

The Artist whom Madurai Forgot



Soma Basu

MADURAI:, NOVEMBER 25, 2015 18:20 IST



With a commemorative exhibition in his birth centenary year, the Aravind Eye Care System in Madurai is helping people to rediscover a great but unnoticed Tamil artist, A.Perumal, who studied and taught at Shantiniketan.

From Perumal ayya, he became the famous Perumalda, the only artist who used the strokes of his brush to take art to the tribals in and around Shantiniketan before independence. But in his home-State (Tamil Nadu) where he spent the last two decades of his life, he remains a non-entity.

In an effort to make the locals aware of the life and works of artist A.Perumal, his followers and well-wishers are collaborating on a three day festival this weekend (November 27 to 29) as part of his birth centenary celebrations.

“We inherited a treasure from him and are showcasing nearly 200 of his paintings and sketches he donated to us, says Chitra Thulasiraj, In charge Aravind Communications, and adds, “His work based on classical Bengal art is very impressive and needs to be seen, understood and appreciated by the people.”

If the Aravind group of eye hospitals took care to preserve Perumal’s paintings since his death in 2004, poet and art critic Indran did the commendable job of publishing a book “Taking His Art to Tribals: Art and Life of A.Perumal of Santiniketan” in 1999. It remains the only documentation of the life and works of the otherwise reticent artist.

“I met him first at an exhibition of paintings by Madurai artist M.G. Raffic Ahamed in mid-80s. Sporting a long white beard and a cloth bag on his shoulder, he was looking like a sage. Soft-spoken but with a purpose, there was something different about him,” recalls Indran.

When I started talking to him, I was astonished to learn about his stay and experience in Shantiniketan and wondered why the Tamil art world had not recognised him.”



(Painting on ceramic tiles. Photo: Special Arrangement)

It was Indran who brought the artist out of his closet. He stayed with Perumal for a month listening to his life story and going through his each work of art. “It was an enormous task to sort out the amazing multi-media works he had done over the decades, transport them all to Chennai and mount them for a retrospective exhibition in collaboration with Lalit Verma of Gallery Aurodhan in Pondicherry,” says Indran.

In his lifetime, Perumal neither held an exhibition nor sold a single art piece of his. Known as man of conviction, principles and lofty ideals, Perumal would tell all that his works belong to Shantiniketan and to the people. After the exhibition in Chennai, he insisted everything be brought back to Madurai, and as per his wish were later given away to Aravind Eye Hospital.

“It is a priceless gift. All our branches across the State display his works and the remaining have been framed and kept for expos now. We too will not sell anything,” says Chitra.

For someone born in a little known place called Ammapatti near village Uthamapalayam in Theni district, the journey to Shantiniketan, arguably the best

known University-town of peace and arts in the country, is nothing but a journey of dreams and empowerment.

Having lost his parents early in life, Perumal, when 16, was accidentally sent to Shantiniketan by a freedom fighter from his village. Son of the first woman graduate in the village, Perumal was the brightest boy in the village school and an obvious choice to be bestowed upon this privilege.

And the young lad lived up to it under the tutelage Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore and was trained in art by stalwarts of those times, Benode Behari Mukherjee and Nandalal Bose.

Perumal not only lived and worked with the great artists but was also appointed faculty at the Kalabhavan for four decades imbibing the Bengal style of drawing. If Indira Gandhi was his contemporary pursuing a different stream, Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, Padmashri Kripal Singh Shekhawat who designed and decorated the first copy of the Indian Constitution drafted by B.R.Ambedkar, and Dr.Krishna Reddy the graphic artist who introduced intaglio color printing in graphic art were among his illustrious students at Shantiniketan.

Yet other than his family comprising his younger sister and three nieces and a few of his friends and fans do not know much about him. Says Prof.R.V.Raju, an old neighbour who lived a few houses away in Alagappan Nagar, “Perumalda was very humble and self-effacing. Socially conscious, he always held a different point of view on almost everything.”

“He was quite critical of the political and art world and always said art has no boundaries and has to be taken to the masses,” adds Prof.Raju, who was instrumental in introducing Perumal to several key people in Madurai when he settled here after retiring from Shantiniketan as the Head of Arts department.

Indeed, it is the people only who have to be the collectors, curator, critics and connoisseurs of art. Only then geniuses like Perumal will not slip into oblivion.



(Painting of A. Perumal on mud wall of Santhal hut. Photo: Special Arrangement)

The Man from Tamil Nadu who trained into an artist in Shantinketan

“A random sample of the cultural resurgence that took place in Bengal, A.Perumal had one of the best opportunities of sitting with Tagore over three months to verify and catalogue the paintings of the nobel laureate for showcasing them at an exhibition in the U.S.

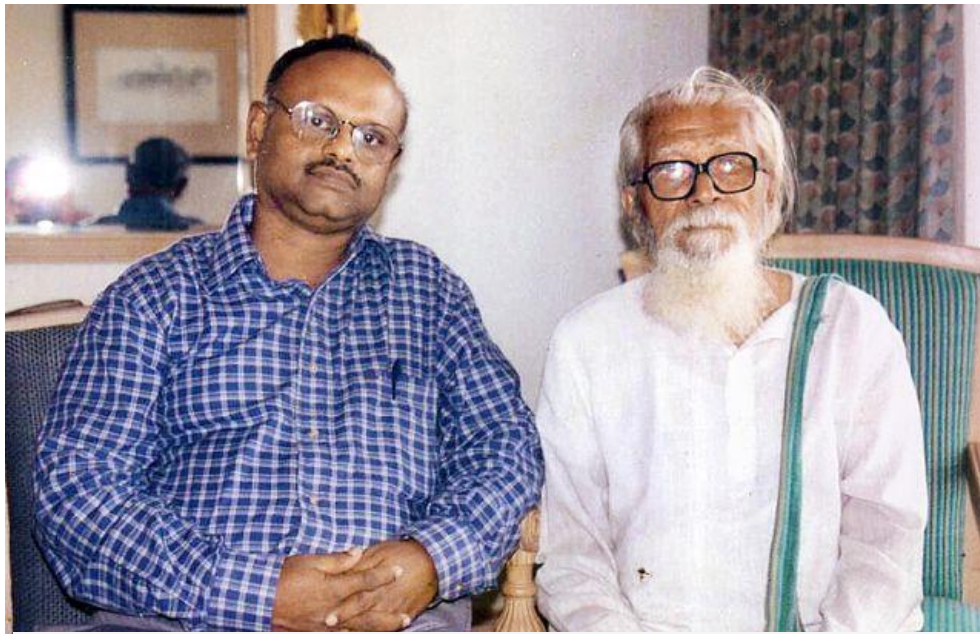
He is a model for all present day artists. It is unfortunate that contemporary artists today are interested only in indigenous style with modern expressions. Art has become elitist and fashionable. But Perumalda would say we should never forget our great values, we either use them or lose them.

Extremely skilled in his genre of traditional paintings in classical style, he believed his every creation of art was a bridge between the work and the spectator and not just an exercise satiating his own interest. He was not for self-adulation and never had an

exhibition inside a gallery but created what Nandalal Bose called the wayside gallery. Believing in multiculturalism and rooted in the ethnic identity of Indian art, Perumal painted on the mud walls of the tribal huts. Anybody crossing the village of the Santhal tribes could see these paintings.

Intelligent and sincere to the core, Perumal was also a multi-linguist who could speak Bangla fluently besides the South Indian languages, Hindi, English and Japanese. He received his Diploma in French from Pt.Jawahar Lal Nehru.

Birds, animals and nature attracted him no end as a hobby. He met Dr.Salim Ali and became a life member of the Bombay Natural History Society and regularly attended nature camps.” - Poet and art critic, Indran.



(Art critic Indran with A. Perumal. Photo: Special Arrangement)

The Uncle and An Artist.

My maternal uncle, A.Perumal, was more Bengali than a Tamil. We used to call him the “Calcutta Mama”. He was a bachelor and would come to our house in Madurai every summer vacation loaded with tins of roshogolla and sandesh. With my parents and two sisters, we would all go on short trips to Kodaikanal, Munnar, Top Slip because he loved nature and photography. He had a very good collection of cameras

and was an avid bird watcher too. His library was equally big and for every occasion, whether it was somebody's birthday or marriage, he would only gift books.

He would always talk about educating boys and girls and empowering them. He spent both his salary and pension in paying the tuition fee of several children in our native village. He gave monthly pocket money to many children.

He was like Dr.A.P.J.Abdul Kalam, who enjoyed the company of children and loved to play and talk with them. He always made it a point to visit schools, colleges and orphanages.

We all went to Shantiniketan with him for a month in the late 70s. A man of few words, I have always seen him scribbling and drawing either on bits of paper, notepads, old cloth and even vegetables but never seen him sit in front of the artist's canvas. He used both ink pen and water colours.” -- Dr.Alli Vijaya Valli, Gynaecologist and Niece of A.Perumal.



(Painting on bottle gourd. Photo: Special Arrangement)

Spectrum of A.Perumal's work

A.Perumal painted and sculpted. His works breathed ethnic and authentic Indian vistas. He was known for capturing landscape, scenery, the wonders of nature and natural objects, portraits, personalities and animal forms with equal deftness and in just about any medium in paint or black ink, on paper, cloth, wood or ceramic tiles. The delightful vignettes of his social world in his every work attest to that. The stamp of Bengal school of art is evident in whatever he did, water colours or the paintings of animals and birds in tempera technique, murals and frescoes, wood or stone sculptures, terracotta figures and carving on clay bricks, panel drawing and scrolls that depicted specific themes and stories, an art that he learnt in Japan.