

The Persistent Quest

6th – 21st December, 2007

MAHARAJA. RANJIT SINGH GAYEKWAD

Ranjit Singhji is not only a trained accomplished musician but also a very talented trained painter. He was trained at the Faculty of Fine Arts; Baroda during the year when Professor N.S. Bendre was present, Ranjit Singhji also enriched his skills at London's Royal Academy of Arts. The multi faceted Maharaja has not left one aspect of Art untouched whether its nature study or portrait or stylized paintings with its own uniqueness. His drawings are extensively rich and are equal to any complete work of Art. Whether its Sculpture or Etching, Ranjit Singhji has not left any medium of expression untouched that could satisfy his quest and it seems, the quest is not over yet. He is discovering and re-discovering himself everyday.

Priyarsi Art Gallery

The unusual aspect about Ranjit Singh Gaekwad of Baroda is that his interest in the arts fits in with the Indian traditional notion of a Raja's accomplishment. (We have the notion of '*nagarika*' being well-versed in sixty four arts.) Ranjit Singh is not only a trained and an accomplished musician but also similarly a fully-fledged trained painter. Maharajas are often sophisticated connoisseurs of the arts, but not usually trained as was the case with his exceptional great-grand-father, Sayajirao Gaekwad IIIrd. We must bear in mind the large collection of Ravi Varma's paintings acquired by him. Even when he grew up in the atmosphere of the arts, Ranjit Singh is an artist by choice. We have to give equal weightage to his royal heritage as much as to his own temperament and strong will. He stands out as a relatively 'softer' royal personality than the opposite kind, which indulges in what some times are taken as 'masculine' preoccupations. One may refer to such an innocuous vocation of a sportsman, as cricket, the strain of which too runs in the family. I am inclined to see Ranjit Singh as a strong-willed person in his own way, who through more than four decades of activity as a painter wishes to convey what he really is, a serious persistent painter. The difference lies in the fact that he does not have to depend on his vocation for basic livelihood. That is why I am proposing the title 'persistent quest' for his exhibition.

Trained at the famed Faculty of Fine Arts at Baroda during the years Prof. N.S. Bendre was the live-wire guru, Ranjit Singh enriched his painterly skills at London's Royal Academy of Arts. In one of his exhibitions during 1960s he has talked about enjoyment of using different mediums as well as the interdependence of drawing and painting, and in the same breath he acknowledged his British teacher, Charles Mohoney and Peter Greenham.

I am presuming that among several conflicts, one of the most difficult of which he would be facing within him self, is to maintain the ordinariness of him self as a human being, through what he chooses to depict and through his accomplished yet unpretentious skills. As modernism is growing older and also too familiar, we are once again able to coolly ponder on the purpose of art: are not the art of drawing and painting concerned with visual representation ? Are not the mediums of drawing, charcoal , ink , coloured pastel, line , water colour, washes , tonal gradations, to be mastered in terms of their characteristics for their own sake and how they are controlled towards representing what the eye has witnessed ? Surely, both give a surprise, what the eye has observed and how the medium depicts it. Both offer visual joy to the onlooker. I think Ranjit Singh repeatedly makes us aware of this joy through his delineations in wide range of media.

The point is, Ranjit Singh, through his work exposes his level of training and the competence achieved in representational devices; a line drawing strengthened by hatchings, or modulated by tonal gradations of thin washes, in such a spontaneous and casual manner. The on looker wonders how seriously he has to take the artist-author. I think this is the baffling surprise in Ranjit Singh's work, the casual mastery of the medium and the accuracy of the ordinary object, be it the clothed model or the un-self-conscious reclining nude, an elderly male in a characteristic posture or a face of a pensive male or simply a male torso. Few Indian artists know what to do with the posed model, male or female.

Ranjit Singh establishes his own humanity through the people he has painted, delineated, described, in the stances, postures and expressions they assume. They may be brown, black or coloured. They establish their own space, their own environment. 'My skill is what I am', is not an unworthy proposition at a time when recourse is unabashedly taken of mechanical devices by many artists. The onlooker has to have a shrewd eye to be able to realize the subtle choices and discretions used by Ranjit Singh, viz., where to have the hatchings, where to increase the darkness or density, where to have blank surfaces how large a range of colours or their intensity is required and so forth.

Along with the 'people', for Ranjit Singh the observed world also includes the 'landscape', which is another genre for him in which he has a comfortable mastery. His landscapes have a consistency about them regarding what he chooses within his 'frame' and also how he handles the visual language. He builds the outdoor space almost like in Paul Cezanne's landscapes. Not only the architectural motif but the structuring of space with prominent foreground as well as the placement of trees, contributes to the architectonics of the landscape. In his colour application he is careful that it contributes to the total structure, rather than be diffused as in the Impressionist approach.

In Ranjit Singh's repertoire there is a range of what we may call 'elaborate compositions', which are colorful, compact and tight structures. In them the artist proves that 'the observed' can be turned into a well structured visual symphony. And he does so in his own very characteristic unobtrusive mastery. Some of the 'elaborate compositions' also reflect the 'will to style', which is more like mutation of the observed imagery. The level of mutation is the resultant 'style', but again emerging by itself and not as a deliberate effort. One may refer to the painting comprising a full-figure portrait. The sitter is comfortably seated in a spacious sofa while the brocaded border of the purplish sari creates the structural web. Similar observations can be made regarding the portrait of two women in which case the tall standing woman in blue dress is a strong vertical shape juxtaposed with a not so sharply stated shape of the seated figure. There are several compositions with single female nude forms, but especially complex is the one with an oblique perspective view. Another remarkable composition is the one with the dancing male figure in a graceful *bharat natyam* posture, over whom are hovering in the sky Saurashtra folk dancers, in virile postures in a topsy-turvy arrangement.

In the above context we may note the series of faces with a wide range of variations which could be the handiwork of some one who is assuredly a master of portraiture, that is physiognomy and expression. There is a frontal face with prominent jaw bones, a well-modelled face suddenly turning towards the front as if looking at the onlooker. Two female faces in profile, but each of whom turn her single eye towards the corner, one toward her left, the other toward her right, are examples of ingenuity. The four variations of a single face with thick lips and cat-like green eyes are subsequently combined in a single painting resulting in a bewitching effect. The child with cows inscribed on the wall, is also basically a prominent face. The peacock tail motif on his shirt, who holds a flute in his right hand, are suitable hints to suggest that it is Ranjit Singh's Krishna.

The simplification of the already discussed faces takes us to the stylistic simplicity of his series of variations on the icons of Sarasvati and Lakshmi. The frontal face with prominent eyes are both exercises in simplicity as well as iconic representation. Both the goddess are given heavy proportions and a sort of 'motherly' ambience. Sarasvati stands or sits holding the vina on her left side, quite convincingly carrying her four or six arms. Her emblem, the peacock, proudly stands nearby. Perhaps, the motivation was received by the presence of the original Sarasvati of Ravi Varma displayed in the palace household, but his venture is more likely also an homage to the goddess by a devoted musician. Actually Sarasvati is the Indian concept of one who is bestowed with divine inspiration, or an artist who possesses intuitive genius. Ranjit Singh has very creatively adjusted the icon to be re-interpreted as Lakshmi who appears amidst clusters of lotuses accompanied by elephant and the swan.

Some years ago Ranjit Singh did a series of rather over stylized drawings in black and white in which line was prominent and the imagery was grotesque to some extent. They also included a seated female musician, actually a vocalist, playing on tanpura at the same time. Such stylization was the basis of a series of sculptures also which were more like cut-out silhouettes of seated female figures.

We can ask the question to the artist as well as keep our fingers crossed:
what next ?

Priyasri Patodia

Ranjit Singhji is an accomplished singer and a trained artist for more than four decades. He was trained at the Faculty of Fine Arts; Baroda during the year when Professor N.S. Bendre was present, Ranjit Singhji also enriched his skills at London's Royal Academy of Arts. Maharajas were always looked upon as connoisseurs of arts but chose to either become sports men or politicians in free India, but with the exception of this one who is a serious artist actively painting for more than 4 decades. Art may not be his source livelihood but is surely his chosen vocation. The Gaekwad family is known for possessing the largest and best collection of Raja Ravi Verma painting who was commissioned at the Laxmi Villas palace, Baroda by his grandfather Sayajirao Gaekwad IIIrd. He grew up in an atmosphere of arts but that may not be the reason for him choosing Art as his vocation in fact coming from a royal heritage sometimes has been a hindrance for him being taken seriously as an artist because of his larger than life position of being a Maharaja . I am presuming that among other conflict, the most difficult of it was to maintain his ordinariness of him self as a human being in fact this may be one reason that though being an accomplished and skilled artist he restrained himself to show his works in India .Humility and simplicity are best ways to describe this extremely skilled and talented artist who will be finally showing his work s of 40 years for the fist time in India in the show titled "The Persistent Quest" which will display his works from different decades. The artist, through his work exposes his level of training and the competence achieved in representational devices, it's a visual joy to the onlooker. I think Ranjit Singh repeatedly makes us aware of this joy through his delineations in wide range of media.

The multi faceted Maharaja has not left any medium of art untouched, whether its nature study or portrait or stylized paintings with its own uniqueness. His drawings are extensively rich and are equal to any complete work of Art. Whether its Sculpture or Etching, Ranjit Singh has not left any medium of expression untouched that could satisfy his quest and it seems, the quest is not over yet. He is discovering and re-discovering himself everyday.

This show will be was display in Baroda for 2 days at Father Sinh Museum Baroda from the 3-6th November and will now be displayed at the Priyasri Art Gallery on the 6th of December for 20 days, Maharaja Ranjit Sing Gateway will be present on the preview date. Politicians, Corporate and other celebrities will be present to support the Maharaja on his Persistent Quest

Priyasri Patodia

Curator and Gallerist