

## [Pious Portrayals](#)

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### INTERVIEW

## Pious Portrayals

Rajasthan-born Sri Indra Sharma, age 74, has been depicting Gods, Goddesses, saints and epic heroes in oil and watercolor as one of India's preeminent religious artists for over 60 years. It is likely that your favorite sacred poster was done by Indrajji. He learned the Vallabhacharya style of infusing a painting with Godliness, thereby rendering it a holy piece of art. Based in Mumbai, Sharma lives part-time at his son-in-law's home on Kauai, Hawaii, where he spoke with Hinduism Today about the painter's world. He indeed is an international treasure.

### On painting as a sadhana

It is a meditation, a contact to God. I paint every day--from 6 to 7 hours--after a 1-hour puja. Sometimes I paint in the late evening because a thought comes to me and I need to express it before forgetting. Early morning is also wonderful. No noise, no thinking.

### On his early, village training

In Nathadwar village is Chitrakaroki Gali, "street of painters." All the houses in this district belong to painters. This is the community where I learned traditional techniques from my uncle, Gopilalji, beginning at age 13. So many techniques are

learned only through the village structure, not in formal schools.

On squirrel hair for paint brushes

Part of our Rajasthani training was to make our own brushes. We went to a garden and trapped squirrels under baskets. One student held the squirrel, while another person soaked its tail in water and arranged the hair. With scissors, we cut the hair on both sides of the tail. After that we let the squirrel go. We performed this ritual only in the summer, because in the winter squirrels needed their tails full of hair to keep warm!

On his British college years

In 1946 I entered Mumbai's Sir J.J. School of Art to also absorb Western styles. Here I learned about sitting portraits, life size and landscape paintings. By God's grace I was first in the class. The best quality of Western style is in depicting scenes realistically.

On some big name commissions

I did 12 paintings a year for the Graphite India Ltd. calendar, each one 22 by 30 inches. This lasted for 20 years. They gave themes, such as Mahabharata or great saints. For Birla, the industrialist, I created 25 paintings.

On his most expensive order

It was for the Singapore museum, at Rs.3 lakhs (US\$10,000), 8 by 10 feet. The scene was of a Moghul King and his court. I put real gold and jewels in the painting, Tanjore style.

### On his prime years of production

I typically produced 30 or 40 per year. The largest ever was 15 by 20 feet for the Brahma Kumaris at Mt. Abu. It was a meeting in heaven, an all-Gods "conference."

### On family involvement, training successors

The whole family supports my work. I am teaching my style to ten students in Mumbai. They are doing well, not at a deep level yet, because painting is a meditation. It takes time to develop. My brother's son, Parsottam, has studied with me for many years and is now a good artist, following my style.

### On Hussain's nude painting of Saraswati

I was so angry I could not sleep for two nights. I told newspapers, "This person is no artist." This is an insult to Hinduism. Nude paintings are okay, but not of Goddesses. On the other hand, many Muslims in India create wonderful Hindu religious paintings. Because when the artist is at work, he forgets about Hindu or Muslim. He only thinks "God wants to be painted."

### On trends in Indian art production

Most traditional artists remain in villages. Some artists are indulging in Western modern art because traditional styles take longer to perfect and longer to create. Now everybody wants to become famous quickly and not spend much time learning, so they go into modern art, in big cities like Mumbai. India's painters right now are about 75% traditional and 25% modern. Some of the modern art [he says with a laugh], if you hang it upside down or right side up, it won't matter.

### On financial realities for Indian artists

Traditional artists are still more affluent than modern artists, because their work is popular among foreign buyers. In India, many families have their own museums and collect only Indian traditional paintings.

### On what infuses a painting with power

I paint with my heart and through meditation, imagination on the subject and through devotion, bhakti. I study scriptures to understand the nature of the characters I paint. It is difficult to convey how all this works, but I basically carry the feeling of Godliness. The main magic is to put soul into the painting, so it has life in it. I have given all my life to this work.

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