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K. SREENIVASULU

K. Sreenivasulu was born in Madras but spent his boyhood days in Nagalapuram, an idyllic, wooded village in the Chittoor district of Madras. His father was an amateur toy maker and was deeply interested in dramatics which was an abiding family interest. Young Sreenivasulu was thus brought up in this fine atmosphere of toys and dramatics. Doubtless, this proved to be one of the most enduring influences on him. Apart from the three R's Sreenivasulu's primary schooling included the making of clay toys and training in a variety of craft work. As he grew, he got more involved in the stage life of the family and started making his own contribution. He learned to paint the back-drops, cut-outs and to make stage-props. The plays were wholly mythological or folk and thus provided thematically a substantial background to the future artist. When he was about fifteen he left his native village and went to Madras, the Southern metropolis. He found the rigidity of ordinary schools and the prevailing apathy towards arts and crafts in secondary education irksome and disturbing. And so he joined the Government School of Arts & Crafts, Madras headed by the well-known sculptor, D. P. Roy Chowdhury in 1937. The atmosphere in the Art School in those days was very far from folk art and mythology. A strange brand of British





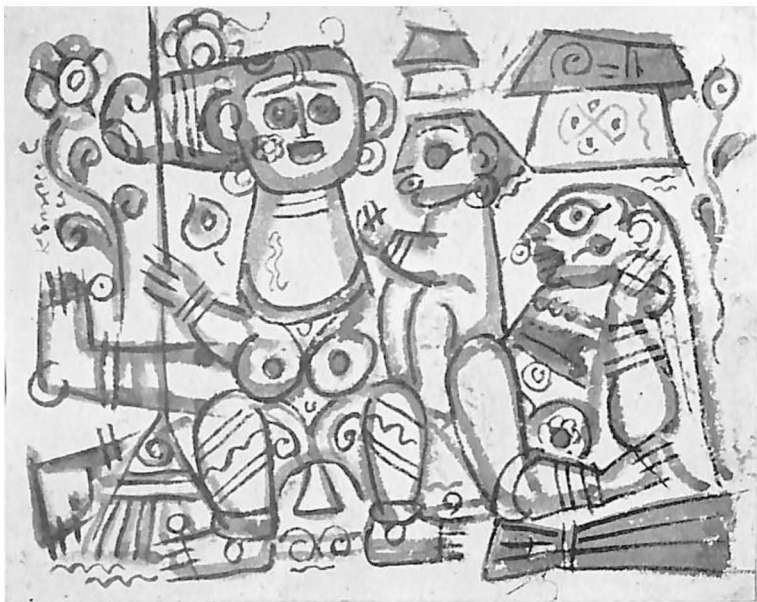
academism prevailed with little scope for the flowering of a young mind inspired by native legend and folklore. But Sreenivasulu got to grips with the current style and acquired proficiency in the academic manner. He soon made his mark as a landscape painter in the manner of Brangwyn whose sensitive water colours made a deep impression on him.

Soon after graduating from the Art School, chance led him to Adyar. Adyar was the seat of the Theosophical Society. There was no job immediately but Sreenivasulu was allowed to stay in the glorious, nascent cultural atmosphere of Adyar. After a while he joined the staff of the Adyar School. Adyar with its great emphasis on Indian thought and culture must have meant a great deal to the young artist on the threshold of his career. The atmosphere of dance and music which pervaded this sequestered oasis in the South resuscitated his latent interests in folklore and mythology. Apart from classical dance and music, Adyar provided a platform for folk-dance, folk-drama and decor. The pressure and richness of all this experience soon led Sreenivasulu into a period of change; a process of self-searching began.

Another opportunity appeared, Sreenivasulu was asked to copy the murals at Lepakshi (Vijayanagar period, 16th century) near

Hindupur. He worked on the copies for three years from 1948 to 1951. The rich, fascinating treasure house of Vijayanagar painting was both a revelation and confrontation to the artist. A new world was thrown open to him. He made copies of some 500 panels of paintings from the ceiling of the mandapas of the Veerabhadra Temple. That set the mood for a new style and approach. The intense inspiration of Lepakshi coloured his immediate work distinctly. See for instance **LOTUS GARLAND** and **GREEN ROOM**. But gradually he evolved a bolder, more simplified style, not unrelated to his major experience. Later he was commissioned to copy the paintings at Sigiriya (Ceylon) and the Chola murals at Tanjore for the Madras Museum. About this time Sreenivasulu was able to study an original collection of Jain miniatures of Western India and a book of paintings by Jamini Roy. The beauty of design and intense colour of the Western Indian miniatures and the boldness and simplicity of Jamini Roy's work appealed to him immediately. Sreenivasulu recognised a kindred heart in Jamini Roy whom he admires deeply. While it is not unlikely that Sreenivasulu was immensely moved by the bold well-knit design and the compact use of colour of Jamini Roy, his work does not show evidence of any direct influence. There are points of similarity as well as of difference in both the

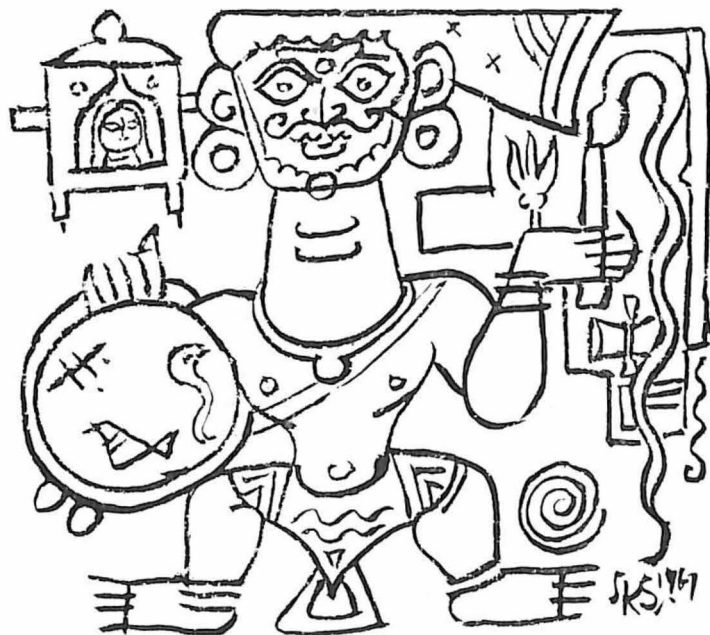




conceptual and the formal aspects of their work. In the most typical works of Jamini Roy there is not even a suggestion of chiarascuro. His composition is straightforward to the utmost degree, almost stark in its strength and contour. Likewise his colours are laid as flat areas, and the overall pictorial impact is one of both power and simplicity. In his search for the essential form he purges his work of all superfluity. Sreenivasulu's approach is quite different. He delights in ornament, in minute details of jewellery and designs on the garments. On the other hand, both have been moved by the formal strength and simplicity of folk art in their respective regions. The Sukhalis of Rayalaseema may have had the same impact on Sreenivasulu as the Santhals on Jamini Roy. Both have derived sustenance from folk theatre. The 'pats', folk toys, terracoitas from Bankura, Birbhum and Midnapur fascinated and effectively determined the very personal style of Jamini Roy, just as the Kondapalli and Tirupati toys, the leather puppets

and temple paintings moulded the style of Sreenivasulu. Lepakshi played the same role in determining Sreenivasulu's early style as the terracotta tiles of Vishnupur and Danihat Sculpture did in the case of Jamini Roy.

The Lepakshi murals are of a highly decorative and stylized kind thematically derived from the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Puranas. The style is distinctly southern, the mood is intensely nostalgic, replete with myth and legend. The lulling, sentimental curve of the line, the intricate, profuse jewellery and textile patterns, the rich colouring and sensuous delineation of the female form characteristic of these paintings left an indelible mark on Sreenivasulu. The impact of Lepakshi on Sreenivasulu, who is basically a figurative painter, devoted to his artistic heritage, was far reaching. But, I am not sure if the Lepakshi paintings did anything more than suggest a manner, apart from confirming Sreenivasulu's predilection for tradition





and causing an inspiration arising directly from the soil around him. If one compared the paintings of Lepakshi with some of the best works of Sreenivasulu done in the wake of his new experience, one would trace areas of influence in the manner of hairstyle and drapery, jewellery and textile design and other details of embellishment. But the drawing of the Lepakshi figure, the stance of the men and women, the overall formal arrangement find only a distant echo in Sreenivasulu's work. What he took from Lepakshi was the use of rich, dark colours, the sensuous beauty of the female form and the graceful flowing line. All this was a sumptuous cup of strong wine and must have satiated Sreenivasulu's thirst for tradition. It was logical that he sensed the need for a more direct, bolder and simpler style.

Sreenivasulu's early paintings reveal his strongest point, his perfect hold on drawing. See for example **TOILET**. He has an unerring judgment of line; the line flows beautifully, remarkably precise and steady. But behind this spontaneity is an intelligent, sophisticated mind that functions with unusual confidence and deliberation. His delineation of the human figure is exaggerated and idealistic. The treatment of the female figure is idealised almost on the basis of the 'Sanskritic' tradition.

Stylistically they are near the Tanjore Murals, over-stylised and ornate. He paints the faces mostly in profile with a chisel sharp precision, whether the subject is a nayika playing the Veena or a simple woman at her toilet or a group of labourers at a game of cards.

The danger and limitation of this style was soon apparent to Sreenivasulu and the realisation brought a change. His women were rescued from the heavy and sentimental classical or semi-classical background and placed in a more natural, contemporary context. The drawing becomes more direct, the decorative details almost echewed and the scene shifts to everyday life (**BASKET WEAVERS**). Sreenivasulu felt the kinship that knit this new phase with the naive vision characteristic of folk art.

Throughout his life Sreenivasulu maintained an interest in folk art. To begin with, folk toys had played a significant role in shaping his mind as a child. He lived surrounded by the wooden toys of Kondapalli, the stiff but fascinating rosewood dolls of Tirupati, leather puppets from Andhra and Tamilnad, temple applique work and other objects. He sketched these for pleasure and gradually they figured as principal motifs in his paintings.

It must be emphasised that the basic inspiration of the real folk artist is quite different from that of the city-bred self-conscious artist who merely draws inspiration from folk art. What distinguishes the style of the one from the other is a whole world of sophistication and education, beliefs and ideas. The naivette of the village artist is genuine and natural. To the Kondapalli toy maker, his manner of work is the only way to create, not a choice. Likewise, the rough-hewn rosewood toys of Tirupati are the work of a craftsman who cannot conceive the human figure otherwise. But to Sreenivasulu and artists like him the attraction for folk art is a matter of deliberate choice. He seizes upon the beauty of form and colour characteristic of folk art,

crystalises and reinterprets the various elements evolving a personal and original style.

As we have observed before, Jamini Roy's work suggested to Sreenivasulu, a vital source of inspiration—folk art. Some pictures like **LAVA KUSHA** bear this out or the large panel, **LIFE OF KRISHNA**. He did not have to look far for a more direct source of inspiration in this respect. The colourful, fascinating toys of Andhra Pradesh provided the basic motifs (**FISHERWOMEN, NADASWARAM PLAYERS**). And then he comes back to the men and women around him who grip his imagination again afresh. Sreenivasulu is essentially an Andhra Painter and has for inspiration the entire expanse of rich colourful Andhra Pradesh apart from his own native Rayalaseema. The dark sinewy, able bodied men and the fulsome amber coloured, neat featured women with their bright vivacious eyes that people his paintings are typically Andhra. Often his figures are reminiscent of the heavily bejewelled Sukhalis, a tribe of Rayalaseema similar to the Lambadis of Hyderabad. The Palm-leaf umbrella, the circular roofed hut are indications of his absorbing pictorial interest in the Andhra landscape. This renewed faith in the pictorial potentiality of his immediate environs asserted itself in his new work (**FISH SELLERS**). These paintings are more organically conceived, in a vigorous and spontaneous manner.

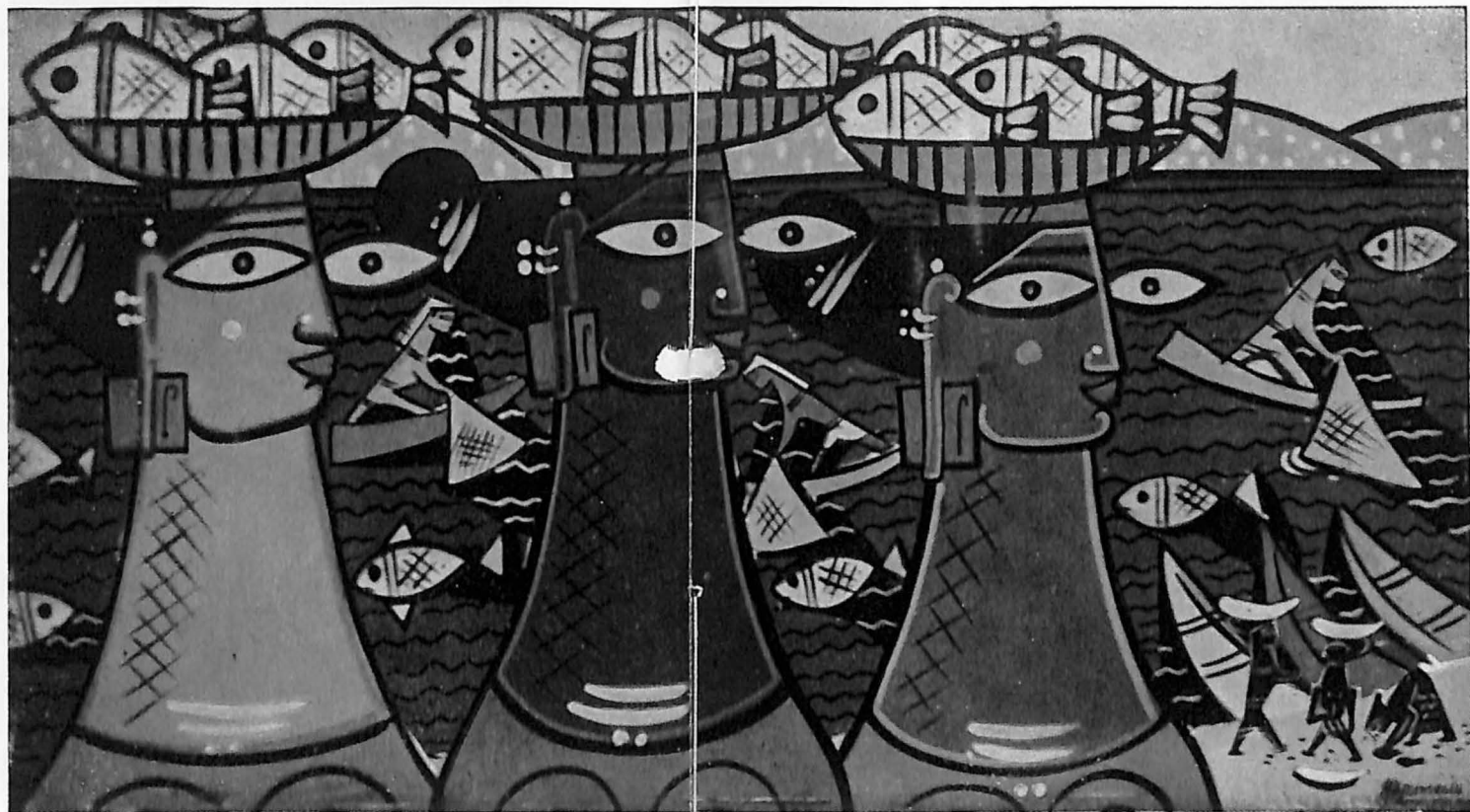
An artist either 'belongs' to his Time with all the implications of this belonging or sits apart from Time, unattached and isolated from the main currents of contemporaneity. But there are artists, like Sreenivasulu, who are intensely aware of the present and who feel and share the forces of the present in a detached manner, although they may not be quite prepared to become 'modern'. This open-mindedness leaves room to draw upon whatever new resources the present has to offer. Between the old and the new there is considerable variance on the conceptual level, but there is a greater possibility of a rapport

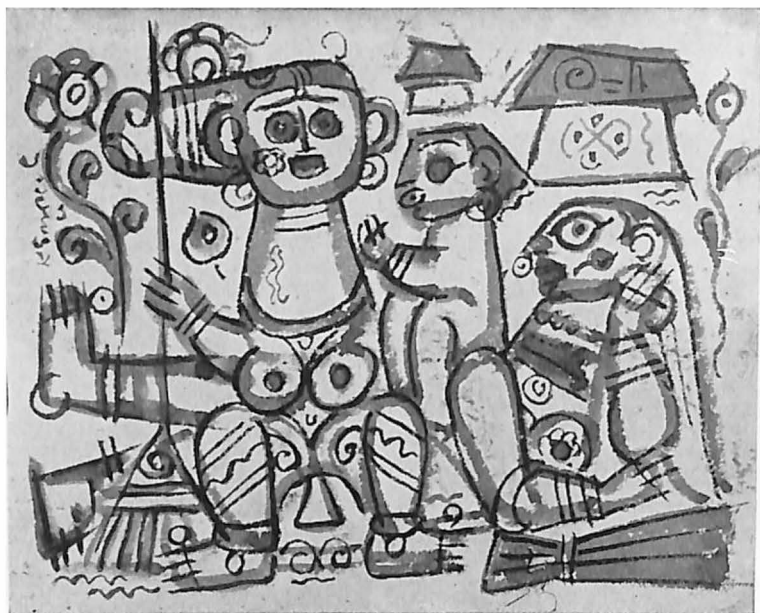
on the technical level. It is possible to accept some of the new techniques and methods without having to sacrifice one's ideology. The new methods open up new pictorial possibilities.

Around 1960 Sreenivasulu started experimenting in a mixed medium, of water colour and crayon. The result was distinctly different from his earlier tempera or water-colour and fascinated Sreenivasulu. He realised that this mixed medium permitted, perhaps demanded, a broader formal arrangement. The detail had to be left behind. The line had to be thick, clear and absolutely unequivocal. Colour also demanded definite demarcation. A good deal of experimentation ensued. And then, a new imagery was born which led further to a new personal symbolism. The eye lost its particular identity and became an area of colour in the whole painting. Details were elevated to the position of key points that held the composition. There is something primeval, archaic in the figuration, a kind of stoicism and vitality exudes from these crude, stalwart men and women. The exaggerated, angular eyes and the big head on the stout neck appear significant and symbolic of a new understanding of the nature of man.

This entire body of work between 1960 and 1964 has again been inspired by folk art and that intriguing spirit of correlation between orthodox beliefs and contemporary aspirations that particularly pervades life in south India. The mood and manner of these new pictures in crayon and water colour is different from the sentimental, decorative painting of the early period. Different also from the work of the subsequent phase sustained by folk art and rural life. I make this observation only in so far as style is concerned. Though this new phase of Sreenivasulu springs from the same background, yet it is astonishingly free from any sort of stylistic inhibition and convention.

S. A. Krishnan



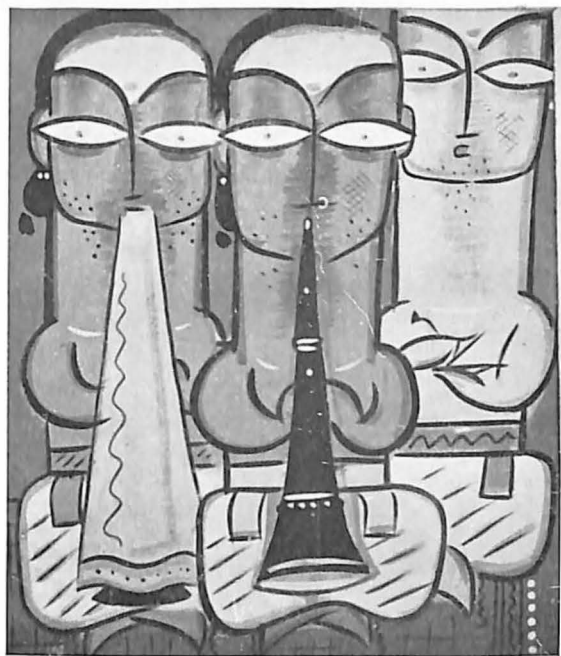


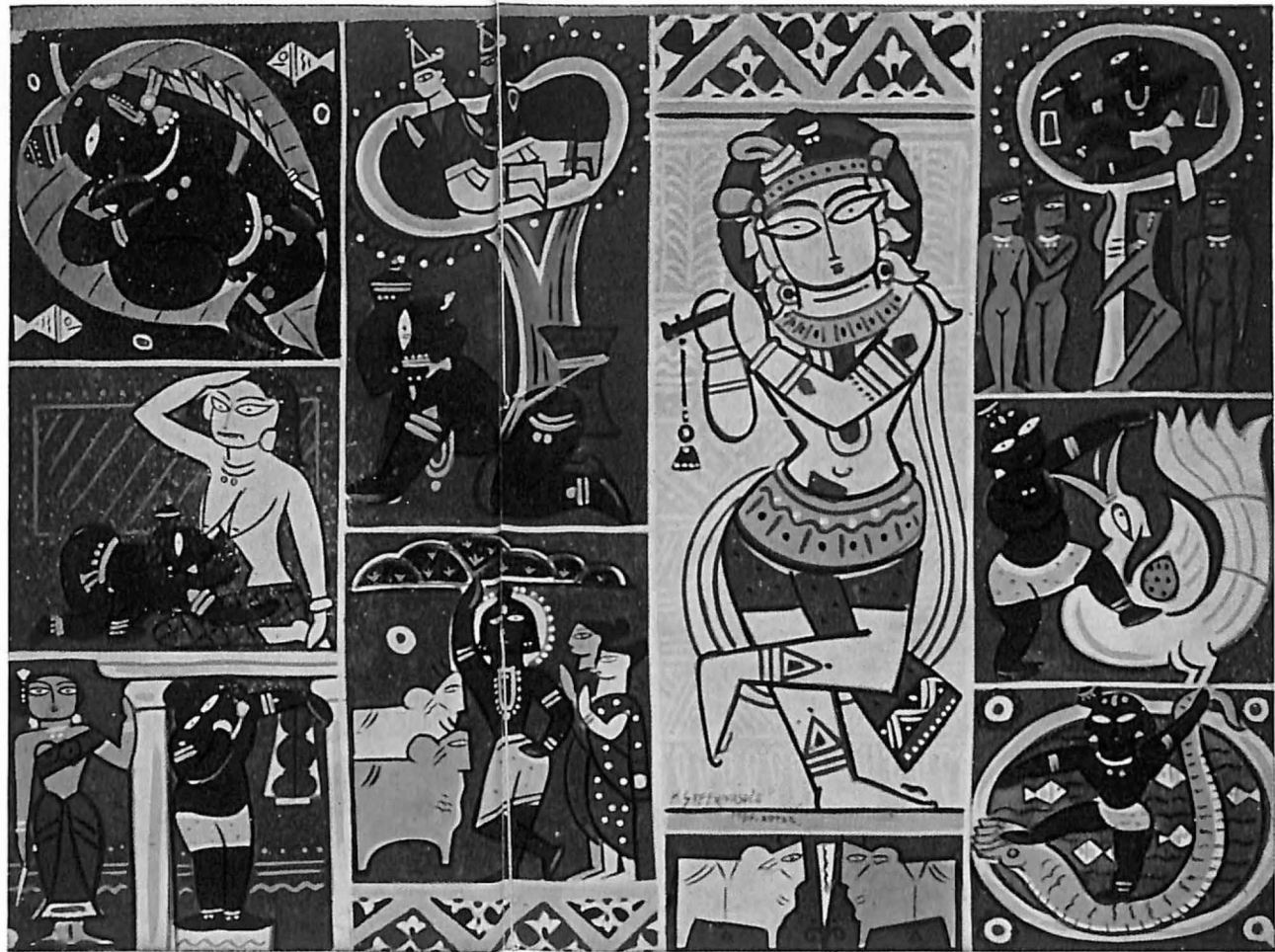










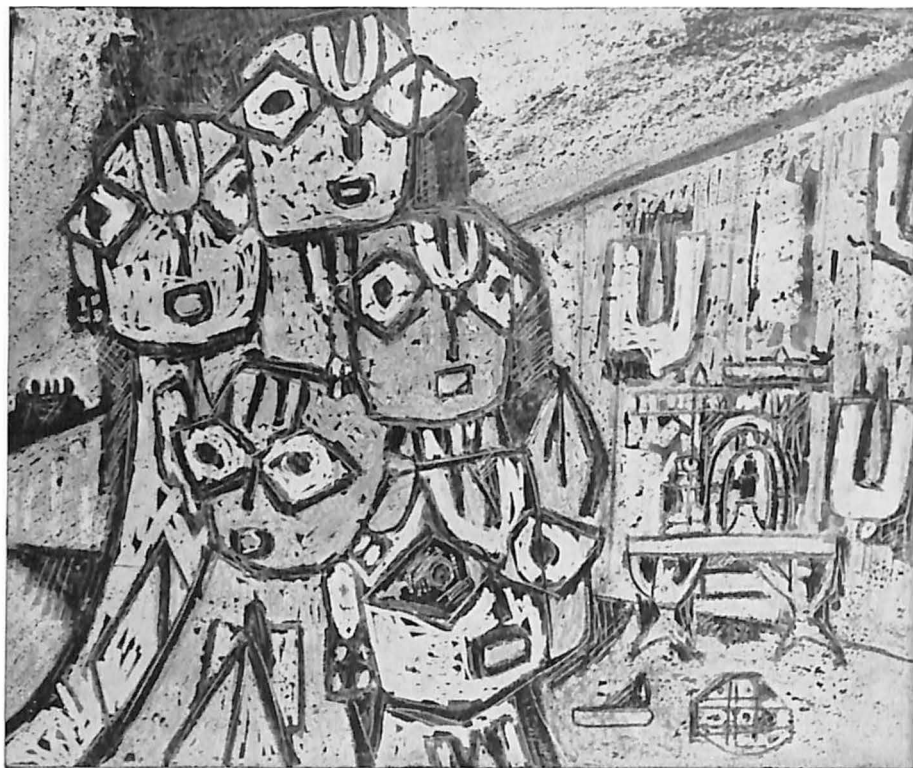
























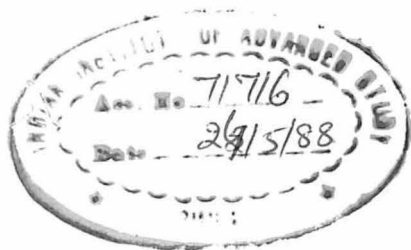








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SREENIVASULU—LALIT KALA AKADEMI

No.	Title	Medium	Year	Size	Collection
1.	Fisherwomen	Tempera	1958	50.5x72.5 cm.	National Gallery of Modern Art
2.	Scavengers	Ink & Water Colour			Artist
3.	Greenroom	Tempera	1950	67x105	Artist
4.	Toilet	Tempera	1950	75x55	State Art Gallery, Patna
5.	Mother and Child	Water Colour & Tempera	1952	55x70	Artist
6.	Basket-weaver	Tempera	1953	62.5x87.5	Mr. & Mrs. Paul C. Sherbert
7.	Nadaswaram-Players	Tempera	1953		Artist
8.	Krishna Lila	Tempera	1956	75x56	Artist
9.	Lava-Kusha	Tempera	1950	45x45	Artist
10.	Gopini	Tempera	1955	51x33	Walter H. C. Laves
11.	After the bath	Tempera	1954	55x70	Artist
12.	Gangamma Jatra	Crayon and Water Colour	1964	62.5x75	Artist
13.	Devotees	Crayon and Water Colour	1964	62.5x75	Artist
14.	Lotus Garland	Tempera	1952	105x67	Artist
15.	Indian Game	Tempera	1956	70x60	Artist
16.	Aswamedha	Tempera		50x25	Artist
17.	Dhasari	Crayon and Water Colour	1964	62.5x75	Artist
18.	Cocoanut-seller	Tempera	1954	80x77.5	Edgar A. Albin
19.	Boyhood of Krishna	Crayon and Water Colour	1964	62.5x75	Artist
20.	Fish sellers	Ink & Water Colour	1954	51x33	Walter H. C. Laves
21.	Mother	Crayon Sketch	1950	55x70	Artist
22.	Devoted Family	Crayon and Water Colour	1964	55x70	Artist
23.	Toilet	Crayon and Water Colour	1963	55x70	Artist

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

SREENIVASULU, K. Born 1923, Madras, Diploma in Fine Arts from the Govt. School of Arts & Crafts, Madras, 1940. Formerly Art Director at the Besant School, Adyar, Madras and now Officer in Charge, Design Demonstration Centre, Govt. of Madras.

Exhibitions: Participated in several important exhibitions of Indian Art abroad including, Indian Art Exhibition, Washington D.C. 1947 (organised by the Academy of Fine Arts, Calcutta); Indian Art Exhibition in Sydney, U.S.S.R., China & Japan (organised by the All India Fine Arts & Crafts Society, New Delhi); All India Fine Arts & Crafts Society's annual, New Delhi, 1953 (President's Award); All India Arts Exhibition, Hyderabad (First prize); International poster Competition, 1953 (2nd prize); Indian Art Exhibition to Eastern Europe, 1956 (organised by the Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi); Commonwealth Arts Today, 1963 (London). Held One-man Show of his works in Madras, 1954 (organised by the USIS) and these works were shown earlier in the India House, New York in 1955. Held an exhibition of works on the life of the Buddha, Centenary Hall, Govt. Museum, Madras, 1956. Works also shown at the Salon de Mai, Paris 1951. He was a Smith-Mundt Scholar at the Ohio State University for specialisation in Child Art Education.

Member of the General Council of the Lalit Kala Akademi since 1957; Member, Executive Board of the Madras State Lalit Kala Akademi; Member, purchase Committee of the National Art Gallery, Madras 1961-64; Member, Progressive Painters Association, Madras and president for one term. Travelled in U. K. & U. S. A. (1955) and Ceylon 1949 and 1952. Represented in various private & public collections in India and abroad, including the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi and the collection of the Ministry of Education.

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