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GROSVENOR GALLERY IN ASSOCIATION WITH ROB DEAN ART

PRESENTS

FROM TANTRA TO TRIBAL

The title for the current show, *From Tantra to Tribal* (however problematic in its terminology) came from reflections on the writings and artwork of the artist Jagdish Swaminathan. One painting in particular provided the inspiration for the show. The painting is an untitled and undated work from the early 1970s, which depicts an egg-shaped form floating in a sea of grey. The cosmic egg is dissected into five planes of colour. The yellow square placed centrally within the egg is filled by a mountain and a glowing seed-like orb. Beneath the egg, an inverted triangle, in tones of red and blue, reflects the mountainous form contained within the egg. The entire image is bordered on two sides by an aura of pure white. It is both Tantric and Tribal.

The painting represents a pivotal moment in Swaminathan's career that references both his early tantric inspired works and his later 'tribal' series. These two sources of reference, tantric practice and tribal art, provide the bed-rock to much of Swaminathan's work. They reflect his belief that these living traditions with ancient roots were as valid a part of the contemporary discourse as any other art movement. In many cases he argued that they were inevitably more pertinent to the contemporary discourse in India than Western modernism, and represented a more sincere approach to art itself.

'In contradiction to the Western approach, the traditional Indian approach to painting space has always been geometric. This is because painting was never meant to represent reality in the naturalistic sense, it was the cogent and poetic rendering of ideal truth in terms of two-dimensional space. The fact that the modern movement in India did not take off from the spatial concepts evolved in traditional Indian paintings at once explains the poverty of its current contribution. Its future rests in a return and re-exploration of these concepts. This too, will be the beginning of the Indian contribution to 20<sup>th</sup> Century World art.' (J. Swaminathan, *The Cube and the Rectangle*, reprinted in *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 40, New Delhi, 1995, p.21. )

Rather than 'trailing behind' the West blindly following art movements that were already in vogue elsewhere, Swaminathan felt that Indian artists needed to be 'in opposition to the ruling culture'. Swaminathan recognised in the art of the various tribal communities that he visited a sincerity of expression and a clarity of vision that was lacking in much of what he saw amongst his art school trained colleagues. 'Historical progression, like the Birnam wood is an illusion: change, yes but progress no. The notion of progress in art is a pernicious doctrine. With such ideas in mind I started the work of building the museum. First I read all that I could about the folk and tribal cultures of Madhya Pradesh. In order to make the museum a live movement, I involved the art students of the state in the drive for collecting folk, and tribal art. ... I of course was continuously on the move, sleeping and eating in my jeep, covering thousands of kilometres. What an adventure it was, for me, for the students and for the hundreds of folk and tribal artists too.' (J Swaminathan, *The Cygan, an auto-bio note*, 1993 reprinted in *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 40, New Delhi, 1995, p. )

Swaminathan's appreciation of both Tantric and Tribal sources did not mean that he sought to merely replicate their style in his own work, nor did he wish to encourage other artists to do the same. 'I am not implying at any point a literal return to Tantra, folk art, etc. but I think we have to become aware of concepts in our history that have given expression to this sensibility of oneness. If the western man is for ever concerned with his loneliness, I will say that loneliness is not disruption. It is a fact of being. To the West the lone individual is lost, the groping individual. To us he is the arrived person.' (J. Swaminathan, *An Interview with Swaminathan by Gieve Patel*, reprinted in *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 40, New Delhi, 1995, p. 25.)

The 'sensibility of oneness' is perhaps the unifying feature of both Tantric and early folk and tribal traditions. In Tantra the practitioner who successfully meditates on the *yantra or bindu* they have created, achieves a state in which they perceive no distinction between the individual and the cosmos, between the manifest and the unmanifest. Likewise in the work of many indigenous artists their art identifies a 'oneness' with nature, myth, magic and the unmanifest spirit world which, through the creative process, draws inspiration and nourishment from the deepest and most primordial roots of Indian art and culture.

The current show intentionally places paintings by anonymous Tantric practitioners and by master artists working in traditional indigenous styles, alongside Indian and international artists to present them as equals in a vibrant and on-going contemporary discourse. I hope that Swaminathan would have approved of the exhibition.

### **The Tantric Connection**

*'Man can no longer be the measure of all things. He is integrally bound with the life of all created things and in everything he seeks the underlying essence, the life-pervading truth of the universe. The world as seen in this state of awareness has been known to Tantra-shastras as the 'subtle world'. By such inward contemplation, man acquires the power to remake his vision both of himself and the world.'*

(Ajit Mookerjee, *Tantra Art its Philosophy and Physics*, New Delhi, 1971, p.11.)

In 1971 Ajit Mookerjee wrote two books on Tantra, titled *Tantra Asana* and *Tantra Art its Philosophy and Physics*. These books provided a platform for a renewed discussion concerning Tantra within academic circles, but it reflects a similar surge of interest in Tantric thought and aesthetics amongst an important group of Modern Indian artists that included Jagdish Swaminathan, G. R. Santosh, Prafulla Mohanti and S. H. Raza, that had evolved almost a

decade earlier. The exhibition presents a few works by some of these artists, but also explores the artistic sources that influenced their thinking at this pivotal moment in their respective careers.

Tantric art from the earliest period of its existence was used as a meditational tool for Tantric practitioners as part of complex ritual practices. The adherents were not considered artists in any conventional sense and the images created were functional ritual objects, intended for personal use, rather than public display. As Mookerjee states in summary to his opening chapter 'art is not a profession but a path towards truth and self-realisation for both maker and spectator.' (Ibid.) Most artworks were made anonymously, often using the most basic of materials, discarded papers and natural pigments. The paintings by the anonymous artists in the current exhibition have come from various sources, but all are likely to have been created in Northern India over the last sixty years. Furthermore, most have been created by artists who were originally trained in the miniature painting ateliers of Rajasthan.

Despite the comparatively recent date of the works in the exhibition, the imagery that appears in these paintings has ancient roots that straddle both Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Tantra as a philosophy and set of practices develops in India in about the 6<sup>th</sup> century C. E. Texts within the Hindu tradition appear as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and by the following century these texts are being studied in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain monasteries across India, Tibet and Southeast Asia. Focusing on the power of divine feminine energy, Tantra inspired the rise of goddess worship in medieval India, and today Tantric practice remains a vital force within multiple traditions. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it has influenced global countercultural movements throughout the world, and continues to influence contemporary feminist thought and artistic practice.

For the Neo-Tantric artists in India, Tantra continued to be an integral part of their artistic vocabulary throughout their careers, but by the 1980s Jagdish Swaminathan's own artistic journey had shifted focus once again, to the more ancient artistic traditions of the Indigenous communities of India. Here Swaminathan found his true calling, helping to establish Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal a multi-disciplined art complex where he presented the art of Indigenous communities from around India in a public space, exhibiting these ancient traditions as part of the contemporary dialogue. Most famously Swaminathan discovered the young Gond artist, Jangarh Singh Shyam painting on the mud walls of his home, and brought his exceptional talent to the world stage.

### **The Tribal Connection**

*'All true art, and Adivasi art specifically, is visionary. It is through art that the tyranny of the senses is overcome and the terror of the unknown transcended. Art, therefore, has been the primary need of man for the health of his mind, just as food has been for that of his body. It is an essential stimulant for overcoming the boredom of existence ... if stimulants provide a corporeal means for living in a parallel reality, art is a sublime means of achieving it.'*

(J. Swaminathan, *The Art and the Adivasi*, The Perceiving Fingers, Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, 1987, p. 35.)

The Roopankar Museum of Fine Arts today forms part the Bharat Bhavan a multi-arts complex situated in Bhopal. The museum has two wings one for urban art, and the other for the art of the Adivasis. The world class collection of folk and tribal art at the Roopankar Museum is the result of a unique experiment carried out in the 1980s, under the guidance of its director at the time, Jagdish Swaminathan. He encouraged thirty art students from state run art institutions to

volunteer in a collection drive for the museum. The students were then sent out into the most rural areas of Madhya Pradesh to search for Adivasi artists and artwork.

Swaminathan states ‘thousands of kilometers were covered by jeep, on bicycles, on bullock carts and by foot. It was a great adventure for the students and all of us: we were taking a bath of humanity every day. We were irrigated by the cultures of our peoples and we were reborn. A live contact was established with hundreds of folk and Adivasi artists during the drive, which has now ripened into an ongoing relationship. The Museum is rooted in the hearts of the people whose works it displays.’ (J. Swaminathan, *The Preface*, *The Perceiving Fingers*, Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, 1987, p. 4.)

The Adivasis – *adi*, the first, and *vasi*, the inhabitants, claim to be the first born on earth. In anthropological terms they are understood to have originated from communities who were present in India prior to the Indo-Aryan invasions that occurred approximately 3000 years ago. Adivasis are not an homogenous group; there are over 200 distinct peoples speaking more than 100 languages and varying greatly in ethnicity and culture. It was from this vast pool of humanity, representing almost one tenth of the Indian population, that Swaminathan gathered his collection of tribal art for the museum. Naturally the collection varies widely and represents many communities.

In the current exhibition we have focused on a few artists whose artworks were chosen by Swaminathan as part of this early period of collection for the museum. These artists include Jangarh Singh Shyam (1962 – 2001), Lado Bai (b. 1954) and Teru Tahad (Lado Bai’s husband). Where possible we have tried to source artwork from the 1980s and early 1990s that reflects the moment in time that the artists were working most closely with Swaminathan himself. In addition to this group, we have also included work by the Warli artist Jivya Soma Mashe (1934 – 2018), who was not associated with the Bhavan in Bhopal, but gained critical acclaim as an artist at a similar period. Alongside these critically acclaimed artists, we have also included a few examples by other indigenous artists (usually of the next generation) whose work shows extraordinary vitality and talent.

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<sup>1</sup> Although Swaminathan often used the word tribal to refer to the indigenous communities of rural India in his writing and lectures, he recognized the pitfalls of the word and preferred the Hindi term Adivasi. Many scholars today now prefer to use the phrase non-metropolitan. By using the term tribal in the title of the show I too recognize the potential pitfalls of the term but use it as an instantly understood umbrella term. The word is not intended in a derogatory manner to any member of any community nor is it used to imply ‘Primitive’ as outdated anthropological discourses can imply.