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L. MUNUSWAMY



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L. MUNUSWAMY

LALIT KALA AKADEMI, NEW DELHI  
1985

ANJALI SIRCAR

As the author of this monograph, Anjali Sircar has a unique association with the art of South India. She has been part of the new art movement that emerged in Tamil Nadu in the 60's, and as a regular Art Columnist has focussed attention on the remarkable growth of contemporary South Indian art.

Her book "S. Dhanapal – Pioneer Sculptor of South India" published by the South India Society of Painters, Madras, has attracted wide attention in India and abroad.

Her major interest is Fine Arts, and she lives in Madras.



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Published by the Secretary, Lalit Kala Akademi,  
New Delhi and Printed at Ajanta Offset, Delhi.

## L. MUNUSWAMY

The career of L. Munuswamy can be seen to encapsulate two histories, his own and that of post-1950 art, for it coincides with and summarises many of the issues central to this period. It is a highly representative career, one which registers with barometric efficacy the demise of the influence of the British Royal Academy on Indian art, the schismatic questions posed by mid-50's art and the channeling of the latter into the art of the current period.

It is very difficult to trace a development in Munuswamy's work through distinct stages. He repeats himself for long intervals, reverts to earlier styles, or leaps ahead unexpectedly. Still, it is possible to discern three levels or manners in Munuswamy's painting which emerged chronologically though none displaced the previous manner. To differentiate between them will help understand where his eye eventually led him.

At a very early age he appeared to have cultivated special powers of vision. Although surrounded by children of his own age, he could not communicate with them and in all probability turned to art to communicate for him. Furthermore, art was a respected occupation in his family. His grandfather, father and various uncles were artisans who excelled in icon and intricate jewellery making, and Munuswamy needed almost no academic training in art. He intuitively worked in close relation to nature and was able, as Wordsworth put it, "to see into the heart of things". Lines formed as he held his pencil or crayon and arrested attention for an essentially aesthetic experience. Like a person who has a message to deliver, he was endlessly propelled forward by the spectacle of his own performance which at a later date led him to claim a basic style in art that survived all his experimentation.

Apparently, a financial crisis in the family acted as a cold shower and found him in an insignificant government job instead of at his dream-portal of the School of Arts and Crafts. A person with a passion to paint found himself drifting into excruciating isolation, his hopes of attaining a bearable self turning desperately ironic. A delicately built boy, rather under the



average height, he seldom manifested any emotion and expressed to no one his interest in art. But during office hours he made many drawings and sketches which formed a fit prelude to the long line of great pieces that was to follow through more than thirty years of activity.

Three years passed, and gradually out of the depth of melancholy and misery he felt his energy revive, and he said to himself: "In spite of everything I will rise again." In the midst of the new artistic ferment he realised that he was in desperate need of instruction. If he could get an established artist to help him, someone whose work appealed to him, he might test his talents in the world's larger arena of art.

Munuswamy made the acquaintance of several commercial artists and the chief benefit of his sessions with them seems to have been his introduction to a remarkable artist, S. Dhanapal, who proved to be a natural catalyst for he radiated an intensity that charged the atmosphere around him. He wholeheartedly adopted Munuswamy as his protege and gave him everything he had to offer. He listened more than he talked, was acutely sensitive, and open to all manner of ideas.

Munuswamy says: "As my first teacher in life, Dhanapal helped foster the artist in me. He joined the Madras School of Arts and Crafts as a student in 1948. The Madras Art School, headed by D.P. Roy Chowdhury was at that time steeped in an atmosphere that was a mixture of the British Royal Academy and the Bengal School of Painting, known as the Oriental School dominated by Nandalal Bose, Abanindranath Tagore and others. The portrait study was of the British School, whereas the creative compositions followed the Bengal style. There was yet another notable artist in the school, K.C.S. Paniker, a man of intellect and rationalist attitude who was on the quest for an answer to problems that had begun to emerge in the wake of nationalism versus world influences.

As a student, Munuswamy had the unprecedented advantage of seeing the world around him through the lenses of three eminent masters who were as divergent as possible from one another, yet dynamic and throbbing with vitality.

"The personality of Roy Chowdhury," says Munuswamy, "was

so overwhelming and his life-style was so aristocratic that he was considered to be a prince among artists. His paintings were undoubtedly a breakthrough in the phase of the prevalent sterile indigenous style and technique. His sculptures were unique in more than one sense. The volume, texture and composition of his creations were dynamic and provocative. His pattern of life was plainly set, but I could hardly fall into that pattern for I realised that the tenderness in me would not be able to withstand the onslaught of his virile, rugged dominance.

"It was precisely in this context that Dhanapal gained my admiration and I found in him the nearness and oneness of the heart and the mind of two individuals. Dhanapal's linear dexterity and falmboyance soaked in native richness touched my heart, and it is this streak of influence that gave me the direction I was to take.

"Yet I could not turn away from the new introspective spirit of K.C.S. Paniker. Himself an accomplished draughtsman and a painter, he never underestimated the need for personal accomplishment and identity, linked with the native genius. It was he who introduced me to some of the best painters of the Impressionist School of Painting in Europe and his frequent discussions and analytical studies of problems facing contemporary artists paved the way for the questioning by the younger generation of artists of the authority of the Establishment and the ultimate breakaway from the so-far-existing decadent British and Oriental styles."

Perhaps Munuswamy was spurred by the personal thirst for self-expression; perhaps he was simply maturing. In any event, although he continued to draw and paint outdoor scenes favoured by Impressionists, he soon provided a fortaste of a phase of art in which he clearly revealed his own character—that of a strong-willed man who was prepared to defy the influences of his environment and put forth his own commentaries, statements and elucidations of life.

A new page is revealed in Munuswamy's art in the 60's — a page far more serious than any that had gone before. Asserting his new instinct for independence, he plunged into the questions of theme and technique with adequate artistic credentials. How

would he go about the question of finding an outlet for his creative work? The human model posed a challenge to his art and expression because of the limited scope it provided for creativity. The framework was fixed and the lines had to be controlled and structured within that framework.

He experimented with an idea of making the human figure real as well as illusory. While working with the human models, he was concerned with neither the subject nor the object but with the space within and without – a composite structure in reality. These were now his models – his own creations – models which had been liberated from the fixed body structure. Though he was basically trying an Impressionist style, in fact it was a combination of line, abstraction and ornamental work, as also placing the model in the centre of the composition while trying to retain balance and harmony. The entire work was leading towards a solution to the traditional problems of expression.

The approach Munuswamy developed when his colleagues were working hard to bring out the photographic likeness of the form through light and shade, was to imprint a way that would justify his temperament and intellectual needs. A compelling description of what the artist was undertaking comes from his own self: "There came now a continuous flow of studies – nearly two to three hundreds of them, unconventional, dynamic and with a vigorous personal touch. My struggle could not be bracketed with or compared to any that was being practised or appreciated at that time. Why? I absorbed all the influences of the European masters, but I was never derivative or imitative. This is an important aspect of my work – there has been a steady, unbroken individualism which formed in me without my being aware of it. It all began with the Impressionists – Manet, Monet, Pissaro, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, Gauguin, Van Gogh on to Matisse, and some of the Fauvists and then the Cubists, Cezanne, Braque, Gris, Picasso. I learnt to look at things in whichever form they were around me – trees, flowers, beast or man or even man-made objects – with both my physical and inner eyes. I always felt at home in the medium of water colour and tempera, but now I was working totally in oils. But I suffered a lot because of my peculiar communication with things animate and inanimate,

achieved through a willed abdication of certain mode of thoughts and expectation. Even my own teachers misunderstood me. When I showed my works to Roy Chowdhury, he said: 'I don't understand you.' But he never stood in my way. That was his greatness as a teacher."

Either out of his struggle or out of his genius – probably both – Munuswamy was able to demonstrate a further meaning of 'impression'. Even in his most abstract paintings, one could effortlessly define the hidden native grain in it. He ensured that the link of Indian roots with his abstract world was secure. The massive female figures which appeared during this period on his canvas resembled Gauguin's "Tahitian Women" in their rock-cut hands and solid torsos and the colouring was unmistakably Matisse's, but there was the final impress of Ajanta in the sinuous and rhythmic flowing lines, like a continuity from one end of the cave to another. Sometimes, there would be a bird, a flower or a mere tree, yet there would never be a break in continuity which is a characteristic of Chola imagery too.

It is difficult to avoid one logical consequence of this way of looking at Munuswamy. It is strange that his emphasis has been more on the linear expression than on tonal values and the masses. He sees the whole panorama of landscape – birds, animals, vegetation, the sun, moon and the water – as a lyrical symphony, full of criss-crossing, overlapping as well as parallel lines, ultimately creating a picture of harmony. His landscapes are sometimes blocks of colour, combined with lines, both delicate and heavy, interspersed actually, to create a dramatic solid vision. Where the landscapes have trees and lakes with the reflection of the sun, the reflection is controlled with geometric lines, straight as well as curved. Here one can see the effect of the Indian miniatures, the entire composition is tied firmly with vertical, horizontal and oblique lines. The animals are solid, yet the figures are so delicately woven as though embroidered on a tapestry. The lions, elephants and horses are brought in mostly for a decorative ornamental effect – a poetic gift which the artist inherited from his ancestors who were master craftsmen.

At the final level, Munuswamy seems to reserve his direction, to live through a shift of vision comparable to the reorientation

we experience when an optical illusion flips over into its reverse arrangement. The vivid impressions of women constitute our only sure refuge; for, if one dares look, the flux lies behind. What would he say about the continuous presence of women in his paintings and drawings? "For me, the focus of attention has always been the woman. She has been the central figure, not only from the point of view of her protective quality but also as a person who could sustain or destroy the harmony of life. And it was during my keen observation of them that women became the object of my study, not only from the psychological and social aspects, but essentially in the evolution of my creative ability."

"I do not particularly remember my mother. I was brought up in a large joint family where my mother found little time to pamper me. when all children were held in their mothers' bosoms, I used to feel lonely, deprived. Perhaps what I could not have in real life, I have tried to get in a world of my own by recreating them in my drawings in various moods and shapes. I have tried to compensate the physical absence of feminine love with the presence of graphic imagery."

In mid-Seventies, Munuswamy suffered a serious setback in the sudden death of his wife, and the subsequent years saw a tremendous change in his attitude towards life and work. He painted fifteen oils on the theme of "Woman and Mother", mourning the absence of the woman he loved. For a brief span he switched to sculpture and made three of them in the shape of flowers and foliage. His "Composition", "Homage" and "Devi" were all tributes to his wife, deep colours with suggestive lines with abstract sweeps soaring towards the unknown – perhaps an effort to reach out to the missing soul.

The artist rallied back from his deep grief, but continued to paint women. But these women were not angelic any more, they were down-to-earth, sensuous, with sinuous limbs and torso. Casting away their colour and sentimentalism, the women became stark, severe, tormented suggestions in lines. The figures appeared distorted beyond recognition, and the various parts of the body were scattered and suspended in space. Was it because the artist was angry with life, and felt deprived? Or was it because he had reached a stage where the presence or absence of things

mattered no more?

Munuswamy himself answers the questions: "I have perhaps arrived at a style where I am able to go through the same old intense feelings for the human form, particularly the form of woman, without going in for the usual, recognisable imprints of their feelings. The paintings shattered and random suggestions of the same forms in broken and faded out lines or structures could represent anything from a female form to an abstract landscape or the rhythm of the waves or the flight of a bird or the swaying of a blade of grass."

His creations could be taken as a commentary on life, a stricture, an angry outburst, or even a poem. But should there be a statement or a description or a graphic presentation of an idea or a feeling? Munuswamy does not feel the need for it and would like to declare to the world: "I have no identity, I am the universal being, the artist."

Munuswamy's method and style as an artist have been those of a man who has something relevant to say and has employed no rhetoric, but driven straight to the point. He cares little for what has gone before him and echoes no painters living or dead. His contribution to art is wholly personal and Indian. His work is racy, of the soil, even its blemishes are national. It is concise, pungent; it abounds in the "unexpectedness of the usual".

Although it deals in realities, it is not prosaic. On the contrary, it contains those essential elements of poetry and deep feeling to which is added in many instances the charm of rhythm. The singular beauty and dignity of many of his compositions, seemingly due to instinct rather than deliberate plan, are salient qualities of his work which more than anything else give the aspect of unforgettable pictorial authority and weight to his major works of art.

ANJALI SIRCAR



















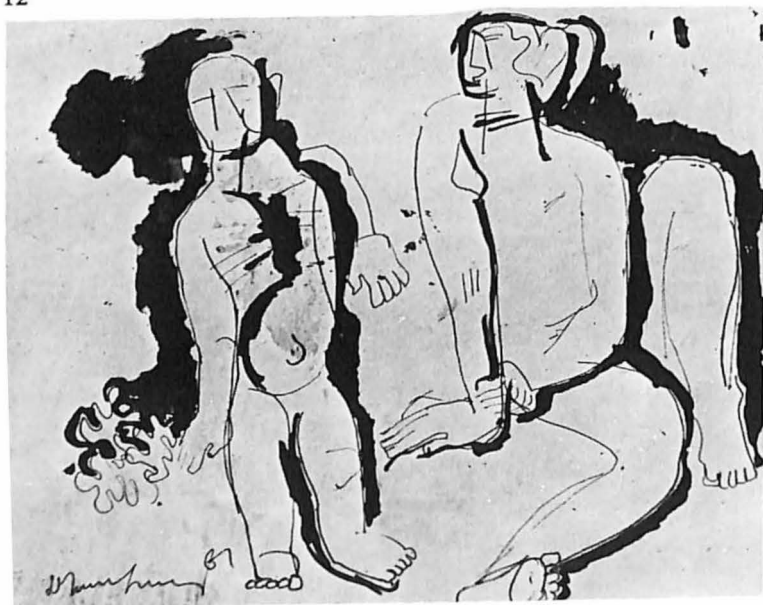




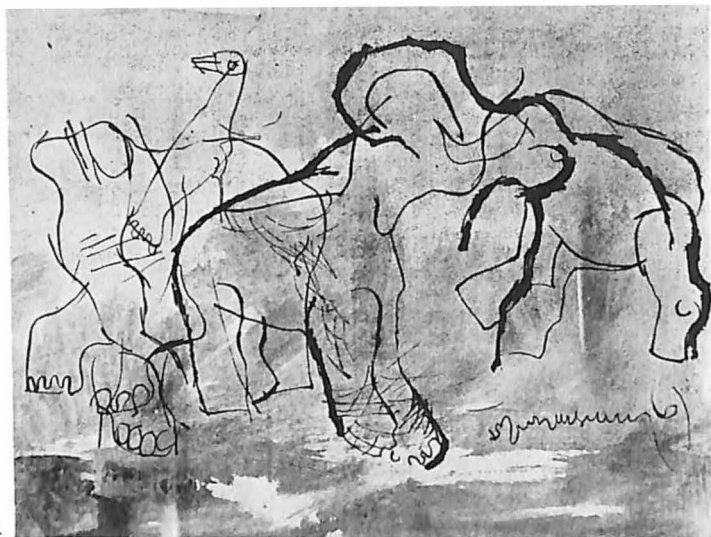












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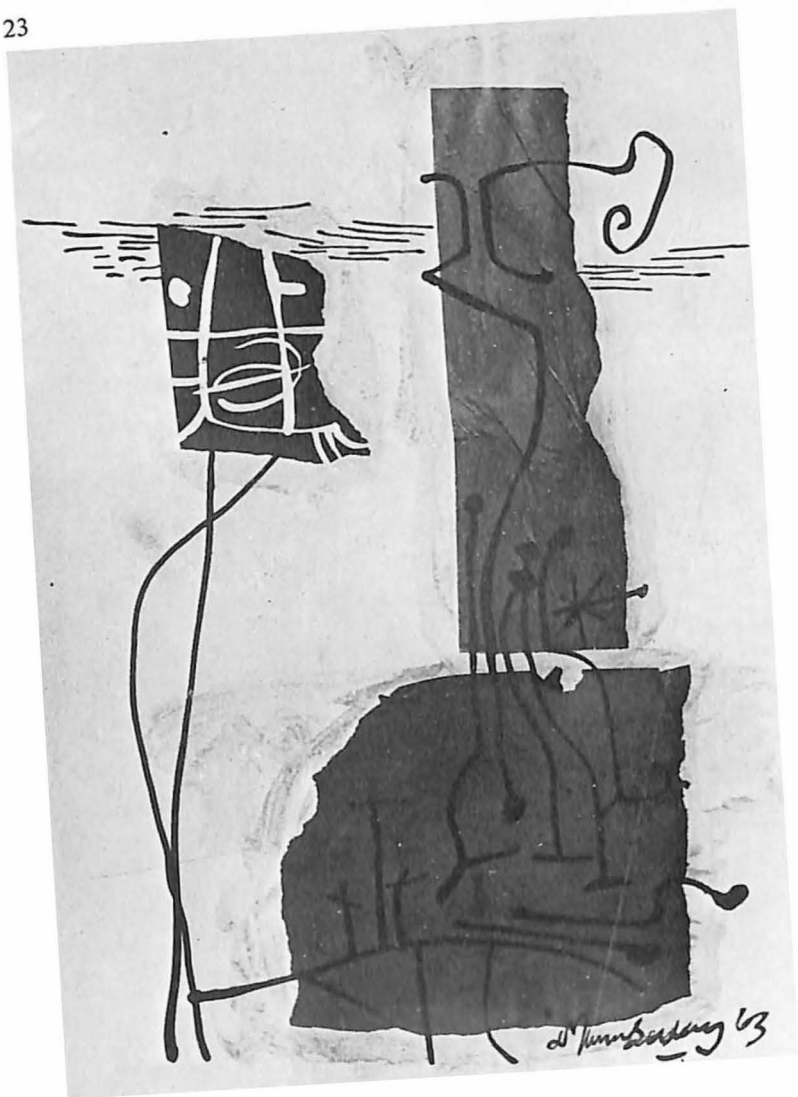
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31



## List of Illustrations

No.	Title	Medium	Year
Cover:	Fashion Model	Tempera	1963
1.	Old Man sitting	Oils	1959
2.	Old Man	Oils	1960
3.	Young Girl	Oils	1960
4.	Nude Study	Crayon	1960
5.	Embrace	Ink & Wash	1960
6.	Animals	Oils	1961
7.	Still Life	Oils	1960
8.	The Lotus Woman	Water Colour	1960
9.	The Swan & the Lady	Tempera	1962
10.	Rhyme	Cryons	1960
11.	Man & Woman	Ink & Wash	1960
12.	Child before woman	Ink & Wash	1961
13.	Portrait	Oils	1962
14.	Birds and Elephants	Ink & Wash	1961
15.	Group Composition	Tempera	1962
16.	Woman Athelete	Oils	1965
17.	The Sinking Boat	Tempera	1964
18.	Symbol	Plate Litho	1963
19.	Chair	Oils	1962
20.	Landscape	Water Colour	1964
21.	Garden	Oils	1961
22.	Elephants	Water Colour	1959
23.	Collage		1963
24.	Passion	Oils	1965
25.	Landscape	Acralyic on Canvas	1984
26.	Fashion Model	Tempera	1963
27.	Landscape	Pastel on Canvas	1980
28.	Landscape	Acralyic on Canvas	1984
29.	Studies	Crayons	1960
30.	Studies	Crayons	1960
31.	Landscape	Acralyic on Canvas	1984

The works Reproduced are in the Artists Collection.

## BIO-DATA

- 1927      – Born in Madras
- 1953      – First Class Diploma in advanced Painting from Govt. College of Arts and Crafts, Madras.
- 1956-57   – Government of India Cultural Scholarship for Research in Painting.
- 1958      – Joined Govt. College of Arts and Crafts as a staff
- 1963-64   – Scholarship under Colombo Plan to Study Graphic Design at Bournemouth, England.
- 1968      – National Award for Painting (Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.)
- 1976      – Tamil Nadu State Akademi Award for Painting
- 1979      – Attended Artists Camp organised by State Akademi, Tamil Nadu at Ooty
- 1982      – Participated at the Workshop and Seminar at Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal
- 1982      – Jury for the State Level Art Exhibition, Tamil Nadu
- 1982      – Served as member advisory board for upgrading in Hyderabad College of Fine Arts & Architecture.
- 1983      – Syllabus Committee member for Art in Schools-organised by NCERT, New Delhi.
- 1983      – Attended the All India Painters Camp at Trichur, Kerala, organised by Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.
- 1984      – Participated at the Southern Regional Artists Camp at Tamil University, Tanjavur.
- 1984      – Served as the Jury for National Exhibition of Art  
Member: Advisory Board College of Architecture and Sculpture, Mahapalipuram, Tamil Nadu  
Principal, Govt. College of Arts and Crafts, Madras.

Collections:    National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.  
                       National Art Gallery, Madras  
                       Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal  
                       Tamil University, Tanjavur and many private  
                       collections in India and abroad

