement spread its influence to other parts of India, and was reflected in places as far apart as Sind and Colombo, with Ahmedabad, Lahore, Delhi and Masulipatam between them. In these centres of different natural environment, temperament, and external appearance, local schools arose in which a common idealism was given the varied expression in line and colour that is a delight to the eye and an inspiration to the mind and high feelings. Out of this movement emerged artists who have taken their place alongside the master-painters of the past in India and outside it for perfection of craftsmanship, and who at the same time have contributed

to world art a special delicacy of touch and emotional reserve that appeals to the finer elements of human nature and have added a dignity and reverence to art through their pictorial representations of the Being and power of the Great Life on which the outer life of humanity and nature depends.

The revivalist movement had been at work for a quarter of a century before its infection of indigenous beauty and skill reached the far south-west coast. All the same Travancore had made a fundamental contribution to Indian art in the work of Raja Ravi Varma (1813-1884). Technically his work was outside the Indian tradition in that his medium was oil-colour and his method realistic. For this he has been criticised by the apostles of tempera and water-colour and symbolical suggestiveness. But it has to be remembered that he worked within the dark century between the break-up of the Rajput and Mughal schools following the dissolution of the Mughal Empire and the revival of Indian painting fifteen years after his death. Whether he was unaware of the vast heritage of Hindu and Moham-medan painting is not clear or whether he deliberately discarded its method and manner. But it is much to his credit that, at a time when the personages and events of the Puranas were subjected to detraction by followers of other faiths, the personifications of cosmic powers and of heroic life, and the stories connected with them by the illuminated imaginations of the seers of old, became the chief artistic motif of his work, and kept the idealism of the vast majority of the people of India fresh. When the Bengal revival appeared, the technique and manner of Raja Ravi Varma was naturally superseded, but his main subject-matter continued.

It has to be mentioned as part of the background of the tenth anniversary of the creation of the Sri Chitralayam of Trivandrum, that Raja Ravi Varma was not a solitary figure in art in Travancore, but was one of a family succession that takes us back a century to the passing of Rohini Ammathampuran, who is recorded in family archives as the first oil-painter in Travancore. With her was Kunjikavu Ammathampuran, also said to be a painter. Examples of their work have not come to light. The latter lady has the remarkable record of being the mother of Raja Ravi Varma (1813-1884), and of a daughter who was the mother of three painters Raja Ravi Varma, C. Raja Raja Varma (1860-1905) and Mungala Bai Thumpurati (1886 and still living).

The all-India influence of Raja Ravi Varma's paintings and the disclosure of masterpieces of mural painting in temples and palaces all over Travancore, were in the air as forces ready for new birth when His Highness ascended the throne in 1931, and the Sri Chitra era of Travancore began. Towards the end of 1934 the feeling of the need of a State Gallery of Painting for the preservation of these expressions of the indigenous creative impulse took shape. Anticipation extended back to the far past in the frescoes of Ajanta and Bagh and Sittanavasal, and forward to the new spirit of artistic patriotism that had animated the Bengal revival of Indian painting, and continued to do so with variations in subsequent individuals and groups.

In the circumstances of the time a new building, equipped with tested means for excluding such anti-artistic things as damp, dust and insects, and for admitting light in such a way that it does not defeat its own ends, was not possible. The alternative was a building adaptable to

the purpose ; and this was happily found in two adjacent houses in the exquisite natural environment of the Public Gardens of Trivandrum, the capital of the State. While structural alterations were being made the pictorial contents of the coming gallery were being accumulated. Ultimately the two, accommodation and materials, came together in a lay-out that enabled artistic beauty and art-history to move together, and so to combine aesthetical enjoyment with education. The bungalow that became the entrance to the gallery consisted of three commodious rooms. These housed works of the modern revival in three phases ; first the major-artists, the Tagores and certain of their disciples like Nanda Lal Bose, Asit Kumar Haldar, D. P. Roy Choudhuri, P. K. Chatterjee and others as time went on : second, disciples of the disciples of the founders, like A. P. Banerjee, B. N. Tagore, Bireswar Sen, and others ; third, painters who expressed variations of the central theme of India in terms of their own tradition and environment outside Bengal, such as Kanu Desai, Somalal Shah, Rasiklal Parekh and Chaganlal Jadav, of Gujerat, under the masterly tutorship of Ravishankar Rawal of Ahmedabad; H. L. Merh of the Lucknow School, Ananda Mohan and Ram Mohan Sastri of South India.

The second building fell into an equally helpful arrangement. Its ground floor became a repository of works of the Travancore painters already referred to and preserved for students of the history of painting in India a remarkable collection of examples of what may be termed Indo-European painting. Its upper floor carried the history of painting in India back through the Rajput and Mughal era to the era of Buddhist painting that ended in the seventh or

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eighth century. It also gave examples of painting from other parts of Asia. But its main feature was the beginning of a gallery of mural paintings from Ajanta to Kerala.

The opening of the Sri Chitralayam on September 25, 1935, was a historical occasion, since the gallery was not only the first in the State, but the only compendious demonstration of the history and characteristics of Indian art south of Mysore. The two contiguous buildings had been transformed into well ordered and cheerful homes of art. A large pandal was put up in the Chitralayam garden to accommodate the audience that assembled for the rare event headed by His Highness the Maharaja, Her Highness Maharani Setu Parvati Bayi, and members of the Ruling Family, also the Dewan, Sir Mohammed Habibullah, and the principal officers of the Government.

It will be well here to recall some of the salient points in His Highness' speech in declaring the Sri Chitralayam open. "The function," His Highness said, "marks the fulfilment of a cherished desire to afford to my people opportunities for that aesthetic education which is one of the prime elements of culture. "Painting," he said, "with the probable exception of music, has the largest attraction for the majority of persons, with its combined appeal to the sense of form and colour." "The gallery," His Highness continued, "is designed to be the nucleus of what may become an epitome of the best examples of eastern art, and it was my hope that it will stimulate the artistic instincts abundant in our country which has never lacked a pictorial tradition". His Highness further expressed the hope that the Sri Chitralayam would demonstrate to the world "tha

Travancore, which had in the past helped in the popularisation of the Puranic lore, can make valuable contributions in the future, and that it will make more accessible our splendid mural paintings and frescoes." His Highness concluded with the hope "that Travancore, which in the Kathakali has given at least one new art-form to the world will evolve her own distinctive school of painting."

If we add to these sage remarks the geographical and historical territory briefly stated in the "Object" of the Sri Chitralayam in the first edition of the Catalogue, and repeated in the three succeeding editions, we shall have before us an outline of the scope within which the progress of the gallery during the first decade of its existence may be surveyed. "The object for which the Government of Travancore has founded the Sri Chitralayam under the authority of His Highness the Maharaja is to provide for the people of Travancore State and visitors, for enjoyment, education and the development of artistic taste, a collection of pictures representing the various eras of painting in India along with some indication of the art of painting elsewhere under the influence of indian culture, life and scenery".

First, as to the quantitative aspect. In the Catalogue of exhibits at the opening of the Sri Chitralayam 160 items were listed. In the fourth edition, just published, there are 357 items, an increase of 3 under 200 in ten years. To these should be added the 17 paintings by Nicholas and Svetoslav Roerich, 23 copies of murals from elsewhere in South India and 10 more from Travancore, bringing the total, with 3 others, to 410, that is, an increase of 250, or an average of 25 annually, say 2 per month.

The largest increase was in the copies of murals. In addition to the South Indian group just mentioned, there were copies of a number of the Buddhist frescoes of Ceylon and some from old palaces in Persia. But the history-making addition was the copies of vestiges of paintings that must have made the mantapam of the small cave-temple of Thirunandikkarai in South Travancore a gem of mural art eleven to twelve centuries ago, just when the great era of Ajanta had ended. The age of the temple is calculable from inscriptions in stone. Seven panels had been painted, but of these two had vanished. On the other five panels traces remained only on the upper parts, and of these true copies were made and added an invaluable chapter to the history and quality of Indian painting. A gap of 800 years or thereabouts between the vestiges of Thirunandikkarai and the well-preserved murals of Padmanabhapuram Palace and elsewhere has to be bridged in order to complete the art-history of Travancore and of India. It is earnestly to be hoped that future research will bring forth examples from the intervening centuries. It is inconceivable that the evident pictorial genius that created Thirunandikkarai should have an eight centuries' rest before awakening in Padmanabhapuram. But apart from this gap, it may be claimed for the Sri Chitralayam that even its partial representation of Indian mural painting, which does not yet include examples from Conjeevaram and the South-east temples and palaces, give a remarkably comprehensive view of that phase of Indian art.

Additions to the original paintings include works of a number of individual artists of note. The largest group additions were the admirable paintings that brought the



work of six women artists together: and the alcove of eleven masterly works from nature by Mr. K. Madhava Menon who since 1943 has been in charge of the gallery and has been teaching Indian-style painting in the School of Arts.

When the Sri Chitralayam was opened, 36 items by Raja Ravi Varma and his relatives (sometimes called the Kilimanur school) were listed. Later, through the kindness and public spirit of the head of the Kilimanur family, a permanent loan of a large number of oil and water-colour paintings and pencil drawings was made to the gallery. The number in the present catalogue (1945) is 71. From this large and varied collection it is now possible to revise the generally held opinion, from gaudy reproductions of Pauranic painting, that Ravi Varma was exclusively a religious painter in high colours. His portraits, which are unknown to the general public, are works of fine technique and character. Two of them, that of Dadhabai Naoroji and the artist's brother, C. Raja Raja Varma, are of a high order. Special interests attaches to the four Mysore kaddah (elephant capturing) paintings that he left unfinished when he died. Though unfinished they are interesting records of their time forty years ago in their recognisable small-size portraits of His Majesty King George the Fifth and His Highness the late Maharaja of Mysore, and in the type of motor-car then used.

Turning to the qualitative aspect of the gallery and with special reference to His Highness' desire that it should afford "opportunities for that aesthetical education that is one of the prime elements of culture," it may confidently be said that the Sri Chitralayam has to a very considerable

degree fulfilled His Highness' desire. That desire is at one with a world-wide realisation that a purely material post-war reconstruction of human relationships will not go as far as it might if the quality of the thoughts and feelings of the people is not raised and refined. Such elevation and refinement will not come by precept or even by example. But it can be very efficiently helped both by the providing of opportunities such as the gallery affords of coming within the influence of beauty in subject and craftsmanship, and particularly by inducing the young to take to painting, not to become professional artists, but to participate in the purifying joy of personal creation of things of beauty. Whether His Highness' desire that "Travancore which in the Kathakali (dance-drama) has given at least one new art-form to the world, will evolve her own distinctive school of painting," will be fulfilled remains to be seen. Certainly if art-teachers, when they arise in the future education of the State, are true to the life around them and to their lovely natural environment, and reject all blandishments of extraneous influence and mere dead imitation, the work which they themselves will produce and will inspire in their pupils cannot fail to have a distinction as marked as that between Bengal and Gujerat.

A review of the first decade of the Sri Chitralayam would not be complete without some mention of sister institutions that arose in the same year, and are partners in the same laudable and desirable work of raising taste and feeling through works of art. The renovation of Padmanabhapuram Palace, a former seat of Government superseded over a century ago, has given to the world a unique exhibition *in situ* of the major arts of architecture, sculpture, wood-carving and mural painting. The Tri-vandrum Museum, once quoted as an example of how not

to arrange a museum, because of its overcrowded and chaotic arrangement, has been gradually transformed into an ever pleasing centre of oriental art-crafts and is the possessor of a very fine collection of Indian bronzes. The former Museum Library became the Museum Annexe, and houses a striking set of paintings by Nicholas and Svetoslav Roerich and the collection of objects of art made by Their Highness the Maharaja and Maharani Setu Parvati Bayi in their tour of Java and Bali in 1939. To those must be added the varied and impressive collection of China, silver, bronze and copper work, and ceremonial costumes, in the private gallery of Ranga Villasam Palace, which gives special pleasure to those who have the privilege of seeing it.

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