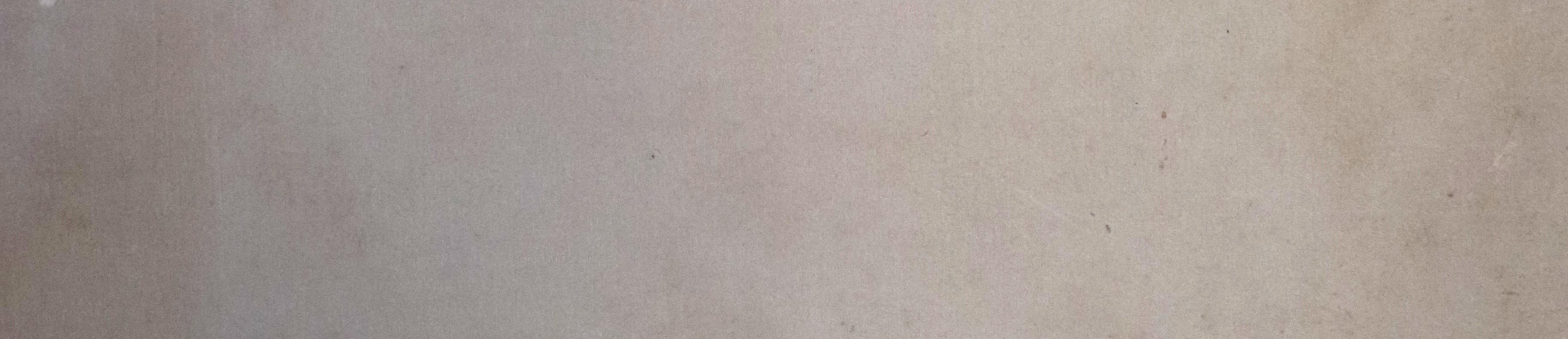
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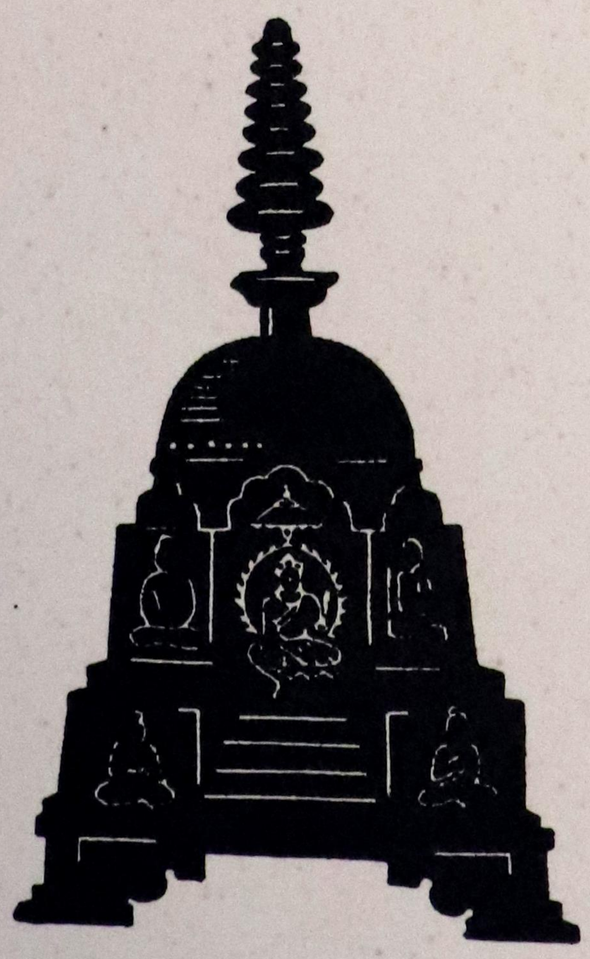
DRAWINGS & PAINTINGS

INTRODUCTION BY

G. VENKATACHALAM

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TO MY MOTHER



ARTIST AND HIS MOTHER

I AM afraid I have to begin this Introduction with a confession. I have to confess that I have no sympathy with much of what passes for Modern Art; in fact, I do not pretend to understand it at all. Much of it seems to me perverted intelligence and a delightful delusion where it is not wilful deception. I do not like this deforming of figures, torturing of forms and mutilation of limbs, in the name of rhythmic design and plastic unity. Analysis of form need not result in the monstrous creations which pass for Modern Art.

There may be, perhaps there is, sincerity behind it, a certain amount of "feeling" for line and colour, and also a commendable mastery of technique, as in the case of some of the early founders of the movement; but why paint in the fantastic way as some of the Moderns do in order to reveal the hidden beauty of form and the vital quality of line? The old masters the world over revealed the same much more effectively without sacrificing either beauty or truth.

Plastic form, which is merely a sensible correlation of line, colour, light and mass to produce the desired effect, is nothing so mysterious after all. Primitive art is full of it. Why then this eagerness, this unholy joy on the part of the Modernists to show the worst in man in this manner and under the cloak of art? Why reveal the baser and bestial side of man through art? Why prostitute a good technique for bad art; why spin clever theories to shield one's vanity and primitive impulses?

It is claimed for Modern Art that it reflects the spirit of the times and tries to represent life as it is. I am sure it does. Life, these days, is certainly a cruel joke and the times are most assuredly out of joint; and in Modern Art we see only too clearly their pathetic and pitiful reflections. Modern Art does truly reflect the hideousness of the modern man's soul, the dark depths of his mind and the frozen feelings of his heart. "The age of decent people is long over," exclaimed a cynic in despair, and it looks as if the age of decent art is long over too.

I must confess that I do not see anything really great, enduring or inspiring in Modern Art except clever technique and the skill of the artist. There is no beauty, no vision, no humanity, nothing worth while to make it immortal. I do certainly admire some of the leaders of the movement, like Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Picasso and others, for their technical skill and individual uniqueness, but even they had no vision, no greatness of the human spirit; and where there is no vision, no humanity, there life and art perish. Art need not preach humanity but it must possess human values.

Art is not something remote and apart from life; and any work of art that beautifies life, enriches life, magnifies life, inspires life is great art, good art. Because Modern Art, at any rate most of it as we see it today, is devoid of all these, it leaves mankind cold and sceptical and is barren of results. Analysis will no more reveal the soul of things than death will reveal the mystery of life. With vision comes wisdom and understanding, and where there is understanding there alone can be creative art. Adventurers and exploiters are not the sole monopoly of the political and financial worlds; they are to be found in the world of art as well.

But there are noble exceptions; and one of them, among the modern painters of India, is K. K. Hebbar, who is a Modern in his art but an ancient at heart. I like Hebbar both as man and artist; and I see in his art not only sincerity and sobriety but sense and sanity. He is a Modern in the sense that he wants his art to be free and



DRUMMER

unfettered and that he does not hesitate to borrow freely not only new ideas but also the rich techniques of some of the Moderns like Cezanne and Gauguin.

He sees in Modern Art certain vital forms which, he thinks, would express his feelings better, and hence his conscious conversion to Modern Art. He sees the absurdity of carrying the exaggeration of ideas and the distortion of forms to a ridiculous degree and avoids them in his art. If a direct and simple approach will serve his purpose, he sees no sense in indulging in artistic conundrums and conjurings. He is too simple a man to want to appear clever or great.

Hebbar hails from Konkan, that land of fair earth and fairer women. Udipi, his home-town, is an ancient seat of worship, and the local temple there dedicated to Sri Krishna, with its *ashtamadams* is a widely known religious centre. Religious festivals are

colourful everywhere in India but more so at Udipi. *Yakshgana* is an ancient art of Konkan, an impressive dance-drama, like the Kathakali in Kerala, a vital dance art with picturesque costumes and colourful display. Its popular name is *Dashavatara attam*. From it, perhaps, was developed the highly specialised pantomime-show, the Kathakali.

Hebbar's earliest recollections, as a child, are these village dramas, which are bound to have powerful effects on any sensitive child. His childhood days were spent around the temple precincts where colour, fragrance, song and music are the normal things of daily life. Painted toys were one of his earliest amusements, as they are of all children, but to Hebbar they were sources of inspiration for creative efforts, for he loved to paint them himself.

The red earth, the green foliage, the grey rocks and the blue sea in which his home was set had considerable influence on his young mind. He wanted to catch on paper or canvas the fleeting beauty of the gorgeous monsoon skies which thrilled his heart and soul. In other words, he was athirst for self-expression.

His mother was his first admirer. Realising the natural aptitude her son had for playing with colours, she encouraged him to pursue his own bent of mind and see what he could make of his talents. Years after, when he became a full-blown



BEGGARS

painter, he recorded with grateful recognition this loving sympathy and keen interest of his mother in his delightful little study of a self-portrait "The Artist and his Mother", which he thinks is one of his best. He was lucky also to find another sincere well-wisher and helper in late Mr. P. Shrinivas Rao, an artist of Udipi, who seeing the boy's precociousness and natural instincts encouraged him to fulfil his youthful ambitions.


A SKETCH

South Canara, especially Udipi, is not an ideal place for any budding artist, and so Hebbar went to Mysore and joined the Chamarajendra Technical Institute. His progress was so rapid and his desire to make headway so great that he felt it necessary to seek fresh lands and pastures new; and this took him to Bombay. There he studied under Mr. Dandavtimutt for sometime and then joined the Sir J. J. School of Art, Bombay, where he specialised in murals, and later became an art master.

But the real flowering of his genius came when he worked under and with Mr. Gerrard, his Principal. Mr. Gerrard was a man of understanding and an artist with vision. He was not much impressed by the antiquated methods of teaching prevailing in the Bombay Art School nor was he satisfied with the kind of stuff produced by the students, which were, at best, but poor pale reflections of the Slade and Kensington styles. He did not see much either in the pseudo Ajantan mannerisms that came into vogue during Gladstone Solomon's time. He wanted his students to be creative and individualistic, and he showed them the trends and the techniques of Modern Art. Whatever may have been his administrative abilities, there is no gainsaying the fact that he was a great enthusiast and an excellent teacher.

Hebbar was one of his favourites and the most promising. Seeing his capacity for assimilating new ideas and his natural gifts for draughtsmanship, he encouraged him to break away from the shackles of the Academy type and to experiment freely and boldly till he found his own self-expression. This was decidedly a turning point in his career, and he never gets tired of expressing his gratitude to his *guru*. He has had other teachers who helped to make him what he is, such as Sri K. B. Chudekar, Sri Dandavtimutt, but to Mr. Gerrard he owes the best in his art.

But no master, however adept he may be at teaching, can really create an artist; he can but help to release his pupil's dormant faculties. He showed him the way, and

Hebbar by his own efforts, hard work and single-minded purpose reached where he now is, as one of India's most gifted artists. Hebbar himself says: "I always experiment to find out the simplest way possible to express my feeling towards life. The moment I start a new work I try to forget my previous achievements but try to find out newer ways to achieve better results. At times I find other artists express their ideas in the same way, perhaps with greater ease and force, and when I discover something in common with them, I try to understand them and to become a friend with them in spirit. I try to make their experiments and experiences as part of my own without in any way suppressing my individuality."

From this time onward he began to paint with vision and understanding. He painted with zest and enthusiasm. He did not completely overthrow all his academy training, for it provided him with a sound foundation, but he loved to create new forms, new colour harmonies. He saw more beauty and significance in simplified forms, as did the old Indian masters, and with the style and technique of masters like Cezanne and Gauguin, he tried to interpret his feelings and thoughts.

And yet it is really not a new way. The folk-artists of ancient India were past masters in this kind of art. Only they did not spin out elaborate theories about them. Jamini Roy in Calcutta has but revived this type of art of old India. Hebbar too has this Indian feeling and character in some of his abstract paintings.

In this monograph are reproduced some of his representative works, which reveal in unmistakable terms the quick development of his art, from the strictly academic and realistic to the modern and impressionistic.

A good example of his academy period pictures is "At Karli Caves" (1939) in oils (which won for him a Gold Medal at the Calcutta Academy of Fine Arts as well as the Bombay and Simla Art Societies' prizes) in which is to be seen all the fine elements of that type of art: correct perspective, good draughtsmanship and realistic approach. It is one of his best in that style.

And compare this with one of his latest "Kanyakumari" (1946) in tempera, and you will notice the enormous change in his outlook, his treatment of the subject and his values of art. While the former is almost photographic in its representation and true in every detail, the latter is more suggestive and symbolic of the temple of the Virgin Goddess than a pictorial representation of India's southernmost point. Its decorative character, stylised form are as delightful as they are simple and significant.



A DRAWING

Compare again his early water-colour study in the Indian style, "Affection" (1941) with his "Go-Seva" (1946) in tempera. The first is a naïve unsophisticated study of a calf bouncing to its mother led by a milk-maid, in flat style, with graceful lines and subdued colour; while the second is full of plastic quality, rhythmic pattern and design. It is easy to discern the influence of Gauguin in such pictures of Hebbar's, but certainly not of Amrita Sher Gil, as some of his critics have opined, for she herself was a student like Hebbar and was much under the influence of these famous Post-Impressionists.

Here a word about the relative merits of flat painting and of three-dimensional painting may not be out of place. Oriental art is mostly of the flat character. In flat painting, which is of two dimensions and, therefore, of no depth, there are infinite possibilities for creating rhythmic patterns with lines, if not with colour, and this lends itself easily to decorative effects. The three-dimensional art of the occident tries to represent the mass of an object with its light and shade effects, suggesting solidity and strength.

But the undue emphasis placed on the plastic aspect of art by the Moderns at the expense of the æsthetical and spiritual aspects is, like the Marxian glorification of the

proletarian virtues at the expense of the other classes, is misplaced enthusiasm. Plastic form is only one of the major factors in any great work of art, but not the only factor as is often claimed by the fanatics of the Modern Art. It is not that one is either better than or superior to the other, but that they serve two different purposes and satisfy two different æsthetic demands.

Hebbar's "Cattle Mart" (1942), a painting of the transition period from the realistic to the impressionistic, is full of æsthetic flavour and pastoral beauty. It is a study of cows, cattle and men in Indian red, green and white, and the Indian feeling is strong not only in its treatment and decorative details but in its lyrical appeal. It won high praise at the recent exhibition in London, and the writer of this note thinks it is one of his best.

Most artists are vagabonds by instinct and have the wanderlust in them. Hebbar is never happier than when he is away from home, wandering among the far-away places, among fair fields, wild woods and ruined cities, musing, sketching and painting. He has travelled extensively in India, from the pine-clad Himalayan valleys to the palm-fringed coasts of Malabar. Two fine examples of his painting representing his vivid impressions of a dance festival in far-off Kulu Valley in the Himalaya and a social festival associated with the attaining of maidenhood in Malabar are reproduced here.

"Festival Dance", as he calls the first, is in tempera, a very successful attempt at depicting the mirth and happiness of the simple hill-folk in the Kulu Valley, who gather in their hundreds amidst the pine forests to enjoy one of their seasonal festivals. The artist has succeeded remarkably in catching the spirit of their dance, the abandonment of their cares and worries, the fine fellow-feeling that always prevails on such occasions and the sheer joy of living. The picturesque costumes of the male dancers in yellow, white and red, with their simple rhythmic steps, accompanied by an orchestra of drum players, pipers and trumpeteers, and surrounded by gaily dressed women in their check patterned sarees, long sleeved blouses and red cloth tied around their heads, and with Tibetans and Nepalees watching the fun and patronising the sweet stalls, all these are vividly and skilfully portrayed with a zest and sincerity characteristic of Hebbar. He painted several colourful scenes of Kulu, but this one was greatly appreciated by the Londoners when it was exhibited at the Academy exhibition.

No less fruitful was his visit to palmy Kerala, where he spent the summer of 1946 roaming about its enchanting villages and dreamy lagoons, sketching the dark-eyed maidens

of Cochin and painting the pageantry of its temple festivals. He found Kerala an artist's paradise and a fertile ground for æsthetic adventure. He painted several large and small pictures, one of which is "To Maidenhood", which won for him the Gold Medal of the Bombay Art Society and a Prize in the Inter-Asian Art Exhibition in New Delhi. The Gauguin influence is there but not at the cost of his individuality.

The plastic quality of Hebbar's art is best seen in his other more ambitious attempt, "Sunny South", in which his ability to use space skilfully to bring out the plastic sense of his subject is most admirable. He has beautifully blended line with colour and light to make the scene animated and attractive as in real life. It is certainly one of his best efforts in oils, which medium he handles as easily and effortlessly as either water-colour or tempera.

Of his "Pandits" Manu Thacker, a friend of the artist, wrote as follows in the 'Illustrated Weekly': "He experiments to evolve a technique of his own, combining eastern and western methods. One such successful experiment is his 'Pandits', in which his impression gained at the Lakshachandi Maha Yagna held in Bombay is superbly rendered." There are other delightful sketches in this book to make it interesting and valuable.

Hebber is a lovable person both as man and artist. He has not the usual airs and poses of the half-baked artists. Of humble birth, kindly disposition and helpful nature, he is a popular young man in the art circles of Bombay. May this first book of his paintings be the means of introducing his art to a wider world, and these few words of appreciation from a traditionalist in art to a Modernist be a source of encouragement to further efforts and better achievements.

May 3, 1948

G. VENKATACHALAM



KANYAKUMARI

LIST OF REPRODUCTIONS

1 Artist and his Mother (1947). • *tempera*

2 Drummer (1948). • *water-colour*

3 Beggars (1947). • *drawing*

4 A Sketch (1946). • *black ink*

5 A Drawing (1948). • in the collection of Harischandra B. Bhatt

6 Kanyakumari (1946). • *tempera.* • in the collection of J. M. Dani

7 At Carli Caves (1939). • *oils.* • in the collection of Tulsidas Kilachand

8 Self Portrait (1941). • *oils.* • in the collection of Wayne M. Hartwell

9 Affection (1941). • *water-colour.* • in the collection of Hon'ble Mr. Justice Lokur.

10 Festival Dance (1945). • *tempera.*

11 Pots and Pans (1942). • *oils.* • in the collection of Amiruddin Salebhoy Tyebjee

12 Cattle Mart (1942). • *water-colour.* • in the collection of J. M. Dani

13 To Maidenhood (1946). • *tempera.* • in the collection of J. M. Dani

14 Sunny South (1946). • *oils.* • in the collection of the Artist. Blocks kindly lent by The Tata Oil Mills Co., Ltd.

15 Go-Seva (1946). • *tempera.* • in the collection of Raja Shamraj Rajwant Bhadhur of Hyderabad (Dn.)

16 Pandits (1947). • *oils.*

PLATES



AT CARLI CAVES



SELF PORTRAIT



AFFECTION



FESTIVAL DANCE



POTS & PANS



CATTLE MART



TO MAIDENHOOD



SUNNY SOUTH



GO-SEVA



PANDITS

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