

# MIRROR

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# The Syncretic Tradition of Goan Art

**As the controversy over Dr Subodh Kerkar's exhibition of artworks inspired by Lord Ganesh rages in Goa, VIVEK MENEZES reminds us that Goan art has developed from a syncretic, universalist tradition which has always defied narrow boundaries of culture and religion**

It was a proud day for democracy in India on 20 August 2009, as our little state of Goa showed the way to the rest of the country on the nagging, confounding issue of freedom of expression and its inevitable clashes with religious sentiments.

In the same week that the high-profile national Art Summit in Delhi quietly perpetuated its disgraceful, craven ban on Husain's artworks, it was marvellous to witness the robust exercise in democracy that took place on the winding Calangute-Candolim beach road, as Subodh Kerkar defied threats to his life and went ahead with his public exhibition of line-drawings, sculptures and installations of Lord Ganesh.

Much credit is due here to Dr Subodh Kerkar, an irrepressible showman who has built a mature international career for himself without leaving his beloved Goa. Despite pressure from politicians who should know better, and likewise ignoring ugly anonymous threats to his life and livelihood, Subodh stood firm where artists and institutions across the country have chosen capitulation and retreat. Credit is also due to the Goa police, particularly SP Bosco George, who handled this sticky situation with clarity and restraint, while allowing both sides the space for expression that is guaranteed in the Constitution.

Credit is also due to the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti and its allies. They exercised their right to assemble in protest – and showed up in impressive numbers to do so – while conducting themselves with impeccable dignity. This peaceful protest by more than 200 men and women leaves no doubt that the HJS and its allies can be sincere about their complaints, and are willing to engage in the democratic system to make their point. They do have the right to be offended by Subodh's artworks, and to act on their objections in the manner guaranteed by law. On 20 August 2009, it was clear that the HJS and Subodh Kerkar could and would peacefully exercise their rights without disrupting each other, and all the players involved thus set a real benchmark for the functioning of Indian democracy. It is an example that the rest of the nation must emulate and learn from.

The most interesting thing about Subodh Kerkar's ceaselessly prolific artwork has always been their rootedness in his life experiences in the profoundly syncretic village culture of Goa. This grounding in the Goan reality, nonetheless informed by wide-ranging global awareness, makes Subodh an inheritor of the magnificent tradition of paradigm-busting Goan artists who created what the critic Ranjit Hoskote calls "an invisible river" which has immeasurably enriched Indian art.

The very best pieces in Subodh's newly opened exhibition bend your perceptions to allow the appreciation of an alternate reality; it can take a beat or two before the twist makes itself felt. This is the case with the single best work here – an emblematic piece of Goan art that should be in the State Museum – where the familiar, glowing contours of a traditional Catholic family altar embrace a spare silhouette of Ganesh. This is the syncretism of Goa writ in wood and brass, layered with the history of conversion, and the dark period of the Inquisition when the Hindus of Goa like

Subodh's own ancestors were driven to venerate easily concealed cut-out images of Lord Ganesh.

This deeply sincere piece is Kerkar at his instinctual best, and could only have emerged from within our Goan culture, where orthodoxies inevitably become blurred and useless, and the boundary walls between ostensibly competitive religious traditions are low, if they exist

describes "a conflation of forms and techniques from every source in the subcontinent, beginning with the fifth century murals of Ajanta, and continuing with the palm-leaf and paper manuscripts and the cloth paintings of Tibet, Nepal, Orissa, Rajasthan and Bengal, even the murals of Sigiriya in Ceylon: nothing 'indigenous' or 'oriental' was excluded, not even Persian and Mughal and Chinese

But there is a lasting lesson from Angelo da Fonseca's experience of "hurting religious sentiments". The artworks have lived to be assessed anew. And today, Angelo da Fonseca is on the cusp of being restored to the very top of the ladder of early Indian modernists. His paintings comprise a marvellous treasure chest that equals the best that any artist from any part of the world managed to achieve in the same era. To the lasting benefit of Goans, much of the main body of his work has been painstakingly gathered together with the assistance of his widow, the gallant Ivy da Fonseca, and has under near-miraculous circumstances been brought home to Goa and the Xavier Centre of Historical Research where it will be displayed in a series of galleries dedicated to the masters of Goan art.

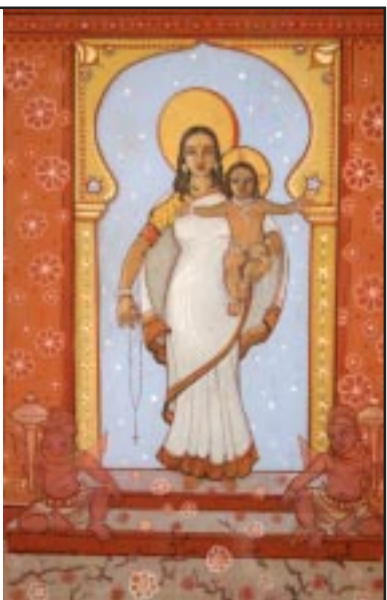
View the paintings by da Fonseca on this page – both surely accused of "hurting religious sentiments" when painted long ago. But they are the opposite of offensive today. These paintings are revealed to be an inestimable contribution to Indian culture – but even more than that, they are powerful evocations of the Goan perspective, the Goan way of worship. They remind us that bigots have never been able to hang on here – their divisive tactics have never found fertile ground in Goa. Our history is long and complicated, but the underlying theme has always been assimilation and tolerance. Goans are natural universalists.

No one embodies this underlying theme better than Dr Jose Pereira, whose accomplishments in an extraordinary range of fields includes study at the JJ School of Art between 1947–1951, where he was classmate to the recently deceased master artist Tyebe Mehta. Though yet little known for artistic accomplishments, it turns out that Dr Pereira is an important pioneer in the context of Indian art history, and his surreal vision of Indian Christian iconography is entirely worthy of comparison to the now world-famous reinventions of Hindu iconography by Mehta (whose Mahishasura sold for US \$1.6 million at auction in 2005).

Besides the paintings depicted here, which have also been preserved for safekeeping at the XCHR, Dr Pereira's masterwork of *fresco buono* on the ceiling of the Borda chapel also illustrates the marvelously layered Goan artistic vision. One section illustrates a passage from a Digambara Jain religious masterpiece of Sanskrit literature from AD 959. Dr Pereira says, "...the novelist's name was Somadeva ... [he] paints an elaborate picture of a large cow-pen. It is thronged with travellers who are happy at being offered buttermilk; in fact they become thirsty for milk at hearing the continuous sound of milking. Old women, decked with flowers, sing and churn butter as cows and bulls mate; the bleating of kids breaking free of halters reminds them of their own children. The kids, for their part, are frisky, and mix with the puppies. Cows, crowned with flowers and grass, flow with milk at the sight of the calves, while bulls burn with jealousy as they watch the calves mate. The members of the cow-pen's owner's family milk the cows, churn butter, offer buttermilk to travelers, and watch cows giving birth." It is an astonishingly evocative image



'Assumption' (1954) by Angelo da Fonseca (image courtesy XCHR)



'Madonna and Child' (1954) by Angelo da Fonseca (image courtesy XCHR)

at all. The impact of Subodh's lovingly adapted altar inevitably brings to mind another medical student-turned-artist, the mysteriously overlooked early modernist, Angelo da Fonseca. It was the cusp of the 1930s. Heady nationalism had already inflamed the imagination of his generation of Goans, so the extraordinarily gifted young da Fonseca didn't just want to be an artist, he wanted to be an Indian artist. Thus he headed to Shantiniketan, to "become a *sisya* of the best Indian artists of the century." It was a transformational experience at the feet of the Tagores, for whom da Fonseca was a prized pupil; for the rest of his life he stayed true to the Shantiniketan tradition, which had at its core what the eminent, inimitable Dr Jose Pereira describes as "an eclectic vocabulary" that sought revival of the great artistic traditions of the India.

In a soon-to-be-published landmark essay on da Fonseca's art, Dr Pereira



'Pieta with standing worshipers' (1969) by Dr Jose Pereira (image courtesy XCHR)

and Japanese paintings." He notes, "only European realism was taboo. This panoply arrayed against the West suited Fonseca admirably in his efforts to create a wholly indigenous Christian iconography."

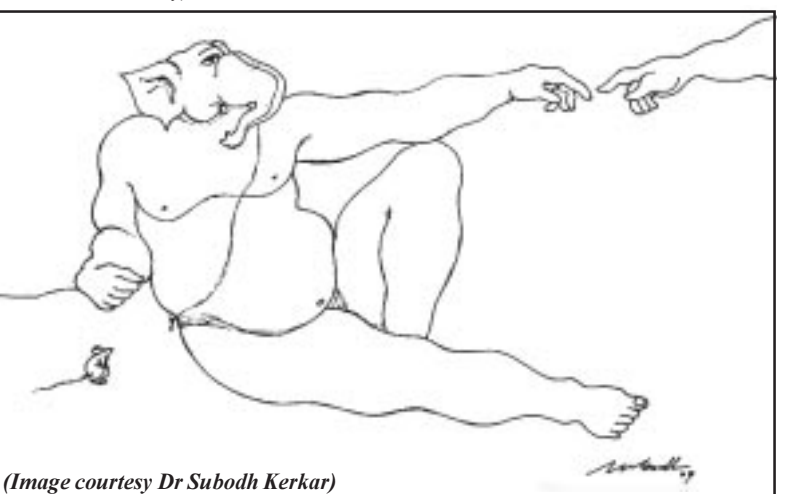
Not unlike Subodh Kerkar today, Angelo da Fonseca found himself confronted by implacable enemies who claimed that he was hurting religious sentiments. He was eventually hounded out of Goa for his Konkani Madonnas and sadhu-looking saints, and, to his lasting bitterness, he even faced censure from his own family. Thus, da Fonseca was forced to leave Goa for simply imagining Mary in a sari – a harrowing experience from the 1940s that we is echoed in 2009 when Subodh is hounded for imagining and painting Ganesh in the manner of Michelangelo (pictured here).



'Crucifixion' (1969) by Dr Jose Pereira (image courtesy XCHR)



'Lord Ganesh in Mexico' (2009) by Vamona Navelkar (image courtesy Ruchika's Gallery)



(Image courtesy Dr Subodh Kerkar)

of classical India, written in Sanskrit 1000 years ago, by a 'sky-clad' Jain, now depicted in a devotional artwork on a Catholic church in Goa. There could be no better representation of the unique, all-embracing artistic tradition of Goa. It is too precious not to be defended at all costs – it is what makes us what we are. And there is no one else like us.

Which brings us to these stirring, beautiful paintings of Lord Ganesh that are sitting on gallery walls in Miramar, and deserve far greater attention than they have so far received. The artist responsible for these lovely paintings is Vamona Navelkar, who himself embodies the best traditions and history of Indian art, and is nothing less than a living Goan treasure.

Vamonbab is gentle, serene and generous, despite a lifetime of knocks and bruises that would have crushed a lesser man. He radiates serenity, though he is too often ignored and passed over for recognition – in this way he has been a true martyr for his art, very much like Angelo da Fonseca. But make no mis-

take, Vamonbab is a man of fierce principle – he gave the *Herald* permission to use these gorgeous images of Lord Ganesh with these words: "I am a devotee of Ganapati; to me he embodies love and compassion. These are universal traits which have relevance in Mexico and Portugal too, and I have therefore used aspects and elements of Mexican and Portuguese culture in these paintings, which I have dedicated to Ganapati, along with thousands of others that I have done like these over the years."

From the Rashtrakutas to Angelo da Fonseca to Dr Jose Pereira to Vamona Navelkar to Dr Subodh Kerkar, this debate and battle has never been about individuals or specific artworks. Instead, it is about a culture that has developed over centuries; and which now looks like it is going to be tested all over again. If history is a guide, the forces of reason will prevail – just as they did on the evening of 20 August 2009. For the time being, we can remain proud of our precious Goa and its culture that still has so much to offer the world.



'Lord Ganesh in Portugal' (2009) by Vamona Navelkar (image courtesy Ruchika's Gallery)