

Rethinking 'Mad after veena'

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Abstract: This research paper focuses on the study of the famous painting, 'Mad after Veena' by K.Venkatappa with the aid of archival material and thereby comprehending Venkatappa's passion for learning the musical instrument veena. Self-portraiture of the artist and the complexity of iconographic cluster are discussed by tracing cross-cultural trends and enquire whether the artist's madness in 'Mad after Veena' is instinctive or strategic. This paper addresses its title, stylistic and linguistic aspects and explores how it had contributed a different dimension to the art movement of Mysore State.

Keywords: K. Venkatappa, painting, Mysore.

I. INTRODUCTION

K.Venkatappa (1886-1995) was an artist of national reputation. He studied in the Government Industrial School in Mysore (1902-8) and with the support of the royal patron, Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV, accomplished his higher studies at the Government School of Art in Calcutta (1909-16). Here, Abanindranath Tagore was his Guru and Nandalal Bose was his batch mate. Abanindranath Tagore had high expectations from both Venkatappa and Nandalal Bose. Venkatappa also had interactions with influential art circles including E.B.Havel and Percy Brown. After more than seven years of stay in Calcutta, he decided to return to Mysore and start working for the Palace (1918). It was during this juncture that Venkatappa became passionate about learning Veena and this resulted in his learning from the highly renowned veena maestro, Veene Sheshanna (1917). It was during this time that Venkatappa was inspired to paint the well-known composition, 'Mad after Veena' (1921-2).

Some scholars and artists like Dr. Shivrama Karanth, V. Sitaramiah and S.K.Ramachandra Rao, have opined about 'Mad after veena' in their writings and describe Venkatappa kneeling down, totally surrendering to the Goddess of veena/music, pleading for her grace. Everything else for him is meaningless. Behind his back or in the background, one finds abandoned objects including the veiled bust of his guru or teacher, Abanindranath Tagore, placed on the shelf. The discipline of painting is said to have been personified and tied to a tall pillar and neglected for a long time. In the bottom, rolls of painting are discarded and rats play with it besides paint box and brushes that are dry and scattered.

Dr. B.V.K. Shastry [Shastry 2004:64] differs from other writings. Shastry does not describe the deserted elements in the background and the personified figure representing a painting/visual art (who in the painting is tied to the pillar). Instead, Shastry identifies the *veena* whole-heartedly inviting the artist (Venkatappa) who is caught in between two art forms; visual art and music (*veena*). This dilemma of his life is said to have resulted in a psychological conflict and is portrayed well in the composition.

Ramesh Chandra [Chandra 2009:1-6] opines that, since Venkatappa paints his psychological status instead of reality and this was one of the earliest approaches of surrealism in the Indian art scenario.

Venkatappa's passion for music: Venkatappa before returning to Mysore received basic *veena* lessons from Srirangam Ramaswamy Iyengar and in 1914 he fabricated '*Sruthi veena*'¹. As Rao says [Rao 2004:53] '*Sruthi veena*' was agreed

¹Venkatappa claims that the instrument facilitates the 'demonstration of the ancient (Indian) musical scale and the twenty-two Srutis of 16th or 17th century or earlier'. He adds that this type of difficult task was accomplished by very few in India and thereby proudly announces that many theorists and practical musicians have appreciated with satisfaction.

upon by musician-musicologists like Tiger Varadachar, Bidaram Krishnappa, Veene Venkatagiriappa, Ralapalli Anantha Krishna Sharma, Srirangada Ramaswamy Iyengar, K.Vasudevacharya, T.Chowdayya, Muttayya Bhagavataru and Arikudi Ramanuja Iyengar. It was exhibited in the Dasara exhibition of Mysore in 1916.

Venkatappa was feeling proud of his accomplishment and supporting this, a letter² by Editor³ of Indian Music Journal tested, verified and certified '*Shruti veena*' as a genuine invention by Venkatappa with a discussion about the technicalities of the *veena*⁴.

Following this, Venkatappa's interest in playing the *veena* intensified and he wished to divert his scholarship granted for Fine Arts study towards studying of the *veena*. Venkatappa's letter reveals him requesting the Maharaja to divert the scholarship amount given for the practice of painting towards learning *veena*⁵. Further, letters of 1917⁶ throws light on the struggles of Venkatappa to learn music.

A letter dated 30-05-1917⁷ from K.Krishna Rao⁸ refers Venkatappa's letter dated 31.03.1917 through which Venkatappa is mentioned to have requested for utilization of scholarship⁹ to learn music in Mysore. As a response to this letter, K.Krishna Rao states that the request was found unreasonable and therefore the scholarship was cancelled.

In a letter dated 27-08-1917¹⁰ Venkatappa states that he had requested for a year to extend scholarship for his study of *veena* in Mysore until he could be sent to Europe to study sculpture. Venkatappa states that he had met K.Krishna Rao (on 16-08-1916) and in return the proposal of learning *veena* was appreciated and was assured scholarship. Venkatappa states that he had received a letter from K.Krishna Rao on 23-02-1917 that had discarded his requisition and recommended to continue the study at the Government School of Art. Calcutta. Venkatappa was displeased with the reply and felt K.Krishna Rao, had no reason nor was there any necessity for him to recommend the grant of Scholarship to continue his studies again at Calcutta School of Art. Venkatappa states that his Principal was satisfied with his accomplishment of in painting and modeling that he had studied for more than seven years. Venkatappa desperately expresses that, "it was the will of God that I should not get encouragement from the Government to develop my natural instinct in classical music". (Same letter dated 27-08-1917)

Venkatappa with everlasting enthusiasm requests to arrange for *veena* classes with Vainikasikamani Sheshanna or Vainika Praveena Subbanna in order to reach perfection in playing the *veena*. Letter dated 07-12-1917¹¹ states that the request for the arrangement of music class with Vainikasikamani Sheshanna or Vainika Praveena Subbanna cannot be fulfilled. Instead it was recommended to attend Palace Music School where Vidwans can teach elementary lessons in *veena*. After much struggle, Venkatappa was privileged to study under Veene Sheshanna (1917-1927).

It was at this juncture that Venkatappa painted 'Mad after Veena'. As K.V.Subramanyam states [Subramanyam 2008:76] ¹²Abanindranath Tagore got a message that Venkatappa was not practicing painting but was more absorbed with the *veena*. Abanindranath asked Venkatappa about his practice of painting. This inspired Venkatappa to paint 'Mad after Veena' in response to the question by his *guru* and sent it to him. In return Venkatappa received a letter from him¹³.

II. SELF-PORTRAITURE

²Divisional Archives Office of Mysore .Palace Maramath.2-1905. P. 30

³H.P.KrishnaRao

⁴He appreciates as follows: "*It is correct according to the principles of Venkatamaki..... Samvadi Sa Ma, Sa Pa, Ga Ni, RiDha, are all kept up and they are correct. Your instrument has suggested certain other facts which require further study*"

⁵Divisional Archives Office. Mysore. Palace Maramath.2-1905. P. 16

⁶Divisional Archives Office. Mysore. Palace Maramath.2-1905.P. 16-22

⁷Divisional Archives Office. Mysore. Palace Maramath.2-1905. P.16

⁸The Inspector General of education in Mysore, Bangalore to K.Venkatappa c/o Messrs.A.Melgiri & Co., Lansdown Bazar, Mysore

⁹granted for the study of Fine Arts at School of Art at Calcutta

¹⁰Divisional Archives Office. Mysore. Palace Maramath.2-1905. P. 18. This letter was written by K.Venkatappa addressing His Highness, Sri KrishnarajWodeyarBahadur, G.C.S.I. Maharaja of Mysore, Mysore

¹¹Divisional Archives Office. Mysore. Palace Maramath.2-1905. P. 22.This letter was written by Office of the Durbar Bakshi, Palace, Mysore

¹²Subbramanyam.Venkatappa: SamakaleenaPunaravalokana. P. 76

¹³ letter reads; "...*may be mad after veena or painting, but that is not sufficient to put it into a picture; in the same way one may be fond of drinking wine but that does not interest all. Your pictures must contain something which is permanent interest for all, then only it can appeal us.*"

In the painting, a male figure is seen kneeling down in surrender. His *uttareya* (shawl) has fallen on the ground and goes unnoticed. He is half nude with a wet cloth¹⁴ clinging to his body denoting a sacred ritualistic practice for dedicated learning. His bearded face and matted hair¹⁵ symbolizes a *yogi* who does rigorous penance. His raised hands towards the goddess with *veena* appear to welcome her. This portrait clearly distinguishes him from insanity (psychological disorder) and portrays him as a rigorous mad aspirant of music.

Venkatappa connects the left and the right section of the composition by stretching himself. To the left (behind him) is a veiled bust of Abanindranath Tagore supported by a huge support¹⁶. The personification of a painting as a lady figure (probably goddess), with brushes in her hand, shown twice to suggest that she is in slumber as a result of long neglect. Rats are busy on rolls of paper. These 'aaharyas'¹⁷ speak of his expertise as a painter and sculptor and also his calculated negligence. Venkatappa's self-portrayal with his firm gaze is oriented towards a female figure with *veena* to the right side (in front of him). With a fine sensibility of a miniaturist, Venkatappa treats each and every element of visual narration with equal care and meticulous detailing. Since the size of the image is very small, it invites the spectator to see within an intimate distance and search for the 'aaharyas' he had devised in the image. Color thickness and transparency is excellently executed. One can gauge the thickness used for the portraiture and the transparency for veils. He handles a subtle color palette that enhances the skin complexion of the figures. This in return contributes sensuality and adds emotional enchantment.

Venkatappa had planned the composition in horizontal and vertical sections that add visual rhythm as well as verticality to the image. This verticality is orchestrated with the melting of forms namely the veil that hides the bust of Abanindranath Tagore, the sari that veils the face of the painting personified as lady and the sari of the lady figure depicted next to the *veena*. This 'implied' verticality suggests a possible connection with Gothic sensibility prevalent with European Art movements like Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and Art Nuevo movements. This verticality of the composition compliments thematically by segregating the left and right sides of the painting wherein the left is for the domain of the painting and the right for the domain of music/*veena*.

The contour lines are very fine and merge with the form and constitute the embossed effect of the forms. The dark color of the *veena* adds more density to *veena* and thus it is emphasized. *Veena* diagonally standing in between both bridges providing a metaphorical ladder. The steps of *veena* are known for *arohana* (ascending) and *avarohana* (descending) of *svaras* that carry feelings. Herein they become the metaphorical steps for Venkatappa's spirit to ascend or for the lady figure (with wings) to descend.

III. 'GODDESS' WITH VEENA

Venkatappa refers to some of the iconographic features from tradition instead of producing an actual icon by adhering to *shastras* or scriptures. Lady figure with *veena* is drawn from the iconographic features of Saraswati as the goddesses of learning. Selectively white sari and *veena* are chosen from the iconographic features attributed to Saraswati in Indian tradition. This lady figure is shown with wings that mark the reference to the western concept of an Angel. The verticality orchestrated with this lady figure clearly reminds one of the Gothic Angel. But none of the Christian Angels had dark halo¹⁸. By further enquiries with European iconographic tradition it perhaps depicts an iconography called 'Melancholy'.

IV. 'MELANCHOLY' AND ART PRACTICE

'Melancholy' was the daughter of Saturn, She represents intellectual and introspective qualities. The iconography of "Melancholy" is based on human temperament that is melancholy. 'Melancholy' though linked with the darker side of humanity carefully balances itself from becoming "really bad". 'Melancholy' is often associated with dualism and the concept of genius. "Melancholy" in modern times was considered as the temperament prerequisite for creative pursuits.

¹⁴signifies one of the disciplinary code of the traditional system of dedicated learning

¹⁵ that is not black

¹⁶ cupboard visible in strict profile

¹⁷'aaharya' is used in the context of visual art. The costume, objects, setting and ambience are visually represented in order to facilitate the spectator to connect the representation to his actual life and experience

¹⁸ dark but not black

In Europe 'Melancholy' developed as an important iconographic theme for Visual art practice. Albrecht Durer engraved a print titled 'Melancholia I' that dealt with a similar theme. Durer too developed a composite iconography (Angel figure) by fusing some of the iconographic features of 'Melancholy' with the Greco-Roman iconography of the goddess of geometry and Angel. In Durer's composition too objects associated with arts are scattered with negligence beneath her feet. Her holding of the compass clearly shows that she is not working but lost in thoughts (probably introspection). This attitude is contrasted with the figure of cupid who innocently (thoughtlessly) works.

Durer through 'Melancholia I' addressed the tension of dualism between the two types of genius that was prevalent in the West. By the examples of Italian Masters like Leonardo da Vinci, whose works were introspective and where a work like 'Adoration of Magi' satisfied him at an introspective level but remained incomplete. This attitude demanded much time to finish each work. In contrast Michelangelo industriously worked on the murals of Sistine Chapel and accomplished them successfully. 'Melancholy' became a part of the vocabulary of the European art tradition. Rembrandt painted his self-portraits with shadow casted on his face. Shadow, that was one of the iconographic features of 'Melancholy', became a part of the vocabulary. Goya and Pierre Baudelaire have done portraits in a similar way. Rodin did 'Thinker' and that too shares similar linguistic traits. In this way one can notice 'Melancholy' as a prevalent dialect that circulated among the modern west.

V. 'MAD AFTER VEENA'

In 'Mad after Veena', 'Melancholy' is re-contextualized by amalgamating indigenous iconographic references. Venkatappa thereby developed a complex iconography by fusing various iconographical undercurrents namely- some of the iconographic features of goddesses Sarswati, the Western idea of Angel figure and some of the iconographic aspects of 'Melancholy'. Thereby Venkatappa codifies his cryptic dialect and contributes to the promotion of such cryptographic language in the art movement of Mysore State. This also contributes to the modernization of the art scenario.

VI. CONCLUSION

'Mad after Veena' shares a language that was prevalent in the modern west. Thereby it contributes towards the modernization of the art movement of the Mysore State. One can surmise that the 'madness' in 'Mad after Veena' is strategic than instinctive based on the strategy of the composition he devices and the visual language he shares. The half nude male figure with wet cloth and matted hair signifies the self (Venkatappa) to be a rigorous aspirant with madness and clearly distinguishes himself from insanity. One finds a composite of; some of the iconographic features of Goddess Sarswati, the angel and some of the iconographic features of 'Melancholy' developed by Venkatappa. This composite figure is adopted as vocabulary of the visual language he uses.

The fact that Venkatappa had chosen to paint 'Mad after Veena' as an answer to declare that he was not painting but was mad after *veena*, points to the fact that he was not detached from painting and wished to be a "genius" painter introducing a cryptographic language.

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