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| The Madras Art Movement (1960s-1980s) |
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| The Madras Art Movement was a regional modern art movement that emerged in the 1960s at Madras [Chennai], South India. Post Independence [1947], Indian artists had to establish their identity and authenticity as did Third World nations internationally. From the locus of the colonial established Madras School of Arts and Crafts, Devi Prasad Roy Chowdhury, its first Indian artist Principal (appointed in 1930) created the fine arts curriculum and set the stagefor the development of this modern movement. It wasdeveloped further under K.C.S. Paniker, the Principal of the Art School in the 1960s[1957-1966]. The group of artists that came together in the early 1960s within the art institution provides for a critical study of modernity exercised by them within the parentheses of the Madras Art Movement. This movement that took place in the early 1960s was pushed creatively by visionaries and stalwarts such as K.C.S. Paniker in painting and S. Dhanapal in sculpture. The artist-teachers along with students creatively interacted with the vernacular art of the region, thus the school played a pivotal role in the formation ofartistic statements from the core members of the Madras Art Movement.The only institution offering comprehensive art education in South India, until the emergence of other art institution in the 1960s, many students aspiring to be artists gravitated here from the four states of Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.  Within the movement two broad styles - “Figurative” and “Abstract” can be identified as practiced by the artists who passed through the portals of this institution and established themselves as artists in their own right. |
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From an art historical perspective as a modern regional phenomenon it defined its space nationally by scripting artistic expressions led by group of pioneering artists foremost among them K.C.S. Paniker, A.P. Santhanaraj, L. Munuswamy, Redappa Naidu, K. Sreenivasulu, Alphonso Arul Doss, K.V. Haridasan, S.G. Vasudev, R.B. Bhaskaran and S. Dhanapal among others. It took shape in the early 1960s partially due to the identity crisis faced by the Madras artists as a groupfrom the South, but within the broader frame of the national milieu, and as a search for identity for Indian artists within mainstream internationalism. The Madras Art Movement gained momentum in the decade of the 1960s.  The discourse on ‘nativism’ instigated by K.C.S. Paniker opened up a dialogue with indigenous tradition and culture, including South Indian dynastic art forms and folk and tribal culture that made a very strong impact in painting as well as in sculpture.  Synthesizing the traditional with the modern, the pioneers set the tone for a distinct identity that became known as the Madras Art Movement.  As a matter of fact the sculptures and paintings that various artists within the Movement produced bear a strong family resemblance.  This is attributed to the spirit of consonance based on the strength of nativist ideology.  The nascent beginnings of this regional movement have been attributed to its first artist Indian Principal D.P. Roy Chowdhary [1899-1975] who took charge of the Art School in 1930; retiring in 1957. He ushered in newfine arts pedagogy at the College of Arts and Crafts, which until then was a site for the manufacture of craft objects that served the colonisers’ commercial purpose.  As a painter and a sculptor, Chowdhary excelled in the Japanese wash technique and Chinese calligraphy. As a sculptor he was successful in portraiture and was inundated with commissions from the elite of the Madras Presidency and nobility of the princely states.   His bronze sculptures reflected socialist subjects such as the ‘Triumph of Labour’ and ‘Martyr’s Memorial’; they inflect the influence of the French sculptor Auguste Rodin, with their rough unfinished surfaces, rich textures and the Neo-classical tradition of theatrical and dramatic gestures and postures.  In 1957 K.C.S. Paniker gave new impetus to art pedagogy at the school by introducing the study of European modernism to the curriculum. A visionary and a theorist, his brilliance, intelligence and sensitivity had led Paniker to achieve national and international fame. His disillusionment with the Indian contemporary art scene necessitated a need for a self-search, leading him to transcend from nature to culture, that is from landscape paintings to studying and analysing the Indian pictorial tradition.  Traditional cultures were researched to glean useful and authentic forms that essentially would help redefine and reinvent the indigenous or the native idiom.  Through these empirical initiatives and investigations into regional cultural forms, Paniker was able to logically arrive at abstraction in his celebrated ‘Words and Symbol Series’.In this series, the ideaswere derived from vernacular idioms, language and mathematical configurations and diagrams of horoscopes.  His first painting that envisages the use of scripts and pictographic elements was ‘The Fruit Seller’ in 1963.  Paniker’s painting ‘The River’ [1975] melds nature and culture.  Nature is visualised in its schematic role; and culture is embodied in its symbols, geometric shapes and diagrams of astrologer’s charts.  This ambivalent approach remains a salient feature in all his ‘Words and Symbols’ series.In 1966 Paniker established The Cholamandal Artists Village, which today is an internationallyknown artists’ commune. It has the distinction of being one of the few artists’ communes in the world today and particularly in India.Human Imagery As A Dominant Trope The human form served as a dominant trope for many artists to mediate as a tool for expression.  In modern Indian art, the significant use of the human form in the artists’ oeuvre was part of a program to represent people from their culture/surroundings and typically utilised human imagery as an expressive medium. In the 1970s it effectively battled abstraction, which had become a privileged expression for many Indian artists, and instead openeda trajectory based on the notion of Indian culture, that is, the values of its social or/and cultural environment. Artists distilled elements from personal experience to create meaningful expressions that made universal statements.  A study of the Madras Art Movement identifies two broad styles, namely abstract and figurative, dependent on the artists engagement with their visual language. Among the figurative artists who made a notable and distinct contribution particularly by their engagement with the regional or the local traditions of arts and crafts, religion and culture were J. Sultan Ali [1921-1992], K. Sreenivasulu [1923-1995], Perumal P. [1935 ], A.P. Santhanaraj [1932- 2008], M. Redappa Naidu’s [1932- 1999] Anthony Doss C.J. [1933- 2008], Venkatapathy D. [1935 ], Alphonso Arul Doss [1939-], K. Ramanujam [1941-1973], Senathipathi M.  [1939 ], Vasudev S.G.  [1941 ], Bhaskaran R. B. [1942 ], Arnawaz Vasudev [1945-1988], Padmini [1942-1969],Premlatha Seshadhri  [1948  ], Douglas C. [1951 ], Muralidharan K. [1954 ],  Abstraction Within The Madras Art Movement  While figuration was engaged by artists as a favoured visual language others opted for abstraction to express their concerns. A group of artists within the Madras Art Movement favoured abstraction,among themL. Munuswamy [1927-], Haridasan K.V [1937 K.M. Adimoolam [1938- 2008], Achuthan Kudallur’s [1945 ], V. Viswanathan’s[1940-], P. Gopinath’s [1948-],Palaniappan Rm. [1958  Sculpture In The Madras Art Movement  The sculpture produced during the early decades of 20th century was an eclectic blend of academic realism with a modern European style.  The late 1950s and the 1960s witnessed a turn towards the indigenous tradition.  This gravitation towards indigenism was a universal phenomenon in the country but more pronounced in the South.  When Paniker initiated his nativist argument in painting, a parallel agenda was also operating in sculpture; S. Dhanapal [1919- 2000] asculptorwho worked along with Paniker departed from 19th century academism and searched for a style that was personal, contemporary and yet not devoid of traditional inspiration.   P.V. Janakiram [1930-1995] S . Kanniappan’s [1932 - 2010]Murugesan S. [1933]T.R.P. Mookiah [1934-2012]S.G. Vidyashankar Sthapathy [1938-] S. Nandagopal’s [1946-]    Among other sculptors who were alumni of the College of Arts and Crafts were C. Dakshinamoorthy [1943-], P.S. Nandhan [1940-], S. Paramasivam [1942-], Kanayi Kunhiraman [1940-], Anila Jacob [1941 ] who live in Kerala, Balan Nambiar [1937 ] in Bangalore. Kanayi Kunhiraman, along with Dhanapal and Janakiram, is considered as an innovative artist, experimenting not only in techniques but also with materials.  Among the many artists who made their mark nationally were the following who worked both in figurative and abstract modes. Surendranath, P.B. [1931], Muthuswamy M.K. [1932 ], Vardarajan R.   [1935 ]  Venkathapathy D. [1935 ]  Henry Daniel ,  Nelson Kennedy J., Harie K.R., Paneerselvam A.P.,  I. Richards, Akitham Narayanan, Rajavelu S.K. [1941 ], Jayapal K. Panicker, T.K. Padmini, [1943-1969], Suryamoorthy M. [1944 ], Raman G. |
| Further reading:  (Bhagat)  (Indran)  (James)  (James, Contemporary Indian Sculpture: An Algebra of Figuration)  (Raman) |