Chapter – IX
Art and Tradition: K.G. Subramanian and his works
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“Without tradition, art is a flock of sheep without a shepherd. Without innovation, it is a corpse” – (Winston Churchill)

Painter, sculptor, and muralist, K G Subramanian was born in a village in north Kerala in 1924. He is among the few artists who have explored the possibilities of modern art from this perspective. As an artist he is extraordinarily versatile, and the exploration of art as language is one of the running themes of his writings. He cherishes the felicity to work in diverse media, sizes, and techniques over a stylistic conformity to a medium, size, technique, and manner of visualization.

While studying economics at Presidency College, Madras, Subramanian became involved in the freedom struggle. He was imprisoned and debarred from government colleges. The turning point of his life came when he joined Kala Bhavan at Viswa Bharati in Santiniketan in 1944. He studied at Kala Bhavan till 1948. Between 1951 and 1959, Subramanian was a lecturer in painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Baroda. During 1955 and 1956, he went to the Slade School of Art in London to study as a British Council research scholar. From 1959 to 1961, Subramanian was deputy director (design) at All India Handloom Board. Bombay. He continued to be a design consultant till 1966. He went back to Baroda as a Reader in painting between 1961 and 1965.

From 1966 to 1980, Subramanian was a Professor of Painting at Baroda. He went to New York as J D Rockefeller fellow during 1966 and 1967. From 1968 to 1974, he acted as the Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda. In 1975 and 1976, he attended the World Craft Council meets as a delegate. In 1976, he was a visiting lecturer at various Canadian universities. In 1980, Subramanian
returned to Santiniketan and till 1989 was a Professor of Painting at Kala Bhavan. During 1987 and 1988 he lived at Oxford as Christensen Fellow in St. Catherine’s College. In 1989, he was appointed Professor Emeritus at Kala Bhavan, Viswa Bharati.

A theoretician and art historian, Subramanian has written extensively on Indian art. His writings have formed the foundation for the study of contemporary Indian art. He has also written some delightful fables for children and illustrated them. A multifaceted talent, Subramanian removed the difference between artists and artisans. He experimented with weaving and toy making. He also reinvented several mediums used in earlier Indian art. For example, the terracotta mural and glass paintings found a new lease of life with his experiments. The artist gave the human figure a new dimension. Drawing upon the rich resources of myth, memory and tradition, Subramanian tempers romanticism with wit and eroticism. He has received the Kalidas Samman in 1981, the Padmashree in 1975, and a D. Litt. (Honoris Causa) from the Rabindra Bharati University, Calcutta in 1992 and became a Fellow of Kerala Lalit Kala Akademi in 1993 and he was honoured with Doctorate from Assam University, Silchar in 2011.

Western modernism was later synthesised with his work, essentially rooted in an indigenous folk tradition. It was in the late 1970s Subramanian shifted his focus to a two-century old vibrant craft tradition of reverse painting and created a new language for the medium that suited his own temperament and our modern sensibility. In the process, he breathed a new life into the medium. Subramanian believes that all visual arts are primarily based on visual facts and our responses to them. In accordance with the complex responses involving
sensation, interpretation and emotional discharge thrown into diverse circuits, his works feed on many-layered impulses that temper romanticism with wit and eroticism. Each medium which Subramanian explores is a response to a particular sensibility strand.

Subramanian’s works have been exhibited in over fifty solo shows, the most recent including those presented by Seagull Foundation for the Arts in collaboration with Nandan Gallery at Kala Bhavan, Kolkata, in 2009; ‘The Painted Platters’ at the Guild Art Gallery, Mumbai, in 2007; and ‘The Magic of Making’ at the Seagull Arts and Media Resource Centre, Kolkata, and Rabindra Bhavan, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, also in 2007.

K. G. Subramanian, one of the few artists who have been able to conceptualise and creatively absorb the living roots of the craft traditions within the Indian folk, tribal, and also urban continuum. Yet this focus came to maturity only by the early 1970s after much experimentation and travel. He articulates on early his work thus:

“A lot of my works of 1952-55 drawn from ordinary motifs, mother and child, woman at the tap, woman with lamp, or before mirror, fisher folk on Bombay sea-side, all pulled in this direction, from a volatile sketch to a stable hieroglyph”.ii

He interacted with modern western artists such as V. Pasmore, W. Coldstream, R. Hilton, and P. Heron during his studies at Slade School. In the second spell at Baroda, as a teacher, witnessed his experiments with the abstract idiom, mostly as a result of the influence from his Slade School experience. Soon this curiosity waned and he returned to media closer to his local roots, but with an evolving universal vision and Bombay (1957-1961, at the Weavers
Center) provided him with an authentic vision. This effort could fairly scan the whole country, encouraging an open national perspective which calmly assimilated international inspirations, merging all such geographical and local factors towards an individual creative journey. It also attempted to fuse the creative input with his educational and infrastructural participation. During the 1960s onwards the Pop art appreciation, Neo- Tantric awareness and the folk, tribal and urban continuum began to reach a wider audience through K.G.Subramanian’s paintings.

K.G.Subramanian is the most influential artist and art teacher of the contemporary Indian art scene. His small format work with terracotta tiles, which began in 1969, reflected the fusion of his earlier mural work with his peephole like format for the polypytchs, while exploring the underlying playful eroticism of the terracotta material.

“I do terracotta relief because clay has a quality that comes close to human flesh; when handled in a certain way, it folds, fissures, wraps, tends like flesh does”, says K.G.Subramanian.

However, it was in the artistic and conceptual maturity of K G Subramanian’ is that one has found unique images clearly reflecting artistic thought-process which were capable of grasping the underlying unity of creative works, across places and through time. His work seemingly arose from absorbing the materialistic philosophy of urban social consciousness, the mystic inclinations of the abstract idiom, and the erotic playfulness of traditional arts such as the Kalighat patuas. As a result, a language trying to encapsulate the folk, tribal, and urban continuum has come closest to realization in his art.
After dispensing with the use of the oil-easel medium by the mid 1970s he began to work with various indigenous media, such as glass paintings. From his 1979, Girl with Cat series glass paintings and various paintings on acrylic sheet one can clearly see the demands of his intuitive logic asserting itself. His ability to clearly conceptualize such instincts was another reason for making him different from other contemporaries.

“In images mixing up uncouthness, swarthiness, disproportion, even brazenness of gesture with a brisk, high-keyed, distanced statement; something between a pin-up and an icon. The glass painting technique which is half-way between the deliberate and the spontaneous lends itself to this”, said K.G. Subramanian.

The will to create a spontaneous-icon, as reflected in all his works, especially the Inayat Khan Series reveals the belief that sees no gulf between all traditions within the contemporary moment, as freedom finds rest in any corner, being sensuous yet tired, erotic yet indifferent. His contribution was increasingly moulding the orthodoxies within Indian contemporary art and its wider links with folk and tribal arts. Fairy tales from Purvapalli series, oil and watercolour on acrylic sheet, Inayat Khan Series: Houses with Flying Horses, Gouache and oil on perplex, 1988, in Ebrahim Alkazi’s collection, Bowl of fruit and Blind mother, oil on acrylic sheet, 1980, NGMA, Pink Woman, Blue Man, and Oil on Acrylic sheet, 1980, Private, Santiniketan, Low Relief Terracotta, The Visitors, Acrylic on canvas 1996, Scene from Ramayana, Gouache on paper (Varnished), 1991, NGMA and Odden counters, Acrylic on canvas, 1996 are his distinguished works.
“In reality the structure of human creativity is complex; it has dissimilar, often warning ingredients; it is private and public, conformist and innovative, free and subject. But a lot of modernists cannot countenance this messiness, this conciliation of opposites. They would rather counter one with the other”- K. G. Subramanian, in his ‘The Creative Circuit’. (Geeta Kapur) vi believed in relation to K G’s works that,

“The imagery is thus voluptuous without being naturalistic, ornamental without being flat. Further, the language so devised being contrary and crossed, it allows for transformation of subject and motif...What I believe draws Subramanian most of all to nineteenth century popular art is precisely this erotic impulse which intertwines moral categories with some innocence and much audacity. Even the moral tales revel in wickedness so that finally the good and bad are thoroughly mixed in a pictorial vocabulary of comic delight. The pictorial vocabulary is devised eclectically. Techniques of delineation affect the style and the style affects the typology”.


“We all have our little obsessions. And they may be continuous, But not enough to become goal. Really speaking, I do not want any more goals and challenges. If the little things I see around excite me and link up into stories of a kind that is good enough”.”
The following paintings of K. G. Subramanian are selected for the study and evaluated for his contribution which is a matter of strength to the modern Indian art.

Plate number 1 and 2 of K.G. Subramanian’s paintings are purely conceptual representations, named as ‘Windows-II’ and ‘Terrace-II’. In the first painting, out of the three main panels, he has arranged nine squares predominantly coloured in red, pink, and lighter hues of red. All over again the panels are subdivided into horizontal and vertical divisions along with ledges, fittings and fixtures with intangible forms of human, creatures in more or less soft white, black, yellow ochre flat surfaces and blue shades of lines and stripes. This painting resembles an outlook of fused but layered structures with a design symphony in a multifaceted residence complex. The second painting has also three panels with two white streaks of separation, and the vast middle panel, two-dimensional created top terrace of a residence, a traditional mat centrally placed along with vegetation, and plants with flowers. Two balconies are placed by the sides of the middle portion. The prime colour is stretched with blue and its shades. Extremely colourful work with geometrical surprise and conventional patterns are the key distinctiveness of the painting.

Plate number 3- ‘Woman with a Pot of Flowers’ and 4, ‘Pink Woman and Blue Man’ are the figurative paintings of K.G. Subramanian. In the first, a woman with a flower pot is central to the painting and in the other, a nude woman is positioned in a sofa in the top and a man lying on the bottom of the painting. All the figures and other objects including the decorative patterns are fixed with two-dimensional representations and flat in character. Magnitudes of all these objects of representations are very expressive and reflect the
contemporary perception of a visual language he derived from the established experiences and his obsession to traditional art forms. With light hues of pink, ochre, orange and pale green colours with linear and geometrical patterns, K G Subramanian made these metaphoric images related to tradition into a visual symbol for the modern epoch in Indian art.

Plate number 5 ‘The Visitors’ and 6 ‘Odd Encounters’, are his later phase paintings. These paintings are fully wrapped with figures and forms, one is picturesque with red and the other has blue dominance in colour pattern. Elongate figures- masked, bearded elderly visitors with a lady, fragmentations in the background with shelves and other objective representations have intentionally created an expressionistic fantasy in the painting. In the ‘Odd Encounters’ again the fragmentations have created a visual treat of the subject, where ‘Durga’ the Goddess, goat and disturbed men and women are brought into as mortals.

K. G. Subramanian is unique among modern Indian artists, who initiated abstraction in the content and innovatively captivated the living roots of the art and craft traditions of the Indian folk, tribal and urban continuum. In this original approach of painting, allied with the tradition of art and culture, he has created mimetically seized representational oddity into an esteemed novel path of modernity beyond the principal aesthetic theory of Plato and the Indian notion of representation, ‘Sadrisya’.


Plate No. 1 and 2

Windows- II

Terrace- II
Woman with pot of flowers

Pink Woman, Blue Man

Plate No. 3 and 4
Plate No. 5 and 6

The Visitors

Odd encounters