

Indian creative field is caught up between the traditional and contemporary. Modernist and aspirational present. Such binaries diminish continuities. Most of us from my generation have been keen to break the then stereotypes that somehow indigenous societies were frozen in time and that modernity resulted in a dramatic new paradigm. But living heritage informs the contemporary creativity. The depth of Indian art needs to be understood as dynamic and drawing on classical and traditional forms. Contextuality of aesthetics is an area of criticality and further research in India.

Rethinking art history curricula and pedagogy remains a challenge in India. This is across the spectrum of art history, not just relating to indigeneity and creativity. Transitions and transformations need to be researched, understood and respected. As in the case of Y.G. Srimati, a forgotten artist from Mysuru, 1926-2007. Dr John Guy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York makes an important contribution for the recognition of Srimati's contribution to Modern Indian Art. He endeavours to bring attention to Indian publics about her work.

The exhibition and catalogue are the means. They are based on archival research of personal diaries, exhibition catalogues, performance programs, press clippings and related ephemera. It is exemplary and more such projects could create a deeper and diverse landscape of the making Modern Indian Art.

Srimati's creativity and vision draws on the dynamism of Indian heritage and traditional imagery in Modern Indian Art. She was trained in classical dance, singing, instrumental music and painting - in that order.

The interdependence of art forms, lyricism, performance and movement are well represented in her innovative and inspirational art works. She was well versed in classical texts such as Chitra Sutra on art and Natya Shastra on classical dance. She was part of the movement to revive, revitalise and secularise Indian classical forms during the turbulent years

around Indian independence. As a teenager she was inspired by the finest sculptures and Chola bronzes in the Chennai Madras Government Museum. It hosted her first major exhibition of art works in the Centennial Hall presided over by the then Chief Minister C. Rajagopalachari in 1952. She sang devotional bhajans for Mahatma Gandhi. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan admired her work.

Srimati came from a Mandayam family of Mysuru Ayyangars. A family of performers. Born in Mysuru, she spent the last months of her life in Chennai. She was exposed to South Indian culture from very early on. Growing up during the years of the movement for India's independence, she was influenced by nationalist atmosphere.

Later on, she spent nearly four decades in New York where she was highly appreciated by both the Indian residents and other Americans. She was deeply into historicism and romanticism. But Srimati's creativity provided for continuity and change in Indian aesthetics of the decades around India's independence. Srimati focussed on themes from Indian religious epic literature and visions of rural culture as her main subjects.

She asserted traditional subject matter as part of a conscious expression of nationalist sentiments. It is no wonder that her work was not compatible with the prevailing progressive modernism of the then New York. Her partner Michael Pellettieri was a companion in her creative endeavours.

Srimati was influenced by several scholars and artists searching for models of Indian classicism. Nandalal Bose, well-known student of Abanindranath Tagore, drew on the murals of Ajanta and Indian mythology.

It was Ghulam Yazdani who provided published material on Ajanta that influenced several artists, including Srimati. She produced 15 paintings for the deluxe edition of Edwin Arnold's translation of the Bhagavad Gita. The commission enabled her to further draw on the intricacies and deep symbolism of the classical Indian epic, the Mahabharata.

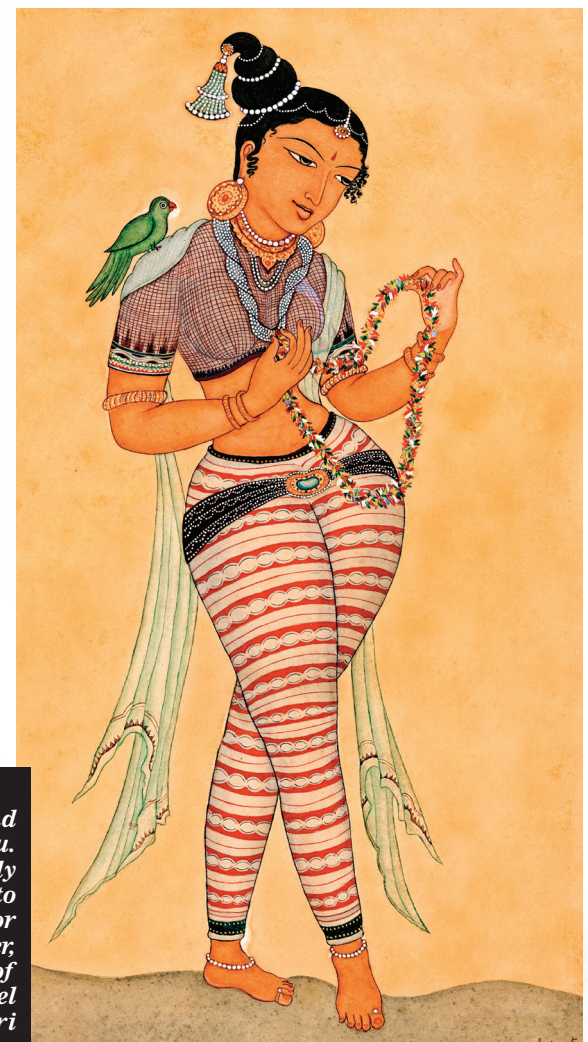
Y.G. SRIMATI: A FORGOTTEN ARTIST OF SOUTH INDIA



Maha Kali. New York, 1980. Watercolor, 28 in. x 20 in. (71.1 x 50.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Michael Pellettieri, in memory of Y.G. Srimati, 2009



Saraswati, Goddess of Learning and Music. Chennai, 1947 - 48. Watercolor on paper, 50.8 x 33.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Friends of Asian Art Gift, 2009



Andal's garland offering to Vishnu. Chennai, early 1940s, prior to 1947. Watercolor on paper. Collection of Michael Pellettieri



Srimati accompanying Mahatma Gandhi at an independence rally, Chennai, 1946. Accomplished in Indian classical music, dance and painting she performed devotional songs in various Indian languages at the Mahatma's rallies. Photograph. Y.G. Srimati Archive, courtesy of Michael Pellettieri



Y.G. Srimati, Indian, 1926 - 2007. Charudatta presenting a pearl necklace to Vasantasena, Chennai, ca. 1952. Watercolor on paper, 10 in. x 13 5/8 in. (25.4 x 34.6 cm). Lent by Michael Pellettieri. Photo: © 2016 M. Pellettieri

Eklavya Practicing Archery before an Icon of Dronacharya. Chennai, ca. 1945 - 46. Watercolor on paper, 36.2 x 25.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Michael Pellettieri, in memory of Y.G. Srimati, 2011

PROF. DR. AMARESWAR GALLA

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Professor Dr. Amareswar Galla was in New York last month on the Jury for the World Monuments Fund when he took time out to visit the Metropolitan Museum



Woman with lotus. Chennai, 1951. Watercolor on paper, 57 x 39.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Michael Pellettieri, in memory of the artist's brother, Y.G. Doraisami, 2016

NEXT WEEK

Heritage Matters will be on the Definition of the Museum from the Triennial General Conference of the International Council of Museums in Kyoto, Japan

Past Columns of Heritage Matters can now be downloaded at the new website: <http://inclusivemuseums.org/index.php/heritage-matters/>

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