FOUNTAIN SPRING

There lies hidden inside each of us, a sublime lotus pond, serene and fragrant – a pristine sanctum of beauty yearning to be liberated from our inner labyrinth . . . anticipating the kiss of the warm light from our early sun, biding time till we are ready to face it, so it may balm our soul and merge with an ethereal vastness . . . .

The seeker must dive into the deepest abyss within, to unveil this vision, concealed behind a mist of turmoil. This immersive journey of stillness determines its own destination – built along a road of pain, yet propelled by a promise of joy. Travellers on this path move and rest at their own pace. A painter’s fingers put aside the brush in surrender, when imagination is tested; a musician’s cords stretch to a note till he is transported, and then recede; a scientist jumps out naked from a tub when God removes his blindfold; a dancer immersed in his expression awakens to find his body exceeding physics and gravity. In that moment, they are all standing at the edge of the lotus pond within.

Ramachandran became an embryo drenched in foetal fluid, ensconsed in the womb of Mother Earth, becoming one with the lotus pond when his boat paddled through a lake overflowing with blooming lotuses. Such transcendental moments occur few and far, even in an artist’s life. His dialogue with the beauty and the decay in the lotus ponds of Ubeshwar, Nagda, Jogi ka Talab and Ekalinji drew him back to Rajasthan a number of times.

Born in a small principality called Attingal, in Kerala, Sir grew up in an intimacy with nature which the city-born only glimpse through the eyes of Roald Dahl. Skipping across paddy fields to local temples, partaking in the daily rituals of a culturally rich town, absorbing the sights and sounds of his surroundings – all embellished the canvas of a fertile young mind. It was serendipitous that he would find himself back in the lap of nature in Santiniketan where he went to study art. A literary and artistic haven on the outskirts of Calcutta, Santiniketan is enveloped by nature and overflowing with cultural inheritance. Here Ramachandran met his teacher Ram Kinker, who emphasised the need to be nature’s apprentice as he said, ‘Nature holds infinite possibilities of inexhaustible inspiration.’ The stalwart, Nandlal Bose, was still around too and his stoic presence was like the wind whispering through trees.

Ramachandran soaked in the energy of the wise and let the beauty of nature unfold in his mind’s eye. And then, Santiniketan brought him face to face with Chameli. In his words, ‘It was love at first sight. I was knocked over and laid flat and have ever remained so*.*’ Born and brought up in Santiniketan, Chameli was everything that Santiniketan stood for – gentle yet strong; beautiful, pure and unaffected. Proud of her roots, she was nevertheless drawn to the love of a man from the far south of the country. Together they embarked on a beautiful odyssey of love, respect and mutual learning – a journey of two individuals, so intimate that there was but one travelogue. Her presence in his life gave him the head start a runner gets in a relay race. Her support and undying belief in him helped him sprint, soar and fly as he honed his sensibilities that were to define the artist he was to become.

Somewhere along this journey, they relocated to Delhi to make it their home along with their children, Sujata and Rahul. It was then that I met him – a bright-eyed, art student, and, as he reminds me, very influenced by Western art movements at the time. He gently pushed my boat down river on a voyage of learning and self-reflection – a voyage that thankfully, is yet to reach its horizon. Though I completed graduation many moons ago, I continue to take the long trip to their home to soak in their energy, and enrich my mind through stimulating discussions with him on art, returning ever-inspired and even hungrier.

Delhi marked a new phase in Ramachandran’s life, introducing several new chapters. Amongst them was the experience of parenthood and nurturing the lives of his two children. The challenge of teaching art at Jamia Milia University brought several trials in its wake. His encounter with the majestic Gaudia Loharsinspired him towards his monumental work ‘Yayati’. And finally, and undoubtedly, he made his acquaintanceship with Rajasthan – the land which played a significant role in his art thereafter.

Rajasthan unfolded a panorama of nature’s bounty, an untouched haven where man and nature lived in complete harmony. It was there, in the land of the Bhils, that the lotus ponds found him. The many white lotuses of Jogi ka Talaab creating a pristine expanse as they swayed to the mystical air,the sensuous pink lotuses dancing to the tune of nature at Obeshwar and Ekalinjji, this magical landscape was a kaleidoscope, changing with the seasons and transforming during the day. In 1998 he painted his first lotus pond inspired by Ekalinji. Given its location by the temple complex, Ekalinji, in particular, has, over time, allowed him to paint the lotus pond through multiple perspectives.‘I felt like a miniature artist describing my comprehensive view of Ekalinji from different angles.’

Nearly six decades of magic-making – mural-like oil paintings, breathing sculptures, flowing water colours, drawings of ink and charcoal that look ready to move, have accorded A Ramachandran a special niche all his own in the art world. Yet the ceaseless seeker returns again and again. The ponds continue to draw Ramachandran back to absorb their many faces under the changing skies, to let him feel the throbbing pulse of an ecosystem of insects, birds, water animals and the flora that symbiotically energise each other. In a world where it is easy to be self-occupied and blinkered into believing that we are unique, the lotus pond is a reminder that it takes each element in the pond to be in harmony for even uniqueness to exist.

The sages shared the wisdom about ‘*sat sangat’* or the ‘company of truth’ – a space of association for self-growth and learning – partaking of the company of wise souls who accelerate our intellectual and spiritual growth. Their enlightening presence in our lives acts as a compass through the numerous swamps and marshes that we must traverse. I studied art for six years at Jamia Millia Islamia under ‘Nair Sir’. Thirty years on, he remains a teacher, a guide, an enabler and to use, perhaps, the most appropriate metaphor – my very own ‘lotus pond’.

Amidst this magnificient display of seven large canvasses, Ramachandran’s sketches provide the viewer with a vantage point as he becomes a quiet observer watching animals frolic and elements breathe through the eyes of the artist. The canvases are milestones of a journey – from the blossoming lotuses that emerge to their full glory and finally, succumb to their inevitable decay – reminding the viewer of the ever-revolving circle of life, where every stage remains beautiful in its own distinctive way.

In putting together my observations, I feel like Janus the two-headed God. I see a world disrupted by technology that continues to change at lightning speed, requiring perhaps of the contemporary artist to be ever more experimental and prolific. And then I look back at my inherited pedagogy seeped in rigour and steadfast toil – more vertical than sheer pursuit. My own conclusion, as curator of this show, is that grounding in one’s own heritage and examination of personal experience will define the authenticity of any artist – past or present. Without deepened foundations, one’s own language will remain incoherent particularly in today’s over-stimulated and volatile environment.

I have been granted a privileged gate pass to the amazing insights of the mind of my mentor – Ramachandran Sir – his working process, and how time and life have shaped his philosophy to determine what and how he paints. Through sharing these notes from my journal, I share a bit of ‘Sir’ as I know him. In doing so, I provide a glimpse of my lotus pond with the hope that you will be reminded of yours . . . .

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