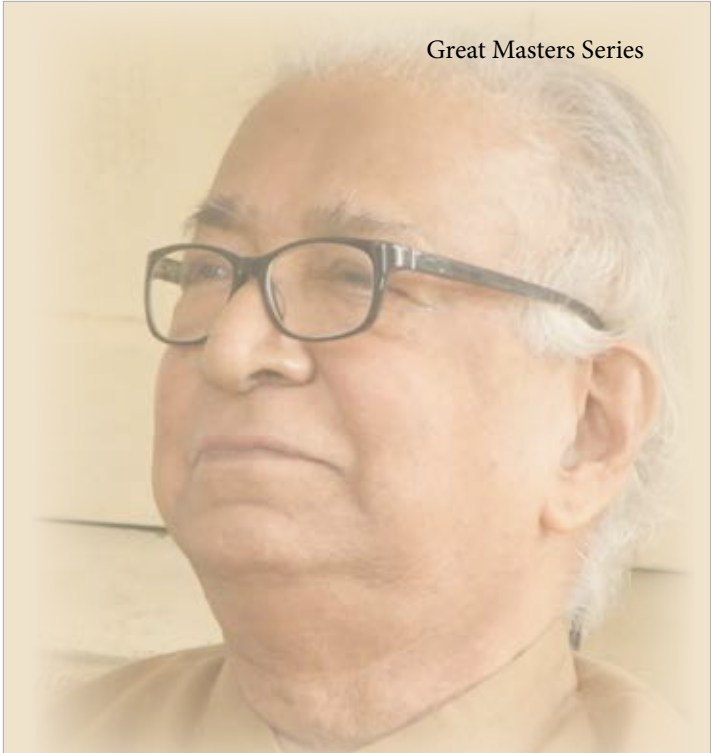


Great Masters Series



The Magic of Making
K. G. Subramanyan

A Documentary

Script, Music & Direction: Goutam Ghose

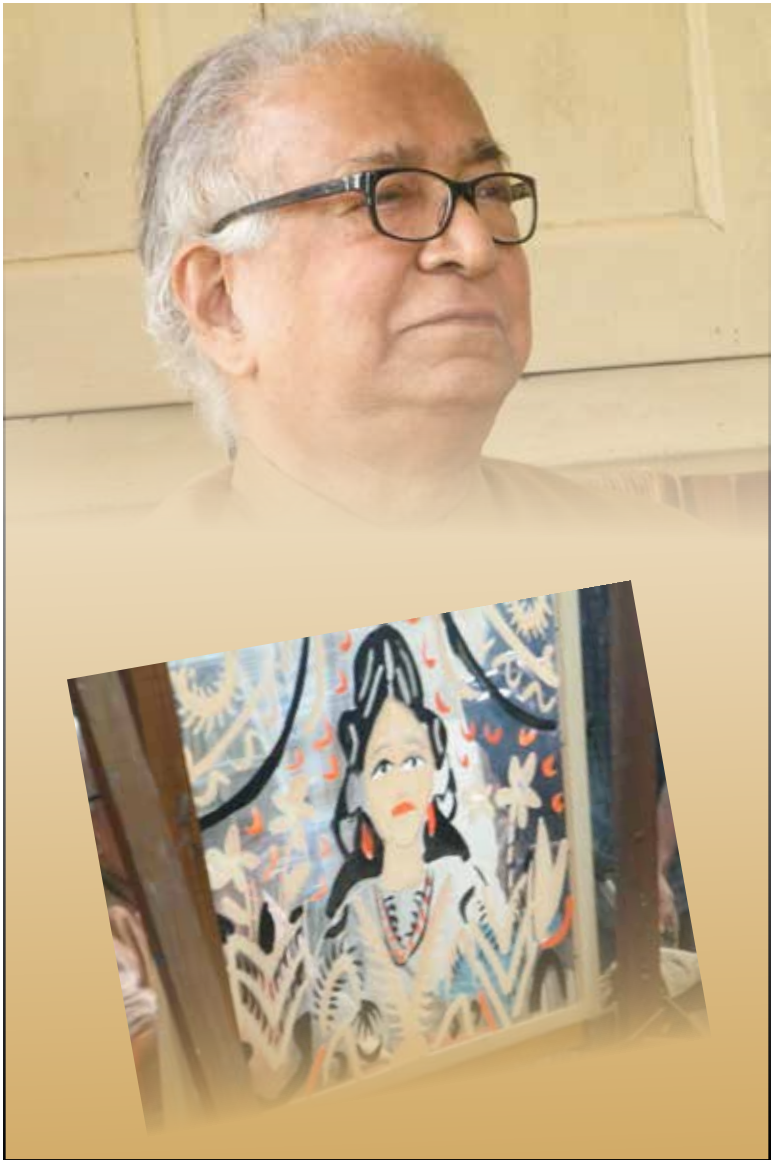
Conversation: Samik Bandyopadhyay

Cinematography: Ishaan Ghose

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K.G. Subramanian- An Artist Locating the Connecting Primeval Line in Areas of Art, Art Practice and Art Education; a Post Modernist Par Excellence

K. G. Subramanian, born in 1924, spent his early formative years in the lush green landscapes of Northern Kerala. His memories of childhood and later developments that contributed to his self-perception, in a changing world of Indian sub-continent, are translated by Mani Da (an endearing term usually invoked to address K.G. Subramanian by all close to him and not so close) into apt metaphors and enlightening anecdotes, revealing an unique mind deeply perceptive, warmly social and famously incisive.

The years that follow his birth, and decades, were marked by events that changed the world. The modernist Europe was realizing its dwindling arguments structured to represent the humane and the liberal. The colonised were fighting back to regain their political sovereignty and human dignity. In fact, the world was soon to see a war, the like of which had no precedent, sparked by local issues of identity and political freedom. Mani Da was at Presidency College, Madras now Chennai, doing economics. It was here he involved himself in active political movement that was growing in undivided India, to expel the British Government. Paradoxically, the Madras Presidency College was established by the British Government in



India. It was structured to produce natives who were inculcated with the idea of the superiority of the ruling government. Since it was seen by the British India, an act of sedition and unqualified rebellion, Mani Da could not continue his studies in any government college and University in India.

The change was in the air, and around this particular juncture in Mani Da's educational aspirational setback, Rabindranath was formulating his ideas in regard to new education. Shantiniketan offered the Indians an opportunity to grow in system of modern experiments in areas of knowledge. The poet visionary looked for inspiration from any part of the world. It was here in India that the idea of Pan-Asian culture took hold and the importance of liberal art education was founded. There was equal emphasis on scientific enquiry and temperament. Students came here to sit under the open sky, in the shade of a tree, with their teachers, converting the landscape into an educational class.

In 1948 he was in Kala Bhavan, learning the practice of creative art when Asit Kumar Haldar and Nandal Bose were grooming potential artists painters. His teachers were connected to artist founder Abanindranath Tagore of Bengal School, a movement that initiated the need to connect the artists with the Indian Nationalist Movement now gaining momentum and force. There was, of course, Rabindranath himself, evolving his doodling art, finding his poetic sensibility endorsing



his experiments in line, colour and form. Rabindranath, modernist in perception, nurtured Ramkinker Baij, a child of Santhal milieu, to join Kala Bhavan and allow his creative impulse a fluid space and articulation. Ram Kinker, proved himself more than worthy of a visionary's expectation, in terms of art and art practice and its education. Ram Kinker's monumental sculptures line the Shantiniketan landscape and add prestige to the collection of the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi. Mani Da, contemporary of Ram Kinker, has in good measure extended the vision of Rabindranath of a new heaven of freedom, a new India to awake. Binode Bihari Mukherjee, another Modernist on the Indian scene, was perhaps the greatest influence on young Mani Da. The brilliant muralist Binode Bihari, whose exemplary visual narratives on the walls of Hindi Bhavan, have given entirely new dimension to the tradition of Indian vernacular poetry and the history of Bhakti Bhava with its egalitarian sensibility. This medieval philosophy of co-existence of various parallel intellectual trends, sustained a cohesive matrix for creative expressions. Mani Da, worked with Binode Da on this immense body of visual literary work.

Mani Da did and continues, creative teaching practice, so to say. His students would wait, hoping he will see on-going works in their studios. The students hoped Mani Da would make his assessment known to them. Mani Da, the teacher conveyed his thoughts in some metaphor, anecdote or perhaps a witty remark. Without







discussing exhaustively, Mani Da was successful in imbibing a sense appreciation of certain artistic value and he opened up a whole horizon of possibilities for the students. After teaching the subject of Painting for few years, Mani Da left for London to join the Slade School of Art, as a research scholar. Here he made his presence felt and London had plenty to offer with its multicultural experiments in history of art, art of collecting and prominent auction houses.

On return to India, Mani Da, who prescribes Gandhian philosophy and adheres to the principle of non-violence in all practices in human condition that ultimately translates into peaceful co-existence. It was an expansive platform for Mani Da when he joined All India Handloom Board in 1959 and stayed there as a Director of Design till 1961. The weaver in him must have been thrilled at this close association with the remarkable community of Indian weavers and their exquisite skills in textile making, coming from weaving and textile centers in remote areas of India.

Baroda as a city perhaps had an enduring fascination for Mani Da. He was back in this small University City teaching again in the Fine Arts Faculty. He was painting with students from 1961 to 1980. He, along with others in the Faculty, promoted cross cultural, multicultural perspective. They made occasions to include crafts into the mainstream art teaching and practice. Toy making and terracotta was to become, under his gaze, an avant-



garde media of expression. Students, while witness to these experiments, were to break for themselves, the lines of differentiation, created to categorise the Art practices into a level that was high and the Crafts of long history and aesthetics, into Minor. The need to erase the line of convenience that separated the Art from Craft was felt and understood as urgent when it came to teaching art in India. This, perhaps, was and is more quintessentially true, as traditions simultaneously live, borrow and evolve in India, many times overlapping what goes as the high and the minor in the practice of creative visual expression.

An innate visual narrator, he is a writer too. What perhaps he has enjoyed most, are his illustrated children's books, which he not only illustrated but writes too. He is an invincible ideologue, a theoretician, making us understand the subtle and linked lines lying between various areas of human life and diverse human creative communications. I still remember my first reading of Mani Da's *Moving Focus* and how well it introduced me to a compelling world of intellectual understanding of art and culture, visual and written graphic. My first copy of it is with me. It still carries signs of my nervous attempt to grapple all that the author artist had to tell. I discreetly underlined with a soft pencil, ticked sentences and paragraphs lest I forget any one thought or idea. I continue to read this body of thoughts of Mani Da, laid out so comprehensively, and buy the book to gift it to others.

Today, when he paints, he says I do so, out of the need, to express myself, in line and colour. He paints, he says, to keep his mind connected with the life that he sees around him. An exhaustive retrospective exhibition was opened in New Delhi at the NGMA and this travelled to other cities in India. This indeed brought together the massive body of works that spanned decades, mediums and transcended boundaries of language. The range of his interests, his productivity, writings, ideas and concepts, all together make this man an artist, whose vision looks beyond the modernist parameter and holds the world in a view, which I may not be too far from truth, if I say is post modernist or even perhaps post post-modernist, in certain respect.

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