

# Attraction of Art that Transcends Culture

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***Pune Artist Mumbiram well known for his independent ways tells the story of his becoming.***

It is seen that in India musical tradition is passed on from generation to generation in a family. But rarely does that happen in the case of painters. But I must say it did happen in my case. In 1910 my grandfather joined the J. J. school of Art in Bombay in the face of severe opposition from his family. It used to be that respectable parents would not allow their young daughters and sons to enter the theatre in those days. The same seems

to have been society's attitude towards an artistic career. It was in J. J. school that my grandfather met Narayan Eranna Puram who was later to found the renowned Abhinav Kala Vidyalaya of Pune. Their lifelong friendship was the origin of my artistic heritage. Thereafter their paths would sometimes meet and sometimes part. My grandfather took up an art teacher's job at the St. Vincent's high school in Pune. He was at his best in Water Colour Landscapes and his work was



***“Marathi Poets”, 1982***

***This is not the portrait of any specific Marathi poets. It is the portrait of Marathi poetry as in 1982. The personalities become the context for each other and create meaning. This inspired watercolor rendering shows the power of personalism as a cultural force.***



***“The daughter in law of Mr. Chitale”,  
 ‘Sometimes life imitates art and sometimes art imitates life. But here art has anticipated art. Four years after this painting was made, a Hindi movie called “Saransh” appeared with a cast and a storyline which is very similiar.’***

always acclaimed at the annual exhibitions of the Bombay . Art Society . For many years he was a Secretary of the Society . On the other hand Puram received patronage from Indian Princes Maharaja of Baroda and the Raja of Aundh to name a few . He illustrated the monumental edition of the Mahabharat published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute . Shankaracharya , the high priest of Hinduism honoured him with the title ' Chitrakalacharya '- The Grand Preceptor of Art .

Even when I was a boy both these masters were well advanced in age . Puram had wholeheartedly dedicated himself to the Art School he founded . My grandfather had retired from his art teacher's job after 30 years of teaching . He bought 2 acres of land on the Poona Bombay road and built himself a little cottage with a garden around . He produced most of his masterpieces in this late period of his life and I was fortunate enough to be a witness to it all . All my sweet memories of childhood revolved around my grandfather's house . He was a very genral man and never lost his childlike innocence. He was fond of collecting birds and animals . He surrounded himself with a large family that included peacocks , doves , ducks , chicken , turtles ,

rabbits , guineapigs , dogs , cats , etc . Every room of his house was full of paintings . He also had a very large collection of prints and cuttings out of magazines of the works of great masters of the past . All these he had meticulously pasted into oversized albums . Finding treasures in the junk market was another of his passions . For my child's mind his house was indeed a living fantasy.

Inside the house he had rare china porcelene statues , brass cannons and trinkets of the most imaginative designs .Outside the house he had a variety of trees- jamool , tamarind , sandalwood , mango , guava . There were birds in the trees and fish in the streams . The sun would rise , the clouds would gather , the grass would grow , the cattle would rest under trees . I watched my grandfather depicting all this in his paintings . Could there have been a better institute that I could have learent Art at ?

N this way I was initiated into Art at a very early age . I made my first memorable picture when I was 3 . I learnt how to handle the brush , how to wet it , how to drain it , how to mix colours , stretch the paper , use the sponge . Besides these technicalities I had also figured out why and where to keep the paper blank , how to

distribute the detail , how to make the composition effective , how to show distance , how to use colour harmony and colour contrast among other things .

It was around this time that Lever Brothers Ltd. announced a painting competition for young artists . Nearly 5000 boys and girls of Pune took part in it . The first 200 were invited to make pictures in the presence of the jury.

I won the coveted prize which was a beautiful blue bicycle . My school also won a silver trophy . The prizes were distributed with great pomp and ceremony at the hands of the Minister of Education . I very clearly remember my grandpa moving about very proudly amidst the guests in his white suit and black bowtie. The principle of my school was also there . The next day he hung the bicycle from a high place in the school building and wrote on the bulletin blackboard in large letters. 'This young artist of today is certain to become a great artist of tomorrow.' My bicycle and I became the subject of every young boy's admiration and envy.

I was 11 years old then. As much as my grandpa was simple and gentle, his friend Puram was impulsive and eccentric. Even so I did get to watch Puram make some exquisite live portraits in watercolors. Puram had God-given gift in his Art. Water colour portraiture is perhaps the most difficult department of the painter's craft. Yet in Puram's hands it seems like a cinch. I was very lucky to have seen the master at work.

In this way it was now almost certain that I was to be an artist. Just then providence struck some near fatal blows that threw the entire proposed plan of my life to the winds. There was a great great flood in the monsoon of 1961 that broke 2 dams above the city. In the deluge that took place grandfather's house went under 20 feet deep water . All his watercolour paintings were pretty much destroyed in the broad day light of July 12,1961. His life's work, through which he was painting the dreams of immortality, was all devoured by the gooey muds of the flood. The dream was shattered. The treasure that he had amassed after great material hardships and with never a thought for money was all washed away. 'No more watercolours. I will only do oil paintings from now on,' the dauntless old men said and started work again . Yet it must be admitted that he could never again reach the great heights he had reached in his watercolours. Oil paintings was not his medium.

At around this time Puram's ceaseless efforts to start a premier art institute for Poona bore fruit. His school was prospering. Just then the executive committee - a group of nonartist city respectables that he had himself put together sacked Puram into dishonorable retirement on the charges of mismanagement: After that he did not live very long. In this way 2 great artists to whom I looked up for inspiration disappeared into the great darkness of oblivion.

'To want to be an Artist in India is to ask for a life of

poverty and misery'. This was the refrain of everybody's advice to me thereafter . Fortunately, or unfortunately, I also liked mathematics very much and was also good at it . Therefore, everyone would urge me to be practical and take a degree in science or engineering . I could always pursue art as a 'hobby', they would add sympathetically. As a result of all this, I quit Art at the age of 12. Goodbye emotions, hello intelligence. I could never have looked at Art as a 'hobby'. Will a man who truly loved a woman be able to visit her as a prostitute ever afterwards ?

My next ten years were outwardly very successful yet inwardly very difficult. It has been my nature that whatever I undertake I do it with full dedication. I had a brilliant academic career in science and mathematics. I took a Bachelor's degree in Electronics and Telecommunication Engineering with a first place in the honour list. I joined the University of California at Berkeley and within a year obtained a Master's degree in Systems Analysis. I got a grant from NASA for research in communication and control. Thus at the age 22 everybody looked at me as a young space scientist about to get the Ph.D. I was exceptional in mathematics; hence I had the good esteem of my colleagues. I was quite a loner and a taciturn. I was a voracious reader. I felt that anything that would be achieved with the help of intelligence was on the palm of my hand. Yet deep inside somewhere I was being untrue to myself.

The years 1968, 69 were the years of turmoil and transformation, introspection and self criticism for all of America. In 1969 America was successful in sending the first man to the moon. Mr. Nixon became the president of the United States. American youth openly rebelled against the war in Vietnam. The very foundation of the American value system was rocked by the tremors of ideological innovations. Berkeley attained prominence on the map of America as the epicenter of that shaker. On the one hand was a powerful and plentiful nation like America that aspired to harness the very sky. On the other hand was a tiny country like Vietnam fighting for Liberty and Equality and its diminutive, sensitive and poetic leader Ho Chi Minh. On the one hand was the material might of science, on the other the spiritual strength of very human values. In those times Berkeley became the eye of the conceptual cyclone that swept America. The social, political and economic values that we take for granted on which human affairs are firmly established were being discussed and examined down to the very roots. New directions were being searched, new experiments were being made. The iron was red hot and on the anvil again. The Central Plaza at the University of California at Berkeley

used to be a very active busy place in the afternoon. It was an open forum for the exchange and expression of ideas. It was on one such afternoon that some organization had put up a table with a sign 'Come and Paint a Picture'. There were plenty of paints, paper and brushes. I was drawn to that table like the proverbial deer that is attracted by the hunter's song. Before I knew it, I had dipped a brush in the paints and was moving it quite freely onto the paper. I splashed those paints on the paper like on the day of Holi in India. My hands and clothes were all full of paints. After much splurging and revelling in colours. I reached home in an ecstatic state. My mind was crowded by memories of childhood. More than that, I was experiencing that pristine feeling of having discovered colours for the first time. It was a strange blissful state of total weightlessness.

After that, everyday, like an addict. I would buy paints and papers and spend hours making combinations and compositions of colours and forms. I had experienced trans-like states when working on some mathematical ideas before. But the states I would reach playing with visual rhythm and harmony were so much more deep and fantastic. My friends must have noticed the change that was taking me over. A German girl that lived in the dormitory where I took my meals took pity on me. She used to come to where I lived and watch my play with colours. One day she said 'Will you paint me?'

My whole outlook on life and my lifestyle were changing. Renate used to like the ocean and I liked the mountains and the forests. Pretty soon we were living in my station-wagon. Renate began painting also. I was making mostly landscapes and some abstracts. I did not worry much about money and I always would have a trickle of it coming. In this way we traveled through California, Colorado, Montana, Oregon, painting along the way. In the passion of Art and Youth we did not know how time passed. She went back to the University, learned Arabic, got a degree in Political science with middle East as specialization and took up a job in Washington D.C.

It was about this time that I learnt about my grandfather's sad demise. He had waited eagerly for my return. He had hoped that I would carry on his artistic ambitions. His last years must have been full of despair. Whatever few paintings he now had with him he used to throw away, anywhere, by the riverside, under the bridge, in the market place, anywhere. The last year of his life he went silent.

I cried a bitter tear. Now there was no going back from Art. On the contrary, I decided to channel my energy into Art in a more planned and concerted manner. Before that, I decided to complete my Ph.D. I wrote a very concise thesis in Mathematical Economics. It was about 'Competitive Growth Models'. I completed it within a year. My Ph.D. certificate bore the signature of the then Governor of California, Ronald Reagan. I threw that

certificate to the wind and set out in search of a new aesthetic ideal.

The first stop in my 6-year sojourn that followed was the beautiful town of Seattle in north-western United States. I improvised a studio in the black neighbourhood on Capitol Hill. So far I had done only a few portraits. The unique physical and spiritual beauty of the Afro American men and women touched me very deeply. They gave me much love. The coming together of the African and European races has created some truly glorious facial types, which I used to paint with great relish. Seattle also has a large population of Eskimos and other native tribes. I moved amongst them and painted many pictures of their lives.

After that, for the first time, I moved over to east-coast of United States. When I came into Washington D.C. I didn't have a penny in my pocket. After much walking and wandering I came upon a farm in Potomac about 10 miles outside Washington. The owner, who was a recluse of an Irish woman, let me make my studio in an abandoned barn on her farm. She used to live alone in her farmhouse surrounded by her 65 Afghan hounds. She also had many goats that she would personally milk mornings and evenings. My barn was on the other end of her farm. Next to it was the farm of Krsna Consciousness Society. Living there I made many paintings on Lord Krsna's pastimes. I had met the great Krsna devotee Shрила Bhaktivedanta Swami in a personal interview in Los Angeles. I used to often visit Washington D.C. In Georgetown I got to make portraits of some well known personalities. I came to know a redheaded 18-year-old amateur actress. This was Madeleine Potter who was recently awarded the Golden Peacock award in the Filmotsav at New Delhi for her role in the movie 'The Bostonians'.

It is New York that must be called the Mecca of American Artists. I spent the summer of 78 in New York. American Painting had become totally Impersonalist. The artists were into the heavy drug scene. Their painting was preoccupied with existential decay and degeneration. Punk rock was of this same genre. My stay in New York was quite a disappointment, the only highlight being a chance meeting with Andy Warhol accompanied by Jamie Wyeth Jr., at midnight, outside the Russian Tea Room. With great

alacrity I had produced a picture of Andy Warhol and myself playing tic-tac-toe at a table shaped like the artist's palette. I presented it to Mr. Warhol, I am certain he will always remember.

I spent two years in the Boston-Cambridge area. I produced my best in America during this time. Six of these works are with the Indian Embassy in Washington DC. Stuart Cary Welch, the now famous

expert on Hindu and Islamic painting wrote a glowing critique of my work calling me one of the leading contemporary Indian Painters. He was one of the prime movers behind the first 'Festival of India' celebrated in America. According to him Indian painters are usually seen following in the footsteps of the successful Western artists of the yesteryear and Western critics see no inspired, innovative or impactful statement in them. On this background he found my paintings "true to experience, full of deep psychological insights, biting with a lining of humour and profound at their best".

The art of a sovereign artist never becomes a slave of style. It is undergoing transformations, taking on new dimensions. My art had now become entirely personalist. I could only see people. My art revolved around the drama of the human situation. I omitted all material details such as houses, buildings, vehicles, furniture etc. As if I was preparing to come back to India. I began painting group portraits with two or three people. The characters themselves provide the context for each other. The characters create the perspective as well as meaning. It became my ambition that Art should transcend culture.

In September 1979 I completed my 12 years of my stay in America. I had completed a tapan or 12 years of penances and austerity. I decided to come back to India. On my return to India what struck me the most was the inundating variety of human beauty one sees here. Very

few Indians are aware of it. The ideas about human beauty are extremely stereotyped here. For example the exaggerated preference for lighter complexion. I say it is a malady to not to be aware of your own beauty. Some say it was because the English ruled India that we got this idea of superiority of the lighter skin colour. It must have been the other way around. A handful of Englishmen could rule India precisely because Indians were in awe of the lighter skin. The effects of a perverted aesthetic are so far reaching. We have no ideals of dark beauty after the Draupadi of Mahabharata. We find this same neglect of human beauty in contemplatory Indian painting. Even a leading painter like Hussain paints blank faces. The affected distortion one sees a lot today is the most offensive example of blind following of western streams. India will have nothing to do with the so-called existential void and degeneration. India will give the world great personalist art.

The winds of change are already in the air. One can see that in the movies chubby faces are giving way to chiseled and pointed faces. Contrast Mumtaz and the old Rekha with the new Rekha and Shabana Azmi and Sarika. We now seem to accept a new variety of faces in what we consider beautiful.

What we need is Art that can provide new archetypes of the Human Ideal. What we need is a Personalist Art.