

[S. RAJAM](#)

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PROFILE

S. RAJAM

A maverick and visionary artist, fervidly dedicated to the perpetuation of South Indian culture, S. Rajam has painted his dreams his way, for nearly seven decades and says he's just starting

KESAV, CHENNAI

He's 83 years old and is, he says, "just beginning." Art and music are his passions, and they keep him young. S. Rajam, renowned South Indian musician, artist and photographer, is as inspired now about his work as he was in 1940 when his art was first published, and he is no less prolific.

Rajam took an early interest in art. His inspiration was kindled by friends and relatives who were also artists, and his skill in drawing and painting was carefully molded and guided by his father, Sundaram Iyer, a prominent lawyer in Chennai and a great lover of South Indian culture. With time and cultivation, his talent and local fame blossomed. In 1981 sheer providence took him to the Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram, Jayendra Saraswathi, who blessed his art with a prediction: "An industrialist will publish your work in book form." The prophecy became reality in 1993 when Dr. N. Maha-lingam, a South Indian philanthropist and writer, published the book

Periapuranam in Pictures which encompasses 63 color and 63 line drawings, all rendered by Rajam.

Today, Rajam lives with his wife Ananda near Chennai. He has been here for 75 years, has no phone and does not want one. "A phone," he says, "is a disturbance." He washes his own clothes and attends to all of his personal needs himself. He has two sons and two daughters who live separately with their families.

His youth was filled with colorful experiences which help to enrich his art today. He was a brilliant student at the School of Arts and Crafts in Chennai where he won several scholarships. He even gained some fame as an actor, starring in three Tamil films: Seethakalyanam, Radhakalyanam and Rukminikalyanam. He visited most of the temples in India and Sri Lanka and actually lived for some time in the 7th century Kailasanathar Temple at Kanchipuram.

One pilgrimage to the caves of Ajanta changed his life forever. It not only permanently set the tenor of his artistic style but also profoundly established within him a mystical perspective on art. When he learned that the Ajanta frescoes were painted by monks, he realized that mere training in art technique was not enough, that it had to come from deep within for true spiritual impact. It was here that Rajam perceived that this work could

truly be his worship.

Artistic Style

A day in the life of Rajam goes something like this: After a late, light brunch of rice, rasam, vegetable curry, buttermilk and pickle, he settles down to three to four hours of drawing and painting. Following a short nap, he instructs his music students starting at 4:00 pm for about three hours. He then takes a light evening meal before painting intensely until about midnight.

"Practically speaking, to paint the Gods and Goddesses, you must imagine them aggressively," says Rajam.

"The line is the life of a painting. I developed my own style, taking from the model of our ancient culture. You may refer to it as creative painting."

Many consider Rajam a maverick artist in the sense that no one paints the way he does, and many do not share his philosophical perspective on art. But he is not unorthodox far from it. He has carefully developed his style from authentic cultural and historical roots, but in

his own way. He is not a copier, nor does he follow any trend of the times. For this he has endured a certain amount of criticism, but has not deterred in the least. He has been composing his own one-of-a-kind masterpieces for the last six decades and, to date, accolades far outweigh reproach. Even so, Rajam himself is disappointed with the drift of the times. "Hindu heritage and tradition is ancient and priceless," he laments, "but devotional art is dying in India and almost extinct. Unfortunately, we Indians ape the Westerners. This attitude wounds me a lot. In tradition, only good things should remain; the bad should be ignored and not continued. This is tradition. The art schools in India have failed to bring forward tradition."

Rajam asserts that in his paintings and line drawings he attempts to imprison the important moments of a person's life to help the contemplative spirit of the observer. His art, he says, is not, nor was it ever meant to be, realistic or photo-like replicas of life, but rather intuitive perceptions of life. His paintings feature a simplicity which is natural and pleasing. There is no artificiality about them. He stresses this minimalism this simplicity of form as central to his approach. It is upon this background of simplicity that he is able to introduce personal innovations. The distinctive elements of his art include soft color schemes, uniquely decorated costumes, and small, knowledgeable cultural "touches" that draw the

observer straight to the authentic time and place being illustrated. He often lets elements drift partially off the canvas. But above all else, there is a flow of curve in all of his designs that projects a certain distinctive grace of smooth motion in stillness.

Rajam's style has graced a vast selection of works depicting the Vedic period, ancient literature, planetary deities as well as Hindu stories, Puranas, festivals, Gods and more.

Technique

Rajam paints on wood, veneer, silk and handmade paper and always in watercolor. Each painting will have at least 25 layers of color and will be washed ten to fifteen times before completion. His technique is to wash the paper after applying one or several layers of color. This helps to make the color stay on the surface and last longer. The handmade, rag paper that he uses can withstand this treatment. He uses transparent watercolor while building the layers, finishing with opaque

application in the final stages.

He visualizes his design and execution only after carefully reading and studying any relevant scriptural references. He also likes to contemplate relevant photographs in this preliminary process. To get these definitive photographs he necessarily became a deft photographer, adding another proficiency to his repertoire of skills.

In particular, he was infatuated with the three-dimensional bronze murthis of South India and over a period of 20 years, recorded through the lens of a camera a collection of some one thousand temple bronzes. "I contemplate on the photograph for many days," he says, "and form a clear picture in my mind. Then, much later, I transfer the image to the surface of the painting."

Music

Rajam is also a musician. In fact, he enjoys more fame in the world of music than art. Born and raised in Mylapore, the Mecca of music in Tamil Nadu, Rajam had the good fortune to receive voice training from great teachers. He served All India Radio (AIR) for 35 years as an "A Grade Musician" (a ranking given by AIR). In 1970 and in 1982 while serving AIR in Chennai, he lead a team of artists to present a percussion ensemble in Africa. He toured Burma and performed 32 musical concerts in the USA. He won the Sangeetha Nataka Academy Award as "best musician" in 1992, and the Kalaa Acharya Award in 1996.

Today, he is most active in music as a teacher. He has a dozen enthusiastic students. Yet, he laments that there is a general degeneration in the education of young people, not only in art and music, but in the culture as well. "Nothing is taught nowadays that represents Hindu culture," he says. "The ancestral theme has been forgotten." Concerning the formal teaching of the arts, he asserts, "Artistic creation is lacking in arts schools. The training imparted is technically oriented, and this is of no use."

In the last ten years, Rajam has illustrated the covers for Dancing with Siva, Living with Siva, Merging with Siva, Loving Ganesha and How to Become a Hindu (all written by Hinduism Today publisher, Sivaya Subramuniaswami), completed 33 new illustrations for the reprint of one of these books, as well as some 50 illustrations for Ramon Pannikar's Vedic Experience (See Hinduism Today March/April, 2001). He's also busy preparing paintings for Dr. N. Mahalingam's up-coming book on the Kanda Puranam (about Lord Muruga), while planning more art for yet another book by the same author entitled Thiruvilayadal (about Lord Siva). He continues to contribute to half-a-dozen Tamil magazines like Ananda Vikatan, Kalki and Om Sakthi and he daily provides private music classes. Fervent bhaktars are asking him for art suitable for worship in their home shrine rooms. Yet, all of this, he feels, is not quite enough. "There is so much more I can do," he confides to Hinduism Today.

His work is his worship, and his message to the young and budding artists of India is this: "Study scriptures to improve your knowledge. Be modern; there is no problem with that. But know the

beauty and elegance of your culture."

To see more of S. Rajam's beautiful art visit
www.hinduart.org