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Palace/Gallery/Museum: The importance of being `National'

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ABSTRACT

What are the sources of authority of an artist who is consecrated in a modern museum? This paper examines the context within which a modern Indian artist, K Venkatappa, attained such an authority in the Princely State of Mysore, despite the fact that neither his artistic productions nor his other activities were directly aligned with nationalist causes. Rather, Venkatappa's dominance within the visual field in the 1950s and 1960s had more to do with the needs of a newly defined state in search of cultural heroes.

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MIDS

The Venkatappa Art Gallery's discreet distance from the imposing red brick Government Museum and the businesslike Visvesvaraya Industrial and Technological Museum (VITM) at the edge of the Cubbon Park in Bangalore may be taken as an unwitting sign of the unanticipated career of K.Venkatappa as the bearer of a provincial nationalist aesthetic. The bustling crowds at the VITM may take in the potted 'history' of the state in the Government Museum, but only those most determined to get their ticket's worth stray into the Venkatappa Gallery. Once there, the crowd's distracted shuffling from bas relief to landscape, from sculptured bust and shruti veena to the personal effects of the artist is not quite reverent, and nothing in the citizenry's reactions appears to fulfil Venkatappa's long held hopes that his work should serve the purposes of visually instructing 'lovers of fine art'. To the extent that 'the 'eye' is a product of history reproduced by education'[1] the citizenry makes Venkatappa its own, but in ways that were not anticipated by the artist.

Nevertheless, Venkatappa is consecrated in the museum space alongside Visvesvaraya, though on quite a different register. Visvesvaraya's authority is derived from his role as a technocrat, Dewan, and the 'maker of modern Mysore', for which Mysorean does not recall with a rush of pride Visvesvaraya's injunction to 'industrialise or perish'?[2] Yet Visvesvaraya's vision of a planned industrial economy for the country, which was to be partially realised in Nehruvian India, shares nothing with the visions of Venkatappa. If Visvesvaraya's Mysore turban was an elegant if quaint reminder of the princely order that he loyally served, he was nevertheless impatient with the old order and yearned for an introduction of the secular national-modern in every sphere of material life. Venkatappa's turban, instead, was of a piece with the palace establishment the artist had long inhabited until his connection with it was rudely severed in 1940.[3] His loyalty to the royal culture was combined with a denunciation of all that the new art market stood for, along with a renunciation of 'modern' artistic sensibilities and the emerging field of forces, of critics, buyers, publicists and exhibitors.

Appropriately, the VITM cultivates a reverence for the power not of science so much as technology, inspiring awe even among the uninitiated. The neighbouring Government Museum dutifully presents a version of Mysore's past, and although some of the 'magic' of doors that obey verbal commands has clearly worn off by the time the visitor gets here, the assortment of architectural and art

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1 Pierre Bourdieu's **Distinction : A Social Critique of the judgement of taste,** trans by Richard Nice, (RKP, London, 1986), p. 3. On the importance of time, or more properly leisure in the cultivation of aesthetic 'distinction' see also pp. 280-83.

2 For a fuller account of Visvesvaraya's involvement in the Mysore economy, see my 'Mysore's Imagined Economy' **Indo British Review**, (forthcoming).

3 See Nair 'Drawing the Line: K. Venkatappa and his Publics' (MIDS Working Paper no, 148, 1997) for a discussion of Venkatappa's relationship to the Mysore Palace culture.

objects provide a comforting sense of antiquity, an antiquity that never quite asserts a chronology or an unbroken tradition adequate to the intentions of its colonial architects.[4] The Venkatappa art gallery, and more specifically the collection of Venkatappa's works, invites pure interest in artistic form, functioning as a sort of bridge between the artistic heritage which the Government Museum deploys as History, and the aspiring or established contemporary artists who hire the halls above, a universe of past and present works of art catering to and defining a range of middle class tastes.[5]

Venkatappa had so consciously shunned publicity and even dialogue with other artists of his time that one wonders at the source of his authority. This is especially puzzling given the smallness of his output, even in his most creative years between 1910 and 1940, after which he did no new work, occupying himself instead with the task of 'reorienting his works' until his death in 1965. Under what circumstances did Venkatappa get elected to so important a position in the aesthetic universe of the new Kannada nation that a premier state gallery had been named after him? May it be attributed to the personal vision of the artist, his indomitable will, or even his transcendent genius, as it conventionally has been?

Here was an artist who declared a degree of autonomy from the art market by self consciously addressing an anonymous community of the future from quite early in his career. Quite unlike the artist who sought out an audience among his or her contemporaries, Venkatappa planned for an audience of the future, an audience that was yet to be, refusing the present in order to be immortalised. Ananda Coomaraswamy had once sternly denounced the artist who longed to be hung in a gallery or museum, the space that was more correctly dedicated to the 'care of ancient or unique works' in imminent danger of destruction.[6] The walls of the Mysore Palace were safe enough for Venkatappa's work, yet he rejected such anonymous safety in favour of a wider public of art-loving people without ever quite relinquishing his distrust of the dangerously untutored public eye.[7]

We know that at least by 1926, Venkatappa had resolved to bequeath his art legacy to an imagined community of art lovers. This imagined community was before long given a positive content by the state's intellectuals, so that Venkatappa came to join the pantheon of heroes that the incipient Kannada nation so desperately needed; yet this genealogy is much less a part of the mythology that has come to magnify and consecrate the artist as genius.

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4 See for instance, Tapati Guha Thakurta 'The Museumised Relic: Archaeology and the First Museum of colonial India' **Indian Economic and Social History Review** 34.1 (1997), pp. 21-51, for a discussion of the failures of early Indian museums in fulfilling more specific pedagogical roles. That the museum also served the role of asserting and displaying colonial mastery of the land is argued by Andrew Grout 'Possessing the Earth: Geological Collections, Information, and Education in India, 1800-1850', in Nigel Crook ed **Transmission of Knowledge in South Asia: Essays on Education, Religion, History, and Politics** (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 245-279.

5 The most useful discussion of the development of hierarchies of taste is in Bourdieu's **Distinction**.

6 Ananda Coomaraswamy 'Why Exhibit Works of Art' in **Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art** (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 7.

7 Shivarama Karanth recalls that Venkatappa simply shut his studio when a visitor exclaimed that his landscapes were just like photographs. Karanth **Bharatiya Chitra Kala,** (Puttur: Shivarama Karanth, 1930), p. 45.

In a recent work that takes a hard, even unsympathetic, look at the mythologies that have long obscured the artist, Ravikumar Kasi asks how it was that an artist like Venkatappa could remain so determinedly indifferent to the groundswell of nationalism, unlike the numerous writers, poets, scholars and journalists who were inspired to participate in defining the contours of the new nation-state and its cultural responsibilities.[8] Yet I would like to reframe the question to ask instead how it was that <u>despite</u> his marked indifference to the world of political events and even to the aesthetic challenges of new nationalist art, Venkatappa has been elected to a place of pre-eminence in the history of modern Karnataka? In other words, from what is his authority derived? And what place then does a figure like Venkatappa have in any attempt to 'reperiodise the modern' in Indian art?[9]

The Bengal School Heritage

There is nothing self evident about the artist's career as a retailer in Karnataka of the new nationalist aesthetic that was forged in Bengal. For although he started out as a member of the privileged clique that owed allegience to Abanindranath Tagore in the early part of the twentieth century, Venkatappa was soon anxious to distance himself from this past, not only in his artistic productions but also by fashioning a genealogy that silently passed over his early artistic formation as a member of the Bengal school.[10] By 1938, it seemed as if his breach with the past was complete when he claimed that he had 'not copied any school with regard to my technic (sic)' choosing instead to attribute his style to genes on the one hand and genius on the other.[11] 'My father and grandfather', he wrote to art critic 'Jayaram'(James) Cousins 'were great artists of their own times and so my technic (sic) is not a copied one in which both Mughal and Rajput schools are combined, as you have erroneously mentioned, but a genuine inborn one suited to my taste and genius.' He even once suggested that 'the neglect of so many centuries...did not do so much harm to Indian art as the renewed patronage or the enthusiastic revival for the last two decades',[12] a clear indictment of those who were marching in step with Swadeshi sentimentalism.

Despite distancing himself from association with the Bengal school, Venkatappa has earned recognition today not only as the one who represents the 'unsophisticated and indigenous aspect of the Bengal school'[13] but as 'one who interpreted the soul of Karnataka in the national idiom'.[14] Taken by themselves, the diaries of Venkatappa or even his artistic productions appear to actively

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[8] Ravikumar Kasi 'Odedha Kannadi' **Sanchaya,** Vol. 8, no. 1, 1996, p. 42. Indeed, the terse and rather unemotional entry in Venkatappa's diary on August 15, 1947 is only the most pointed reminder of the artist's detachment from nationalist politics or concerns. K. Venkatappa Private papers (KVPP), Karnataka State Archives (KSA).

[9] Geeta Kapur 'When was modernism in Indian art' **Journal of Arts and Ideas,** Nos. 27 and 28, p. 105.

[10] Venkatappa to J.H.Cousins, June 4, 1928, KVPP, KSA.

[11] Venkatappa to Cousins, August 3, 1938, KVPP, KSA.

[12] Letter to Srinivas Row, no date place (1929), KVPP, KSA.

[13] Jaya Appasamy 'He created a new Indian style', **Savi nenapu,** (Bangalore: Karnataka Lalitkala Akademi, 1987), p. 71.

[14] A S Raman 'A Determined perfectionist', **Savi Nenapu,** p. 64.

deny the possibility of his recuperation within the space of an emerging Kannada identity: the Kannada intellectual often seemed to intrude into the artist's life, 'disturbing' and 'delaying' the genius at work.[15] His troubled relationships with such admirers as V. Sitaramaiah and K. Shivarama Karanth were symptoms of his anxiety not to allow the pictorial account to be subordinated to the linguistic one, but rather that the visual field get the full focussed attention it deserved.[16] Nor did the artist actively collaborate in visualising the Kannada nation or allegorising its historical past.[17] Yet the fact that there is no evidence of the artist's overt links with the national movement need not be taken as the absence of the national in the formation of this artist. These moments when nationalism intrudes into the artist's life must be seized, so that the silences in his narrative may be made to speak, for 'the artist produces work in determinate conditions, he does not work on himself but on that thing which escapes him in so many ways, and never belongs to him until after the event.'[18]

Surely it was the Big Other, the Indian Nation, that Venkatappa chose to address when he began maintaining a diary in 1913, until 1958 with few breaks. For Venkatappa chose to keep the diary in English, rather than in his native Kannada, except for a few entries in the 1930s. His knowledge of English of course enabled him to exit the Palace world and participate for seven years in the emerging art establishment at Calcutta. At Calcutta, he was exposed to an intensely provincial nationalism, and yet Venkatappa chose not to restrict himself to the language of his province, whether in private or in public writing. In this sense, he was part of an emerging convention of maintaining a dual identity, a division of labour between the languages he used.[19] The choice of English for diary keeping betrayed an unconscious interest in addressing the Indian Nation that was in the making, and was distinctly at odds with his marked indifference to the political. For it was otherwise only through the efforts of the cultural nationalists and critics that he was inserted in the narrative of the aesthetics of the modern Indian nation, especially since these nationalists engaged more directly with his artistic productions.

In Calcutta itself, Venkatappa's work had shown such promise that William Rothenstein the British critic who saw an exhibition of the Bengal school at the India Society in London, had claimed that 'he would place Mr. Venkatappa as at the head of the school, and was even inclined to go further and place him at the head of any living school.'[20] Ananda Coomaraswamy too greatly admired the 'pure clean colour schemes of earlier Indian art' and naturally found Venkatappa's work

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15 Diary, April 5, 1949; April 3, 1951, KVPP, KSA. In 1949 he spurned the artist Rumale Chennabasavaiah's offer to arrange for Karnataka Congressmen such as Hardekar, T Siddalingaiah and KC Reddy to visit his studio.

16 See Pierre Bourdieu **The Field of Cultural Production** (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 47. The details of these exchanges are considered in my 'Drawing a Line'.

17 Contrast however the work of Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose as discussed in Tapati Guha Thakurta 'Visualising the Nation: The Iconography of a 'national' art in Modern India' **Journal of Arts and Ideas** No. 27-28, pp. 7-40.

18 Pierre Macherey, **A Theory of Literary Production**, translated by Geoffrey Wall, (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 68.

19 Indira Choudhry has discussed the work of a late nineteenth century Bengali litterateur Hemendra Prasad Ghose who kept a diary in English, even while he otherwise wrote in Bengali. Choudhry **Of Warriors, Heroic Women, and Ascetics: The Politics of Culture, Bengal 1867-1905** (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

20 JDW 'The India Society', **Modern Review** Vol. 8 No 2 (1910), p. 161.

full of 'real promise', 'really beautiful and naively expressive.'[21] There is no doubt that for Comaraswamy at least part of Venkatappa's appeal stemmed from his closeness to 'tradition' for 'none can portray the gods but those who have themselves seen them.'[22] And to him, Venkatappa was among those endowed with the ability to 'suggest the appropriate spiritual and material environment' of the Hindu epics in painting.[23]

Venkatappa's landscapes of Ooty and Kodaikanal, painted in 1926 and 1934 respectively, were so immediately a success among a wide range of Kannada litterateurs, that he appears to have fulfilled their need for a definite aesthetic as well as a collective yearning for a yugapurush, a man of the age who would rescue tradition in redefining the 'modern' without being slavishly regimented by it. Venkatappa's career as an artist did not quite follow a predictable path. He could well have agreed with James Cousins' remark in quite another context that the 'perpetual craning towards the past is apt to give the national neck a twist'.[24] Like the other artists attached to the Palace at Mysore, Venkatappa too had decisively broken with the 'Mysore school' of painting that was his legacy. Yet unlike the Palace artist, he had not embraced the academic realist oeuvre of Ravi Varma, preferring, at least until the early 1920s, to develop the Bengali aesthetic in which he was groomed by Abanindranath. These works, of which most were illustrations of the epics favoured compositions of spiritualised figures, although his attention to detail and his brilliant sense of colour did little to compensate for the overall weakness of the composition and the stiffness of the somewhat archaic figures.[25]

In his Calcutta years, Venkatappa had adhered to the evolving Bengal school style in his choice of subjects (largely figurative illustrations of Hindu legends), medium (tempera and watercolours), and style (miniature tradition of the Rajput and Moghul oeuvres). After the early 1920s, when he also did a few plaster busts, he worked primarily in three genres that sharply diverged from all his years of careful swadeshi grooming. He chose a rather dated medium - ivory miniatures - to do portraits of famous personages, he executed a series of meticulous landscapes, and a series of bas reliefs in plaster of Paris, all of which appeared to hark back to his academic training rather than his Bengal years.

An unusual portrait of Sirdar Gopal Raj Urs, entitled 'Physical Development', for instance, stresses anatomical detail, and emphasises the muscles in a way that was to be repeated in the bas reliefs depicting male figures such as Rama, Siddartha, Kanva and Ekalavya. Indeed, Venkatappa increasingly favoured anatomical accuracy as the mark of a well grounded art: S.R. Kukke an artist who sought his advice was shown 'certain anatomical defects in his painting' in 1951.[26]

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[21] Ananda Coomaraswamy, **Art and Swadeshi**, (Madras: Ganesh and Co, 1912), p. 129, 130, 132-33.

[22] Ibid, p. 130.

[23] Sister Nivedita and Ananda Coomaraswamy, **Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists**, with 32 illustrations in colour by Indian artists under the supervision of Abanindranath Tagore (London, 1920 [1913]), Preface.

[24] He was referring to Jacob Epstein's suggestion that all students of art must study the old (western) masters. 'The Future of Indian Art' **Rupam**, Vol. 5 No. 17, (1924), p. 44.

[25] 'Venkatappa's output has an archaic quality which is informed at his best with delicacy and charm'. P Ramachandra Rao, **Modern Indian Painting** (Rachana, Madras, 1953), p. 20

[26] Diary, September 11, 1951, KVPP, KSA.

The obsession with 'fidelity to the original' persisted even in the later years. Venkatappa's 'scrap book' of newspaper clippings filed an advertisement for 'realistic busts in paper, terracotta, cement plaster and imitation marble' of 'the father of the nation'[27] alongside Nehru's admonition of those memorialising Gandhi: heavily emphasised were the words "... the greatest care should be taken that only real works of art are permitted.'[28] Venkatappa had come a long way from Abanindranath's sternly classical prescriptions drawn from Indian iconography that he, Venkatappa, himself had helped illustrate.[29] Even his early drawing 'Ardhanareeswara' closely reflected the idealised proportions of the Indian iconographic conventions.

His approach to realism was however rich with ambiguity, bearing all the marks of his own private negotiations of the hierarchies within and outside the Palace. Consider for instance his bas reliefs which were examples par excellance of his interest in realist representations of the body. He took care to represent the upper caste bodies of Droncharya, Kanva, Rama and Siddhartha in all their aquiline "Aryan" fineness, delicately textured and with beautifully proportioned limbs swathed in fine cloth. In contrast, 'Ekalavya Practicing Archery' deliberately coarsens not only the profile of the boy but the lower limbs, which are thickset and ungainly, clothed in the rough shorts of the Mysore peasant. That this theme was chosen at all is an important indication of Venkatappa's admiration for the efforts of a lower caste to enter into spheres hitherto denied to his ilk, a tale that bore some similarity to Venkatappa's own complex negotiation of his caste heritage. Yet the attempt to idealise one representation while making another more realist was symptomatic of his own struggles with the iconographic conventions to which he was exposed, and those he was developing on his own. How distinct from the poised Shiva, frozen in mid-dance even as he threatens the world ('Shiva Thandava') is Ekalvya, rooted to the earth. Indeed, not only was Venkatappa proud of his ability to evoke social difference in his bas reliefs, he won many admirers for this work.[30] As for his female figures, the exaggerated flow of their garments relieved the artist of any responsibility for anatomical detail, and as such these figures were the quintessential spiritualised and asexual beings that symbolised an idealised, upper caste, womanhood.[31] It is all the more striking then that the realist genre evoking space, a geography of the imagined nation, so to speak, namely the lonely mountainscapes, even more than the works of mythological or historical construction, appealed to such a wide range of intellectuals.

This article will trace the manner in which the artist negotiated, even desired, the shift away from the Durbar Hall/Palace to the Museum/Gallery, a move that implied retreat from the patronage of the Maharaja to the (posthumous) patronage of the nation state. This may help explain the apparent paradox by which an artist is consecrated by the very agencies that he so conspicuously denounced. The consecration, it is argued, was certainly enabled through the

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[27] **Hindu** February 27, 1945, KVPP, KSA.

[28] **Hindu,** February, 26, 1948, KVPP, KSA.

[29] Abanindranath Tagore 'Indian Iconography' **Modern Review** Vol. XV, No. 3, March 1914.

[30] S.N. Chandrasekhar, 'With him began my Art Appreciation', **Savi Nenapu,** p. 84.

[31] As the large number of portraits in the Mysore Palace testify, this was the commonest way of depicting women of the Royal Family.

cultivation of an authority, an authority founded as much on mythologies about his achievements and his persona as a 'genius' as on the genres which he chose to explore in his artistic production, especially in his post-Calcutta years. But more crucially, the authority was derived from the needs of the Kannada intelligentsia for modern heroes in a period of nationalist awakening, heroes whose modernity did not quite erase all marks of loyalty to the palace culture of Old Mysore. Only such an account can help dismantle the mythologies that obscure the field of artistic production, a task that demands more than factual refutation,[32] while serving to unsettle the certainties of narratives about Indian modernity. Only then may we make sense of Venkatappa's negotiation of the twin demands of modernity and nationalism, whether in his refusal to be called into public debate on the question of what was the national aesthetic, his rare participation in exhibitions or in his style that increasingly recalled a Europeanised academic training rather than the Orientalised aesthetic of the Bengal school.

Such an approach also helps us to locate an artist who remained impervious through the 1940s and 1950s to the experimental productions of the Bombay Progressives, and later the Madras progressives as well, while finding himself increasingly aligned with those defining a provincial Kannada aesthetic. Venkatappa's career tells us as much about the emerging sense of nationness that was being forged in Karnataka, for if the Kannada intellectual located the provincial aesthetic in the life and work of one who both revered and defied the Mysore palace, it was because Kannada nation-ness too had the same contradictory relationship to that node of power in Princely Mysore, namely a loyalty to monarchical power that was not unmixed with a desire for modernity. It was Mysore State, with its relative autonomy from colonial rule and its cultural unity that formed the core of the imagined Kannada nation for nationalists from Bombay Karnataka, Hyderabad Karnataka, Coorg and Madras Presidency.[33]

Naming the art lover of the future

Venkatappa may have been inspired to keep his artistic productions away from eager buyers and for an 'art loving public' as early as 1926, but there was neither in his diary nor in his style of work a reference to the 'public' that was being constituted by the incipient Indian nation. In fact Venkatappa had, at least since 1934, stopped exhibiting his works publicly, preferring instead to conduct visitors through his studio. Who then would constitute this anonymous 'public' of the future for whom his works were intended? Only in the 1950s, after the nation had come into being, do we find overt references to the gradual equation of the 'public' with the 'national public'. Regretting his inability to participate in the Dasara Exhibition in Mysore in 1950, Venkatappa claimed that his paintings were 'specially created' and 'zealously preserved' for installation in a gallery 'for the benefit of students and the Nation.'[34] To the Governor of Madras, Krishna Kumar Singhji, who solicited work from Venkatappa for display in the newly opened Madras

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[32] As Kasi has done in 'Odedha Kannadi', pp. 34-42.

[33] For a brief outline of the consequences of this see Janaki Nair '"Memories of Underdevelopment": The Identities of Language in Contemporary Karnataka' EPW, 31.41 and 42, (October 12-19, 1996), PP.2809-16.

[34] Venkatappa to Secretary, Dasara Exhibition Committee, September 21, 1950, KVPP, KSA.

Gallery in 1951, he further elaborated his concept of the public as 'national public', refusing to break his collection since he was protecting his works from the 'art knowing millionaires of Ahmedabad and Bombay' in order to give them over to the Indian nation, by which he claimed he was honouring a promise that he had made to Gandhi.[35]

Yet if the 'national public' was not to be found in the Dasara exhibition or in the Madras Gallery, where and under what conditions was it constituted? A strong invocation of the 'nation' did not appear through the 1920s and 1930s, but only gradually after the 1940s. It is likely that G. Venkatachalam, an art critic who had since the early 1920s been an admirer of Venkatappa, gave new meaning to the anonymous public when he wrote to the artist in August 1950: 'your paintings and sculptures are too precious to be kept hidden under a bushel; you must make some arrangements for their soon being considered as national art treasures'.[36] By this time, Venkatachalam's importance in defining a pantheon of modern Indian artists was considerable, especially since he collaborated with Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay in planning the national academies that were then coming into being, even assisting as member of the National Art Purchase Committee.[37] For Venkatachalam, it was a just culmination of several decades of identifying with and propagating the ideals of nationalist art, and Venkatappa had long been among his circle of artistic heroes.[38]

Beginning in the 1920s, after his return to Mysore from Calcutta where he had been a student of Abanindranath Tagore, Venkatappa was claimed by two intersecting though distinct circles of cultural nationalists: his earliest connections were with English speaking critics and writers loosely associated with the Theosophical movement originating from Adyar. Notably, it was James H. Cousins and G. Venkatachalam who introduced Venkatappa to a wider urban public all over India through exhibitions and lectures in the 1920s and 1930s. Some of these introductions, such as to Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, were to be of lasting importance. But by the mid 1920s, Venkatappa was also claimed by the small yet growing band of Kannada litterateurs, a circuit that had little to do with the world of Cousins and Venkatachalam. It is not quite certain that the provincial intellectuals were aware of the early acclaim Venkatappa had won as a Bengal school artist, since the **Modern Review**, then the only English language journal that propagated the work of the new 'nationalist' artists, ignored Venkatappa's work altogether.[39] Aspiring essayists and novelists, such as Shivarama Karanth and K.V.Puttappa, poets such as V.Sitaramaiah, and Kannada newspapers and journals such as **Prabuddha Karnataka, Viswakarnataka** and **Tai Nadu** placed descriptions and reproductions of Venkatappa's post Calcutta works in circulation, thereby winning him many admirers and converts: here too many of the early contacts, such as S.Nijalingappa, were of lasting importance.[40]

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[35] Venkatappa to Krishna Kumar Singhji, August 21, 1951, KVPP, KSA.

[36] Venkatachalam to Venkatappa, August 22, 1950, KVPP, KSA.

[37] Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, **Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces : Memoirs** (Delhi: Navrang Publishers, 1986), p. 66.

[38] See G. Venkatachalam, **Contemporary Indian Painters** (Bombay: Nalanda, 1947 [1927]), esp. pp. 35-41.

[39] I have discussed this is more detail in Nair 'Drawing a Line'.

[40] S. Nijalingappa, 'Kunchadondige Hutiddano Ee Kalavida?' in **Savi Nenapu**, Bangalore, 1980.

The exhibition was developing as an important location for building up public taste as well as for announcing the position of an artist within the emerging artistic universe of major Presidency cities of Madras, Calcutta and Bombay. Venkatappa's works were sought by those speaking to a range of publics: by exhibitors anxious to represent as fully as possible the Bengal school of painting in all its regional variants;[41] by those, such as the Indian society of Oriental Art, who kept in touch with the erstwhile pupils of the guru Abanindranath Tagore,[42] by aspiring critics who wished to carve out an identity that was distinct from the decorative milieu of the amateur[43] and finally by those who were building up not just taste but a provincial idiom of cultural nationalism.[44] The Congress exhibition, with its awards and certificates of merit was an important location for otherwise busy Congressmen to discover and thereby legitimate new aesthetic sensibilities. It was probably at the Congress exhibition in Madras in 1928[45] that nationalists of the Madras Presidency had an opportunity to see Venkatappa's Ooty landscapes so that C. Rajagopalachari hailed him the 'Turner of India', a comparison that was declared inappropriate by Venkatachalam not on obvious formal grounds but because Turner though a great master, 'lacked the sensitiveness and the spiritual heritage' that Venkatappa possessed.[46]

Venkatappa was equally sought out by provincial art schools and exhibitors as far afield as Machilipatnam[47] Rajahmundry[48] and within Karnakata, Bangalore, Mysore[49] and Dharwar.[50] More important, Venkatappa was increasingly sought out by those who saw him as an exponent of a specifically Karnataka idiom of nationalist art, though this remained unspecified.[51] Inviting Venkatappa in 1927 to exhibit his work at a conference of teachers from Bombay Presidency at Dharwar, R.R.Diwakar, editor of the Kannada weekly **Karmaveer** also urged the artist to elaborate on the 'theory and philosophy of Indian art' and enquired whether 'there are any distinguishing features in Karnataka art?'[52] These questions clearly went far beyond Venkatappa's ability and indeed his sphere of interest, for he wrote little that reflected on matters of aesthetics, except for expressing wonder at the mysterious ways of God in arranging the elements so that his inspired visions of nature could be captured on canvas.[53]

It is most certainly his discussions with D.V.Gundappa and B.M.Srikantaiah in Bangalore in the mid 1920s that yielded the idea of an art school and studio where his works would be

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41 Fyzee Rahamin, Society for the Encouragement of Indian art to Mirza Ismail, July 29, 1927, KVPP, KSA.

42 Bratindranath Tagore to Venkatappa, November 16, 1935, KVPP, KSA.

43 Venkatachalam to Venkatappa. July 3, 1926; Diary July 6, 1926, KVPP, KSA.

44 RR Diwakar to Venkatappa, October 15, 1927, KVPP, KSA,

45 S.V.Ramaswamy Mudaliar to Venkatappa, November 19, 1927; December 17, 1927; January 2, 1928; February 14, 1928, KVPP,

46 Venkatachalam to Venkatappa, July 27, 1927, KVPP, KSA.

47 He was invited to exhibit at the Andhra Jatheeya Kalasala, Diary April 6, 1920, KVPP, KSA.

48 He was invited to the first annual exhibition of the Andhra society of Indian Art, Diary March 10, 1923, KVPP, KSA.

49 Venkatappa to Todhunter (?) September 29, 1929; Charles Todhunter to Venkatappa, September 28, 1929; October 8, 1929, KVPP, KSA.

50 RR Diwakar to Venkatappa, October 10, 1927, KVPP, KSA.

51 Ibid.

52 R.R. Diwakar to Venkatappa, October 15, 1927, KVPP, KSA.

53 Venkatappa to Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, July 25, 1926; see also Chattopadhyay **Inner Recesses Outer Spaces**, p. 102-03.

lodged for posterity.[54] Beginning in the 1920s, Kannada literary figures such as Shivarama Karanth, A.N.Krishna Rao, Kuvempu, B.M.Srikantaiah, Arayya, V. Sitaramaiah, and journalists such as D.V.Gundappa, T.T.Sharma and P.R.Ramaiah to name a few, were regular visitors to Venkatappa's studio at Mysore, visits that became more frequent following his move to Bangalore in 1940.

Yet it was a barren landscape that Venkatappa inhabited since there was no bustling milieu of artists to which he belonged. Venkatappa dominated the field of art and was recognised as a solitary idealist.[55] Indeed, since he had not taken kindly to the world of publishing, did everything to turn students away from his door, and did not participate in exhibitions after the late 1920s,[56] Venkatappa's main contact with the public was in his studio, especially after 1942, through which he personally conducted groups and interested people. But it was a public that expressed its interest by seeking him out in his territory, a public he preferred to an anonymous crowd that wandered through the impersonal space of a gallery.

Ironically, it was through the gallery that Venkatappa first became known to the Kannada public in the mid 1920s. In fact, the national circuit of which James Cousins and Venkatachalam had made him a part first introduced the artist to his circle of Kannada admirers, especially since the Bengal school aesthetic was an object of derision among culturally conversant University students in Mysore, who were only gradually tutored into appreciation of its subtleties.[57] More or less ignored by the **Modern Review**, Venkatappa found a champion in Cousins who persuaded the Yuvaraja of Mysore to acquire a few of his paintings in 1924 and donate them to the newly founded Gallery of Indian art at the Jagan Mohan Chitrasala in Mysore.[58] In this new location, Venkatappa acquired a whole new set of admirers for whom access to the emerging world of modern art was rather limited.

Cousins and his wife, Margaret Cousins, founder of the Women's Indian Association, were Irish cultural nationalists who had come to India in 1915, attracted to the rather esoteric nationalism that was fostered at the Theosophical Society in Adyar. Cousins had no particular training in art criticism, and later even admitted that the Tarot cards had pointed him to a career in art.[59] It is a symptom of the new and uncharted field of art criticism that Cousins, whose artistic writing never rose to great heights, could become influential merely by pronouncing the importance of a spiritualised aesthetics.[60] In particular, the courts of Mysore and Travancore relied on him to make purchases for the modern art galleries, draft the catalogues and recommend artists to various royal patrons who preferred to trust the critic than their own sense of judgement. It was not entirely without reason then, that Venkatappa told Cousins in 1938 that he should acquire an education in

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[54] Diary, April 11, 1926, KVPP, KSA.

[55] Karanth, **Bharatiya Chitrakala**, p. 45.

[56] The details of Venkatappa's negotiations of the field of artistic production are in my 'Drawing the Line: K.Venkatappa and his publics'

[57] M.V.Sitaramaiah, 'Kalatapasvi', in **Savi Nenapu**, p. 9.

[58] Cousins to Venkatappa, September 3, 1924, KVPP, KSA.

[59] James H and Margaret E Cousins **We Two Together** (Madras: Ganesh and Co, 1950), p. 260.

[60] See James H. Cousins, **The Renaissance in India** (Madras: Ganesh and Co, 1918); **The Aesthetical Necessity of Life**, (Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1944); **The Social Value of Arts and Crafts**, (Bangalore, 1925).

art criticism rather than mislead the public. But this was well after Cousins had already done him the service of introducing him to a new circle of admirers.

The artist as 'distracted genius'

In their new location at the Mysore gallery, Venkatappa's paintings gained fresh visibility. Although both 'Mahashivarathri' and 'Mad after Veena' were admired and written about a great deal, it was the latter that appears to have instantly captured the imagination of the Kannada intellectual. This was a painting that Venkatappa had done in 1921 in response to an anxious query from his guru Abanindranath, who had heard that Venkatappa had more or less abandoned art in favour of music. By this time, Venkatappa had taken to learning the Veena at the Mysore Palace school with such earnestness that even Mirza Ismail, the private secretary to the Maharaja, despaired at the thought of wasted artistic talent, never mind the wasted investment.[51] Ironically, Abanindranath had evoked the metaphor of marriage in his letter to Venkatappa, a confirmed Brahmachari. 'The art of painting is your **first wife**; do not neglect her for the new bride music. All arts are sisters; if you do not care for all of them, you will place yourself between the quarelling muses.'[52]

'Mad After Veena' was done by way of a response to the Guru. In it, the artist portrayed himself as a distracted, even mad genius, gaunt and unshaven and on his knees before the Veena which dominates the picture as a whole, and the winged Goddess of Music. Behind him to the right are the scattered objects of his earlier concern; high on a pedestal, but shrouded in cloth is a bust of his guru Abanindranath. Two muses of painting and drawing are lashed to a post, mute and helpless, as rats gnaw at the abandoned paints and brushes. Further, the bust of Abanindranath also drew attention to his talents as a sculptor.

Abanindranath was disapproving of this rather literal autobiographical portrait, saying it did not appeal even though it was technically very good. 'You may be mad after Vina or painting but that is not sufficient to put it into a picture...your pictures must contain something which is of permanent interest for only then it can appeal to many.'[53]

Yet Abanindranath had not quite accounted for a wide range of tastes. Burjor N Treasurywalla, a tireless collector who was one of Venkatappa's earliest buyers, had made an offer for the painting in 1922, which Venkatappa rejected because it was too little.[54] A visitor to the Madras Art exhibition in 1923 similarly showed an interest in buying the painting, but was discouraged by the price.[55] Finally it was Cousins who arranged for the sale of the painting to the Yuvaraja, later persuading him to donate it to the Jagan Mohan Chitrasala in Mysore.[56]

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51 Diary, June 26, 1918, KVPP, KSA.

52 Abanindranath to Venkatappa, no date, KVPP, KSA.

53 Abanindranath to Venkatappa, March 24, 1922, KVPP, KSA.

54 Treasurywalla to Venkatappa, March 3, 1922; Diary October 27, 1922, KVPP, KSA.

55 Diary February 4, 1923, KVPP, KSA.

56 Jagan Mohan Chitrasala Mysore, Gallery of Indian Painting, Catalogue with an Historical Introduction and explanatory notes, (no date), p. 75-76. Palace archives, Mysore.

The work drew instant admiration from visitors to the gallery. In 1928, **Prabuddha Karnataka** published the painting with a long and detailed background note on the history of the artist and of the painting itself.[67] It was interpreted as a fitting response to the query of the Guru. 'After reading [Abanindranath's] letter, Venkatappa wondered how to reply. "When the situation is like this what can I write? Is it possible to forget him? He should [be made to] understand this." and he drew the picture as a response to his Guru's letter.'[68] The picture may well have depicted Abanindranath under a shroud, but the fact that Venkatappa had crafted a pictorial reply was proof enough that he had neither abandoned painting nor sculpture. The painting was clearly admired as much for its aesthetics as for its clever multiple message.

James Cousins proposed a different reading of Venkatappa's painting in the Mysore gallery catalogue, since he saw artistic anguish about the lack of patronage in this work. No wonder Venkatappa objected so strongly to Cousins' suggestion that this 'poignant piece of autobiography' implied that the artist was 'despairing of appreciation of his work as a painter' and therefore turned to the 'divinity of music.'[69] Though he had read a different meaning, Cousins had nevertheless arrogated to himself the honour of having introduced Venkatappa to his Kannada public; had he not introduced Venkatappa's work to the Yuvaraja, in whose establishment the artist worked?[70]

None of these readings appears to have been adequately attentive to the artist's complex negotiation of the Palace culture to which he returned after his years at Calcutta.[71] It was, after all, he who had been exposed to changed conditions of artistic production and not the Palace itself. A strict economy of awards and honours designated the status of cultural artistes at the Mysore Palace. Some of these such as the dancing girls were marginalised and gradually eased out of their positions of importance in about the second decade of the twentieth century. Within the prevailing economy, the Palace musicians had a distinct edge over the Palace artists. The active encouragement of music had long been an obsession of Mysore Maharajas; the court of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV included such luminaries of Karnatak music as Veene Seshanna, Bidaram Krishnappa, and Veene Subbanna, as well as Kanakahalli Vasudevachar.

Nor was Krishnaraja Wodeyar merely a patron; he himself was an exponent of Karnatak, Hindusthani and Western music. One of Krishnaraja Wodeyar's earliest acts upon ascending the throne in 1902 was to confer the title of 'Vainika Shikhamani' on Veene Seshanna.[72] Other titles awarded by the Mysore Palace included that of Vainika Pravina on Subbanna and Ganavisarada on Bidaram Krishnappa, while Kanakahalli Vasudevachar was later given the title of Sangeetha Sastra

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[67] **Prabuddha Karnataka**, Vol 1 No.1 (1928), p. 9-10.

[68] Ibid, 8-9.

[69] Jagan Mohan Chitrasala, Gallery of Indian Paintings, Catalogue with an Historical Introduction and Explanatory notes, (no date), p.76.

[70] Ibid, p. 75.

[71] I am grateful to Madhava Prasad for suggesting this framework in interpreting the painting.

[72] L. Anantsami Rao Deputy Secretary, Government of Mysore, to Palace Controller, September 9, 1902, **Selections from the Records of the Mysore Palace**, (Mysore, 1993), pp. 25-26.

Rathna.[73] Veene Seshanna's accomplishments were rewarded with rare honours such as the Myana (Palanquin) from the Maharaja Gaekwar of Baroda[74] and although the Mysore court did not permit him to use it officially, Veene Seshanna was high on the honours list of the Mysore Palace.[75]

On the other hand, Palace musicians were not much higher paid than the Palace artists,[76] but the roll call of honour was a monopoly of the musician. Even after 36 years of laborious work at the Palace that included paintings from photographs, landscapes on order, painting of the insignia of Mysore on carriages and chicks, and the painting of deities, artist K.Kesavaiah was not admitted to the Darbari list as Vidwan in 1938.[77] Kesavaiah was not even properly remunerated for this work.

On his return to Mysore in 1916, Venkatappa was more than aware that his social origins within a community of hereditary artists attached to the palace (Chitragaras) was a handicap that his hard earned cultural capital could not quite efface. Although his interest in music was awakened in Calcutta itself[78] his decision to formally join the Palace school in 1918 could not have been merely a consequence of his thwarted plans to visit Europe for training. Although the Palace Music school appeared to be dominated by Brahmins, there appeared to be much more scope for mobility here than among the lowly crowd of palace artists. Though Venkatappa won admission to the Music school only after some effort, and was assigned the teacher Subrahmanyan, he informally managed to get instruction from the maestro Veena Seshanna himself until the latter's death in 1926.[79]

Venkatappa's study of the veena at the Music school was clearly an attempt to enter the world of music, better appreciated and honoured that the world of plastic arts. Having forsaken his Bengal school connection by returning to the world of the royal patron, he recognised that an alternative cultural capital could be earned only in an alternative sphere of the arts. Yet his career at the music was relatively undistinguished though he achieved a fair degree of accomplishment, and despite the invention of the 'Shruti Veena' which harked back to a 17th century ancestor.[80] Though his knowledge of the theory of music was formidable, one of his own peers, C Narasimhaiah, referred to him as a 'good player' but as a 'first rate artist.'[81]

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[73] **Selections from the Records of the Mysore Palace**, p. 83.

[74] Ibid., p. 20.

[75] Ibid, p. 22.

[76] Compare the tabular Statement (A) Extract from Service Register of Palace Sangeeta Vidwans etc, Chamundi Thotti, Baravard in **Selections from the Records of the Mysore Palace**, p. 46, with 'Report No. 62/20/21 948 from officer in charge Chitrasala', Palace Archives Mysore, no place, no date (19437).

[77] Office note, August 12, 1938, **Selections from the Records of the Mysore Palace**, p. 253; for a list of his work see pp. 251-2.

[78] Diary, November 5, 1913, KVPP, KSA.

[79] Diary March 4, 1916, KVPP, KSA. The Palace Music School was started in 1916 with 16 senior and junior Vidwans and several students. **Selections from the Records of the Mysore Palace**, p. 123-126.

[80] Venkatappa to Maharaja of Mysore, August 29, 1917, pp. 260-1, **Selections from the Records of the Mysore Palace**, p. 20-1.

[81] C.Narasimhaiah, 'A Note on the Palace Artist School' , August 8, 1924, **Selections from the Records of the Mysore Palace**, pp. 123-126.

The upper caste musician who renounced the world was culturally valued, even rewarded far more than a lower caste artist who was distinterested in worldly gain. 'Mad After Veena' was done at the time when he was fashioning a new relationship with the Palace, a refashioned relationship that was in place by about the mid-1920s. Venkatappa's foray into the music world was an exploration of the possibilities of being a many sided genius and recognised as such. It was music alone that could allow the artist to transcend the worldly and transport the audience into transcendent pleasure. Although, as we shall see, Venkatappa tried to imbue his landscapes with a similar mystique, the realm of painting was not one which successfully evoked such spiritualised sentiments. 'Mad After Veena' was an attempt to portray the artist as distracted genius.

Before long, Venkatappa's works were doing the rounds of newspapers and journals such as **Viswakarnataka** and **Rangabhumi**, while V. Sitaramaiah used his works to illustrate his book of poems.[82] Shivarama Karanth's short Kannada introduction to the emerging nationalist aesthetic began with Ajanta and Bagh and concluded with the lonely and heroic efforts of Venkatappa in Mysore, speaking highly of 'Mad after Veena' and of 'Mahashivarathri' the two works that were in the Mysore Gallery.[83] By this time, in any case Venkatappa's radical estrangement from the world of modern art practices and institutions was so well known that his studio was the only location for reverentially viewing his other works and meeting the artist.[84]

Even such limited contact with the public was clearly persuasive and introduced new ways of seeing where they were urgently required. In this context R.R. Diwakar's remark is revealing: 'people here [Dharwar] do not know the essence of true Indian art and your work will be an eye opener to them as it was to me...'[85] Kuvempu similarly counted himself among those who were transformed by Venkatappa's landscapes.[86] It was the landscapes above all that drew the highest praise from Kannada litterateurs, and the acclaim of Homi Bhabha who, while at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore in the 1940s spoke of Venkatappa's landscapes as 'a unique experience' calling the artist 'the only one in India in which (sic) modern painting has given us pleasure as great as that of the greatest art of the past'.[87] What was it about Venkatappa's landscapes that had such immediate and widespread appeal?

Pleasures of the Landscape

Venkatappa's 'discovery of India' in 1913 took him on a long journey through the western Himalayas and then again, as a guest of Gaganendranath Tagore, to Darjeeling. From this time, he appears to have developed an enduring passion for mountain views and for landscape painting. Venkatappa's landscapes[88], primarily two series done at Ooty in 1926 and at Kodaikanal in 1934,

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[82] V. Sitaramaiah, **Githagalu,** (Karnataka Sahitaya Prakatana Mandira, 1931).

[83] Shivarama Karanth **Bharatiya Chitra Kala,** (Puttur: Shivarama Karanth, 1930), p. 45.

[84] Ramachandra Rao, **K. Venkatappa,** p. 74.

[85] Diwakar to Venkatappa, October 10, 1928, KVPP, KSA.

[86] Kuvempu to Venkatappa, May 12, 1955, KVPP, KSA.

[87] Homi J.Bhabha to Venkatappa, February 27, 1940, KVPP, KSA.

[88] All of them are currently at the Venkatappa Art Gallery, Bangalore.

bore no resemblance to the landscape tradition of his artistic forebears such as Jamini Prakash Gangooly,[89] the Japanese wash inspired works of Gaganendranath Tagore or even the works of his own peers such as Nandalal Bose or Benod Behari. Full blooded people untouched by the marks of modernity seeped into Nandalal's landscapes,[90] works that throbbed with the idealised lives of the labouring poor and spoke of nostalgia for an organic rural community.[91] Venkatappa's choice of mountain landscapes appears on the contrary as a deliberate withdrawal from the community of beings at work in the fields and plains of Mysore, to the remote, receding hills of the western ghats, an absorption with the grandeur of nature unmediated by arduous human labour.

Venkatappa's landscapes are therefore entirely emptied of any human presence save the lonely God's eye view of the observer-artist. Only in 'Path to Elk Hill', done in Ooty 1926, is there a merest hint of two figures disappearing down the path. As such, his paintings are evidence of a self-absorbed struggle for pure expression, a refusal to engage with the hurly burly of human life, revealing as much of the leisurely contemplation of the artist 'recreating' on canvas what has already been 'created' by the hand of god. Venkatappa's rather aristocratic taste for retreats to the hills had been cultivated in Calcutta, and were easily sustained in the leisurely courtly culture of the Mysore Palace when the Maharaja's own retreats to the hills were frequent. Even so, he was nudged into doing landscapes more seriously by the tasks that Mirza assigned him in the first days of his return to the palace, namely the 'Bird's eye view' of Mysore City for the royal patron.[92]

It was in these landscapes that Venkatappa's talents as a brilliant colourist were deployed to the maximum, and as compositions they were far more successful than the illustrations that were weakened by his rather stiff and archaic figures. Venkatappa's sense of colour had long been acknowledged and admired by even his severe critics.[93] But landscapes also provided Venkatappa an opportunity for the delineation of a spiritualised aesthetic that made no reference to the dreamy, vapory figurative mode of the Bengal school, exploring instead the realm of nature in ways that went beyond mere affinity to the retinal image.

Writing to Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay in July 1926, on the spiritual and intellectual value of 'Dawn' a landscape that attracted large crowds at an exhibition in Bangalore,[94] he exulted in the

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[89] Partha Mitter **Art and Nationalism in Colonial India**, pp. 110-113.

[90] Tapati Guha Thakurta 'Visualising the Nation', pp. 132-3.

[91] For a provocative consideration of the relationship between the representation of people in 18th and early 19th century landscapes, see John Barrel, **The Dark side of the Landscape, The Rural poor in English Painting 1783-1940** (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[92] Diary June 4, 1916, July 7, 1916, July 8, 1916, KVPP, KSA. These pictures have remained untraced: there are the detailed studies of an agrahara in Mysore city. 'Municipal High School and Agrahara Mysore' (1917), and 'Eucalyptus Tree in old Agrahara Mysore', 1917, a detail of the earlier painting. Venkatappa Art Gallery, Bangalore.

[93] Arun Sen 'The Exhibition of Oriental Art', **Modern Review**, Vol. XIII, No. 4, (April 1913), p. 442; Karl Khandalavala on 'Buddha and his Disciples', Frontispiece to Venkatachalam **Contemporary Indian Painters** (Bombay: Nalanda, 1947); Ramachandra Rao, **Modern Indian Painting**, p. 20; Venkatachalam, **Modern Indian Painters**, p. 39; there is also Treasurywalla's description of him as 'a colourist of high order', Treasurywalla to Venkatappa, July 20, 1921, KVPP, KSA. Chattopadhyay, **Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces**, p.102

[94] Diary, July 14, 1926, KVPP, KSA.

providential act by which 'the star of Venus' appeared in the same position which he had sketched by lamplight the previous day. 'This picture is to me as if it were His document made by Him to me, that He would be ready to help me whenever any difficulty comes in the way of my sincere and devoutful (sic) study and quest of him through the various aspects of His wonderful creatures'.[95]

There is no specific visual reference in his work to the geography of the Kannada nation or its people, no aesthetic marker by which it could be heralded, as was the Bengal school, as a refashioned Kannada aesthetic. Yet his works held the Kannada intellectual in thraldom, and specific chords were struck so that Kuvempu, only just emerging as one of Karnataka's modern writers and poets, was moved to write poetry dedicated to 'varnashilpi' Venkatappa.[96] Only slowly was a more provicial nationalism slowly taking root. Nor was it just the Kannada intellectuals who were awestruck by his work; equally smitten were politicians who were rising in the firmament of Karnataka politics, such as Kengal Hanumanthaiah.[97] S.Nijalingappa, first came upon the work of Venkatappa ("Veeneya Huchchu'), in the pages of **Prabuddha Karnataka** as a student of Central College, and was later entranced by his landscapes. Nijalingappa's familiarity with the work of the artist must surely have helped when as the Chief Minister of Mysore, he made possible the consecration of the artist in the Venkatappa Gallery, even urging that proper obeisance be paid to the artistic work.[98] To this range of cultural and political nationalists, who were drawn to the broader struggle for freedom, it was Venkatappa's Kamataka origins and his relationshp to the Mysore Palace that mattered more than a vernacular idiom in the visual field.

In his landscapes, Venkatappa retained the small format 'to be seen at close hand and at leisure'.[99] To many of Venkatappa's Kannada admirers 'it was Venkatappa's ability to capture those fleeting moments of nature that were above all impressive. 'How difficult it was for him to paint the landscapes of Ooty at Dawn, in the afternoon, in cold or rain, or at midnight!' Karanth remarked.[100] In his introductory work on India's art heritage for the Kannada reader, Karanth commented at length on how Venkatappa combined notions of rupa and bhava with an attention to detail that surpassed even the western masters. How often Karanth himself had used his magnifying glass to study these works at leisure.

The stress that Venkatappa laid on this personal private and essentially visual experience at once empowered viewers, giving them a device for the control of a world that was being

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95 Venkatappa to Kamaladevi, July 25, 1926, KVPP, KSA.

96 The first 'Varnashilpi: Venkatappanavarige' was written on May 30, 1929, after Kuvempu saw Venkatappa's bas relief of Shakuntala's departure from Kanva's ashram; the second, 'Varnashilpi' was written on August 16, 1931, when Kuvempu had seen the landscapes.

97 S.K. Ramachandra Rao, **K. Venkatappa: the Man and his Art**, (Bangalore: Government of Karnataka, 1988), p.78.

98 S. Nijalingappa, 'Kunchadondige Huttideno Ee Kalavida?' **Savi Nenapu**, p. 16-18.

99 Jaya Appasamy, **Abanindranath Tagore and the art of his Times**, (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1965), p. 25.

100 Karanth, **Bharatiya Chitra Kala**, p. 45.

decidedly transformed. In another context, Jamini Roy's passive and doe-eyed Bengali woman was an anchor in the midst of a sea of despair brought on by famine and war.[101] Although political turbulence was by no means as marked in Mysore, the choice of mountain views that effaced all suggestion of labour or toil, even in an idyllic romanticised fashion, spoke of a concern that was shared by the viewers. 'For in an important if not always literal sense,' Denis Cosgrove has said of landscapes, 'the spectator owns the view because all of its components are structured and directed towards his eyes only' so that what is privileged is 'those who control the landscape, not those who belong to it.'[102] This was in keeping with Venkatappa's growing distaste for the world of art markets, critics and reproductions, and if for the artist it was a way of rediscovering a moral order that was rapidly receding, it was only in Nature and 'the increased value of barren or uncultivated land'[103] that such a morality could be reclaimed.

The moral order of Old Mysore, represented by the Maharaja, had long been in retreat, yielding place under colonialism to a new economic and political order. By the 1920s and 1930s this new form of despotism was challenged by the nationalist awakening in various parts of Karnataka, particularly the Kannada speaking areas of Hyderabad, Bombay and Madras Presidency, which looked to a defined cultural core that could legitimate the sub-nationalist claim. That cultural and administrative entity was Old Mysore. The relationship of the nationalist movement to the Maharaja was therefore distinct, since it was in his name that the despotism of the Dewan, the appointee of the paramount power, was challenged. Until 1947, Mysore's anti-colonialism was not opposed to or critical of monarchical modes of power; instead the struggle was waged in terms of rescuing the Maharajah and therefore Mysore from the colonial bureaucracy.[104]

During the most active period of agrarian change in England namely the eighteenth century, painters spurned the farmed landscape in favour of hills and wild heaths; the picturessque appealed precisely because it kept representations of agrarian change at bay.[105] This was a use of the picturesque quite distinct from the 'cult of the picturesque' in the period of early colonial rule, when art was the handmaid of knowledge in understanding the recently annexed provinces, a unique alliance of art and science that succeeded in the erasure of history.[106]

What was offered to an emerging Kannada public was therefore an opportunity to share the monarchical gaze, a chance for a layperson to become king of all that he/she surveyed.

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[101] Ratnabali Chatterjee, **From the Karkhana to the Studio: Roles of Patron and Artist in Bengal** (Delhi: Books and Books, 1990), pp. 118-137, esp. p. 134.

[102] Denis Cosgrove **Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape,** (London, 1984), p. 26.

[103] Ibid., p. 232.

[104] See James Manor, **Political Change in an Indian State: Mysore 1917-1955,** (South Asia Books, 1978), 155 ff.

[105] Hugh Prince, 'Art and Agrarian Change, 1710-1815', in Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels ed **The Iconography of Landscape: essays on the symbolic representation, design and use of past environments** (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989). By far the most provocative reading of landscapes is in John Berger's interpretation of Gainsborough in **Ways of Seeing** (London: BBC and Penguin, 1986), pp. 105-108; for a suggestive interpretation of the declining importance of rural figures in the English landscape see **Barrell, The Dark Side of the Landscape.**

[106] Nicholas Dirks, 'Guiltless Spoliations': Picturesque Beauty, Colonial Knowledge and Colin Mackenzie's Survey of India' in Catherine Asher and Thomas Metcalf ed **Perceptions of South Asia's Visual Past,** (Delhi: Oxford and IBH, 1994), pp. 211-34.

Venkatappa's landscapes are not panoramic so much as framed slices of the hills, delicately but intensely textured, detailed yet using thick, even, layers of paint. It is in many ways a perspective derived from photography, and we know that in the last years of his life, Venkatappa was fascinated with the moving image, becoming an inveterate cinema-goer in the 1940s and 1950s.[107]

All too often it was Venkatappa's work that brought the hills to those who had not yet had an opportunity of visiting them. Arayya, who first met Venkatappa in 1930, and was overwhelmed by the brilliance of his landscapes, vainly tried to assess the works' fidelity to the original: was the earth of Ooty really so red, and the lakes so clear as had been depicted?[108] Venkatappa's reply that Arayya would not be able to detect any uneven surfaces in his painting did little to stem the sense of disappointment that the writer felt in the 1950s, when he finally did make it to the hills. But Arayya's record of his disappointment is revealing, since it is likely that Venkatappa's landscapes were, despite his best efforts to visually educate his visitors, too often taken to be literal representations of the Western Ghats.

Mythologies

It now becomes somewhat easier to understand Venkatappa's domination of what was essentially a barren artistic landscape in Mysore before the 1950s. Venkatappa's idiom, whether in depopulated landscapes or in the realist likenesses that marked his bas reliefs and ivory portraits, was easily acceptable and even most admired for its reality effect.[109] In addition, the several eccentricities of Venkatappa -- his fetish for punctuality, his litigiousness, his vows of aparigriha and brahmacharya -- were clearly marks of a modern artistic ego in the making. In addition, Venkatappa also nurtured a specific relationship to the Royal patron, combining loyalty and gratitude with the active cultivation of new publics. He belonged to the princely culture of old Mysore as did most of the litterateurs, while striking a path away from that core. Not even the faintest whiff of the struggles of the art worlds at Bombay, which produced the vigorous work of the Bombay Progressives, of which a fellow Karnataka artist, K.K. Hebbar was a part, or even Madras, closer at hand, appears to have blown through Mysore.[110] The cultural world was content with Venkatappa as the premier instance of modern art.

Venkatappa's unique standing is emphasised in the numerous mythologies that sprang up to surround the man. The praise that Venkatappa won as early as 1910 from the British art critic William Rothenstein was long cherished as early recognition of his genius. Although art historians are far from unanimous on whether Venkatappa was part of the team that accompanied Lady Herringham to the Ajanta caves in 1910-11, with Nandalal Bose, Asit Haldar and Samarendranath Gupta,[111] hagiographies

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[107] To give just one example, he saw Walt Disney's 'Fantasia' at least six times in two weeks in 1945!

[108] Arayya **Na Kanda Karnataka**, (Tumkur: Electric Press, 1953), p. 115.

[109] Nijalingappa, among others, dwelt at length on how the sinews of the horse, the eyes of Shakuntala, the veins of Kanva etc were most impressive in the bas reliefs by Venkatappa. **Savi Nenapu**, p. 16-18.

[110] See Geeta Kapur, 'When was Modernism in Indian Art'.

[111] Partha Mitter alone cites Venkatappa as a member of Lady Herringham's team; **Mitter Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922, Occidental Orientations**, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 305; see however, Guha Thakurta **The Making of a New "national' Art**, p. 278; Indian Society of Oriental Art, **Abanindranath Tagore**, November 1961, p. 99.

and accounts in Karnataka have never been in doubt, and indeed Venkatappa did nothing to contradict them.[112] Venkatappa's status has been affirmed through comparison with other well known icons: thus Arayya claimed that while Ravi Varma could only paint nature as a backdrop to his figures, here was an artist who was able to focus on Nature.[113] Thcugh Nandalal Bose, who has been acknowledged as Abanindranath's most talented heir, did work that bore little resemblance to that of Venkatappa, the two have been likened to 'twin birds on a tree' on purely circumstantial grounds.[114] Venkatappa is alleged to have dictated the terms of his appointment to the Maharaja of Mysore[115], and made Nehru return from a locked studio in 1951 since the Prime Minister was late for his appointment[116] The official consecration of the artist by the Lalit Kala Akademi in 1962, when he was elected Fellow, and received an Award, only enhanced the image of the artist who had variously been hailed as 'Varnashilpi', 'Kalatapasvi', 'Siddhapurusha' and 'Vishwakarma', all of which spoke of his unique place in Karnataka's cultural universe.[117]

Conclusion:

'This museum is a temple. We must be properly vigilant and protective so that it may inspire humanity for centuries to come.' So wrote S. Nijalingappa on the occasion of the birth centenary of Venkatappa in 1987.[118] The idiom of 'devotion' which marks this statement recalled vestiges of the royal culture of Princely Mysore long after it had vanished. Venkatappa's persona did a great deal to ensure that such resonances were heard even in the secular space of the gallery.[119]

This was certainly the engagement with his work that Venkatappa might have desired, although the gallery space had been considered more appropriate for Venkatappa by many of his admirers. Homi Bhabha who had begun regularly visiting Venkatappa's studio at Malleswaram in 1940, was a devoted admirer who sought to improve his own amateur efforts as a painter. In 1943, he had said to Venkatappa , while he was still hoping to complete his assignment for the Mysore palace, that the panels should remain in his studio for 'he did not like that they should be sent to the Mysore Palace to be kept in the darkness as the other panels are.'[120] The characterisation of the Palace as a restricted and gloomy place, unworthy of such works as Venkatappa's was not one with which the artist could have had any quarrel by this time. He too

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[112] Ramchandra Rao, **K. Venkatappa**, p. 26; K.V. Subrahmanyam, **Venkatappa Samkaleena Punaraavalokana**, (Bangalore: Chitrakavya Prakashana, 1990), p. 57; Kasi 'Odedha Kannadi', p. 35; P.R.Thippeswamy, 'Adarsha Jeevi', **Savi Nenapu**, p. 46

[113] Arayya, **Na Kanda Karnataka**, p. 116.

[114] Ramchandra Rao, **K.Venkatappa**, p. 119-121.

[115] M.S.Nanjunda Rao, 'Varnameye Baduku', **Savi Nenapu**, p. 35; G. Venkatachalam, **Contemporary Indian Painters**, p. 36 .

[116] A.S.Raman, 'A Determined Perfectionist', and M.S.Nanjunda Rao, 'Varnameya Baduku', in **Savi Nenapu**, p. 66, 39. See however, K.V.Subrahmanyam, **Venkatappa**, p. 57; and Kasi 'Odedha Kannadi', p. 36.

[117] Shivarama Karanth's second work on art, 'Karnataka Paintings' for which he took the assistance of K.K.Hebbar, ended in 1900, and thereby avoided mention of Venkatappa.

[118] Nijalingappa, 'Kunchadondige Huttidano Ee Kalavidha?', **Savi Nenapu**, p. 18.

[119] An overwhelming number of respondants especially from the working classes likened a museum to a church in a study of taste. Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel 'L'Amour de L'Art' as cited in John Berger **Ways of seeing**, p. 24.

[120] Diary, September 10, 1943, KVPP, KSA.

was acutely aware of the responsibility of addressing a wider national community. Yet he was not entirely indifferent to the monarchical culture, and longed for the leisure that princely patronage alone could afford. He sought out nostalgic references in newspapers to the vanished world of princes, highlighting for instance the following words of C. Rajagopalachari who urged public support for art in 1948: 'One picture would probably take three years and would be taken to a munificent king who would pay Rs 10,000 to Rs 15,000 for it. Art required atmosphere on a lavish scale associated with kings.'[121]

By contrast the munificence of the nation-state was paltry and dissatisfying. Venkatappa took several years to honour his commitment to give the newly opened gallery at Madras a piece of work and when reminded of this commitment, he retorted sharply that he had asked for plenty of time.[122] No new work was done, and Venkatappa finally donated the ivory minature portrait of Bhup Bahadur of the early 1920s to the Madras Gallery in 1954.[123] That same year, when his bas reliefs were sought out by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, then President of the All India Handicrafts Board, to be acquired for permanent display, Venkatappa's cited the case he had filed against the Maharaja in order to state his price.[124] Although Kamaladevi's reference to the bas reliefs as 'frescoes' considerably irked the artist,[125] it is more likely that the Board's Rs 25,000 offer fell a little too short of the Rs 40,000 that he demanded. Venkatappa refused to part with his work, but the new importance of a small though reliable constituency of people in Mysore must have held its own attractions. The bas reliefs, once wrenched from their proper place on Darbar walls could retain their authority only in the gallery space of the more eager Karnataka nation.

Today there is little to suggest that the museum is necessarily an improvement over the Palace durbar hall, for in these post-privy purse times, the same crowds shuffle through gallery and durbar hall alike. The national public makes its own sense of Venkatappa who is deprived of the privilege of personally explaining his work. However, there is no doubt that in the busy garishness of the Amba Vilas darbar Hall, one could easily miss Venkatappa's bas reliefs, three panels interspersed between several blank ones that are a lasting reminder of his 'eviction' from the palace in 1940. Extracted from this garish milieu and installed on the spartan walls of a gallery in Bangalore, capital of the redefined Karnataka state, Venkatappa's bas reliefs command a fresh authority.

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[121] The Hindu February 27, 1948, KVPP, KSA.

[122] Letter to Superintendent of Government Museum, Madras, July 1952, KVPP, KSA.

[123] Superintendent Government Museum, Madras to Venkatappa, May 17, 1954, KVPP, KSA.

[124] Kamaladevi to Venkatappa, September 2, 1954; Venkatappa to Kamaladevi, October 7, 1954, KVPP, KSA.

[125] Venkatappa to Kamaladevi, September 27, 1954, KVPP, KSA.