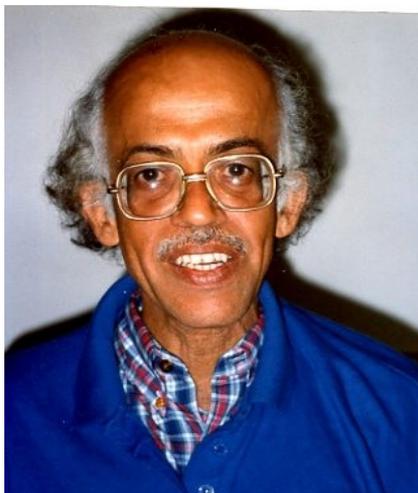


## Approaching Arya



When I met him in Dharwar, Arya stood, so to speak, in the margin of my small group of students and his wife, Vidya, was the only woman among half a dozen good hearted bachelors, most of them coming from distant regions, and living on campus, while the young couple stayed in town, in the family home where Vidya took care of her father whose wife had prematurely died.

In the small French department of our university, the atmosphere was truly brotherly. Today I realize that my merry students were all slightly inebriated with their first experience of freedom, far from fatherly authority, and with the newness of the tasks I offered them, which matched their youthful appetite for learning. Everything became a pretext to joyful meetings outside class, around the guru they had decided I was. Vidya would gladly bring her husband to those picnicks and parties.



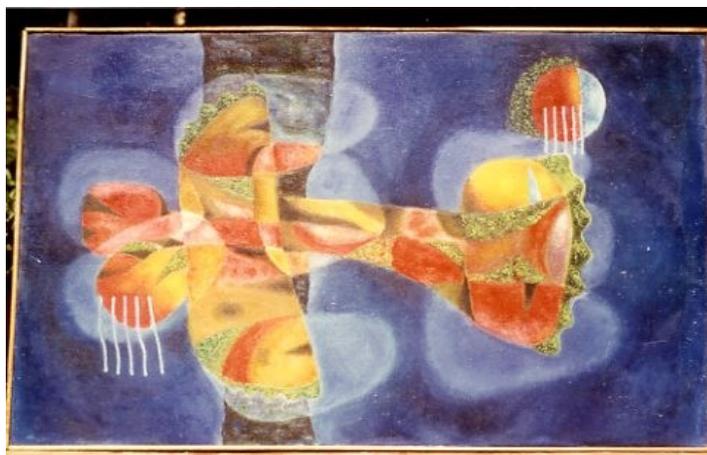
Arya was at ease with us – his easy going ways and humorous conversation were in tune with our moods. I became aware of his vast, precise culture, which seemed to jar a little with the modest employment he held as a bank clerk. But we knew that painting was his favourite activity and that he had published poems in kanaka. He was therefore an artist.

Actually he had obtained a MA in Sanskrit, a fact I learnt later, and he might have dedicated his life to teaching, a much more demanding calling. His situation in the bank may have been selected to leave him more freedom of spirit and more spare time for his art.

Arya's paintings looked to me like half abstract, luminous creations, which I appreciated for their elegance, but, not understanding his underlying ambition, deemed merely decorative, even though I used to compare him with Gauguin, a bank clerk too, who had veered artist without ever attending an art school.

This young painter had been selected to show his work in a Bombay gallery, a young assistant journalist had published an enthusiastic account of this first personal exhibition, Arya had wished to meet the author of the article which was signed Vidya. They met, liked each other, fell in love, and finally got married without heeding – free spirits as they were – the caste barriers (jâtri) still very strong at the time. The young couple came to live with Vidya's father in Dharwar she stopped studying journalism and registered in French. Their new residence was also closer to Arya's own family who had always lived in Udupi in the South-West of Karnataka.

That is all I had known of Arya for a long time, when suddenly, in the luminous heart of the dry season, Vidya, then in her last year as a graduate student, our dear Vidya, died. A murderous attack of lupus, I believe, I am not sure. I remember walking towards their white house on the Saraswati hill with my students huddling against me, squeezing my arms. With tight lips we trudged in the dust under the slanting rays of the evening sun. In the drawing room which seemed



vaster and whiter, emptied as it was of all furniture and images, we saw Vidya, our Vidya, our sister, our daughter, lying on the ground draped in a cloak which covered her entirely except for a lifeless face which was no longer hers without the vivid look of her black lustrous eyes. Arya was sitting cross-legged beside her and did not raise his head. We touched his shoulder and departed in silence.

Arya remained a permanent invitee in our group. The students included him in all the celebrations they organized. Later, when they left the university and were replaced by young sophomores who had not shared this tragedy, my relationship with Arya changed, it became

more personal, tinged with a budding friendship. I dare the word even though Arya seems to consider me to this day with the respect due to the guru I was for his wife. I feel ashamed. He knows so much more than I will ever do.

He was at ease in many languages. He took me to a kathakali performance and I realised that he had a near professional understanding of the nuances of the makeup, of the significance of the gestures, the complexities of the plot, the mystic meaning of each adventure. He made me read a young author, Grish Karnad, who became one of the most important Indian dramatists of our time. He would quote, in the same whisper, Kerouac and the Bhagavad-Gita in the



original text. He was well up with the turmoil of plastic creativity which was then giving birth to conceptual art. When he came to Paris he did not enter the Louvre or the National Museum of Modern Art as a tourist. I got the impression that he was honing his tools as an artist. Later on when we wandered through Tuscany

with our friend and accomplice Michael Gottlob, I saw him equally at ease in the pagan décor of the Uffizi and in the religious atmosphere of the Duomo. He had grown roots into all the epochs of the Indo-European world. With such a vast strange personality, where did he come from ?

The printer-publisher Madhu Gopal, a frail old wise gentleman, called me up one morning, as I strolled by his shop on the Great Square.

“I have often seen you in the company of our common friend Arya Acharya, he said, drawing a stool for me from under the bric-a-brac of his backroom. But do you really understand him? Do you know his origin and his itinerary? I know he is much too discreet to have disclosed his story to you...”

“Is it all that important? I am not interested in gossip.” My respectable interlocutor swept the objection away.

“It is essential for us, Hindus. You know Arya is a Brahmin. Actually he belongs to a rare, celebrated family – the servants of the Udupi temple. To this same family belonged the saintly reformer Acharya Madhva who established and codified the cult of Krishna in that same temple, seven centuries ago.”

He then launched into long sinuous explanations from which I extracted the idea that this Madhvacharya had founded a samga, a religious community within the frame of Vishnu's cult. As often happens in spiritual affairs, the descendants of the prophet had inherited his authority over the community. Finally, through the complicated interplay of generations my friend Arya had found himself in a situation which, by right of birth, gave him the position of supreme guru, of swami, of predestined pontiff !!

He received in consequence, as future head of the matha, (fraternity) an education which was more akin to an initiation : he was fed a pedagogical royal jelly of which Sanskrit, theology and liturgy formed the basis, with a few other subjects which were deemed necessary to his future calling.

He became a priest, the head of the matha. A prestigious position. Was he the only one to don the title? did he have to assist his predecessor, to compose and compromise ? Very soon he fled. Why did he choose a different accomplishment of his karma? Why did he shuffled off the coil of so venerable a post? Did he rebel, resign, was there a transaction, a conciliation ? Anyway young Arya abandoned his ministry.

According to Madhu Gopal, this renouncement might have imperilled his life. There were few examples in the past of initiated young levites who had thus refused to serve. They had invariably been found dead in a ditch. But times had changed, and Arya escaped this violent fatality. He melted away into the vast Indian space, lived for a while, it is believed, in Pondichéry, then plunged into the swarming Bombay metropolis and resurrected a painter.



When I met Arya this story seemed forgotten since he had resumed contact with his family in Udupi and visited them frequently. I imagine that one of his brothers had taken up the spiritual heritage.

I have not attempted to verify venerable Madhu Gopal's assertions, and I leave the full responsibility of the story to him. I never asked Arya any question on his supposedly meandering youth. The episodes narrated by Madhu Gopal are of a rather flattering nature, anyway : a crossroad where the precepts of duty, of loyalty to the family and caste, of obedience to the karma meet, in tense ordeal, with the calls of individual liberty, of adventure, of art, and what else ...I remember that I had made the remark that this itinerary was in some way similar to Vincent Van Gogh's, a would-be minister turned painter. Mahdu-

Ji had looked at me in surprise: he had never heard of that Vincent whose fame, popularized in Europe through posters and coloured magazines, had not yet reached our corner of the Deccan...



As a veiled confirmation of his revelation it came to my mind that Arya held an MA in Sanskrit, and yet had never alluded to any academic studies. He must therefore have obtained that degree as a free candidate after reaching a high level of knowledge in his subject...in what school if not in the annex of a temple?

From time to time he would disappear for a few days: I would notice his absence at the bank window where he lingered in a job obviously too modest for him. Then he came back – no, he would say, he was not on leave, he was on a mission: his employer had sent him to one of the agencies to solve a conflict among the staff.

Are you a union delegate, then? I asked with surprise, revealing my European conceptions.

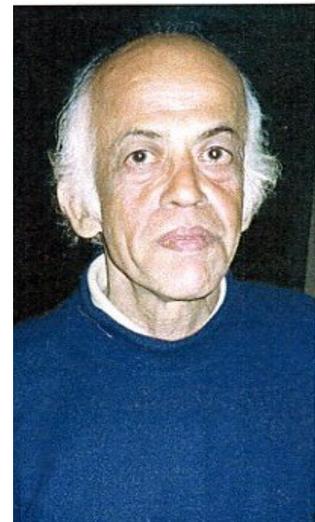
Not at all, he would answer. I have no title, no function, no delegation of power. Not my cup of tea, you know...

He laughed but would not explain. I vaguely understood that he had been asked to play the role of a mediator. On what authority? I guessed the one that had been given to him by right of birth as the head of the matha, a dignity that was still his in everyone's eyes, and through the

name of Acharya, which sanctified him in the wake of his ancestor. In this confusion between an inherited sacred mission and the realities of the financial world I discerned a very Indian way to deal with social matters. I think it helps situate my man.

He was a frequent visitor to Europe. The occasion of his first trip was a linguistic session to which he had accompanied Vidya, and their stay in France had glowed in their memory as a honeymoon cruise. Later on, when he was invited for exhibitions in Germany or in Italy, he never failed to come back to Paris in a kind of pilgrimage. There he would meet old friends from Dharwar who had married French wives and founded families, like his faithful Vasant Raichoor. And once when he was invited by a charming gallery, Passage du Grand Cerf, not very far from my house, he accepted as a matter of course the hospitality I offered him.

His company proved both light and intense. A total vegetarian, he fed on fruit and lentils, but he had an immense appetite for poems and images. We lived with open books, without a shadow of pedantry. Arya has a rare quality, seldom to be found among artists: an acute interest in what others have to say or produce, while he remains humble and discreet about the ways and means of his own creations. A superficial encounter with this courteous, attentive man will leave you totally ignorant of his importance as a writer and an artist. He has published ten books in the Kannada



language, and a collection of poems in English. He has translated several plays of the Sanskrit theatre and adapted them for the radio, he has shot a courageous documentary on the present situation of the ex-pariahs, and, above all, he is the author of a full-length film which has received the highest prize a Kannadiga production can aspire to.

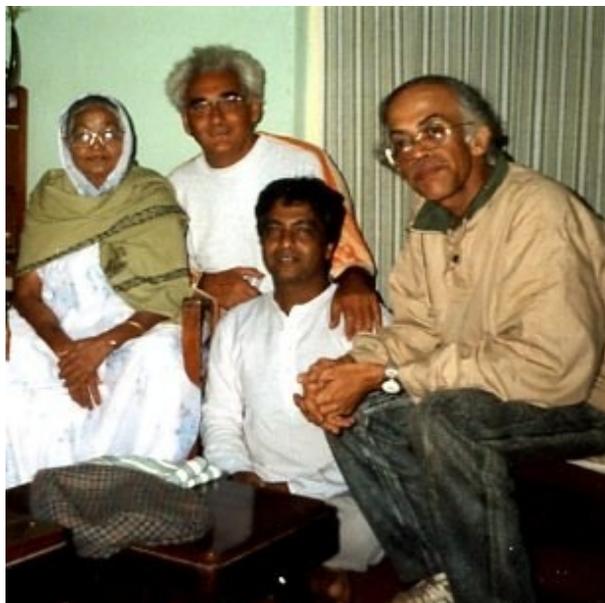
Beside his abundant production as a writer his paintings have been internationally recognized. In Karnataka he is recognised as an eminent artist and in 1998 he has been conferred the Lalit Kala Academy award.

In 1998, spending the winter in India I enjoyed the hospitality of his studio of Kalyan Nagar, in Dharwar. I then discovered that everyday he faithfully wrote a long letter to Vidya, the woman of his life, as others would write a diary. He told her his reflections and the trifling events of the day, as if she had simply gone away on a journey and he wanted to keep her aware of what was happening at home.

At that time he was working on a painting that he would later call “Double game”. I then wrote a commentary of that picture that was developing under my eyes. I hope my explanations will help some of you to approach Arya’s elaborate art.

The images with which I have tried to illustrate this text are old photographs of mine, extracted from cardboard boxes, or cut out from imprecise catalogues and scanned with clumsy enthusiasm as well as unfortunate mediocrity. All my thanks to Christiane Pilot-Raichoor and Marie-Hélène Vigneau who have provided me with the most acceptable of the lot.

December 1994 at the home of our hostess Mrs Raichoor (left). Beside her Robert Vigneau, a the sitarist Ustad Hameed Khan, and our Ary Acharya, whos cap is negligently resting on the low table. My student Vasant Raichoor who took the photograph seems to have inherited my clumsiness in that art. But I decline all responsibility...



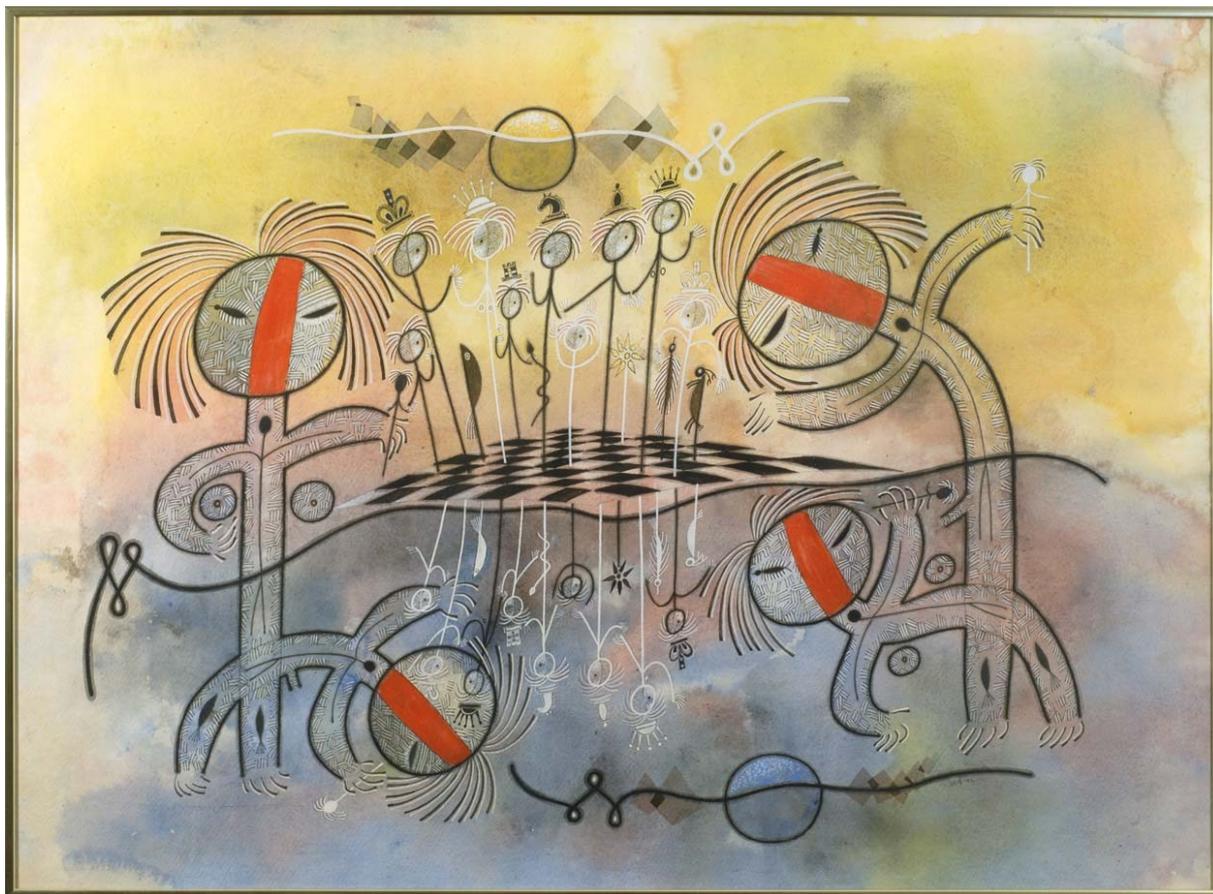
## One of Arya’s pictures : Double Game.

Arya belongs to that category of image-makers who do not endeavour to present us with a reflection of the world, but rather with a reflection **on** the world. They are concerned with signs and symbols and not with light, perspective or other physical references. His painting must be seen as an intellectual quest, in which psychological, philosophical and even mystical problems are approached. Images of the imagination, they decipher more than they represent and belong to the vast family of symbolic art: sacred, primitive, aboriginal, popular....

Better than vague generalities I think the description and translation into words of one precise work will help to enter Arya’s complex world.

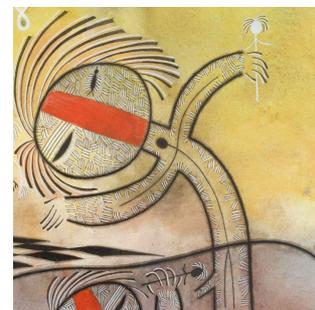
Double Game was completed by mid January 1994, but the composition took up the sketches of a notebook in which Arya used to draft his projects. In general he works rather fast, starting at dawn. Yet several days are needed to complete the painting: the artist divides the work to be done into several phases, according to various technical constraints (drying the background after washing it, for instance) but also simply to keep the inspiration fresh at all

stages of the realisation.



Deciphering the subject of Double Game presents no difficulty; the title suggests the theme: the couple, the reflection, the double, and their corollaries; symmetry, complementarity, opposition.

In the upper half, against a transparent background of airy daylight, two schematized figures are playing chess. The one to the left is obviously feminine, with two circles under the arms symbolizing breasts, while the one to the right sports a rather amusing tiny tube which leaves



no doubt as to his virility. Between them a simplified chessboard is seen in perspective. On it stand small puppet like figures, topped with a crown, a horse, a tower. Obviously a game of chess is in progress.

The chessboard rests on an undulating line which clearly separates the sunny, light, rosy upper part from the lower half whose blue-grey colours suggest a nightly or watery world. The two figures have their prolongation in this underworld. At the point where the trunk divides into legs another figure (their double), smaller and of opposite sex, seems to spurt out from their body. There is continuity between the tall figure and the small one, they have the same legs, but the small one does not emerge from the obscure lower world. Those small doubles represent the hidden personality of the two chess players – the contrary tendencies we all carry within ourselves. A truism in modern psychology.



Hinduism, which Arya has imbibed with his education, presents this elementary truth in a clear simple way: each god possesses a feminine form, his *shakti*. Vishnou and Mohini, Shiva and Parvati are two aspects of the same divinity. But Arya chooses to stress the repression of our hidden doubles, of our shameful impulses. Under the table, in the dark, we conceal an ample part of our personality.

Yes, personality is the point. If the feminine part raises her head, her masculine hidden double lowers his, and the masculine figure bends down while his feminine double rises in an inverted curve.

The use of black and white underlines those intimate contradictions: each hidden double holds in his left hand a pawn similar but opposed to the one his dominant figure is wielding, as if the hidden figure was playing the other one's game, as if cheating was going on underneath.



The complexity of our figures and of their doubles is not limited to their movements.

The four of them are built around a central structure – a dot (the head) and curved lines (the limbs). Skeleton? Bird? Soul? What do those stylised figures represent if not the intimate geometry of each person. And we shall learn later that geometrical shapes have, Arya's world, a metaphysical significance.



in

What is more, animals dwell within the figures. A fish soars along their legs, birds inhabit their eyes. Arya thus reminds us of our biological constitution: from the waters under our feet to the air spread over the earth, we are part of animal life.



We should also notice that the players strangely hold their catch in their left hand. Two or four left handed players might exist, of course. But I prefer to think that they preserve their right hands for more important actions. If we examine the movements of those right hands, held out in a gesture of appeal, twisted in refusal and regret, we soon guess the mute, unconscious message of the encounter. Could not they hug each other? Love each other?

No, they can't. The impossibility is posted on their faces, which are, all four of them, crossed over by a violent red bar, and turned into no-way road signs. Each one remains closed up on his secret, his shame, his taboo, and forbids himself any real contact, without even imagining that the other one is gifted with the exact configuration which would make their encounter complementary – and perfect.

Thus with a few lines, a few signs, Arya has drawn up our contradictions, our inhibitions, our fears – in short, our solitudes.

Weighed down by their repressed double, chained by the interdicts they inflict upon themselves, shall our two characters manage to communicate? Barring love, what relationship can exist between them?



They can play, Arya says. He did not choose chess by chance. First he had thought of a card game. But no game but chess, he says, so well reflects the human world in its various organised forms, with our struggles for survival and for power, our straight or oblique movements and intrigues, our treacheries. Shall we not all experience, in our existence, the situations of King, Queen or Bishop, Knight or mere Pawn ? Moreover Arya's chess board does not limit itself to our human comedy, it embraces the whole of our live environment. The pawns are flowers. Fish, birds and four legged beasts, the elemental forms of the animal reign in water, air, and on earth are present too. The chess board is the stage of the world where puppets sway and toss in a ballet.

They do not seem to be aware that they are mere toys in the hands of our two figures which suddenly appear gigantic, threatening and domineering, lords and masters of the creation. Caught in his contradictions the human couple is nevertheless sovereign of the world, king and queen.



Those puppets dancing in the sun do not realise either that they possess a symmetrical reflection: from the chessboard of daylight, their inverted doubles dive into the dark part of the painting. Shall we talk of an anti-world, as some will say anti-matter? Rather an inverted world, a theme familiar to the artists of metamorphosis and ambiguity.

The hidden doubles of the two main characters have also seized a chess piece on the inverted chessboard and they play their symmetrical game. Thus the duplicity of the world is exposed. The events which take place in broad daylight combine with those that hidden forces organise. But which is the real game? Who truly determines the course of human events, the visible character or his hidden double? The image gives no answer. Is not it enough that the question should be asked?

Two symmetries structure the composition. The vertical one opposes two complex characters who seem to communicate through a game. The horizontal one opposes the daylight world of appearances where playing is the rule, to the hidden world where cheating is the habit.



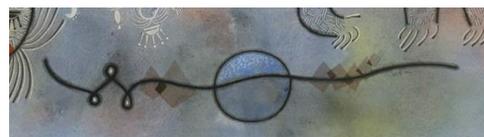
Since a game is going on, it should be natural to ask whether the image indicates who is winning. If we suppose that the left hand holds the pawns taken from the opponent, their colours should help us to find out who is playing black, and who white. In any case we cannot but admit that the feminine player is in a desperate position, with only a queen and two pawns left to defend a king threatened by all the major pieces of his opponent. Yet who could predict an end to that game? Actually it should never end. A probable victory, or defeat, would introduce a plot, whilst the image has been composed to explore a situation, not

to suggest a story. No one should win or lose. The chess game is just a way of spending time, like the dialogues in Beckett's theatre, or the ball in the Pascalian concept of *divertissement*.

Time and time only structures the whole. Three repeated curves are enough to express it. One, undulating in the middle part of the painting suggests the horizon. The two others (white in the upper part and dark in the lower half) frame the picture. There is no limit on the sides. Those lines are symbolic representations of time, often figured as a snake.



According to the Hindu tradition Vishnu, before creating the world, is asleep on a coiled snake, which will unroll when Vishnu wakes up and Creation begins. A clear symbol of a metaphysical evidence: there is no duration if there is no existence. The snake proceeds through undulations, as time does. Here we stand afar from the Christian tradition in which the snake is a dangerous animal, an incarnation of the devil which Our Lady will trample under her feet. In India the beneficent idol of the cobra has a place in each village with particular rites of devotion. Arya naturally uses the serpentine curve to express the passing of time through which every life finds its shape.

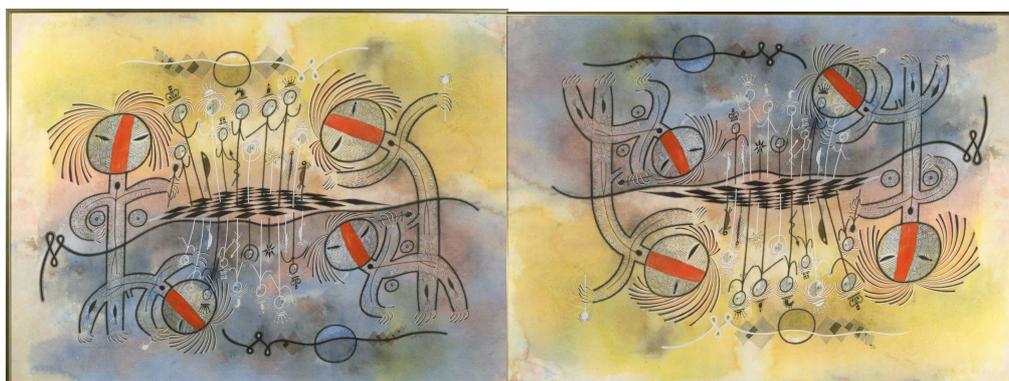


A circle is associated to this symbolic curve. It represents the sun, round as the primeval starting point from which all life draws its origin. Another symbol, then.

That is why those three similar geometrical figures, where the circle is insistently linked to the curve on the upper and lower limit as well as in the middle of the painting, should not be seen as mere decorative elements: they express the intimate association of Space and Time, the famous four dimensions of our existence, and here the very location of the painting.

Of course what we are confronted with is the concepts of Space and Time, not the real and therefore limited forms of History and Geography. The background of the painting even suggests a sort of luminous or uncertain infinite which is akin to the sky, our two-

dimensional characters are positioned on each side of a three-dimensional (according to the laws of perspective) chessboard. Arya has insidiously taken us into a totally impossible world, the cosmic metaphysical world of ideas. Who but God could boast such a vision of the world? Here the artist identifies himself with the Creator of all visible and invisible things...



In the Hindu cult we find a catalogue of diagrams called *yantra*, which should be read as abstract representations of the world and of the divinity. Obviously Arya's compositions are linked to this tradition which they continue and renew. The painter has gone beyond pure mathematical abstractions, he freely integrates in his work a whole catalogue of forms with which we have become familiar through contact with primitive as well as modern art. Moreover Arya's ambition diverges from the strictly religious use of the *yantra*. Yet, beyond the evident differences in treatment and final destination, we are confronted in both cases with a symbolic expression of the world.

Another tradition which gives Arya's art a peculiar charm and whose influence is hardly discernible by a western eye is the *rangoli*, a form of protective drawing. In India, after having swept her threshold at dawn the lady of the house decorates it with a *rangoli*, that fragile ritual decoration traced with coloured powders. All Indian women excel in the technique of powder drawing: they gather the powder in the closed hollow of their palm and let it run to the ground, a tiny stream of colour, between the thumb and the index. This particular technique (no tool, only the hand) generates serene slightly dancing curves, characteristic of feminine gestures – peaceful generous tender gestures of wives, mothers, sisters. Priestly gestures too when it comes to decorating the temple, house of the divinity.



The spirit of *rangoli* impregnates Arya's work: space limited by the frame, starlike composition, symmetry, repetition of forms in plastic rhymes, economy in the use of colours.

*Yantra* and *rangoli*... the art of Arya, which seems so close to contemporary art must be re-situated within those two extreme traditions: the *yantra*, elaborated by erudite priests, the *rangoli*, a popular form, the sacred daily chore of housewives.

No artifice there, no research. Arya did not have to look for those traditions outside his own history, they came spontaneously: he was initiated to *yantras* during his education as a Brahmin destined for the priesthood, and the *rangoli* was a ubiquitous presence during his early years, between the two famous temples of Udupi where this technique is particularly and beautifully practised.

Those are not alien, but personal influences: they have nourished his childhood. But here they are called to reflect the obsessions of a precise individual: his secret wounds, his astonishments, his abysses. Through *Double Game* we can approach some of these themes: solitude, sexual ambiguity, confrontation, seduction, the game as a veil over helplessness, inhibitions. Other compositions would lead us to discover other themes, just as serious, with an image of death in the margin. A philosophy of despair appears in the final run, half veiled by graphic elegance and joy in the execution.

Like many creators Arya uses his art as a sort of psychoanalytical cure. Yet his introspective



search and findings will remain in his personal laboratory, his back kitchen. Of course, as an artist, he finds his inspiration within himself. Could he find it elsewhere? But Arya's technique bars him from anecdotic egotist confessions, and lyrical complacency. His compositions spring from

personal suffering and private experience, but the final image is abstract, symbolical, universal. Cleaned of superfluous elements they tend to classicism. Let each of us receive this message and adjust it to his own itinerary. Our painter is a moralist.

The photographs of the original painting Double Game have been realised by Gabriel Stauffer.

Translation by Marie-Hélène Estève