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Aristotle stated that

“The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance, and this, and not the external manner and detail, is true reality”. i

The leading attitude and principal concern of art were to represent nature and life in all forms of works of art. The relation to the resultant aspects and phenomena of reality is reproduced in art not to eliminate imperfection, but precisely because it is considered as beautiful. Imitation of nature by Plato that demanded of art something different from the formal principle implied, but it is exclusively new in the philosophy of art or in aesthetics of current system. There is an essential difference between the new view of art and the imitation of nature theory. First of all it shows the definition of art as reproducing reality.

“In earlier times artists liked to show what was actually visible...nowadays we are concerned with reality, rather than the merely visible” ii - Paul Klee

The definition of art as ‘imitation of nature’ explains only its formal objectives and challenges on modern art in India in the beginning phase. The orientation from the early period to modern, the concept of art in India, restricted artist’s resources of reality with the repetition of the objects and observable facts of nature in art, the modern artist are ready to prepare a crucial and critic living with reality, attentive superiority and energy for his creative inclinations. The depiction or representation of mere nature is devoid of content, which restricts his sphere of sublimity in art. Not only limited to beauty but to the content, having an artist’s
emotions, imaginations which hold the reality of general concern in his life and his works. Frequently, the artists resist to describe an object in order to explicate its significance in the representation. These resistances of reality in K.C.S.Panicker’s paintings are to prove the artistic precision, advanced consistency in the issue of art and the degree of the reality, nothing but a rationalization of aesthetic delight.

“The first impression of a work of art is its otherness from reality” – Suzanne Langer

K. C. S Panicker is one of the imperative painters, who advanced a radical pictorial language in the concept of reality as subject matter in modern Indian art scene. Panicker, a teacher who has created a unique direction and imagery in his authority on diverse applications of modern inclination was inspired by the then generation of artists; work in an ambience of imperative inner exploration, focusing on linearity, within an idiom which marked the traditional South Indian craftsmanship, principally its ornamental feature with a conceptual rigidity, proved a decisive and fascinating creative option of modernity in India.

K. C. S. (Kovalezhi Cheerampathoor Sankaran Panicker), was born in 1911 in Coimbatore. He joined the Madras School of Arts in 1936 for a three year course under Roy Chowdhury, the eminent artist and the then Principal. Soon after Panicker emerged as a painter and later he joined the Madras School of Arts as a teacher. Panicker’s earlier paintings an evocative visual recollection, were watercolours. Landscapes, the boat men, the Muslim fishermen, boat jetties and people from the market, were his desired focus and that reflected the working-class life of Kerala.
The village scenes of coconut and areca nut groves, sandy plains, blue skies, lakes, green fields, coconut groves, waterways and masses of his reminiscence of the village in the Malabar Coast, where he lived for a short period of three years in his early childhood were eminently portrayed.

“I began to draw the pictures of villages and coconut groves with which I was familiar with in Kerala. The sight of canals was highly inspiring and it made me highly emotional. Tears welled up in my eyes at the sight of it. Knowing that it was quite unbecoming of a man, I was at pains to hide the tears from others by quickly wiping them off.” said Panicker.

1940s Panicker’s paintings had human characters with nature in the background. Later he painted ‘Christ and Lazarus’, ‘Christ Healing the Leper’, ‘Peter’s Denial’, the Biblical subject matter that had inhibited use of colour and displayed the form in a monochromic accuracy. The supremacy of figuration in particular and mastery over the human anatomy were noticeable. The paintings of large groups of people belong to this phase show the shady aspects of street life. The concern and helplessness in the faces of these lengthened human figures articulate the situation of the aftermath of the Second World War. The custom of using multi-colours is roughly missing in these works but the detail is represented by significant strokes of masterly precision. During the 1950s Panicker began to be critical of the hegemony of Western art. He started experimenting with the mural and sculptural traditions of India. As K G Subramanian found it:

“His western excursion affected him like it affected most Indian artists of any artist of individuality; it threw him back on himself. It was as if across the seas
a strange longing for his land caught him in the pit of his stomach. On his return he
became committed indigenes, though not in a traditionalist sense.” v

Panicker went on experimenting with great narrative tradition of the Indian
mural. ‘The Life of a Malabar Peasant’ of 1955 was a pleasing scheme of the
disparate phases in the life of an unknown peasant. The pictorial space is packed
with human figures in the vegetation of Kerala’s landscape. The early
expressionistic figuration is utterly missing and an innovative and figurative
advance has progressed out of his relations with the simplified Chola bronze
modelling.

He established the Cholamandal Artists Village, near Mahabalipuram, in
Tamil Nadu with the objective of constructing a substitute to the artistic stimulation
from the so called Western way. Panicker said;

“Life in India today seems to provoke her artists to begin to think more
pertinently of their aesthetic requirements, and to evolve in their own minds a
clearer picture of what they are looking for in the art of their time. They fairly
accept that what passes for modern Indian art in many quarters here is, at best, an
almost sterile Indian inspiration, which alone can ultimately fuse the apparent
contradictions into an acceptable pattern...” vi

Panicker was unique in his colour application, and the modern advancement
of form in his paintings. His paintings create a firm and profound notion, which
exclusively reflect the force of Ajanta paintings and Chola frescoes. K.C.S Panicker
would prefer a variety of colours, and generate a ‘new’ painting or with one leading
colour as the essential, with textures and diffusing glare and care. The Words and Symbols Series signify a scintillating break from the previous works.

“...My work of the Words and Symbols Series, started in 1963, using mathematical symbols, Arabic figures and the Roman script, helping me create an atmosphere of new picture making which I seemed very much to need...in the course of time when my symbols changed I found the Malayalam script more congenial...The scripts are not intended to be read. To make them illegible I introduce strange shapes and characters in between the groups of letters. The symbols and diagrams, the tabular columns etc. have no meaning whatsoever other than their visual aspect and images born out of association of ideas”. – K. C. S Panicker.

In the beginning Panicker expressed a social apprehension throughout his paintings, and he pooled individual innovative precautions and the enhancing defences of the line in almost all his paintings. Panicker began his search for a new contemporary Indian pictorial idiom, when others were inspired of Western mode, had progressed his expressionist expedition from the early paintings of socially perceptive and imaginative paintings.

“To me the modern art of the West had as early as 1956 ceased to be, a living or vital source of inspiration capable of sustaining me further. I had to begin afresh”.

Words and Symbols, a series of paintings as Panicker displayed was an advanced design of visual occurrence from a long cessation of a terrible sense of life, which he experienced. Subsequent to his packed toss pigments, he shifted to the
impulsive silence of uncongenial linear geometry, sinking the entire temperate human elements into frozen prototype of horoscope. The philosophy of ‘time and space’ were pertaining to observe, while ‘mass’ was redefined as the strength of line arrangements and script, and the substance given to the geometric symbols as a resources of generating the enhancing centre, was moderately stimulated by Tantric symbolism.

“Words and Symbols only suggest what Panicker left unsaid about the insignificance of individual existence”. - Santo Dutta

In Panicker’s paintings, the stylistic refinement is strikingly minimal and never defies the human situation represented. The socio-cultural scene of the mid 50s in Kerala was also to be considered, like, the life of a Malabar Peasant. The reflection of the working class ideal in theatre and literature had a strong presence, also an aftermath of the communist upheaval.

Lumbini or life of Buddha painted in 1956 is a departure from the peasant ideal to a philosophical ideal. Paintings of this phase were Lumbini, The Garden and Summer Series that displayed philosophical formulations about man and nature. In these paintings, Panicker de-individualized the human figures into universalized human iconic forms. He departed from the specific geography of landscape to a romantic conceptual space. In terms of colour, his canvases became light and foggy with pinkish pigments. Genesis, the painting is a narrative of the three stages of Man-Woman relationship. Figures are again simplified in linear sweep with large heads and puppet like bodies. The flat pictorial space is divided into shaded thick strokes that suggest different stages of life. This treatment is similar to the oil
sketches of Mother and Child series drawings, which he had been doing quite often during this period. These oil sketches were done on paper and conceived as complete drawings.

There came an important occasion which inspired Panicker to associate his ideas on pictorial language and calligraphy. He remembers:

“One day suddenly I happened notice a page from the mathematics note book of a young student. Arabic figures Latin and other symbols of Algebra and Mathematics and the linear and other formation of geometry all helped me to a new idea. I had been familiar with these past but only a student of maths. But now these opened out a vista of creative art with renewed ardor, I plunged into the new phase in 1963. By the time my lines had begun to assume the essence of words and symbols.”

Fruit Seller was the first painting in which Panicker tried to synchronise the alphabet with the pictorial image. This painting is a statement on the entire process of painting that Panicker intended to take up further. The title of the painting and also the idea of the 'mental process of picture making- a predominant concept about child art of modern painting- is also inscribed prominently in the painting. From the calligraphic pictorial order, Panicker’s exploration went further to the folk and local traditions and also to the organic relationship of the words. He found the word as the valued usage of man as he progressed throughout the epoch. He says:

“Every letter in the written word has a highly evolved form, a form attained through usage and guided by man’s racial or national sense of seeing and shaping.
the line following the laws of continuity and free manual rhythm of action, man has been writing for centuries.”

Later Panicker tried to understand the palm leaf manuscript and astronomical chart of Kerala. The words and the representation of the sluggish lines in these manuscripts blended into a new pictorial language as Words and Symbols. The majority of the forms all over the paintings have a function of symbols trace back to historical sources. The Mohanjodaro bull, sun, the weighing balance, the fish and snakes are all symbols that exist in the intrinsic perception of Indian tradition. He had his sturdy condition of the strict reviverist tendencies that emerged in his Tantric innovations.

In 1944 -he established the progressive painters association in Madras. In 1966, Panicker founded the Chozhamandal an artists’ village in Injambakkom, 20 kilometres away from Chennai. Cholamandal artists’ village, was the first ever-Indian Artists colony to be established. It was a dream project and a place where artists live and work together. Panicker introduced the medium of illustration to Malayalam and his illustrations to novels and short stories appeared in several magazines. Panicker also initiated the publication of a magazine called Art Trends, which brought contemporary trends in Indian art. In the 70s the pictorial space of his canvases were packed with words and symbols in the dark background and proved a certain revolution. The mystifying abstract backdrop of words and symbols distorted to fading concrete way for simple linear spaces of his alternative landscapes like Ponnani landscapes, these Crow Series of paintings were also an imperative imagery of his visual world. In his ingenious life, the Dog series in 1976,
imperceptibly and insistently imprecise, the Dog holds the observer with delusion and obscurity. A different painting, River, in 1974, was a river with lessening leaves. A river with fishes, boats, and drum player had the temperate use of lines and colours offered on pictorial space. Panicker said;

“Unless you can draw what is in front of you how it is possible to draw from imagination. The crux of the whole exercise is encapsulated in these utterances”.

The paintings of K C S Panicker are selected for the study and assessment of his contribution to the modern Indian art scene are.

Plate number 1 and 6 demonstrates an innovative notion of ‘modern’ constituent of pictorial language in modern Indian art anticipated by K.C.S Panicker. His ‘Words and Symbols series’ is expressively implicated to an exceptional type with abstracting forms against the pre-modern narrative tendency of Indian art scene. Words, symbols, designs, drawings, doodles and tantric signs are the components, which are innate by acquaintance from the ‘puranic’ religious perception. In the first painting light shade of the Indian red colour is stretched in the whole picture plane in the background and exceeding two intense mass of forms of simple greyish red colour which is inlayed. On top of that, there are scribbles of one male figure on top and three female figures in the lower portion with fine and perfect lines. Representation of a bull and some animals linearly placed along with a black sun and a palm tree manuscript is there on the surface. With letters or words he prepared are unusual forms seen in the painting.

Plate number 2 is a landscape painting in yellow and red. It seems to be a monochromatic combination that Panicker equipped with a realistic landscape into a
rational expressive approach that interprets a new meaning of reality in image making procedure in modern visual art scene in India rather than the strict insight of reality of European naturalism.

Plate number 3 of K C S Panicker’s painting titled ‘Dog’ is a significant visual image that pictorially represents a rural hungry dog in a red outlined blue segment that had in the middle a crow on a half circled space along with earthly arc shaped centre. Here Panicker depicted plants in white or gloomy colour. The entire tough blue toned painting is literally covered with Malayalam and English words and symbols and tantric descriptions along with the images. The starving dog is the biggest object of representation in this composition, which is a symbol and a myth of sacred aspect from the epic ‘Mahabharata’, a very early domesticated animal that always escorts the master wherever he goes. Almost all the tantric representations, words and symbols are in black or dark in colour. In this painting, K C S Panicker has broken the conventional reality of representing nature and confronted with the essence of reality to prove the creative accuracy, complex reliability in the issue of choosing the ideals from a myth and made passionate to the exceptional intensity of the reality of the theme.

Plate number 4 and 5 are picturesque landscape paintings of KCS Panicker in water colour. First one is with green backwaters and land with elongated coconut trees and dense vegetation typical of Kerala. Quite a lot of traditional boats were placed in the centre of wet space with some of them carrying the rowers. Land and water are divided between white doorways with loudspeakers. In reality a festive disposition has been created with several essentials in green and a little highlight of
white and red colours. The other painting is in dense greenery with dark green against light green, yellow and pink, more excessive than a European academic style followed by his contemporaries. In Panicker’s paintings, the style of sophistication is prominently minimal and in no way resists the human situation represented or imitated. Influenced by the detailed geography of Kerala, landscape paintings are transformed to an idealistic intangible visual space. In terms of colour, his canvases became light and foggy with pinkish pigments. In general KCS Panicker’s paintings have fashioned a new kind of reality in modern art of India, which is away from an imitating reality of nature established by Plato and ancient Indian conception of ‘Sadrisya’, but have a correlation with nature, artist and the art.


Langer Suzanne, Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art (1953)


Dutta Santo, Three Retrospective exhibitions, LKC, April, 1979.

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Plate No. 1 and 2

Words and Symbols

Landscape
Plate No. 3 and 4

Dog

Untitled
Plate No. 5 and 6

Landscape

Words and Symbols