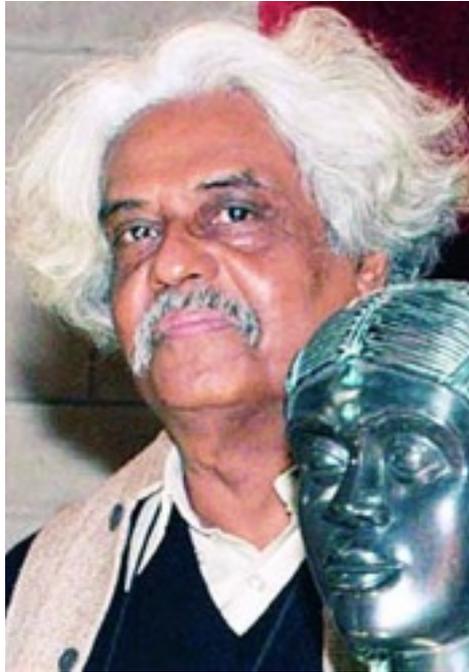


A. Ramachandran

Artist

'The artist is a creator, a miniature version of God'

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A. Ramachandran is one of India's leading painters and sculptors.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I look at art as a way to find the underlying structure of all that I see – whether a tree, a human figure, a rock. Finding the principles that operate at each level, feeling the life rhythm through it all is what art is about, but also spirituality. I cannot dissociate the two.

I have been going every year for three decades to a few villages near Udaipur where I just sit and sketch. This is where I find all my inspiration and my raw material. In Delhi I barely look out of the window for any inspiration, apart from a few trees from time to time. Studying those tribals and the simplicity of their lives, their harmony with nature, the grace their bodies have like no one in cities, the way they can laugh like birds – it is all a spiritual experience. My whole world is in those few villages. There I find a very living world, like no model in a studio could ever be. And as villagers keep moving, I must try and capture within a few lines the movement of their body, capture the life movement, the rhythm of life.

Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?

My entire life has been like a floating log. None of my life decisions was pre-designed or preconceived – neither leaving Kerala, nor going to Santiniketan, nor moving to Delhi, not even marriage or children. My wife being Chinese we spent years together before marrying. And then two children came, unplanned. One day they were ready to leave and moved to Canada, which of course I had never planned either.

But as the log floats on the river of life, I do not think the flow is all random. It has a logic of its own. I could not have accomplished all the work I have done in the last forty years without guidance. And I actually believe that if you are gifted for something, nothing can stop you from doing or becoming it. It is in the order of things.

Do you believe you have a special mission or purpose in this life?

As the river's flow is not random, one is destined to accomplish certain things, way beyond having two instead of three children for instance, a small or a large bank account.

I always felt I had to draw and paint, since I was a child. I would paint the walls around me, I would cover my notebooks with sketches. I was also dedicated to classical music, which I learnt from the age of five. But looking at the two forms of expression I had some gift for, I opted for the first one. I thought that as a musician, I would have an immediate effect in front of an audience, but as a painter, it could go through centuries. Today, I may stand in front of an early Christian painting and be tremendously touched by it. So the timelessness of the medium, if well preserved, is what attracted me.

I did not go and study art immediately as my parents opposed it. Back then it definitely was not a respectable profession. Instead, I studied literature, which was actually a blessing. It gave me a much broader outlook than my fellow classmates once I joined art classes.

Now what would that medium be used for?

At first, driven by anger, I focused on social and political issues. But somewhere in the seventies, I realized that it was merely a journalistic exercise, appealing to people for immediate effect. So I abandoned it.

I am actually convinced that a great work of art is not about the subject. Look at Van Gogh's paintings – merely a flower or a chair. It is only a chair! But it can take you to other realms.

On the other hand, have great paintings on war or human misery ever changed the situation on the ground? The victims do not see those pieces. They end up hanging in the living room of some wealthy, often guilt-ridden person. So if my mission was to do social reform, I should try and become Mother Teresa or Baba Amte. I should go and do real work instead of wasting my brushes and colours. I should get people out of the gutter and see that they have a peaceful life till they die.

You cannot say "I am a painter, I sit in my drawing room and worry about the people in gutters in Calcutta". That is humbug. I do not want to be insincere in that way. Even when I go to villages I do not pretend I will change their lives, educate them, develop schools and so on. I only look at their lives, my subject is not their problems.

So as I understood the social purposelessness of social painting, I gave it up. Instead, I looked at another model. Buddha, Jesus Christ, Guru Nanak and many others all had a gift of knowing more than others and finding simple ways of communicating it to people. Artists are a little bit like that. It is about being a channel, a conduit for something that is beyond us. And in that way, it is a very limited role, meant for a few people who have the patience and time to look at my work, and be touched by it, transported by it.

As someone once said, if there is one man, anywhere in the world, who at some point will appreciate and understand my work, then I am satisfied. I do not need 5,000 people to admire it; neither does it have to happen in my lifetime. It can be anywhere, at any time. I believe this is the ultimate aim of an artist and its function in society.

What is spirituality for you in your day to day life?

Spirituality to me is art, and art is an endless quest of every moment. There is no end to the discoveries one can make and this is why people have never stopped painting since the beginnings of time, or why an artist never retires till he dies.

Take color for instance. I used to be quite monochromic in my paintings. I did not know that color can create an elevation of your mind. And I am not talking about it in a theoretical way as Kandinsky or Paul Klee would. Actually I experienced and understood that color is like an epileptic fit. You try some blue over a yellow and suddenly it gives you an electrical shock. You had never known such a mélange existed and you become unconsciously involved in a relationship with the newly created color. It starts pulsating in your mind. You realize those ordinary pigments bought in the market take another dimension and create an electrical charge. That charge creates a new kind of light. And you realize there is no end to discoveries. You realize you are only a drop in the flow of explorers, neither the first, nor the last. But as you are part of the flow, you can also be proud of being the river, of being the sea.

Many times when there are doubts, when I am clueless about the next step, guidance comes from my intuition, as if I had a double. One person in me deals with all social, rational and material responsibilities. Another one is completely disconnected from all this and entirely dedicated to the process of creation. He takes over in those moments and enables me to go beyond the already known, the already created, the logic devised by generations of artists before me. And thus true creation may occur, creating my own logic.

Of course I do pujas at times and pray for peace of mind. But my true and most powerful prayer is when I paint. Every moment I draw or even think of painting is a prayer.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

All of art is spirituality to me and as I understood at Santiniketan from my teachers, there are essentially two approaches to creation: either you take over the language evolved by many artists before you and improvise on it; or you choose a direct confrontation with nature and try to find your own way, your own language. The second process is much more complex because you start from scratch, you study and watch nature and try to evolve your own syntax that becomes subsequently the grammar of your expression.

The principle of that approach is quite simple: no matter what object or being of nature, it has an underlying inner structure which you can identify if your perception is keen enough. Once you do so it

becomes yours, and you can transform it in an image of your own that contains all the images you have seen – for instance when you look for the common features of a being from the embryo stage to childhood to old age. Similarly, you can look at anything and find a basic order instead of getting lost in a cluster of details. That order is like musical notes vibrating harmoniously if the strings are correctly tuned. In art as well, you create a visual chord and if it touches something in you, it means it has touched an inner chord. This to me is ultimate spirituality. Because by touching that, you are touching God who created that system and those structures. And if you do it correctly, you understand the greater composition created by God. The microcosm gives you an intuition of the macrocosm. In the end, the artist is also a creator, a miniature version of God.

You can feel it in early Christian art for instance, where they were trying to touch a chord that would be reminiscent of God. And ultimately, all great works are created that way, when people surrender to something beyond themselves (and certainly not to the market forces), when it is not about the ego, about becoming another Picasso or Francis Bacon.

And this is the big question of contemporary art: where can it now go? Everything, absolutely everything has been explored and experimented since art has become free of any constraint, earlier in the 20th century. You can have models roll on your canvas for art, you can mutilate yourself and call it art, you can commit suicide and make it a form of art. Where else can one go? What else can be invented? What else can be "new"? And most importantly, why all this and what is the meaning of it? Catching attention and increasing one's market value? Apart from shocking everybody's senses, is there something deeper? None of that means much to me and I think of the time when artists would create the most magnificent masterpieces for temples and never sign their name. The whole social responsibility of artists was very different back then.

Can you share a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?

During childhood, I was imbibed with a certain element of religiosity, like most people in India. Going to the temple or having pujas was the most natural thing in the world. Nobody would question it or try to understand it too much, as it simply is part of what is done. After my studies though, when I moved to Santiniketan, I came across a very different kind of religiosity and the traditional one from my upbringing was completely pushed in the background. There, I found some very profound teachers, and a notion of religion inspired by Tagore and the Brahma Samaj movement developed by his father and others. This, along with the very spiritual approach of art through nature which I imbibed at Santiniketan was definitely a turning point for me.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

I would think that the greatest man I have met, and the greatest influence on me was my teacher at Santiniketan. Ram Kinkar Baij was an eccentric figure who never married, often drunk, and like a Sufi saint, would utter some powerful thoughts from time to time. The emphasis was never on art history and academic studies – art schools in Bombay, Delhi or Calcutta were more traditional in that sense – but rather on personal improvement, the development of one's perception faculties and creativity. This happened mostly by going into nature, rather than spending time in a classroom. And gradually it shaped my entire view on life and my approach to art.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be reincarnated as?

I would become an artist and improve whatever I have started and learnt in this lifetime. Also, I would want my wife to share my journey again. But she may be quite bored by this prospect.

If there was one question you could ask God, what would it be?

I never ask God. God only talks to me.

What is your idea of happiness?

As an artist, I would say that those fragments of a moment when you create and achieve something, those little moments of discovery – they are far greater than anything else and nothing else could define happiness. Besides, those moments are uniquely mine, no one else can share them.