Working Paper No. 148

Drawing a line:
K.Venkatappa and his Publics

by
Janaki Nair

Madras Institute of Development Studies
79, Second Main Road, Gandhi Nagar
Adyar, Chennai 600 020

June 1997

Drawing the Line: K Venkatappa and His Publics

Authors' Name and Institutional Affiliation:

Janaki Nair
Madras Institute of Development Studies
79, Second Main Road
Gandhinagar, Adyar
Madras 600 020

ABSTRACT

The transition from the world of the royal patron to the emerging bourgeois art market was negotiated in a number of different ways that together constitute the field of modern art. This paper develops the coordinates within which one twentieth century artist, K Venkatappa forged a new relationship with the royal patron, the Maharaja of Mysore, while celebrating his estrangement from the mdoern art market. The very insistence with which Venkatappa renounced the rewards of the modem art establishment it is argued, was a form of participation in it. Indeed, the specific relationship that he developed with the princely court culture, which was simultaneously reverent and defiant, was as crucial as his artistic production in his eventual consecration as the modem Kannada artist.

Acknowledgement:

I owe many thanks to the comments of Ayesha Abraham, Tapati Guha Thakurta, Manabi Mazumdar, M S S Pandian and Madhava Prasad. A short version of this paper was presented at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

Drawing the Line: K.Venkatappa and His Publics

Janaki Nair

MIDS

On June 1, 1916, K. Venkatappa returned to Mysore after seven years at the Government School of Art, Calcutta, where he had been among Abanindranath Tagore's privileged band of admirers and eager pupils.[1] Venkatappa left Mysore in 1909 for Calcutta with a scholarship from the Maharaja of Mysore who had long been impressed by the phenomenal progress shown by this young painter.[2] At Calcutta, he enjoyed the tutelage of Abanindranath and earned a modest reputation as a member of the increasingly acclaimed 'Bengal School' of art which had pioneered a new 'nationalist' aesthetic.[3] Could Venkatappa's return then be seen as something of a retreat from the privileges and risks of the emerging art world of Bengal to the relatively safer spheres of princely patronage and select audiences at the Mysore Palace? Not quite. The complexity of Venkatappa's negotiations -- of the Palace culture that he had briefly left, of the emerging modern art world of critics, buyers, exhibitors and promoters, and of the Kannada national consciousness that was in the making -- defies definition as 'reluctant modernity' or even as an anti- or non-modern subjectivity. For 24 years i.e. until 1940 when he was rudely dislodged from his privileged position, Venkatappa built a career that combined assiduous devotion and loyalty to the Maharaja, at once his patron and his public at the Palace, with a cautious cultivation of a new, though by no means anonymous or bourgeois, art public, while simultaneously striving to distinguish himself from the milieu of other Palace artists, a milieu to which he had himself been born. Both in his choice of genres and subjects after his return to Mysore, and in his relationship to the field of agents who constituted the new world of artistic production, Venkatappa carefully deployed his educational capital while simultaneously staging a break, denying too easy identification with the nationalist aesthetic as it was forged by Abanindranath and his pupils. Far from being a retailer of the new nationalist aesthetic, then, as was repeatedly claimed by art critics and historians alike,[4] and rather than going forth 'like an apostle' 'to transmit the light of the Master'[5] as did most of Abanindranath's other pupils, Venkatappa staked out a lonely path for himself, celebrating his estrangement from the emerging world of modern art.

This paper charts the co-ordinates of Venkatappa's art world, and his specific relationship to them: they include the Royal Patron, the artcritic. The art collector, the artistic reproduction and the student. The active insistence with which Venkatappa declared his reluctance to embrace the imperatives of the evolving field of artistic production was itself, I would argue, a form of participation in it, and as such

1 K.Venkatappa Diary, (hereafter, Diary), K.Venkatappa Private Papers, (hereafter KVPP), June 2, 1916, Karnataka State Archives (KSA).

2 P. Raghavendra Rao, Private Secretaryto the Maharaja of Mysore, to Raghavalu Naidu Electrical Engineer, Palace Division, 12 June 1905, KVPP, KSA.

3 Tapati Guha Thakurta The Making of a new 'Indian" Art: Artists Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal c. 1850-1920, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

4 G. Venkatachallum Contemporary Indian Painters (Bombay: Nalanda ,1947) p. 21, 65; Jaya Appasamy says he represented "an unsophisticated and indigenous aspect of the Bengal School" in 'He Created a New Indian Style' in K, Venkatappa: Savi Nenapu (Bangalore:Karnataka Laithkala Akademi, 1987), p. 71.

P. Ramachandra Rao Modern Indian Painting (madras: Rachana, 1953), p. 12.

may be located within that sphere of artistic autonomy that Pierre Bourdieu has characterised as 'anti economic economy'.[6] To the extent that Venkatsppa spurned the institutions and practices of the emerging modern art market, and renounced the profits of recognition in the short run it was only in the hope of reaping longer term symbolic profits. Among the many lessons that Venkatappa had learned while at Calcutta, and more specifically from his admission to the charmed circle at Jorasanko, the Tagore household, was the extraordinary importance of a 'specific capital' denied to those whose destinies were dictated by caste or hereditary callings. It was perhaps as a way of compensating for his inheritance that Venkatappa carefully defined a distinct ethico-moral universe that valorised abstinence, of the sexual and the material kind, and developed a mode of working that was as critical as the product itself. The artist's complex negotiations of the reconstituted field of artistic production in the twentieth century and his extraordinary self image are therefore as crucial as his artistic output in any account that hopes to make sense of his consecrated status as one of the earliest bearers of the modern Kannada aesthetic.[7] If anything, Venkatappa's career distinctly disrupts the narratives of how the twin demands of 'nationalism' and 'modernity' were negotiated by his contemporaries and as such serves as a crucial site for 'reperiodising the modern' in ways that relate art forms to social formations.[8] Charting the co-ordinates of Venkatappa's art world helps us to reassess Venkatappa's struggles during a moment of transition from the world of the royal patron, whose powers were strictly limited, but capricious, to the altogether new risks of an art market, a transition that Venkatappa managed by addressing an anonymous body of 'art lovers' fortuitously given a content by the ideologues of the incipient Kannada nation.

Making an Artist of an Artisan

To many of his contemporary chroniclers, Venkatappa's personal dispositions -- his memorable eccentricities, his excessive litigiousness and his obsessive austerity -- were the necessary marks of artistic genius.[9] Yet this was the moment when the world of modern art and its bourgeois public was being constituted, so that art critics, galleries, exhibitions and art journals alike were as critical to the legitimation of an artist as the work of art itself. We cannot therefore make sense of Venkatappa's 'uniqueness' without a consideration of both his position within the emerging social structure and his personal dispositions.

Venkatappa's staged indifference to the material world was not altogether unique. After all, the Bengali artists shared Venkatappa's calculated 'interest in disinterestedness' to an extent[10], in keeping

6 Pierre Bourdieu The Field of Cultural Production (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 54.

7 This article does not discuss, describe or assess any of the works of art at length, focussing instead on the conditions of artistic production. Briefly, Venkatappa's work, after his return to Mysore, consisted of some figurative works, (watercolours and tempera on paper), largely on mythological themes, a series of miniature landscapes of Ooty and Kodaikanal, a series of bas reliefs in plaster of paris, on mythological themes, and a few portraits on ivory of important personages.

8 Geeta Kapur 'When was Modernism in Indian Art' Journal of Arts and Ideas Nos. 27-28 (1995), pp. 105-106.

9 Venkatachalam, Indian Painters, Ramachandra Rao K. Venkatappa, K.V.Subrahmanyam, Venkatappa: Samakaleena Punaravalokana. Even critics who are more willing and able to demystify this artist usually resort to doing so through an evaluation of his art work alone. Ravikumar, Kasi 'Odedha Kannadi' Sanchaya, (1996) Vol.8, no.1, p.42.

10 Bourdieu The Field of Cultural Production, p. 40.

with the emerging nationalist aesthetic's critical interrogation of the more mercenary and imitative trends within Indian art at the time, although Abanindranath's scornful reference to the 'evil spirit [that] smells of trader's greed' who 'sells himself at a fixed price and sometimes at a high value' all in the service of 'wealthy people' was somewhat disingenuous.[11] Yet Venkatappa's relation to artistic production was distinct, since Abanindranath's scorn was enabled not because the Bengal school kept itself sternly aloof from the lures of the market but because many, though not all, of its artists were already endowed with sufficient economic and social capital to risk failure. To the extent that the cultural milieu of the Bengal school was coterminous with that of the Bengali bhadralok, an emergent Bengali middle class, it was one with which Venkatappa, by virtue of his caste, class and, let us not minimise this, his regional or provincial origins, was singularly unequipped to fully integrate.

Venkatappa was born in 1886 to a Chitragara family, traditional workers in gold leaf whose ancestors had long served under the Vijayanagar kings. In the early 19th century, Venkatappa's forefathers arrived in Srirangapatna from Chitradurga to seek refuge in the court of Krishnaraja Wodeyar III[12] and participated in the brief revival of the Mysore style of painting in the early nineteenth century.[13] Of Venkatappa's father Durgada Krishnappa, himself an employee of the Mysore Palace, we know very little except that he belonged to a traditional caste of painters. Indeed, most of the artists employed in the palace -- K. Kesavaiah, S.Shankarappa, Y. Nagaraju, Basavaiah, M. Rama Narasaiah -- came from similar traditional artisanal backgrounds.[14] The 'hollow crown' restored to the Mysore Maharaja by the British, especially after the interregnum of direct rule from 1831 to 1881, set serious limits to the nature of royal patronage of the arts, particularly the performing arts.[15] Even so, caste continued to be considered the ideal preserver of a 'traditional artistic culture' so that later writers even suggested that 'traditional artists alone deserved to be encouraged' in the propagation of artistic ideals.[16]

11 Abanindranath Tagore, 'The Three Forms of Art', Modem Review Volume 1, no. 6 (December 1907), p. 393.See A.K.Coomaraswamy for a similar indictment of the artist who longed to be 'hung' or 'shown' in a museum, 'for things are made normally for certain purposes and certain places to which they are appropriate and not simply for exhibition because whatever is custom made i.e. made by an artist for a consumer is controlled by certain requirements and kept in order. (emphasis in original). Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art p. 7.

12 V. Sitaramaiah, K. Venkatappa, i, (Lalit Kala Academy, 1980); Ramachandra Rao, K. Venkatappa, p. 13.

13 Pushpa Sundar Patrons and Philistines: Arts and the State in British India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 113.

14 Memo File no 33, Chitra Sala Department, Mysore Palace Archives.

15 I have elsewhere discussed the manner in which the Mysore bureaucracy undermined and finally put an end to the services of Devadasis in Muzrai temples and tafe women in the Palace of the Maharaja. See Janaki Nair "The Devadasi, Dharma and the State" Economic and Political Weekly, 31.50 (December 1994).

16 V. Aiyaswami Aiyer 'Indian Arts and Crafts', Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society Vol. III, no. 1 (October 1916), p. 58. Indeed, E.B.Havell expressed dismay over the dilution of caste as a marker of tradition when he wrote that 'students not belonging to the weaving caste' used the Serampore Central Weaving College as a passport to work in Swadeshi factories. E.B.Havell Artistic and Industrial Revival in India (Delhi: Usha Jain, reprint, 1986), p. 136.

Both Venkatappa and his father were surely witness to the arrival of Raja Ravi Varma and his brother at the Mysore Palace in 1904, and Venkatappa's only oil portrait of a woman probably dates from that period.[17] Ravi Varma was commissioned to paint a series of nine paintings for the Durbar Hall of the newly constructed Palace, and for a generous sum of Rs 25,000, executed these works between 1904-06.[18] Ravi Varma's formidable reputation, and his own noble origins, no doubt, went a long way in ensuring that this painter was treated with far more privilege than any of the Mysore Palace painters of the time.[19]

Venkatappa gained precious exit from the cloistered world of the Palace painter to the more privileged but relatively alienating world of the Calcutta Art School. The Calcutta school offered quite different instruction from what Venkatappa had received at the Industrial Institute at Mysore, and by 1909, the entire range of elements so crucial to a modern art establishment -- critics, publishers, exhibitors and middle class patrons -- were harmoniously at work in promoting the work of Abanindranath and his pupils.[20] The critic 'Agasthya' was not far off the mark when he wrote that 'much of the power and vitality of the Tagore school is a gift from the opposition camp;'[21] the severe attacks on the Bengal school that were launched in the Assembly or the press were a sign of its growing influence, rather than its marginal status.

There was little by way of preparation for this new world in the palace culture of Mysore, or even at the Industrial institute that Venkatappa attended, for traditional painters, though frequently encouraged to upgrade their skills, were strictly subordinated to the production regime at the Palace. Of the three major art schools that had been established by this time, Madras alone actively encouraged students from hereditarily artisan castes to seek training in European academic norms. Venkatappa had passed all the examinations offered by the school for external candidates; another Mysore artist, K.Kesavaiah, had attended the Madras school on a scholarship from the Palace before returning as supernumerary painter in 1902.[22] In contrast, both the Bombay and the Calcutta art schools were decidedly elitist by the 1890s: in Calcutta this elitism was most marked, says Partha Mitter, with 'the majority of boys belonging to the

17 Today at Shashwati museum, NMKRV College, Bangalore.

18 Correspondance between Ravi Varma and Mysore Palace, Selections from the records of the Mysore Palace, (Government of Karnataka, 1993), pp. 231-246; Sl. no. B 190, 1904, Chitrasala Department, Mysore Palace Archives.

19 So that Ravi Varma and his brother could ask for, and be obliged with, music from the finest at the Mysore Palace School of Music. Sl. no B 190, 1904, Chitrasala Department, Mysore Palace Archives. Even his son, Rama Varma was able to turn his father's reputation to his advantage when he received Rs. 1000 as payment for the painting of 'Harishchandra' in 1914. Palace Memo, 8.2.194, in Selections from the Records of the Mysore Palace, p. 246.

20 Guha Thakurta, The Making of a New Indian Art, pp. 277-284; see also the Indian Society for Oriental Art special issue on Abananidranath Tagore (Calcutta, 1916).

21 'Exhibition at the Government School of Art' Rupam, Vol. 3 No. 11 (July 1922), p. 76.

22 K. Kesavaiah to Maharaja of Mysore, 22 July 1903, in Selections from the Records of the Mysore Palace, p. 247.

bhadralok castes,' even if, like Surendranath Ganguly, they came from desparately poor backgrounds.[23] Exemplifying the hierarchy between traditional artist and gentleman painter were the salaries paid to Lala Iswari Prasad of Lucknow, and Abananindranath Tagore respectively at the Calcutta art school: Rs 75 and Rs 300.[24] The caste heritage had its uses even in Calcutta, since it was the traditional artists Venkatappa and Iswari Prasad who were set to work to produce indigenous pigments.[25]

The Calcutta art school did throw up opportunities that traditional artists may not have had access to: Venkatappa was among the five artists chosen to illustrate the much circulated text of Sister Nivedita and Ananda Coomaraswamy The Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists[26]; with Nandalal Bose, he provided the illustrations to Abanindranath's pioneering article on 'Indian Iconography;'[27] his works were regularly included at the annual exhibitions of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, Calcutta, which also frequently arranged sales.[28] The inclusion of his works at the India Society of London in 1910 earned him handsome praise from the art critic William Rothenstein, words that have ever since been cited as enduring evidence of Venkatappa's early genius.[29]

The most relentless propagation of the Bengal school was done in the pages of Modern Review from its inception in 1907;[30] yet one searches in vain for reproductions of the Mysore artist's work, even at a time when he was unquestionably close to Abanindranath. At least one later critic deplored this systematic exclusion. Writing on the 'tremendous push to the cause of Indian art' by the Bengal school, N Vyasa Ram complained

> ...most people know about the Bengal art only through the pictures appearing from time to time in the Modern Review. Unfortunately however, for reasons best known to

23 Partha Mitter Art and Nationalism in Colonial India: 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 55, 318. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee similarly noted that neither the Calcutta School nor Santiniketan drew students belonging to the hereditary artisan castes or guilds. 'The Revival of Indian Art and the Lucknow School of Arts' Modern Review, Vol. 41.No.4 (April 1927)), p. 404.

24 Guha Thakurta The Making of a new 'Indian' art, p. 270.

25 Mitter 'Art and Nationalism in Colonial India', p. 313.

26 Sister Nivedita and Ananda Coomaraswamy Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists, (London, George Harrap and Co 1920).

27 Modern Review Vol XV, No. 3, March 1914.

28 Diary, February 13, 1914; March 8, 1920; June 21, 1920, KVPP, KSA. It is not quite clear whether Venkatappa was a member of the team that accompanied Lady Herringham to the Ajanta caves in 1910-11, although see Mitter Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, p. 305. Contrast Guha Thakurta The Making of a new 'Indian' art, p. 278.

29 JDW 'The India Society' Modern Review Vol 8. No. 2, August 1910, p. 161. See also Ananda Coomaraswamy Art and Swadeshi (Madras: Ganesh and Co, 1912), p. 132-33, for an appreciation of Venkatappa's early work.

30 James Cousins claimed that his early knowledge of the Bengal school was confined to reproduction in the Modern Review, though that did not restrain him from writing in praise of its efforts. James Cousins and Margaret Cousins We Two Together, (Madras: Ganesh and Co, 1950) p. 260.

themselves, those responsible for the selection of pictures for publication in the Modern Review do not seem to use enough discretion in the matter. It has to be even admitted that personal considerations in these matters are likely to exercise greater influence in the matter of selection that merit.[31]

Nothing seems to have come of S.V.Ramaswamy Mudaliar's suggestion to O.C.Gangoly, writing on living Indian artists in 1923, to include Venkatappa as the 'only one in south India.'[32] As for Venkatappa's own discontents about the bewildering social milieu of which he was a part, we know very little except that he was appalled, while searching for alternative accomodation as a guest of Gaganendranath Tagore in Darjeeling in 1914 that 'flesh, fish and vegetables are cooked and served by the same Brahmins in the same kitchen.'[33]

At any rate, Venkatappa had a fierce sense of loyalty towards his patron, the Maharaja of Mysore, which he cited while turning down an attractive offer from Percy Brown of a Government post as 'Art Adviser'.[34] He returned to Mysore in 1916 when his scholarship had ceased, although, in a move that was distinctly at odds with what the Bengal School had so consciously rejected, Venkatappa now sought the Mysore Palace's support for a visit to England to learn bronze casting'.[35] Venkatappa's visit to Europe was not to be, since Government support was delayed due to war, [36]and his interest in acquiring a European training soon faded as he was drawn into the world of music at the Palace school headed by Veena Seshanna, from whom Venkatappa received personal instruction in the veena.[37] In many ways, the period at the Palace Music school served as a useful interim arrangement by which Venkatappa avoided immediate absorption as Palace artist, while staking a claim to royal patronage on somewhat different terms.

31 N. Vyasa Ram 'The New Spirit in Indian Art' Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society Vol. 17. No. 4 April 1927, p. 298.

32 Diary, July 27, 1923, KVPP, KSA.

33 Diary, May 15, 1914, KVPP,KSA.

34 Diary, May 31, 1916, KVPP, KSA.

35 Venkatappa to Inspector General of Education in Mysore, December 13, 1916; Percy Brown to Private Secretary, Maharaja of Mysore, February 17, 1916, KVPP, KSA.

36 Diary, July 8, 1916. This was later narrativised as the Mysore Government's reluctance to risk 'a great loss to the art world' by sending Venkatappa to a war-torn Europe. Prabuddha Karnataka, Vol. 10.No.1 (1928), p. 6. His colleagues from the Calcutta school, Asit Haldar and Promode Kumar Chatterjee, both went to Europe in the 1920s, and Haldar came back, as Abanindranath wrote to Havell 'perfectly cured of foreign ideas'. Abanindranath Tagore to E.B.Havell, September 5, 1925, as cited in Ramachandra Rao, K.Venkatappa, p. 104.

37 Diary, 24 January 1918, 30 January 1918, KVPP, KSA. Venkatappa was first assigned to study under Seshanna's junior, Subrahmanyam, with whom he had many conflicts, and after a while, with Veena Subbanna who was next only to Seshanna. By 1918, he was receiving instruction from Seshanna as well, sometimes at his residence, a relationship that continued until about 1925. Diary March 4, 1918, KVPP, KSA. See also, Margaret E. Cousins The Music of the Orient and Occident: Essays towards mutual understanding (Madras: B.G.Paul and Co., 1938), p. 150.

Redefining the Palace as Patron

As a scholarship student returning to the palace of his patron, Venkatappa could hope for none of the privileges of a Ravi Varma. Yet he could, and did, use the newly gained cultural capital to his advantage, marking himself off from the Palace artists in more ways than one. Venkatappa refused to take up a Government job until the war was over, claiming that his 'education was not quite complete'[38] and firmly turned down the suggestion that he return to the Calcutta school even with a scholarship saying that he had learnt all that it could offer.[39] Unwilling to follow the footsteps of his father, Venkatappa attempted to turn his metropolitan experience as well as his newly acquired asceticism to his advantage. Yet his need for a working relationship with the Palace establishment set obvious limits to radical redefinition of princely patronage, as his encounters with the Private Secretary to the Maharaja, Mirza Ismail soon revealed.

To Mirza, the Mysore Palace had made an expensive investment in Venkatappa and the artist's immersion in music rendered useless the fine arts training that had been 'acquired at an enormous expense and trouble.'[40] Mirza set Venkatappa to work on a set of three landscapes, for which the artist was to provide a written explanations 'so that spectators (sic) may easily understand';[41] Also assigned to Venkatappa was the design of a seal for the Mysore University.[42] Mirza saw little reason to distinguish Venkatappa from other Palace artists who were frequently asked to paint portraits of various personages,[43] and asked Venkatappa to paint some portraits of the Maharaja in 1918.[44]

Venkatappa avoided identification as another Palace artist even well before he got the prestigious commission to decorate the walls of the Amba Vilas Durbar Hall. In doing so he carved out a career quite distinct from that of the other Palace artists. Like the other Palace artists, Venkatappa too broke with the tradition of his forebears; the Mysore style painting was abandoned and saw a brief revival only in the work of Y. Subrahmanya Raju. At the same time Venkatappa's Calcutta training had taught him to reject the large scale oil paintings in the new academic realist oeuvre of Ravi Varma which was enthusiastically adapted by the other Palace painters. At Calcutta, Venkatappa's work conformed to the evolving Bengal style, although his use of brilliant, flat areas of pure colour, were reminiscent of the miniature tradition, and his somewhat stiff, archaic figures were distinct from the dreamy vapory creations favored by the other Bengal school artists. Back in Mysore, he struck out in different directions that drew as much on his training in academic styles, reviving the dated technique of painting minitaure portriats on ivory, developing

38 Diary, August 16, 1916, KVPP, KSA.

39 Diary, March 31, 1917, KVPP, KSA.

40 Diary, February 14, 1918; also June 26, 1918, KVPP, KSA.

41 Diary, June 4, 1916, KVPP,KSA.

42 Diary, July 8, 1916, KVPP, KSA.

43 Palace artist Kesavaiah was asked to paint a portrait of Dewan Purnaiah for the Victoria Memorial. File no 30, 1899-1913-1927, Jagan Mohan Palace and Chitrasala, 6-8-1905, Mysore Palace Archives.

44 Diary, February 14, 1918, KVPP, KSA.

a distinct style of landscape paintings, and going beyond prevailing Palace art conventions in proposing the medium of plaster of Paris for a series of bas reliefs at Amba Vilas.

Though he was not above accepting a commission to decorate the Palace walls, he distanced himself from the arduous and poorly appreciated labours of other palace artists. K. Kesavaiah, for instance, only slightly senior to Venkatappa, and had been sent by the Mysore Palace in 1897 to train at the Madras School of Arts for three years.[45] He was appointed to the post of Palace artist for Rs. 10 a month[46] though he was soon able to combine Palace work with teaching at the Chamaraja Technical Institute, Mysore.[47]

The job of Palace artist was unenviable, quite distinct from the leisurely contemplative life of a gentleman artist so evocatively depicted in Nandalal Bose's drawing of the group at Jorasanko.[48] Apart from his heavy teaching schedule, Kesavaiah was expected to produce several paintings for the Palace on a variety of subjects, for which he was separately compensated, though usually only with arbitrary sums which covered the costs of his materials.[49] His assignments ranged from restoring old paintings, painting the Mysore coats of arms on carriages, and refurbishing chicks to making enlargements of photographs and painting landscapes to order. Nor were Palace artists automatically entitled to Palace honours: even after long years of service, Kesavaiah fought in vain to have his name added to the Darbar Honours list of the Mysore Palace, or at least a permanent well paid post.[50] As late as 1943, Kesavaiah earned no more than Rs 35 per month, marginally more than his fellow palace artists who earned sums between 20 and 35.[51] Gifts or presents from the Maharaja himself were rarer, though artists were urged to await princely 'rewards' rather than charge for their time and labour.[52]

The Palace artists were frequently ordered to paint portraits of various royal personages from photographs for distribution to institutions all over the state, the pace of such reproductions quickening when there were administrative changes, or when the Royal household was altered.[53] Work on a series of large scale oil paintings for the Kalyana Mantapa depicting the Dasara and Birthday processions was begun in the 1920s, and continued well into the 1940s.[54] There was little by way of artistic freedom to

---

45 Petition of K. Kesavaiah, June 6, 1925, Selections from the Records of the Mysore Palace, p. 257.

Letter dated July 22, 1903, Selections from the Records at the Mysore Palace, p. 247.

47 Letter dated June 6, 1925, Selections from the Records of the Mysore Palace, p. 257.

See Guha Thakurta 'The Making of a new 'national' art', p. 276.

49 D/O No. 163/1, List, 30 July 1917, Selections from the Records of the Mysore Palace, p. 251.

50 Kesavaiah to Darbar Bakshi, 11 October 1928, Selections from the Records of the Mysore Palace, p. 259.

51 S. Shankar Raju to Huzur Secretary, 24 November 1943, Chitra Sala Department, Mysore Palace Archives.

52 B. Ramakrishna to Thamboo Chetty 20 October 1916, File no 8, Sl. no. 4, Box 17, Chitra Sala Department, Mysore Palace Archives.

53 Beginning in 1940, several dozen portraits of the new Maharaja Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar, were produced for distribution to the schools, colleges, bar associations, etc at the rate of about 66 per year. Palace Administration Reports, 1940-43.

Palace Administration Reports, 1934-43.

relieve the sheer hard labour of the Palace artist, who was frequently reminded of his lowly status in the Palace hierarchy, as when Palace artist Abdul Azeez was asked to varnish the paintings of Ravi Varma in 1907. When both he and Kesavaiah were assigned to paint a series of pictures of Gods and Goddesses, they were merely expected to follow the advice of assorted Palace officials including the Dharmadhikari.[55]

Venkatappa decided that the life of Palace artist was an unacceptable destiny, and did everything to avert this fate. In order to prise himself away from too close identification with the Palace artists, it was critical that the labours of artistic production be recast, even mystified, as artistic creation. There was a self conscious attempt therefore throughout his life to proclaim the position of a distracted, even mad genius, indifferent to the mundane world of praise and profit. Not surprisingly he refused the costs of his materials, while graciously accepting a present of Rs 50 from the Maharaja for his landscapes.[56] To the creative artist, the prospect of a job in the Government, as arranged by the Inspector General of Education in 1918, was an unhelpful distraction.[57] Throughout the period before his commission to decorate the Amba Vila Darbar Hall, he resisted all attempts to draw him onto the payroll of the Palace: it was unthinkable to even consider completing the panels of the Dasara procession begun by Abdul Azeez for which he was tempted with offers of '30 to 35 thousand rupees'![58]

Crucial to his self definition was the manner in which the 'artist' was distinguished from the 'artisan',[59] since only the former was culturally (and therefore materially) valued: the contrast between a Kesavaiah and a Ravi Varma was too stark to ignore. The category of artisan was one that Venkatappa struggled to get away from: no wonder he reacted so strongly to G. Venkatachalam's description of him as 'a skilled craftsman with a supreme command over his technique'.[60] Furthermore, Venkatappa was painfully aware of the limited liberties of a Palace artist: 'I am not' he wrote to Tiger Varadachari in 1935 'a Palace artist but an independent man.'[61] One way of asserting the difference was to cultivate a stern asceticism which he continually announced as a way of equally distancing himself from the Palace controlled artist and producers for the new bourgeois art market.

55 Ramakrishna Rao to Thumboo Chetty, June 10, 1916 and July 5, 1916, File no 30, Vol 3, Jagan Mohan Palace and Chitrasala, Mysore Palace Archives.

Diary, August 11, 1916.

57 Diary, February 3, 1918, KVPP, KSA.

58 Diary, January 2, 1924, KVPP, KSA.

On April 9, 1924, he went to a public library to consult the New International Dictionary for "the exact difference betwqeen artisan and artist". Diary, April 9, 1924, KVPP, KSA.

60 The word 'craftsman' was heavily scored out in Venkatappa's copy of G.Venkatachalam's book Contemporary Indian Painters p. 39. Curiously, Venkatappa seems to have either missed or ignored P.M.Ramachandra Rao's even more damning indictment that he 'was a skilful draughtsman and a colorist of the highest order.' P.M.Ramachandra Rao, Modern Indian Painting (Madras: 1953).

61 Venkatappa to Tiger Varadachari, November 15, 1935, KVPP, KSA.

Fashioning a self image

By his avowed, and insistent, distanciation from several kinds of material attachment, the artist claimed the status of a Yugapurusha, a man of the age, rather than a mere member of a new art movement. In a way, Venkatappa's acceptance of celibacy as an ideal, his strict code of self-reliance and his principled austerity were the logical, if somewhat extreme, outcome of his translation of the mystical, spiritualised aesthetics propagated by the Bengal school into a principle that governed the more intimate spheres of everyday life. Escape from the stifling confines of the Palace culture had exposed Venkatappa not only to a bewildering world of new art practices, but a world that was unmistakably bourgeois. The fashioning of a new ethical code could well have served as an anchor in that severely alienating environment. He was gently mocked for his desire to lead a pure life while at Calcutta: would 'Appa' return from his visit to the Himalayas, the legendary abode of the Sanyasi, Abanindranath wondered in 1913?[62] He did return, bringing with him new and enduring principles for living that contemplation of the mountains had yielded.

Venkatappa has left behind a densely hatched self-portrait that helps to reconstruct not only the new subjectivities he was sculpting, but also the field of forces as it was being constituted in his time. It is a sign of his emerging sense of self that he maintained a diary, largely in English, from as early as 1913 with few breaks until 1958. It may be that when he inscribed the words 'Self Help is the best help' on May 6, 1913, that he formalised what was to become a remarkable if obsessive austerity in his private life, taking the vow of 'aparigriha', a renunciation of gifts or services from others.[63] The adoption of the vow of brahmacharya similarly was a sign of his yearning for the mystical aura of one who conserved his psychic and sexual energies for artistic production. His insistence on Brahmacharya as a condition for the pursuit of a career in fine arts made him turn away at least one married student, M.V.Sitaramaiah.[64] Whether he wilfully modelled himself as an artist 'of the type Sukracharya describes in his Sukraniti'[65] is somewhat less certain, but unmistakable was the sense of awe that he inspired even among more discerning critics such as P.R.Ramachandra Rao.[66] His spiritualised persona, and his strict code of living have necessarily become, as Ravikumar Kasi has pointed out, inseparable from Venkatappa the artist.[67]

Had Venkatappa confined himself to the world of the Palace, he could well have maintained the 'purity of his life',[68] an uncompromising but relatively anonymous existence. That the artist is known to us at all today is because of his relation with his publics -- whether critic, buyer, student, publisher or exhibitor

62 Ramachandra Rao, K.Venkatappa, p. 30.

63 Ibid, p. 31; Ravikumar Kasi 'Odedha Kannadi' p. 34; M.S. Nanjunda Rao 'Varnamaya Baduku' Savi Nenapu, p. 38.

Sitaramaiah, 'Kalaatapasvi', Savi Nenapu, p. 14.

G.Venkatachalam, Contemporary Indian Painters, p.60.

66 P.R.Ramachandra Rao, Modern Indian Painting, p.12.

67 Kasi 'Odedha Kannadi' p. 34.

68 Venkatachalam, Contemporary Indian Artists, p. 41.

-- a relation that was admittedly unorthodox, but far more complex than the mythologies have tended to suggest. If Rabindranath Tagore who visited Mysore in 1922, expressed surprise that Venkatappa had not yet become a sanyasi, it was with good reason.[69] For the artist did not entirely reject the emerging world of modern art, nor did he neglect the more material aspects of life, as he himself indignantly pointed out to James Cousins in 1928: 'I was not rich but never lived the life of penury as you have baselessly stated in the Madras catalogue'.[70] If he had not become as rich as Ravi Varma, he suggested, it was because he preferred austerity but by no means was this a self image of the starving artist in the proverbial garret. Venkatappa was conscious of the limited and receding importance of the Palace as a source of support for new artistic production, as much as he was aware of the perils of ignoring the emerging bourgeois art world. He steered himself through this period of transition by forging a very specific relation to the many people and institutions who legitimised and even consecrated the artist in the modern period, thereby making it possible to appeal to more than one constitutency and cautiously expanding his publics beyond the sphere of the Palace without sacrificing the limited securities of that domain.

The Making of an artist's public

a. The critic

The work of art is inescapably a part of a field constituted by a set of agents -- critics, collectors, publishers, students, and academies. In India too, the world of the art critic was in the making even as the modern artist was being made, deciphering and thereby legitimating the work of art, while actively denouncing others. Ananda Coomaraswamy, who described critics as those who made up for what the artist lacked ('few artists are themselves able to write well about their own art') also called the critic the 'servant of artists'.[71] Abanindranath Tagore alone, it was elsewhere claimed, had the rare ability to combine the roles of artist and critic.[72] There was early recognition in Modern Review that the defeat of 'Ravi Varmaism' was only enabled by 'intelligent connoisseurs who have learnt the art of judicious appreciation.'[73] Ravi Varma's raw appeal could be countered only by disabusing the ignorant person of the 'childish notion' that a 'work of art, if it is a really good one, is bound to appeal to him however deficient he may be in his knowledge of Art...'[74] At the same time, the critic had to be distinguished from the charlatan, for too many 'disappointed drawing masters, photographers, poster designers, jute brokers, members of the ICS and many England returned gentlemen of erudition' crowded the scene[75], and in the

69 Diary, September 28, 1922, KVPP, KSA.

70 Venkatappa to Cousins, June 4, 1928, KVPP, KSA.

71 Ananda Coomaraswamy, 'About Pictures' Modern Review, Vol. 8 No. 5, (November 1910), p. 523.

72 An anonymous article suggested that he be given a chair of Fine arts in the Calcutta University, Rupam, Vol. 2.No.8 (1921), p. 34.

73 Arun Sen 'The Rise and Decadence of Art in India', Modern Review, Vol. XI, No. 6 (December 1912), p. 602.

74 P. Ramanand, 'The Fine Arts in India' Modern Review Vol. 21. No. 1 (January 1917), p. 97.

75 AC 'Indian Art and Art Critics" Modern Review, Vol. 39,No. 1 (January 1926,), p. 132.

absence of the proper authority 'derived either from training or personal study' 'any hack could do a disservice to art'.[76] The naive ideology of the untutored person, who disparaged the Bengal school artists for 'painting fingers bigger than hands and nails bigger than fingers and eyes half shut just like those of confirmed opium eaters',[77] could be countered only by a Stella Kramrisch, an Ananda Coomaraswamy. a William Rothenstein. Indeed, the Bengal school artists appear to have leaned more heavily on the interpreter than artists such as Ravi Varma did.[78]

The value of the critic in producing both an educated public and a decipherable code was further enhanced by his ability to secure patrons for the struggling artist, especially at a time when royal patronage was precarious or entirely unreliable.[79] Venkatappa realised that stepping out of the face-to-face culture of the Mysore palace brought its own share of risks that called for reliance on the critic. There were others who shared a similar background as his, like Kundanlal Mistri of Baroda,[80] or Y. Nagaraju of Mysore[81], who after testing the waters of the modern art world, even visiting Europe, returned to the comforting security of the Palace. Venkatappa, though denied his trip to the west, grasped the opportunities offered by the new world with both hands while keeping a firm foot in the Palace establishment. He had received heady praise from William Rothenstein, who said in 1910 that he found the relatively unknown artist so promising that he 'would place Mr Venkatappa at the head of that [revivalist, i.e. Bengal] school, and was even inclined to go further and place him at the head of any living school.'[82] This was cherished for decades by Venkatappa's contemporaries and biographers, and was considered more authoritative than the Bengali critic who found Venkatappa 'lacking in heart',[83] and was taken as an enduring sign of his 'international reputation'.[84]

Venkatappa's life and work after his return to Mysore was in many ways transformed by contact with the likes of James Cousins and G. Venkatachalam. More a promoter than a critic, Cousins came to occupy an important position not only in the Palace establishments of Travancore and Mysore, but also among collectors and cultural nationalists of southern India. Husband of the nationalist and Women's India Association founder Margaret Cousins, James Cousins arrived in India in 1915 as a journalist and joined the world of Annie Besant at Adyar.[85] The Adyar group was actively forging alternative spiritualised

76 'Art and Art Critics in India', Modern Review, Vol 51,.No 3 (March 1932).

77 The words were Surendranath Mallik's during a debate in the Bengal Legislative Assembly 'Indian Art'. Modern Review, Vol. 32. No. 3, (September 1922), p. 402.

78 See Tapati Guha Thakurta, 'Westernisation and Tradition in South Indian Painting: The Case of of Raja Ravi Varma', 1848-1906, Studies in History, 2.2 (n.s.) 1986, p. 191.

79 See for instance the report on Mr Solomon's speech at Bombay calling for the careful cultivation of bourgeois patrons. Rupam, Vol. 2, No. 8 (1921), p. 36.

80 Mitter, Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, p. 64.

81 Report no. 62/20/21, 948 from officer in charge Chitrasala, Chitrasala Department, Mysore Palace Archives.

82 JDW 'The India Society', Modern Review, Vol. 8. No. 2, p. 161.

83 Arun Sen, 'The Exhibition of Oriental Art' Modern Review, Vol. XIII, No. 4, (April 1913), p. 438.

84 Venkatappa to Huzur Secretary, December 6, 1935, KVPP, KSA.

85 Modern Review Vol 59, No.1, (January 1936), p. 110.

nationalist aesthetics and ideals of beauty on other fronts, importantly through the development of a sanitised bharatanatyam dance form vested in Brahmin performers, as distinct from the more erotic sadir performed by the devadasis. Any inadequacy of training in art criticism was more than amply made up in Cousins' enthusiastic appreciation of the Bengal school in the pages of New India, despite the fact that his early knowledge of this work was confined to reproductions in the Modern Review.[86] In 1916, he was invited by John Woodruff of the Indian Society of Oriental Art to visit the Eighth Annual Exhibition at Calcutta, and Cousins' suggestion that the whole exhibition be transported to Madras in his care 'for a dignified and intelligent display' was accepted. The exhibition 'made a stir in the cultural life of Madras [and] got wide newspaper publicity' and though 'not a picture was sold' Cousins' career as an authority on art was launched.[87] His somewhat vapid writing replete with general platitudes about the Indian Rennaisance and the Bengal school, thrived in the Adyar environment, where reiterations of the need for a new spiritualised aesthetic and flattering, if unspecific, remarks on the works of artists themselves were more than adequate.[88]

Venkatappa met Cousins in September 1923 through S.V.Ramaswamy Mudaliar, a businessman and collector who had commissioned an ivory miniature portrait from the artist.[89] Cousins talked about Venkatappa on his lecture circuit,[90] invited him to do a portrait of Chand Bibi in water colour [91] and had won the confidence of the Mysore Palace establishment enough to get Mirza to set up 'the first permanent compendious gallery of Modern Indian painting in South India' at the Jagan Mohan Palace in 1924, an extension of the Museum started in 1915.[92]

It was Cousins who initiated the Yuvaraja of Mysore into appreciation of the work of Venkatappa and persuaded him to buy two of Venkatappa's paintings -- 'Mahasivarathri' and 'Mad After Veena' -- for the Mysore Gallery in 1924.[93] Of 'Mahasivrathri', Cousins later wrote in the gallery catalogue: 'This picture was admired for its own merits and bought by His Highness before he knew anything of the artist who painted it.'[94] Cousins' importance as the one who legitimated Venkatappa's work was growing[95] and along

86 James H. Cousins and Margaret E. Cousins We Two Together (Madras: Ganesh and Co, 1950), p. 260-61.

87 Ibid., p. 260.

88 See Cousins The Renaissance in India, (Madras: Ganesh and Company, 1918); Aesthetical Necessity in Life, Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1944); The Social Value of Arts and Crafts (Bangalore: 1925). Also Cousins' description of Venkatappa's work in Catalogue of the Jagan Mohan Chitrasala, Mysore Palace Archives.

89 Diary, September 16, 1923, KVPP, KSA.

90 Diary, September 28 1923, KVPP, KSA.

91 Cousins to Venkatappa, September 21, 1923, KVPP, KSA.

92 Cousins, We Two Together, p. 415; Jagan Mohan Chitrasala, Mysore, Gallery of India Paintings with an Historical Introductions, and explanatory notes (no date), p.76. Also, Cousins to Thumboo Chetty, July 3, 1924, File no 30, Vol V, Mysore Palace Archives.

93 Cousins to Venkatappa, September 3, 1924, KVPP, KSA.

94 'Jagan Mohan Chitrasala Mysore, Gallery of Paintings with an Historical Introduction and explanatory notes' (no date), p. 75.

95 Mudaliar to Venkatappa, July 7, 1923; July 1, 1923; July 27, 1923; September 10, 1923, KVPP, KSA.

with G.Venkatachalam, publicised Venkatappa's work in lecture tours both in India and elsewhere,[96] recommended his work to exhibitors,[97] and arranged the sales of pictures,[98] including those that had been returned unsold from elsewhere.[99] The autobiographical and rather literal representation of the anguished artist in 'Mad after Veena', for instance, torn between the two muses of art and music had been returned with Abanindranath's forthright comment that though the technique was good the subject was not appealing: 'You may be mad after vina or painting but that is not sufficient to put it into a picture...Your picture must contain something which of permanent interest for only then it can appeal to many.'[100] Cousins installed this work at the Jaganmohan Chitrasala,[101] and in its new location, came to be seen and appreciated, even revered by a range of Kannada intellectuals: Abanindranath had not quite accounted for provincial tastes.

There was something about the painting's depiction of the artist as a mad genius that appealed to a range of Kannada litterateurs, such as Shivarama Karanth, RR Diwakar, Kuvempu, V. Sitaramaiah, DV Gundappa, and BM Srikantaiah.[102] The composition, though somewhat dominated and even overwhelmed by the veena, was the closest that Venkatappa came to a self portrait. In it, the unshaven, gaunt artist is on his knees before the veena, turned away from his guru Abanindranath, whose sculptured head on a towering pedestal is shrouded, while the imprisoned muses of painting and drawing mutely yield their power to the goddess of music who alone commands the artist's attention.

Cousins had chosen this painting in keeping with his commitment to the new spiritualised aesthetic, for he sought to direct the work of Indian artists according to the tastes of his western audiences 'who preferred' he claimed, 'religious pictures, pictures of symbolic and imaginative kind, pictures giving intimate glimpses of human life in India' to 'natural scenery'.[103] Yet asserting Venkatappa's status as a legitimate practitioner of the new Indian aesthetic was an important part of the critic's work, as was consistently done by Venkatachalam, Cousins and Ramaswamy Mudaliar in the 1920s[104]: 'how could I

96 Cousins to Venkatappa, August 31, 1927, KVPP, KSA.

97 S.Fyzee Rahamin Society for Encouragement of Indian Art, to Venkatappa, July 29,1927, KVPP, KSA.

98 Diary , August 6, 1924, records that Rs 630 was received as payment from Cousins for the two paintings bought by the Yuvaraja, after the ten per cent commission. KVPP, KSA.

99 Diary, February 14, 1923; March 15, 1923; April 27, 1923; May 26, 1923; KVPP, KSA.

100 Tagore to Venkatappa, March 24, 1922, KVPP, KSA.

Indeed, it is more than likely that the theme suggested itself to Venkatappa after he received Abanindranath's letter telling him that 'painting was his first wife' and music only 'his second'. Abanindranath to Venkatappa, November 2 (no year), KVPP, KSA.

101 Jagan Mohan Chitrasala, Mysore, Catalogue, p. 76.

102 See for instance, Shivarama Karanth Bharatiya Chitra Kala, (Puttur: Shivarama Karanth, 1930), p. 45.

103 Cousins to Venkatappa, November 25, 1929, KVPP, KSA.

104 Venkatachalam to Venkatappa, June 7, 1927, July 1, 1927, July 8, 1927; August 2, 1927; February 14, 1930, July 19, 1934; August 27, 1944; August 22, 1950, KVPP, KSA.

pretend to exhibit the art of India' Cousins once wrote to him, 'without at least one Venkatappa?'[105] So highly did Cousins' rate his importance as a critic that he was deeply offended when the Madras Exhibition of 1928 awarded Venkatappa a gold medal for just one painting while he himself, who arranged the section, was given only 'a certificate of merit'![106]

The legitimising authority of the critic came to good use in the long run: Cousins' description of his meeting with William Rothenstein in London, who recalled that Venkatappa was the most promising Indian artist, was produced as evidence before the Magistrate's court in 1925, proof no doubt of Venkatappa's international reputation; other expressions of Cousins' praise also made their way into the courtroom in 1937.[107]

Neither Cousins nor Venkatachalam was indispensable, and their relations with Venkatappa soured by the late 1920s. Venkatappa's enhanced self-image, due not just to the commission he secured to decorate Amba Vilas Durbar Hall in the Mysore Palace, but also to his growing reputation among the Kannada litterateurs, now permitted him to challenge Cousins the critic.[108] Cousins' indirect indictment of landscape art could not have endeared him to Venkatappa who began doing landscapes in 1926, and with astonishing success, reversing the order of 'progress' that had been charted by Cousins, who described an early Ooty landscape as 'an example of western style painting in which the artist had attained high ability before turning to his own Indian art'.[109] Venkatappa objected to the description of 'Mad after Veena' in an exhibition catalogue, in which Cousins suggested that Venkatappa had turned to music out of his frustration at not being recognised as a painter: rather, the artist claimed, he shunned the 'mob' because he was 'quite well known to his Highness the Maharaja of Mysore my patron' long before Cousins had entered the scene.[110]

In 1938, there were further signs that Venkatappa no longer needed endorsement of the kind offered by Cousins: Cousins' entry in the revised Chitrasala Catalogue was wrong, Venkatappa said because 'my technic (sic) is not a copied one or one in which both Moghul and Rajput schools are combined as you have erroneously mentioned, but a genuine one suited to my taste and genius'.[111] He

105 Cousins to Venkatappa, January 1, 1928, KVPP, KSA. In turn, Cousins took credit for his 'artistic wisdom' in recommending Venkatappa to the Rani of Cooch Behar, especially after the ivory portrait of her husband was declared 'a beautiful piece of Indian painting fully worthy of the masters of the Moghul and Rajput schools'. Cousins to Venkatappa, October 1, 1925; Khusru Jung, Comptroller to Maharani of Cooch Behar, to Venkatappa, February 18 and 28 1925, KVPP, KSA. The Rani was immensely pleased with the portrait which was modelled on photographs, especially after 'slight alterations' to the nose 'greatly improved the picture'. Khusru Jung to Venkatappa, 16 July 1925, KVPP, KSA.

106 Cousins to Venkatappa, February 19, 1928, KVPP, KSA.

107 These are evident from the seals on the letters preserved by Venkatappa; the actual details of the two cases are not known.

108 Venkatappa to Cousins, June 4, 1928, KVPP, KSA.

109 Jagan Mohan Chitrasala Catalogue, p. 77.

110 Venkatappa to Cousins, June 4, 1928, KVPP, KSA.

111 Venkatappa to Cousins, August 3, 1938, KVPP, KSA.

now traced a genealogy that made no reference to his years at the Calcutta school. Secure in the knowledge that he had the patronage of the Mysore Maharaja, Venkatappa criticised buyers such as the Rani of Cooch Behar to whom Cousins had introduced him, concluding that Cousins should get himself an education as an art critic rather than mislead people. Critics aside, Venkatappa's relationship to his patrons, whether royal or bourgeois, was always troubled, given the ease with which he believed that he had been wronged, and above all, poorly valued.

b. The Collector

Venkatappa's consistent refusal to sell his work after 1926, when he decided to start a painting school and studio in Bangalore, has overshadowed the artist's earlier anxieties about the question of a just price for his work. Far from being indifferent to the value of his work, Venkatappa emerges from his diaries and correspondence as one who was more than marginally concerned about the prices his work commanded, especially in the early part of his career; not even his frequent assertions that such concern was more about proper recognition of his artistic genius detract from his early reputation as one who struck a hard bargain.

In part, Venkatappa's indignation at receiving just Rs 400 from the Rani of Cooch Behar for his ivory portrait of her late husband[112] stemmed from the high expectations he had of royal patrons; even Venkatachalam had led him to believe that he would be paid several thousands.[113] He knew of the Maharani's expensive and fruitless search for a suitable portrait artist, which made the 'petty sum' for his pleasing portrait even less acceptable. Cousins' assurance that a generous donation towards his studio/school would soon follow failed to persuade Venkatappa to part with the second portrait:[114] instead he demanded rather steep, therefore unacceptable, rates calculated against the number of landscapes that he could execute in the same time.[115] Similarly, he returned the sum of Rs 150 given by S.V. Ramaswamy Mudaliar for his ivory portrait in 1924,[116] and though there were eager and determined buyers for his Ooty landscapes in 1926, especially 'Elk Hill Path' and 'Dawn' which were on display in Bangalore, Venkatappa refused to part with them for what he considered were 'very poor' rates.[117]

What does one make of an artist who preferred to keep many of his works unsold, and refused commissions that offered too little by way of compensation? What was that critical threshold that signified recognition, so that, while responding to disappointing offers on grounds that they disrespected his artistic genius, he could still bargain for marginally higher prices? Finally what may we make of a person who

112 Venkatappa to Cousins, October 7, 1926, KVPP, KSA.

113 G. Venkatachalam to Venkatappa October 26, 1925, KVPP, KSA.

114 Cousins to Venkatappa, December 23, 1925, KVPP, KSA.

115 He wanted Rs. 3000 for the portrait in ivory, Rs. 1500 for the bust on paper, and Rs 2500 for a full length portrait.

116 Diary August 25, 1924, KVPP, KSA.

117 Diary July 14, 1926, KVPP, KSA.

took several people to court for real and imagined wrongs and injustices, using the courtroom as a stage to defend, perhaps even build up, his reputation as an artist, rather than material gain? This was after all, the same man who displayed such acute anxiety about making a go of his life as an independent artist that he repeatedly sought the help of astrologers in the early 1920s.[118] All this changed rather dramatically after he was first approached to do work at the Mysore Palace.

In his dealings with a Bombay collector, Burjor N Treasuryvalla, we may discern Venkatappa's negotiations of the contradictory promises of the art market especially since Treasuryvalla was a mirror image of sorts, persistently arguing that his 'love of art' be considered as far more important than the modest amounts he was willing to pay for art works. A partner in his father's stockbroking firm, Wallace and Company, Treasuryvalla was a zealous collector of modern Indian art, seeking out new artists and persuading more established ones to part with their work for little or no payment. Treasuryvalla was a collector in the classic nineteenth century mould, choosing to hoard his treasures, only reluctantly bringing them out of the closet for guests, and never permitting his possessions to leave his house for exhibitions.[119] He began long and regular correspondance with Venkatappa in May 1920, when he first expressed his keenness to 'enrich the small collection of work by Bengal school artists'.[120] After wooing Venkatappa most patiently for more than four years, Treasuryvalla acquired three of his paintings and commissioned several others that were not delivered. Describing Venkatappa's 'Mrugathrushna' as 'a veritable masterpiece', Treasuryvalla declared 'There is hardly any other painter amongst the disciples of Tagore except Nandalal who could have produced a work of such extreme beauty'.[121] But such lavish praise did not make up for what Venkatappa considered was meagre payment of Rs. 100, although Treasuryvalla denied that he had thereby 'degraded art'[122] insisting instead that the true enthusiast was worth far more than a rich patron.[123] Three years later Treasuryvalla only paid a marginally higher amount of Rs 130 for Venkatappa's 'Buddha' picture, and that after much haggling.[124] All the while, Treasuryvalla used a steady flow of compliments to soften the artist, urging Venkatappa 'not to be a Shylock' by slyly suggesting that other Bengal school artists, were so impressed by his devotion that they had donated their works.[125]

While commissioning a series of paintings, Treauryvalla took extraordinary liberties with the artist, specifying not only the sizes but also the themes, the kind and quality of the colours, demanding a 'generous use of gold' in themes of 'Hindu mythology.'[126] Urging Venkatappa to use a 'medium which

118 Diary October 19, 1923; June 8, 1924, KVPP, KSA.

119 Venkatachalam to Venkatappa, January 29, 1925; August 16, 1925, KVPP, KSA.

120 Treasuryvalla to Venkatappa, 21 May 1920; Diary 22, May 1920, KVPP, KSA.

121 Treasuryvalla to Venkatappa, June 25, 1921, KVPP, KSA.

122 Treasuryvalla to Venkatappa, February 11, 1922, KVPP, KSA.

123 Treasuryvalal to Venkatappa, February 2, 1922, KVPP, KSA.

124 Treasuryvalla to Venkatappa, September 19, 1921; October 4,1921; October 11, 1921; January 25, 1922; February 2, 1922; February 11, 1922, KVPP, KSA.

125 Treasuryvalla to Venkatappa, February 10, 1922, KVPP, KSA.

126 Treasuryvalla to Venkatappa, July 20, 1921), KVPP, KSA.

would last longer and and which would keep the colours unchanged for a long period'[127] Treasuryvalla requested a set of raginis featuring women with 'beautiful gold sarees with broad gold bands at the edges' executed of course in 'permanent colours'.[128] In fact, Treasuryvalla only rose in Venkatappa's estimate in 1923, when 'he seems to have understood the worth and the real value of my works.'[129] Yet Venkatappa refused to honour his many requests, and instead sent Treasuryvalla his unsold pictures.

It may be no coincidence that Venkatappa demanded, and received as much as Rs 800 from Treasuryvalla for the last painting that he sold to him in 1924, ('Sita and Mareecha') shortly after he was approached by the Palace authorities to decorate the Amba Vilas Darbar Hall.[130] This spoke of a new found confidence, of an artist unwilling to take mere praise in lieu of hard cash. It was also the moment when he recognised the importance of drawing the line between executing a commission and slavishly accomodating the desires of his patrons. Treasuryvalla's detailed demands were after all quite different from receiving suggestions before executing a commission, for had not Ravi Varma himself asked the Mysore Palace establishment whether the figure of Rama should 'be painted in the natural flesh tint or in the blue colour as depicted in the puranas?'[131] Treasuryvalla's demands were troubling since they indicated that Venkatappa had not sufficiently distanced himself from the Palace artist who worked at the bidding of his employer. His position as modern artist was vulnerable for here was a patron who brazenly dictated every aspect of the artistic production, denying the artist the role of 'creator' except in his display of draughtmanship and skilful use of colour. Venkatappa had also learned that it did not always pay to accomodate the desires of the buyer, having obliged the Rani of Cooch Behar by narrowing down her husband's nose to acceptable proportions, without reward.[132] Nor was he willing to remove the figure of the woman from Buddha picture for S.R.Ramaswamy Mudaliar, not even on historical grounds.[133]

In what way could the artist declare his autonomy while still earning a 'fair' value for his work? Venkatappa was able to resolve this question by accepting the commission to decorate parts of the Mysore Palace, for which he was approached as early as 1924[134] while simultaneously beginning a series of landscapes at Ooty, which proved an instant success in an unexpected quarter, among a range of cultural nationalists.[135] His contact with Kannada litterateurs such as D.V.Gundappa and B.M.Srikantaiah

127 Treasuryvalla to Venkatappa, 27 June 1921, KVP, KSA.

128 Treasuryvalla to Venkatappa, December 26, 1923, KVPP, KSA.

129 Diary October 5, 10, 1923, KVPP, KSA.

130 Diary September 18, 1924; September 21, 1924; September 27, 1924; September 29, 1924; October 2, 1924, KVPP, KSA.

131 Ravi Varma to P. Raghavendra Rao, 22 March 1905 in Selections From the Records of the Mysore Palace, p. 238.

132 Khusru Jung to Venkatappa, March 28, 1925; July 16, 1925, KVPP, KSA ; the mythology of Venkatappa has it that he finally refused to alter 'the drunkard's nose' Venkatachalam, 'The Artist with Strong Character', Savi Nenapu, p. 57.

133 Mudaliar to Venkatappa, August 1, 1923; September 10, 1923, KVPP, KSA.

134 Diary, September 8, 1924, KVPP, KSA.

135 Diary, May 1926; April 11, 1926, KVPP, KSA.

must also have encouraged him in his resolve to set up a 'painting school and studio' at Bangalore, after which he obstinately refused to sell his paintings.[136]

The commission from the Palace released him from the tedium of making a living without reducing him to the level of palace artist. Venkatappa's segmented existence allowed him to devote a part of his time and effort to pleasing the royal patron, while zealously hoarding his landscapes for posterity. Even the choice of genres seems to reflect this new division of labour: the plaster of paris bas-reliefs, largely illustrating mythological themes belonged to the Palace milieu, were immovable and meant for the restricted pleasure of the patron. The small and pleasing landscapes in watercolour had broader appeal both in the use of colour and in the meticulous detailing, and were available for wider circulation and appreciation.

The series of low bas reliefs in Plaster of Paris were proposed as a way of 'harmonising' with existing 'crude and gaudy' upper portions which were already in place,[137] and are a relief in an otherwise garish room. The subjects that Venkatappa first proposed for the walls of the Darbar Hall were somewhat eclectic, ranging from illustrations of mythological themes, such as Shakuntala's departure from Kanva's ashram and Draupadi swayamvara, to 'love scenes'. Nor did he miss an opportunity to declare his loyalty to the king by proposing as well

> an episode from the Purana history of Yadava from which the Mysore Royal Family descends. For this subject I would suggest the scene of 'Srikrishna's Upadesha' of Bhagavad Gita of Arjuna.[138]

Venkatappa's suggestions regarding the bas reliefs were readily accepted by the Maharaja, and Venkatappa in turn claimed that he was glad to accept whatever the royal patron offered. The contrast with the world of Treasuryvalla could not have been starker, the artist released from the labours of pleasing multiple art dealers and buyers. So well known was his independence of the bourgeois public after 1926, that Venkatachalam indignantly spurned Treasuryvalla's last bid to freely procure a tempera rendering of Shivarathri in exchange for lending his Venkatappas to a Bombay exhibition.[139]

Legend has it that Venkatappa insisted that he would undertake the Palace assignment only on condition that 'the subject for the panels should be left to him; that there should be no time limit; that he must be permitted to visit the palace in his own daily garb of a short coat, a turban, a dhoti and an umbrella tucked under his arm, that there should be no official interference of any sort from the palace.'[140]

136 Diary, July 14 1926, KVPP, KSA.

137 Diary, September 9, 1924; 'Amba Vilas Darbar Hall, Mysore', text and drawings at Venkatappa Art Gallery, Bangalore.

138 Undated Memo, 'Subjects for paintings on the wall of Amba Vilas by Venkatappa, KVPP, KSA.

139 Venkatachalam to Venkatappa, August 9, 1927, KVPP, KSA.

140 Venkatachalam, Contemporary Indian Painters, p. 36; Ramachandra Rao, K.Venkatappa, p. 57.

Mythology apart, between 1926 and 1940 the privileges he enjoyed were certainly not those of a Palace artist. After he completed the first of the reliefs in late 1928, 'Departure of Shakuntala'[141] duly approved and admired by the Maharaja himself,[142] Venkatappa received a princely sum of Rs 5000.[143] His work alone was singled out for mention as a 'masterpiece' in the Palace administration report on the artists' annual productions,[144] and by 1931, he was allowed the use of a set of rooms above the Palace dispensary as a separate studio. Not only was he relieved of the strenuous labours of reproducing portraits from photographs or painting the Mysore coat of arms, the generous compensation freed him from reliance on intermediaries who were more than likely to 'distort' his work.

The clearest expression of privilege was the extraordinarily long time Venkatappa took over each bas relief: the second bas relief of Siddhartha was completed only in 1934, a good five years after the first, while the third, the Dance of Siva, was completed in 1939. In those 14 years, Venkatappa only briefly turned attention away from the bas reliefs when he did a series of landscapes at Kodaikanal in 1934.

Meanwhile, the studio had become a place of pilgrimage, especially for Kannada litterateurs such as D.V.Gundappa, Kuvempu, V. Sitaramaiah, and R.R.Diwakar, who were treated to private showings of the art works by lamplight in select groups though only by appointment. Venkatappa could not have been unmindful of the risks he took in relying on the patronage of just one man, even if he was royalty, so the cultivation of this new public could well have been his way of coming to terms with the dwindling importance of the Palace. Even so, the abrupt termination of his commission a few weeks after the death of Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV in August 1940 was a rude and unexpected shock.

What the new Maharaja might have found so objectionable is only a matter of speculation. By taking nearly 14 years to complete a handful of bas reliefs, Venkatappa compared poorly with the pace of either a Ravi Varma or the humbler palace artist,[145] and the artistic aura that he so carefully built up did little to compensate.[146] Venkatappa's bitter exchange with James Cousins in 1938 must have cost him dearly, for Cousins was a cherished advisor to the Palace administration, rearranging the pictures at the Chitrasala, making new purchases and drafting the catalogue, as well as making periodic changes to it.[147] And Venkatappa seems to have sounded his own death knell in his artless letter of condolence to Jayachamaraja Wodeyar, the new Maharaja:

141 Diary 17, December, 1928, KVPP, KSA.

142 Diary, 2 January 1929, KVPP, KSA.

143 File no 33, Sl. no. 11, Office order dated 30.1.1929, Chitrasala Department, Mysore Palace Archives, Mysore.

144 Palace administration report, 1928-29, p. 20.

145 Palace Administration reports from 1928-29 to 1944-45 give us an indication of the enormous output of the Palace artists.

146 Venkatappa's communications with A.V.Subrahmanyaraj Urs are a case in point, May 15, 1931, November 11, 1933, KVPP, KSA.

147 Palace administration reports, 1938-39, p. 18; 1941-42, p. 18; 1942-43, p. 17.

> It is no exaggeration if I say that his late Highness was a fountain of patronage to all sorts of aesthetics, and that evil days, I fear, seem to have fallen upon aesthetic subjects from the days of his death.[148]

Jayachamaraja wasted no time in dispensing with the services of Venkatappa. On September 23, 1940, the artist received news that the present Maharaja did not want any more panels, and that he had to vacate the Palace dispensary after Dasara.[149] The Palace remained cool towards Venkatappa's entreaties that he be allowed to complete his commitments to the late Maharaja, and on September 25, 1940 the only complete panel, the 'Dance of Siva', was removed to Amba Vilas;[150] Venkatappa moved residence to Bangalore, where he remained until he died.

Venkatappa's silence about the exact nature of the contract with the Mysore Palace was a sign that dealings with the royal patron occured on an entirely different register. Indications are that there was no formal contract, so the termination of the commission by the new Maharaja dissolved the distinction between the royal and the bourgeois public: the new Maharaja's action smacked of cold blooded calculations entirely unworthy of a royal patron, and aroused the litigant in Venkatappa, by now a victor of many court battles. In 1943 when it became clear that the Palace was unyielding on the question of fair compensation, Venkatappa instructed his lawyer to file a suit in the Magistrate's court against the Mysore Palace for breach of contract, and claimed compensation of Rs 40,000.[151] The suit was dismissed as unmaintainable by the District Magistrate, a decision that was upheld by the High Court in 1946, on grounds that the Palace was not a legal entity and the sovereign was 'not liable to be sued in his own courts without his consent'.[152]

The courtroom had long been the stage on which Venkatappa strove to establish his artistic genius. The case against the Maharaja was no exception, since Venkatappa hoped to recoup his honour rather than make good the loss of a patron. Losing the chance of a public hearing was therefore more of a blow than his failure to recover dues from the Palace for the case was argued entirely on technical grounds, and few of the nationalist papers reported more than the legalistic details of the argument.[153] Despite growing resentment against native princes, the artist rallied no more than a few sarcastic comments aimed more at mocking the institution of the Maharaja than sympathising with the artist.[154] It

148 Venkatappa to Maharaja, August 6 ,1940, KVPP, KSA.

149 Diary, September 23, 1940, KVPP,KSA.

150 Diary September 25, 1940, KVPP, KSA.

151 Diary September 20. 943, KVPP, KSA.

152 Mysore High Court Reports, Volume 51, Venkatappa v. The Mysore Palace, October 28, 1946, pp. 486-527.Venkatappa submitted a set of documents, probably as proof of his agreement with the Palace, but regrettably, these records are intraceable. More surprising is the fact that all papers relating to the case are missing from Venkatappa's private papers as well.

153 The Hindu, October 30, 1946.

154 Indian Express, November 1, 1946, KVPP, KSA commenting on the decision that the Mysore Palace is not a legal entity said 'some of the State Congress leaders would prefer a judgement declaring the occupant of the premises in question as a legal nullity.'

did not help that he had for so long actively shunned 'publicity' and 'advertisement' by discouraging the reproduction of his works in the popular magazines and the press. Over the years, he had also gradually withdrawn from the exhibition circuit, stating his resolve to establish a studio.[155] But the circulation of the work of art, even in reproduction, went a long way in building an artist's public: Venkatappa's distrust of this was yet another way of drawing a line between himself and the likes of Ravi Varma or even the Bengal school.

c. The Reproduction

If Ravi Varma's national popularity was enabled by the mass produced oleographs that invaded every home, the work of the Bengal school was no less actively retailed by the exhibitions and excellent reproductions of the Indian Society of Oriental Art.[156] More important, as Abanindranath himself admitted 'our pictures are in every household today because of Ramananda Babu ... by his perseverence and financial investments in superior colour and half tone prints he had created a demand where none existed before...'[157] Chatterjee's Picture Albums, though privately dismissed by Havell as 'Chatterjee's trash' placed in national and international circulation a range of high quality reproductions of the Bengal school. Reducing the 'tyranny of the Ravi Varma oleograph', as Cousins put it, was solely enabled by the Modern Review, redefining taste in such a way that even south India, where Ravi Varma had not yet relinquished his hold over a pious public, 'will not for long be content to exist on Bengal reproductions'.[158]

Neither Cousins nor the Fine Arts associations in Bangalore to which Venkatachalam and art dealer Fred Harvey belonged compared with institutions like the ISOA, although beginning in 1924, exhibitions were frequent, and Cousins and Venkatachalam toured the country with slides of various artists.[159] Though Venkatappa's distrust of reproduction bordered on paranoia, he was not entirely averse to high quality reproductions: in 1911-13, he did the series on the Ramayana for the Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists, and in 1931, he sought Palace permission to photograph his bas reliefs for reproduction in international journals.[160] At other times, he sent gifts of photographs of his work to friends and well wishers,[161] and even offered R.R.Diwakar photographs in lieu of works for exhibition in Dharwar.[162]

155 Despite knowledge of his aversion to exhibitions, there were several requests. Bratindranath Tagore to 'Appa Saheb', November 16, 1935; R.R.Diwakar to Venkatappa, October 10, 1927; Venkatachalam to Venkatappa, July 21, 1934, KVPP, KSA.

156 O.C Gangoly, 'Indian Society of Oriental Art', in Abanindranath Tagore Goldern Jubilee Number (November 1961) p. 99.

157 As cited in Mitter Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, p. 350; also Guha Thakurta The Making of a 'new' Indian Art, esp. 274-284.

158 Cousins, 'The Future of Indian Art' Rupam, Vol. 5 No. 17, (1924), p. 46.

159 Venkatachalam to Venkatappa, August 9, 1927; August 2, 1927; Cousins to Venkatappa 25 November 1929

160 Venkatappa to A. V. Subrahmanyaraja Urs May 15, 1931; reply to Venkatappa, May 17, 1931, KVPP, KSA.

161 As on January 1, 1926 four photos were sent to E.W.Edwards Hardwicke College, Mysore, Diary, KVPP, KSA.

162 R.R.Diwakar to Venkatappa, October 10, 1927, KVPP, KSA.

High quality journals such as Modern Review ignored Venkatappa, even though he regularly sent works to the exhibitions of the Indian Society of Oriental Art in the early 1920s. But if the 'national' art publisher cold shouldered the artist, there were far more eager takers in Mysore, and other Kannada speaking regions of the South. Especially after the mid 1920s, Venkatappa's works were increasingly sought by a range of struggling poets, writers, and journalists. Venkatappa declined a five year contract from K. Bhaskara Sastry to illustrate his translations of several Sanskrit texts into Kannada, for which a monthly salary of Rs 60 and other facilities were guaranteed.[163] Prabuddha Karnataka published a long article about Venkatappa with reproductions of his works in 1926.[164] Two years later, it introduced readers to the now famous 'Mad after Veena' (Veeneya Huchchu) accompanied by a detailed biographical sketch.[165] By this time, both Viswakarnataka and Tai Nadu were carrying regular reports on the artist's plans for a school, extending the aura of the brilliant and talented artist.

Venkatappa was always anxious to assert the 'irreducibility of the pictorial work' and rescue it from being mere illustration or 'secondary to the printed work.'[166] So upset was he by the 'cold and horrible' reproduction of his work 'Mad After Veena' (Veeneya Huchchu) in Shivarama Karanth's book Bharatiya Chitra Kala that he refused to accept the complimentary copy.[167] Karanth had pleaded that his 'abilities were small', that none of his publications had ever paid their way and that 'even poverty of means should not hinder me from doing what little I can towards art.'[168] Venkatappa found Karanth's excuse unacceptable, pointing to the irreperable harm done by poor reproduction, especially when the 'linguistic account' was far superior to the 'pictorial' one, for such reproductions only helped some western critics to continue their work of maligning Indian work.[169]

Venkatappa kept a stern eye open for any reproductions that appeared without his permission, demanding apologies (in third person) from those who had reproduced his work in journals and even threatening some with law suits.[170] Rangabhumi, the journal of the Amateur Dramatic Association of Bangalore which published his 'Mahashivarathri' was severely rebuked for 'grossly misrepresenting the work of the 'world renowned artist',[171] for which editor B. Sreenivas duly apologised.[172] Faced with the

163 Diary February 23, 1918, KVPP, KSA.

164 Diary January 14 1926, KVPP, KSA.

165 Prabuddha Karnataka, Vol. 10., No 1, (1928), pp. 5-12.

166 Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production, p. 47.

167 Diary, August 21, 1933.

168 Shivarama Karanth to Venkatappa, August 4, 1930, KVPP, KSA.

169 Venkatappa to Shivarama Karanth, August 10, 1933, KVPP, KSA.

170 Letter protesting poor reproduction of 'Nocturne' (no date, no place), KVPP, KSA.

171 Draft Letter, no date, no place, KVPP, KSA.

172 B. Srinivas to Venkatappa, 8 October 1930,, KVPP, KSA.

threat of litigation, it was safer to admit defeat, as A.R.Krishna Sastri did when he readily admitted he had seen Venkatappa's picture 'murdered'[173] and agreed that 'Nobody knows more than I do how defective were the reproductions in Prabudhha Karnataka but that was the best we could do in this country.'[174] Only after a long and tedious exchange of letters, blocks and proofs did Venkatappa agree to allow V. Sitaramaiah to use his works as illustrations in his book of poetry.[175] Even so, the artist asked for all the blocks to be returned to prevent their further use as book and newspaper illustrations.[176]

May these exchanges be taken as a sign of an artist who only reluctantly engaged with the world of modern art production and reproduction, or were these signs of a highly developed modern artistic ego? 'That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction', Walter Benjamin has noted, 'is the aura of the work of art,'[177] and it was precisely this aura that was fiercely protected by Venkatappa. Coming to terms with an ever expanding scale of art viewers, whether in galleries or exhibitions, or even in reproductions, meant taking risks which Venkatappa was clearly unprepared for. He saw no particular value in popularising his work in marked contrast to Nandalal's enthusiastic even programmatic embrace of the reproduction as a vehicle for the circulation of new artistic ideals.[178] No wonder Venkatappa made impossible demands of those who wished to publish his work, not all of which were related to the quality of the reproduction. Approached by the Assistant editor of the Hindu in 1926 for a photograph of his landscape 'Elk Hill Walk' for publication in the Illustrated Annual, Venkatappa declared that the 'cheap paper' was unworthy of his work. He evoked a sharp response from the editor for demanding the 'security of any well known gentleman' as a condition for sending his work, and for selfishly keeping the picture only for 'the edification of a select few rather than the many who need it.'[179] Venkatappa was convinced that the Hindu could prove its commitment to 'educating the ignorant mass artistically' only by distributing the newspaper free of charge![180]

Keeping a tight rein on reproductions was clearly a hopeless task, but Venkatappa's exasperation with inattentive reproduction came to a head when two photographs of the Palace bas reliefs appeared in Udbodhan the Bengali monthly of the Sri Ramakrishna Mission. In its 1935 (Ashwin 1342) Puja Special number, the journal carried reproductions of Venkatappa's 'Renunciation of Buddha' and 'Rama gifting the signet ring to Hanuman'.[181] The Rama picture which had inadvertantly been reproduced in the reverse,

173 A.R.Krishna Sastry to Venkatappa, October 11, 1930, KVPP, KSA.

174 AR Krishna Sastry to Venkatappa, October 17, 1930, KVPP, KSA.

175 V. Sitaramaiah to Venkatappa, 29 September 1930; Venkatappa to Sitaramaiah, 9 October 1930, 31,October 1930, 6 November 1930, KVPP, KSA. See V. Sitaramaiah, Githagalu, (Karnataka Sahitya Prakatana Mandira, 1931), which contains illustrations by both Venkatappa and Nandalal Bose.

176 Venkatappa to Sitaramaiah, 6 November 1930, KVPP, KSA.

177 Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, translated by Harry Zohn, (New York: Schoken Books, 1985), p. 221.

178 Guha Thakurta 'Visualising the Nation' Journal of Arts and Ideas, No.27-28, (1995), pp. 31-35.

179 Assistant editor Hindu to Venkatappa, 8 September 1926.

180 Venkatappa to Assistant editor Hindu, 10 September 1926.

181 Udbodhan, Ashwin 1342, Puja Special (1935) p. 473, 497.

angered Venkatappa enough to seek the help of the Mysore Palace to object, since the mistake damaged not only the artist and his 'international reputation' but 'the fair name of our progressive model state which is well known for its civilisation and Fine Arts'.[182] Not just aesthetic principles were violated, he claimed, but religious sensibilities, for the reproduction showed Rama 'giving the ring with the left hand and wearing the sacred thread on the right.'[183] The explanatory note may well have compounded Venkatappa's indignation, since descriptions of the artist as 'able' 'competent' and 'a skilled draughtsmen' did not diminish the prime importance given to Venkatappa's master, Abanindranath.[184] Though the Palace refused to be drawn into this affair, the RK Mission was quick to rectify the mistake carrying a written apology in the 1342 Magh issue and after Venkatappa's approval, reprinted the blocks the right way up in its Jaistha Issue.[185] This did not prevent Venkatappa, an adept at court procedures[186] from filing a suit for libel and claiming damages of Rs. 1.

It is more than likely that Venkatappa filed the suit in a fit of pique, for the photographs of the bas reliefs had been taken by a Swami Nikhilananda who promised to reproduce them in 'selected artistic periodicals in America.[187] To discover them published in a Bengali religious journal instead must have been a blow to Venkatappa's aspirations, and the one rupee suit was clearly an attempt to publicly recoup his honour. As it happened, it was no more than a pyrrhic victory when the court found in his favour: one of the two witnesses who appeared on his behalf to testify on the maintainability of the suit of libel, Shahid Suhrawardy, frankly admitted that Venkatappa's work did not appeal to him.[188] Percy Brown the second witness was more appreciative, but the judge, whom Venkatappa noted was hostile to his counsel[189] commented at length on the pettiness of the complaint, awarding the one rupee in damages but only half costs since too much court time had been wasted. 'It appears to me unfortunate,' the judge declared, 'that a man in the Plaintiff's position with a considerable artistic reputation should have allowed his case to be pressed so strongly and in such detail on the quantum of damages, particularly in view of the very full apology which had been made...'[190]

182 Venkatappa to Huzur secretary, December 6, 1935, KVPP, KSA.

183 Ibid.

184 Udbodhan, 1342 (1935).

185 The Calcutta Weekly notes Reports of Important Decisions of the Caclutta High Court and of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council on Appeal from India, Vol. XLI, Nov. to Dec. 1937-38, p. 1046.

186 The first case he filed was in 1920 at the Mysore Magistrate's court against a person who stole coconuts from his trees, for which the convicted thieves were caned. Diary, November 19, 1920, KVPP, KSA. The judge while appreciating his work as an artist did his best to discourage the artist from litigious behaviour and hoped he would become a great man. But Venkatappa having drawn blood, developed a taste for courtroom battles. Although we don't know the details of all cases, he successfully fought at least three other legal battles before the Udbodan case, and threatened several recalcitrant buyers and patrons with legal action. Diary, March April 1924, September 3, 1932; January 1933. Even the publicised setback against the Mysore Palace did little to diminish his appetite for legal battles. Ramachandra Rao, Venkatappa, p. 86-87.

187 The Statesman April 7, 1938, p.13.

188 The Calcutta Weekly Notes, p.1047.

189 Diary April 16, 1938, KVPP, KSA.

190 The Calcutta Weekly notes, p. 1051.

Yet it is a sign of how much Venkatappa depended on such verdicts as proof of his fame that he reported his victory to Abanindranath Tagore as a repeat of Whistler's famous one shilling suit against Ruskin.[191] Venkatappa relished court battles so much that he thought nothing of the enormous costs he had incurred in fighting the Udbodhana case. Clearly, the costs of litigation, whether in money or time and effort, were more than fairly compensated by the verdicts, in defending or even establishing his image as a principled artist. Such qualities as unwavering commitment to ideals in personal life were so important to the work of artistic production that he stressed the virtues of asceticism as a fundamental quality for any aspiring artist, and consequently succeeded in turning away many potential students. His desire to serve as a role model and as a pedagogue was clearly at odds with his unwillingness to accept students and develop their skills and abilities.

d. The artist as pedagogue

It was part of Venkatappa's staging of himself as a committed artist that he referred to himself throughout his life as 'a student of fine art.' He had been an exemplary student, 'quiet and gentlemanly', and 'a credit to the state he represents.'[192] Yet his diaries and records reveal a remarkable indifference to reflection on art practices or even to dialogue with other artists.[193] Even when he consulted his guru Abanindranath in 1937 while working on the 'Dance of Siva' it was only to clarify the sastraic injunction about how many hands were permitted in representations of the God.[194]

In striking contrast to Abanindranath's other pupils who fanned out across the country to head various institutions of art, Venkatappa studiously avoided being attached to any institution, whether new or existing.[195] He refused to be tempted by the possibility of a job at the Andhra Jatheeya Kalasala at Machilipatnam in 1920,[196] a job later accepted by Promode Kumar Chatterjee, and turned down CR Reddy's tempting invitation in 1928 to join the Andhra University Faculty of Arts and Music and 'make a name that will live for centuries'.[197] His loyalty to the Maharaja and his gratitude for opportunities received tied him to the Mysore state, and especially the Palace. The only students who were lucky enough to receive instruction from him were Anand Mohan Sastry and Ram Mohan Sastry who were recommended by Srinivas Rao of the Machilipatnam school in 1926[198]; although Ram Mohan soon

191 Diary, April 8, 1938, KVPP, KSA.

192 Percy Brown to Private Secretary, Maharaja of Mysore, 1916, KVPP, KSA.

193 In 1951, he told O.C.Gangoly that he did not believe in attending lectures on art. Diary Septmber 11, 1951, KVPP, KSA.

194 Abanindranth's reply was simply to reassert what he had said in the article on Indian iconography: 'You must know that the sastras were made after the statues were made by artists.' Abanindranath to Venkatappa, February 11, 1937. The bas relief finally depicted Shiva with two hands.

195 Nandalal Bose was at Santiniketan, A.K.Haldar at Lucknow, Samarendranath Gupta at Lahore, Sailendranath Dey at Jaipur, Sarada Ukil at Delhi, Promode Chatterjees at Machilipatnam, and D.P.Roychoudhry at Madras: although Ramachandra Rao claimed that Venkatappa 'taught at Mysore', this was not the case. Ramachandra Rao, Modern Indian Painting, p. 12.

196 Diary April 16 and 17, 1920, KVPP,KSA.

197 Diary August 24, 1928, KVPP, KSA.

198 Srinivas Row to Venkatappa, March 19, 1926; June 1, 1926; September 23, 1926, KVPP, KSA.

dropped out. Venkatappa was an exacting teacher, and so grudging in his appreciation of the students that when he received news that the two had been taken onto the staff of the Machilipatnam school, he described it as a 'a great pity' as an 'increase of incompetant persons as teachers lecturers and writers on Indian art throughout India': 'The neglect of so many centuries I think did not do so much harm to Indian art as the renewed patronage or the enthusiastic revival of the last two decades.'[199]

With such a reputation, it need not surprise us that his resolve to start a free school of art in Bangalore remained unrealised. He asked several people, including Mahdi Hasan of Osmania University to send him worthy students,[200] but made conditions too difficult for potential students; he refused M.V.Sitaramaiah because he was already married,[201] a group of others because they were 'older than 14 years,'[202] and dismissed Narayan Sangam, a student of Nandalal's from Bombay presidency who was sent by Abanindranath, as a mere 'beggar'.[203] He had no more than the minimum contact with the other artists associated with the Palace. Painter Y.Subrahmanya Raju recalled that when he gently informed Venkatappa of complaints that he had not shared his knowledge with others, the artist answered that he had climbed to the summit of the art world, a feat that was impossible to teach another person.[204]

Venkatappa's intolerance as a teacher has long been seen as just another eccentricity; yet Venkatappa's determination to start a school contradicted this active discouragement of individual students. There were ample indications that the principle of self denial could no longer be made a condition, yet Venkatappa desired authority within a mode of power (the guru-shishya paramapara) that was already in retreat, overwhelmed by the pressures and material rewards of the emerging art market. Marthanda Joshi confessed his difficulty in 'being detached from the world of economics' in a letter to Venkatappa: though he had hoped to spend his lifetime studying art with him, Joshi was forced to accept a job as artist in Calico Mills.[205] Venkatappa's long cherished desire that his works should above all serve the task of instruction could not be realised with any group of students. Yet he steadfastly refused to part with his works in the belief that they would eventually be lodged in a location where they would instruct rather than serve merely as decoration or to cater to private pleasures. After 1941, his own studio served as a private gallery through which groups of critics, writers, scientists and nationalists were conducted by the artist himself. When the royal patron had all but vanished, and the bourgeois buyer was as yet unacceptable in Venkatappa's schema, what else could fulfil his aspirations except the agencies of the nation state?

---

199 Letter, no date, place (1931?), KVPP, KSA.

200 Diary Jaunary 27, 1942, KVPP, KSA.

201 Sitaramaiah Savi Nenapu, p. 14.

202 Diary July 6, 1948, KVPP, KSA; also Balarama Kulkarni to VEnkatappa December 20, 1046, KVPP, KSA.

203 Abanindranath to Venkatappa, May 31, 1928, KVPP< KSA.

204 Subrahmanya Raju, Savi Nenapu, p. 20.

205 Marthanda Joshi to Venkatappa, January 13, 1937, KVPP,KSA.

Conclusion

On October 5, 1940, Venkatappa left Mysore for Bangalore where he had purchased some property for his studio and school in 1928.[206] The move from Mysore represented a sharp shift away from the courtly culture of the Mysore Palace of which he had so long been a part, but was now clearly threatened with extinction. Abandoning the leisurely world of Mysore for the hard, shiny brilliance of the administrative capital was also a shift in loyalties, not so much from the royal patron to the bourgeois art market but to the new arbiters of state power and indeed taste. Was that a moment when the artist was confronted with his historic error of judgement in actively seeking the patronage of the Maharaja on his return from Calcutta in preference to a bourgeois public? Venkatappa was too clever by far to be destroyed by the Palace administration's betrayal of his trust, for had he not, as early as 1926, prepared for this break, simultaneously developing a mode of existence, a genre (notably his landscapes), and indeed a new, though doubtless small, public that was far from aristocratic?

Ironically the very court verdict that so forcefully asserted the unassailable power of the Maharaja succeeded in convincing Venkatappa that the world of royal patrons and palace artists had come to an end. Soon after his appeal against the palace for Rs 40,000 was dismissed in 1946, he received an offer of Rs 5000 from the Maharaja, and the freedom to do as he wished with the remaining panels, but Venkatappa no longer wished to be beholden to the Mysore Palace refusing to compromise his 'principles' and dignity.[207] There could be no turning back to the capricious princely culture of Old Mysore, or indeed any other princely state: even VV Srinivasa Iyengar's offer to arrange for him to join the Travancore State was therefore completely unacceptable.[208]

The desire to bequeath his legacy to an 'imagined community' of art lovers had defined his approach to buyers, critics, students and publishers alike since 1926. Only much later was this 'imagined community' given a content by his growing band of admirers, when Venkatappa took his place among those forging the aesthetic of the new Kannada nation.[209] After 1940, Venkatappa did no new work, except for completing the bas reliefs and one landscape in 1957 and otherwise reorienting his older work. Yet it was in this period that he was consecrated as the bearer of modernity in Kannada art. It was a role for which Venkatappa had only unwittingly prepared, and his actions a few days after his High Court appeal was dismissed reveal a man who had finally came to terms with the new field of forces when the link with the Palace was decisively broken. On the night of October 28, 1946, Venkatappa read in Tainadu that his appeal had been dismissed. After flatly declining all Palace offers, on November 20, 1946, Venkatappa set about doing something he had resisted all his life: mounting all the certificates of merit and medals awarded to him since 1910. 'Though framing them and showing them to visitors was against my will and taste all these 36 years,' he confessed in his diary,'yet the inner urge to bring them to light was great , so I took them out of the trunk in which they were locked ever since they were received.'[210] Between November 23 and 25, he displayed these as well as his works in chronological

---

206 Diary, April 14, 1928, KVPP, KSA.

207 Diary, November 14, 1946, KVPP, KSA.

208 Diary, May 1944, KVPP, KSA

209 A.S. Raman 'A Determined Perfectionist', Savi Nenapu, p. 64.

210 Diary November 20, 1946, KVPP, KSA.

order for several officials and ex officials of the Mysore state.[211] It could not entirely have been a coincidence that Venkatappa was asked in November 1946 shortly after the case ended, to head the Kamataka Academy of Fine Arts as President, a post to which he recommended K. Kesavaiah instead.[212] He had no need for such formal positions: by this time, after all, the Kannada nation had already laid claim to Venkatappa as a modern Indian artist.

---

211 Diary, November 23-25, 1946, KVPP, KSA.

212 Diary, November 20, 1946, KVPP, KSA.