John Clark

**K.C.S.Panicker (1911-1977)**,

Kovalezhi Cheerampathoor Sankaran Paniker was of Malayali backround but spent most of his active life as a painter, teacher, and organizer in Madras, now Chennai, in Tamil Nadu. His work is important for three reasons: it shows his own stylistic trajectory out of the modernist dilemmas faced by an artist before and after Indian Independence; it indicates the way Indian visual material from Malayalam script to magical diagrams could be mobilised to produce a kind of abstract pictorial discourse; it manifests how regionally based artist could link up with and generate significant modernist work at a national and international level. Modernism is a reflexive discourse where the subject is how an art form manifests the modern, the position which relativises the past, to make new selections of pre-modern exemplars where the modern becomes a pair with an invented tradition, and distances practice from a naturalised, unconscious customary. Modernism’s subject is the modality of the modern. Paniker’s work clearly shows this shift from a humanist identification with the Indian poor or politically oppressed using the practices of post-impressionism to the early-1950s. He moves to an identification with the Indian folk as a repository of visual experience but also a public visuality with considerable pre-colonial history.

In in the series *Words and Symbols* from 1963 he geometricalises his ground then flattens his depicted space, uses cartouches and bounded planes of colours as the grounds for what appear at first sight to be script characters and diagrams, but turn out as design elements deployed as visual counters to a selective ambiguation of his distance from Indian narratives, and how ‘ancientness and storytelling operate to articulate what it means to exist within the postcolonial condition’.

Paniker questioned the stress on a singular, Indian aesthetic which would impede or narrow the development of a future Indian modern art. Clearly in practice he thought one way to achieve this was also to create a directly modernist art in the regional centre of Madras, rather than mediate his relation to modernism indirectly via the trope of the Indian national:

..we in India must develop a reformed aesthetic vision, free from the severely restricted early nineteenth century concept. The aesthetic impulse of an Indian artist has to be Indian but any narrow nationalistic idea of recreating our great cultural and artistic heritage shouldn’t bog him down. That could be very dangerous for an artist of a new age. We should break away.

References and further reading:

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