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

Srimati’s public profile was one of a classical musician, vocalist and dancer. She was a lifelong friend of the preeminent Carnatic vocalist M.S. Subbulakshmi. She performed in the beautiful Mafura Mandap in the Philadelphia Museum of Art on more than one occasion at the invitation of art historians and curator Stella Kramrisch. She was modest and not into self-promotion. She was deeply into the lives of artists. Srimati, therefore, occupied centre stage on artists of her times in India and in fact, across the world, as much recognised. In India she was popular. Several of her works are posthumously acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 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. Sundalal 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 vast storehouse of literature and various of rural culture as her main subjects.

Srimati focussed on themes from Indian religious epic literature and scenes of rural culture, of an Indian style. She explored themes from Indian religious epic literature and scenes of rural culture, asserting traditional subject matter as part of a conscious expression of nationalist sentiments; her assertion was unprecedented, and this gave her almost intuitive, sculptural understanding of the human figure. 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 nationalistic aspirations.

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 aesthetic values, and the study of world art. Her relationship to a range of artistic forms is to be researched, understood and respected. 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 to this project.

In his book The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York: Gift of Michael Pellettieri, in memory of Y.G. Srimati, 2011, Dr. Guy succinctly states that “Srimati’s paint

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He further states that “through her highly controlled and softly modulated use of watercolor washes, Srimati built on the poetic and lyrical styles developed a generation earlier in Indian art.”

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is experiencing a renaissance of its creativity and production. Art galleries are reinvigorating themselves through philanthropy. Art galleries founded through philanthropy is an enticing world for Indian artists - emerging and established. In this time of vibrancy, I hope that art historians and curators would find a search to uncover and celebrate more Indian artists of the years around independence, especially female artists who have been relegated to oblivion.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Gift of Michael Pellettieri, in memory of Y.G. Srimati, 2009


Indian creative field is caught up between the traditional and contemporary. Modern art and its representation may be too narrow and not represent the diverse range of ideas.

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