The K K Hebbar Gallery and Art Centre, Manipal is housed in the premises of the Manipal Centre for Philosophy and Humanities, Manipal University. It envisions itself as a space that nurtures and encourages the spirit of creative expression and art pedagogy which was central to the life and times of artist and art educationist Kattingerri Krishna Hebbar (1911–1996).

The Art Centre houses twenty five works of K K Hebbar from the Portrait Collection, courtesy of the K K Hebbar Art Foundation.

HGAC opens its doors to cross-disciplinary engagement with artists and other cultural practitioners in and around the region of South Canara and aims to encourage a deeper and more meaningful relationship between the people, the student communities in the region and art. The Art space situated on the top floor of the building of the Manipal Centre for Philosophy and Humanities, is the first step of the University’s initiative to eventually establish a cultural centre promoting art and performance with special emphasis on the coastal region of South Canara.

Hebbar’s Legacy
K K Hebbar, born in Karnataka and later based in Bombay, represents a rare set of artists from the south that emerged as singular critical modernists of the country during the seventies without identifying themselves with any artist movement or group. The most prominent
contemporaries of Hebbar in Bombay were the Bombay Progressive Artists’ Group of the time which included F N Souza (1924 - 2002), S H Raza (1922 - ), M F Hussain (1915 - 2011), K H Ara (1914 - 1985), H A Gade (1917 - 2001), S K Bakre (1920 - 2007) et al. While his style evolved through depiction towards abstraction, a major medium being oil on canvas, it was complemented by a equally robust body of work in the medium of the line drawing - a style now famous as the ‘singing lines’ - a term attributed to his drawings by writer Mulk Raj Anand (1905 - 2004).

Having had formal artistic training form the Sir J J School of Art, Bombay and later at the Academy Julian, Paris, Hebbar taught art at the J J School for many years and was sought after as an art mentor by several institutions. While his early works reflect an influence of the academic style, he belongs to the generation of painters who allowed themselves to be influenced by the world and tried to grapple with a ‘world of art buzzing with terminological search, even re-enunciation of the art process’. His later travel across the world especially to Europe and the Far East including Japan and Indonesia therefore had a significant influence on him that made him re-define his style which become more globally encompassing, abstract and symbolic. Distinct from these, however are his portraits, which reflect a more intimate and personal mode of the artist’s interaction with his contemporaries and the people in his world.

**Hebbar and South Canara**

Hebbar hailed from Kattingeri, a village near Udupi and had grown up amidst a musical environment rich with folk performative traditions like Yakshagaana. His longstanding friendship with the cultural polyglot Dr. Shivrama Karanth (1902 - 1997) who also hailed from the same region is well-known. As a young man, Hebbar had learned Kathak from a disciple of Pt. Birju Maharaj (1938-), not in order
that did not profess to belong specifically to either nation or state, implied a general dissolution of the nationalist/regionalist tag that an artist is often pinned with. ‘Where does one place that creative output that refutes both the national and the regional?’ - the question raised is important especially when in the light of considering these art works as not only aesthetic objects but as vectors of socio-cultural forces and products of their own times and contexts.

**On Portraiture**

The portrait as an artistic genre has had as many trajectories, from being an intimate gesture of affection towards kins to celebratory moments of historical significance to moments of self-reflection through self portraits.

Hebbar's portraits reflect a different mode on artistic engagement, one reflecting not only aesthetic concerns but a larger socio-economic context under which the portraits and the people in the portraits existed.

In his own autobiographical essays, only passing references have been made to his portraits. In scholar H Y Sharada Prasad’s words, they appear more as documentation works than purely artistic works. The artist has appeared to have felt that government commissions, though economically encouraging and valuable in terms of being in contact with eminent personalities, could ‘force the bird into a cage’. Nevertheless, they stand testimony to historical figures, friendships and intimacies and relationships which existed and constituted the world of the artist and perhaps even shaped his worldview. Art historically portraiture has close links with traditions of masks and performance.

Hebbar spent much of his later professional life in the city of Bombay. He continued to remain what critic H A Anil Kumar calls ‘a subversive modernist’ by managing to remaining outside of frameworks that defined the blanket-identity of an Indian Modern Artist. Kumar observes that Hebbar was a ‘diaporic-from-within, neither a nationalist nor a regionalist.’ Thus his works to learn dance, he insisted, but in order to instil a sense of rhythm that would reflect in his art works. His singing lines adeptly captured the vibrant energy of Yakshagana dancers in the elaborate costume, complete with the head dress (ketaki mudhale) and the breast plate (kavacha). In fact the tiny headdress that was later introduced for the costume of female roles in Yakshagana by Dr. Shivrama Karanth has been attributed to a suggestion from Hebbar.
arts with inherent social bearings closely entrenched in discourses of realism and expressionism, representational and non-representational modes and so on. While some formalists like Roger Fry maintained that the model in a portrait is a mere scaffolding upon which the artist builds up a form, others like Spengler define it as a ‘biography in a kernel’.

The question remains as to what aesthetic function can the medium of portraiture embody in our present day context? Other than being symbols of social contexts, portraits offer us with an many tangents for thought with regards to the body and its representation, the philosophical implications of the self, the face and the world, the image as sociological and ideological symbols as well as literary narratives.

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