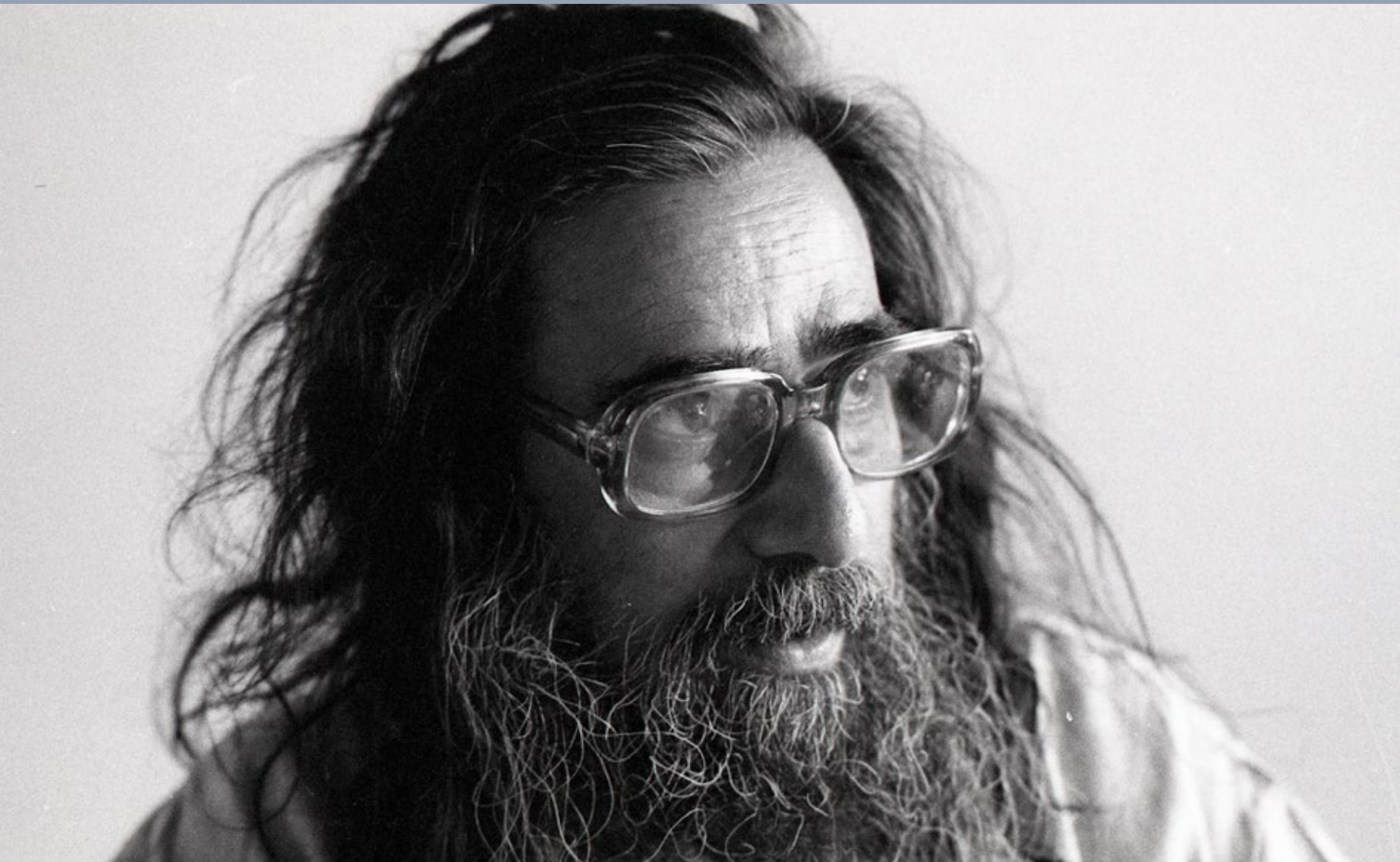


The Symbolism of  
**Swaminathan**  
A JOURNEY THROUGH THE YEARS



23 – 30 January 2020 • New Delhi • Exhibition

**SAFFRONART**

The Symbolism of  
**Swaminathan**  
A JOURNEY THROUGH THE YEARS



J Swaminathan, Poland, 1958  
© S Kalidas  
Image courtesy of Gallery Espace



Image courtesy of Dhoomimal Art Gallery

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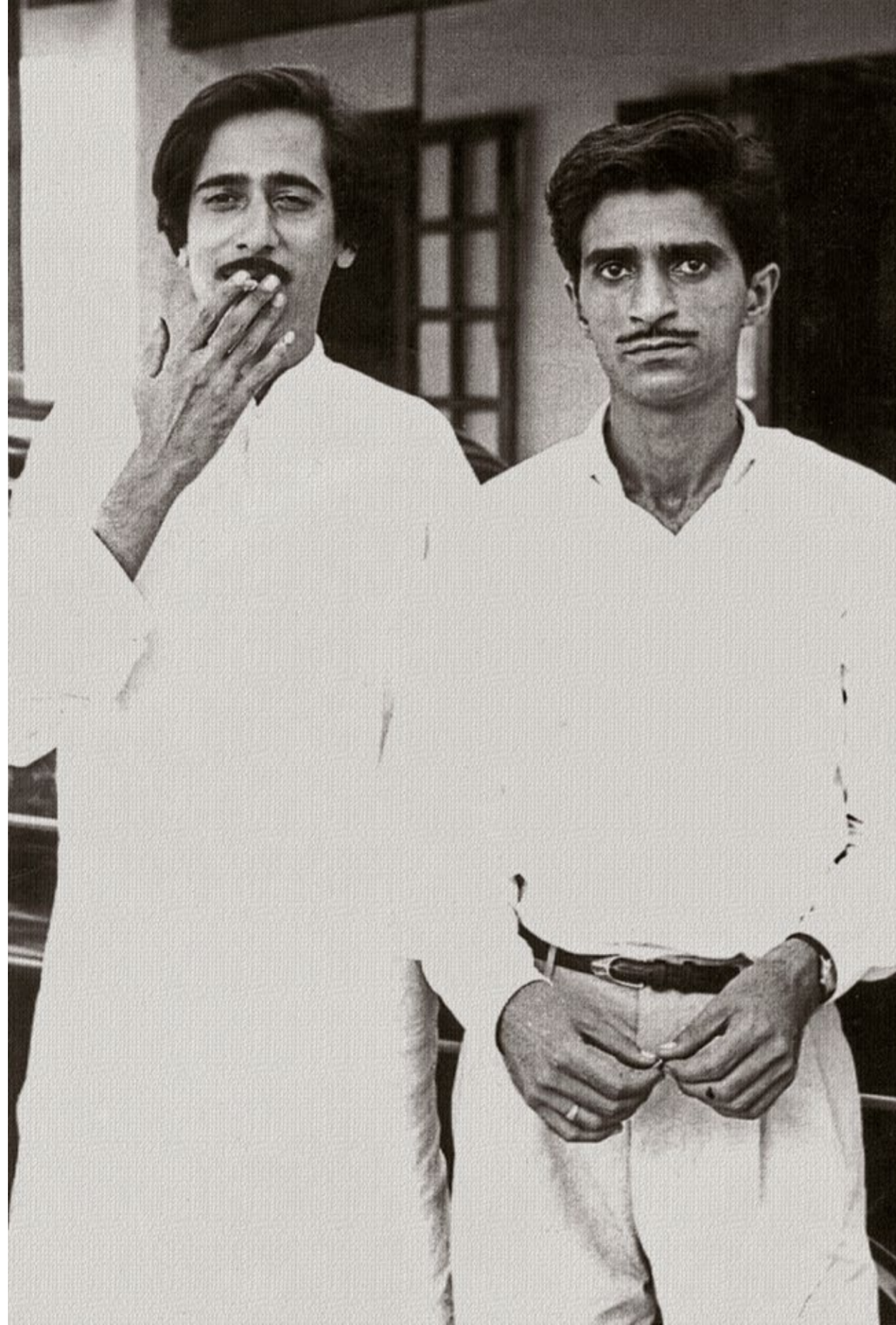
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“All true art, and tribal art specifically, is visionary. It is through art that the tyranny of the senses is overcome and the terror of the unknown transcended.”

– JAGDISH SWAMINATHAN



© Jyoti Bhatt



The artist with Narendra Dixit  
© S Kalidas  
Image courtesy of Gallery Espace

J agdish Swaminathan was a versatile artist, writer, and activist, and is considered one of the stalwarts of Indian art. During his career, he explored colour, geometry, repetition and symbolism, and his firm belief in the relevance and even superiority of folk and tribal art was demonstrated not only in his practice – which was often inspired by such motifs – but also in his tireless efforts to promote these art forms as a museum director. It was his ideas that set Swaminathan apart from his contemporaries, who often borrowed inspiration from the West.

Swaminathan was born in Simla on 21 June 1928, the sixth child in a large Tamil family. He was a curious, even “impossible” child, and his tryst with art began early. “I was six years old when I first smelled oil paint. My aunt, Parvati, had returned to India after completing her studies at Leeds in 1934 and it was she who gifted me with a box of Reeves oil colours and the smell of oil has stayed with me all through these years. Decades later when I had a one-man show in the town of my birth my aunt went about telling everybody that I painted much better when I was a child.” (J Swaminathan, “The Cygan: An Auto-bio note,” J Swaminathan, Geeta Kapur, Gieve Patel et al, *Lalit Kala Contemporary 40*, New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1995, p. 7)

At school, Swaminathan showed an aptitude for drawing and languages – his flair for the written word would prove to be significant in earning a livelihood – and he later joined the pre-medical programme at Hindu College in Delhi. Being inclined towards the arts, however, Swaminathan dropped out of college to explore other options. He became involved in politics, initially joining the Congress Socialist Party, where he also edited the weekly Hindi journal. After experiencing the violence of Partition, he became a part of the Communist Party of India (CPI), and met his future wife Bhawani Pande at one of their gatherings. The couple was married in 1955 despite the disapproval of their families. The following year, Swaminathan resigned from the CPI and began to seek a more stable life for himself and his growing family.

“The truth is Swami loves words as much as he loves paint. And he likes to paint a little with words, from time to time.”

– RICHARD BARTHOLOMEW

## A TURNING POINT

After their wedding, Swaminathan and Bhawani briefly visited Betul in Madhya Pradesh, and the artist considered this a turning point in his life. He described coming across a scene in the tribal village of Korku, where a boy bitten by a snake was being revived by a witch doctor. “This early encounter with tribal life was to have a deep impact on my later life as an artist.” (Artist quoted in S Kalidas ed., *Transits of a Wholtimer: J Swaminathan Years 1950-69*, New Delhi: Gallery Espace, p. 22) It was also on this trip that Swaminathan started to “draw tentatively again,” and upon his return to Delhi, he briefly enrolled for evening classes in the Art Department of the Delhi Polytechnic where his teachers included artists B C Sanyal and Sailoz Mookherjea. Though he was unable to balance these classes with his full-time job as a translator and editor at the People’s Publishing House, he continued to moonlight as a painter.

In 1958, Swaminathan enrolled in the printmaking programme at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Poland with a scholarship; but despite being happy there, he left before graduating because he yearned to be back with his family. Upon his return to India, Swaminathan “launched” himself as a freelance painter, “prepared to brave all the storms that life may brew up but determined to stick to the canvas and the brush.” (Swaminathan, Kapur, Patel et al, p. 9)

In 1960, Swaminathan had his first exhibition of prints and oils, alongside artists P K Razdan and N Dixit, which was inaugurated by M F Husain. The positive attention he received led to a number of solo shows in the next couple of years, and his work was collected by the likes of George Butcher, art critic of *The Guardian*. “This painting is seminal because it precedes all neo-tantric trends in modern art,” said the artist of his own work. (Swaminathan, Kapur, Patel et al, p. 10) In 1962, he was instrumental in calling for the need to rethink the art scene, in order to counter the influence of Western movements such as abstract expressionism and the Paris School. According to Krishen Khanna, “He thought that all modern painting in India since 1947 was far too concerned with the mundane physical world. Nor did he favour any kind of revivalism. He talked and wrote about the numenous [sic] image at a time when most artists were dealing with phenomena... He found in Paul Klee a kindred spirit as he did in the folk and tribal artists [yet] his own work bears no formal relationship to theirs.” (Krishen Khanna, *J Swaminathan: Contemporary Indian Art Series*, New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi)

Indeed, Swaminathan felt that the perspective and realism that the British tried to teach Indian artists was misguided, and Indian artists were far more progressive. Eventually “the modern movement in the West gave up linear perspective for two-dimensional space, a principle practised by our miniature painters and folk artists long before Picasso was born... The use of flat areas of colour as against tonalities, the simplification and distortion of forms to depict “meaning” instead of mere fact... the anthropomorphic imagination functioning in our miniature painting, the psychedelic use of colour in Tantric painting and the geometric use of space in all of our traditional

painting have one end in view: not to represent reality or even analyse it, but to create that para-natural image which inspires man to contend with reality.” (J Swaminathan, “The New Promise,” Swaminathan, Kapur, Patel et al, pp. 19-20)

Such discussions with fellow artists led to the founding of Group 1890 on 25-26 August in Bhavnagar, Gujarat, which included artists such as Jeram Patel, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh and Jyoti Bhatt. “The Bhavnagar meeting was the outcome of prolonged discussions through personal meetings and correspondence over a period of two years between like-minded artists on the situation existing in modern Indian art. Having come to a common understanding regarding the vitiating influences which hinder the unfolding of authentic development in art, it was decided to launch the *Group 1890* movement... To us creative expression is not the search for, but the unfettered unfolding of personality.” (“Group 1890 Manifesto,” S Kalidas ed., pp. 70-71) The group’s only show was held in October 1963, inaugurated by Jawaharlal Nehru and introduced by Octavio Paz – a Mexican poet and diplomat – who later helped and encouraged Swaminathan to start a journal of art criticism titled *Contra* ‘66.

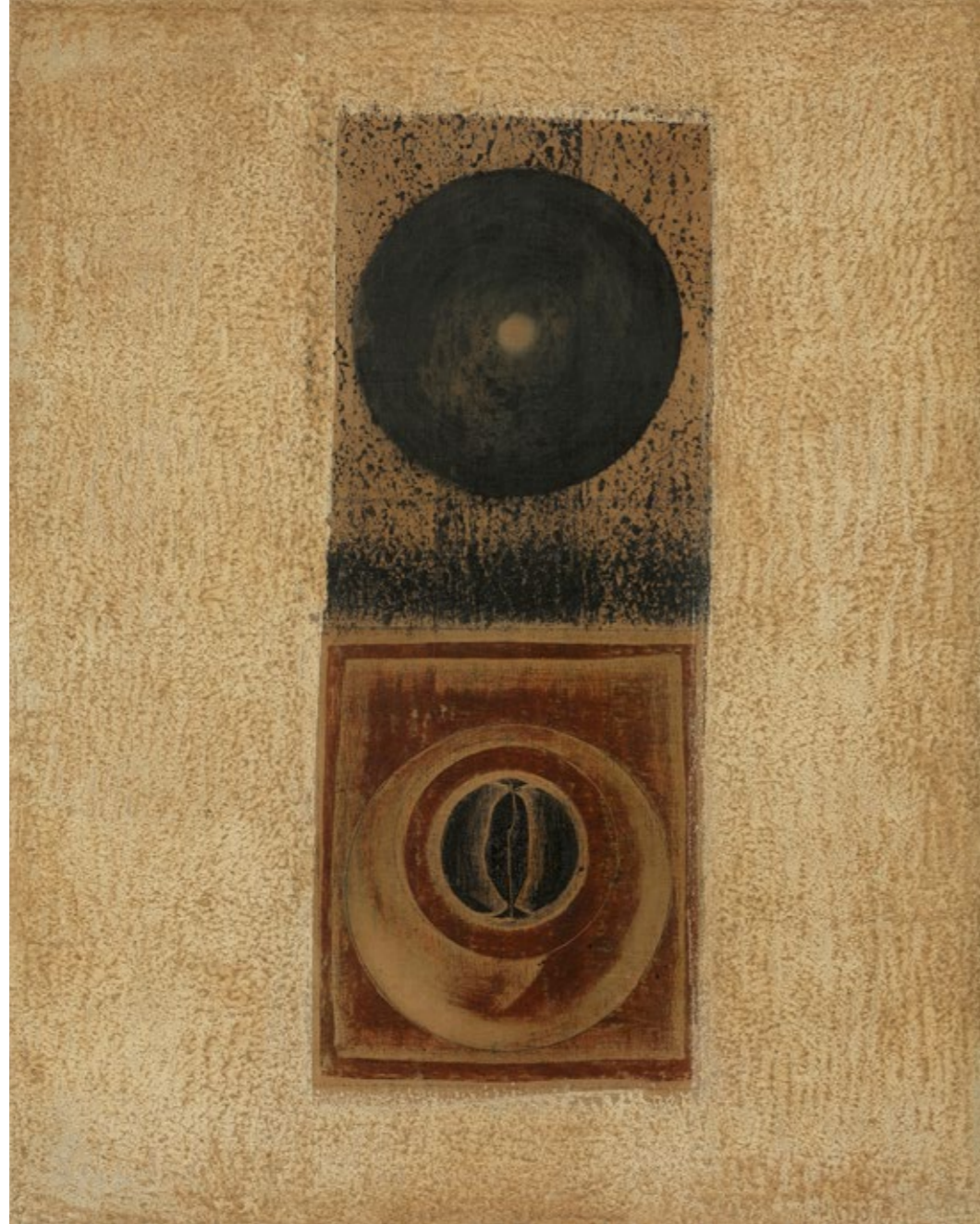


Raghav Kaneria, J Swaminathan and S Harsha with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru at the inaugural Group 1890 exhibition, 1963



Group 1890 exhibition catalogue, 20-29 October 1963





1

*Shoonyam in Yoni*

1960, Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 in (76 x 61 cm)

From the Collection of Rohit Singh Mahiyaria, New Delhi



2

*The Emerging Sign*

1965, Oil on canvas, 23 x 34.75 in (58.5 x 88 cm)

## A UNIVERSE OF COLOUR

Swaminathan became the first painter in India to be awarded the Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship in 1968, and was also selected to be on the international jury at the São Paulo Biennial. During this time, in the late 1960s, his style underwent a significant shift, strongly influenced by Pahari miniatures. The relationship between colour and space took precedence – and would remain an important aspect of his oeuvre – leading to a series titled ‘Colour Geometry of Space,’ followed by the famous ‘Bird, Mountain, Tree’ series that the artist has become known for. “He managed to dissociate common phenomena from its normal associations and lodge it, as it were, in a universe of mystery and wonder, creating images which are about to reveal themselves but never quite do so... To achieve this he invented a technique which involved the application by rag of several colours simultaneously without the volatile pigments running into each other creating grey areas. It was the association of pure and quite often conflicting colours adjacent to each other which resonated. He would then paint the surrounding area in a single colour which as often as not, was contrapuntal.” (Khanna)

In Swaminathan’s ‘space geometry’ paintings, simple geometric forms and shapes appeared through a process of reduction, rendered in a soft, flat colour palette. The artist explained that their recurrence in his work seemed to have a “symbolic significance. They appeared clothed in certain more specific symbols like that of the snake, the sperm, the lotus and the sign OM, reminiscent of ancient totems which had, not a ritualistic but a magical significance for me.” (J Swaminathan, “Colour Geometry,” Swaminathan, Kapur, Patel et al, p. 21)

Swaminathan explored the ‘Bird Mountain Tree’ series for nearly two decades, featuring vivid planes of colour and new combinations to present the three titular motifs. “What happens is that when you see a recognisable object, and notice it time and again, then you come to ‘feel’ its repetition.” (Jagdish Swaminathan, *Art Etc. News and Views*, originally published in Hindi in *Ravivar*, 1979, online) His profound interest in the underlying symbolism of the folk and tribal art of Central India drove him to simplify and seek origins in a desire to return to purity. “His structures were elemental, uniquely his own. He conjugated them to create undreamt of images. Hills, birds, insects, plants, water, air, unbuildable buildings but no human beings. Their relationship on the canvas had nothing to do with the laws of this physical world... A

rock suspended in mid-air with a sleek bird atop of it, a mountain reflected in a lake which leaves you guessing as to which is which, and steps on a monument leading nowhere.” (Khanna)

The elements in this series are representative of larger ideas, and are themselves only agents. “The mind moves through the object to the idea, and through the idea to the object. Thus, the work becomes concrete and abstract at the same time.” (J Swaminathan, “The Traditional Numen and Contemporary Art,” *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, No. 29, New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1980, p. 11) In the placement of these objects, Swaminathan played with notions of reflection and shadow, thereby raising questions about existence and perception. His “obsession” with these repetitive motifs inspired a range of widely differing reactions. While Krishna Chaitanya allegedly threatened to throw a stone at any such future works, Ashok Vajpeyi, Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena and Krishen Khanna wrote poems inspired by this series.

In the 1970s, Swaminathan, alongside other artists, initiated a call for reforming the Lalit Kala Akademi, and briefly served as its board member and organised a successful international triennale. Towards the end of that decade, he was invited by the government to establish the Roopankar Museum of Fine Arts at Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh.

“The introduction of representational forms in the context of colour geometry gave birth to psycho-symbolic connotations. Thus a mountain, a tree, a flower, a bird, a stone were not just objects or parts of a landscape but were manifestations of the universal.”

– JAGDISH SWAMINATHAN



3

*Untitled*

Circa 1960s, Oil on canvas, 11.25 x 15.25 in (28.5 x 39 cm)



4

*Untitled*

Circa 1960s, Oil on canvas, 11.25 x 15.25 in (28.5 x 38.5 cm)



5

*Untitled*

Circa 1960s, Oil on canvas, 11.25 x 15.25 in (28.5 x 39 cm)



6

*Untitled*

Circa 1970s, Ink on paper, 10 x 8.75 in (25.7 x 22.3 cm)



front



reverse

7

*Untitled*

Circa 1970s, Ink on paper, 10.5 x 7.25 in (26.6 x 18.4 cm)

This is a double-sided work



8

*Untitled*

Circa 1970s, Ink on paper, 12.25 x 7.75 in (31 x 19.7 cm)



9

*Untitled*

Circa 1970s, Ink on paper, 12.5 x 7.75 in (31.8 x 19.7 cm)



10  
**Untitled**  
1971, Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 in (127 x 127 cm)

From The Darashaw Collection



11

*Untitled*

Circa 1970s, Ink on paper, 12.5 x 7 in (31.7 x 17.8 cm)



12

*Untitled*

Circa 1970s, Ink on paper, 11 x 7 in (27.8 x 17.5 cm)



13

*Untitled*

Circa 1970s, Ink on paper, 11 x 7.75 in (27.8 x 19.5 cm)



14

*Untitled*

Circa 1970s, Ink on paper, 11.5 x 8.25 in (29.4 x 20.9 cm)



15

*Untitled*

Circa 1970s, Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 in (126.8 x 126.8 cm)



front



reverse

16

*Untitled*

Circa 1970s, Ink on paper, 15 x 11 in (37.8 x 27.8 cm)

This is a double-sided work



17

*Untitled*

Circa 1970s, Ink on paper, 11 x 7.75 in (28.2 x 19.8 cm)



18

*Untitled*

1974, Oil on canvas, 49 x 49 in (124.5 x 124.5 cm)

From the Collection of Mahender Jain

# VARIATIONS OF AN ARTIST'S VISION

By Our Art Critic

The Dhoomi Mal Gallery is currently presenting a selection of Swaminathan's latest paintings. Let me state at the outset unequivocally that I find these visions as pleasing and satisfying as ever. As ever, yes; for it is impossible to check the flow of Swami's earlier images as they rush in one's mind while viewing the current series, more so while reflecting upon them.

What happens finally is a process of assembling and sifting so many images, so many visions, so many details until it all becomes one total and integrated experience. All this is an acceptance of the signal fact that one's reaction to any experience is necessarily and inevitably conditioned. It is a process in which both the artist and the viewer are equal participants. And when an artist, like Swaminathan or Santosh, pursues a specific line of approach, the process becomes relevant with a capital "R".

To come back to Swami's current series, there are the familiar constituents of his imagery. They must recur in such a scheme as his. The hill, the bird, the tree and the purely compositional contrivances like the vertical stripes and the frame. They have also acquired certain nuances.

The hill stretches across undulatingly, heaves and throbs with energy; is severed from the terra firma and hangs in space. The tree becomes archetypal, a bush symbol of life and growth. The bird sheds specificity and becomes more spirit; it is less a peacock and more a plumed serpent. The wavy texture of the hill yields place in more than one painting to thick vegetation—the depth, the texture and iridescence of colour is fresh experience (the blue of painting No 6). The background colour is more intense (the large area of red in No 9 or the rich green in another painting). The tree is the lone, sole subject in one painting.

All these are variations and

interpretations of familiar, recurrent, basic image concepts.  
 On view until March 3, daily between 10 a.m. and 7 p.m.

## Swaminathan repeats but does not pall

By An Art Critic

AS A DANCER may repeat him or herself over years with minor improvisations and yet continue to delight the audience, so may some painters. Given the belief which inspires an artist, we do not tire of oft-told tales. This thought comes to mind while reviewing J. Swaminathan's latest works at Dhoomimal Gallery.

There are some additions, for instance the painted border to the main composition. The work appears mounted, as it were. Or else it acquires safeguards in the form of two white stripes.

Again in some works, pyramidal steps have been included, as though to support freer, undulating, flying forms. Some compositions give the impression partly of being cut-out flat collages. Elsewhere the doodled smoke is balanced against spray-

### ART

smooth surfaces. The range of colour from work to work is large; at times the crayon effect makes for a delicacy.

Number 9, for instance, gives the evocation of Fujiyama, an effortless, rather than substantial or weighed-down sensibility. But yet the birds take off like rigid dagger-jets, flying darts or flying fish. The charm that the painter sets out to cast is achieved by the many contrasts of texture, though the borders seem redundant.

Decoratively pleasing as the work is, it could be that it has become a shade too smooth, a trifle too facile. Practice has made perfect, certainly, and the composition, by completely shutting out the world and its turbulence achieve an *ananda*. But, nevertheless, the hint of blandness makes us wonder whether it has any necessary surprises for us, even though it does not fall into the brash tradition, euphemistically called 'avant garde'. When a work becomes too easy on the eye, too easily acceptable, one comes to feel that the style has reached journey's end and the painter had better research his psyche. After all, painting is not like classical dancing. The painter must renew some day. Swaminathan should be able to do that for he is one of the thinking ones.

## Tradition with an innovative touch

The interplay of tradition and originality in artistic creation is a subject on which much has been written though no definitive conclusion can be claimed to have been reached. Two exhibitions during the week have fortuitously brought up the issue once again.

The Cottage Industries Emporium is presenting a small but fine exhibition of Mithila paintings, with the artists or artisans also at work in the hall. There is no hesitation in using again and again the traditional figures, designs and episodes. Innovations have emerged but not out of any conscious desire to be different or original. For example, one of the peasant artists is creating several virtual spaces in the same picture with different episodic sequences. Similarly, subtle changes in the palette are also emerging.

### Exhibitions

While the rich palette of blues, reds and yellows continues, there are muted, delicate statements in black line against heliotrope or cream ground with touches of light pink. On a small time scale, tradition is revealing its capacity to be innovative which in a longer span, stands out with undeniable verity.

But the artist, as distinguished from the artisan, is—as Sartre might put it—condemned to be free and self-aware. Difficult analytical problems arise in a situation where the artist hugs, not just an inherited tradition, but his own prior performance, down to the detail of the figural elements and overall composition. J. Swaminathan's was an exceptionally fine and lyrical vision of nature when he composed imagery, which had the freshness of the first morning of the world, out of hill and lake, a tree and a bird on the wing. These paintings had the affect-drenched imagism of the haiku poetry of the Japanese. But he has worked many variations with them already, and more are on show now at Dhoomi Mal's.

To the self-aware artist, these variations may seem wholly justifiable because it is elementary in Gestalt theory that a new pattern or arrangement, even of the same elements, is a fresh entity. But one can wonder whether the exquisite precision here masks a situation where—to seek help from the heavyweight idiom of Coleridge—imagination is running out and Fancy is taking over. The meanings of these terms have become very relevant in today's discussion of the brain as a computer. The controversy is still going on. But there is considerable agreement on the view that while the brain is capable of original perceptions (imagination), the computer can make recombinations (Fancy) of elements if they have been fed into it by programming. Swaminathan's images are still beautiful; but there is obvious facility in their production; placement of the main masses at different depths in the virtual space; extension of the peak into a hill line of three or more crests; placement of the bird at different locations in the sky and at various angles of flight; transposition of the colours. The computer can take over now, a thing which it could not have managed with the first, original vision.

# THE ECONOMIC TIMES

BOMBAY, SUNDAY, MARCH 3, 1974

*It is said: "Why, so can I, so can any man."*

*"But will they come when you do call for them?"*

—Henry IV, Part I.

J. Swaminathan's conjuring up of fairy land atmosphere in his paintings currently on view at the Dhoomi Mal Gallery, New Delhi, presents, to the viewer a Wizard of Oz land where strikes, airports, queues and headaches of high prices have no place.

Instead rocks defy gravity, long plumaged birds soar in free flight in comet-like trajectory and red moons like giant lips define the features of a new Arcadia.

Swaminathan's work is said to be divided into four phases. In the first he was influenced by the prehistoric and primitive totemic sign language. In the second phase, Indian folk motifs, adorned with leading him on to some dabbling with Tantra. Then follows the abstract phase. It is this phase which forms the core of his current work. Without going into the merits or otherwise of the comparisons that most Indian painters have to undergo, various periods in their careers, (as in European painters of the 19th century) it can be said that Swaminathan has arrived at a personalized equation with colour and perspective.

### Geometric shape

Colour areas which are texturally evocative of erosion paintings by children create a feeling of deep space without the use of conventional perspective. Since white colour areas, these are invested with a perpetual presence of light. Sheets of translucent water reflect the geometric shapes of the clay-eroded hills above, which a rock or a bird might levitate.

Many of these are beautiful constructions, the best among them like "Dhoomimal" and its many variations, as mysterious as the moon, as exactly charted as a lunar map. "Gati-Sangati" with its multiple birds and boulders succeeds in creating a feeling of the universe in motion. As a poet once said "Pata bhī jo lālā hai to bas terī nāz se Air jādā samāgar hai madhī madhī kyon" (Even a leaf can stir only at Thy command. How then can men be held a sinner?) It is this cosmic vibration that one senses in this painting, the unrelenting movement of matter through space and time.

Not all the paintings are so successful. At times, the shades of Max Ernst's insistent bird and countless studies of Arizona mountains, bleak and burning under their stark suns become overpowering. Despite the Sanskrit titles and the peacock imagery used by Swaminathan, I found no evidence to support the claim made on behalf of the artist that his work goes back to the specific Indian tradition as contained in the Pahari miniatures. To my mind such labelling of works with obscure Sanskrit iconography is unnecessary. Hindu tradition, per se, does not lend itself to rendition by Western norms of perspective. It seems an exercise in what philosopher

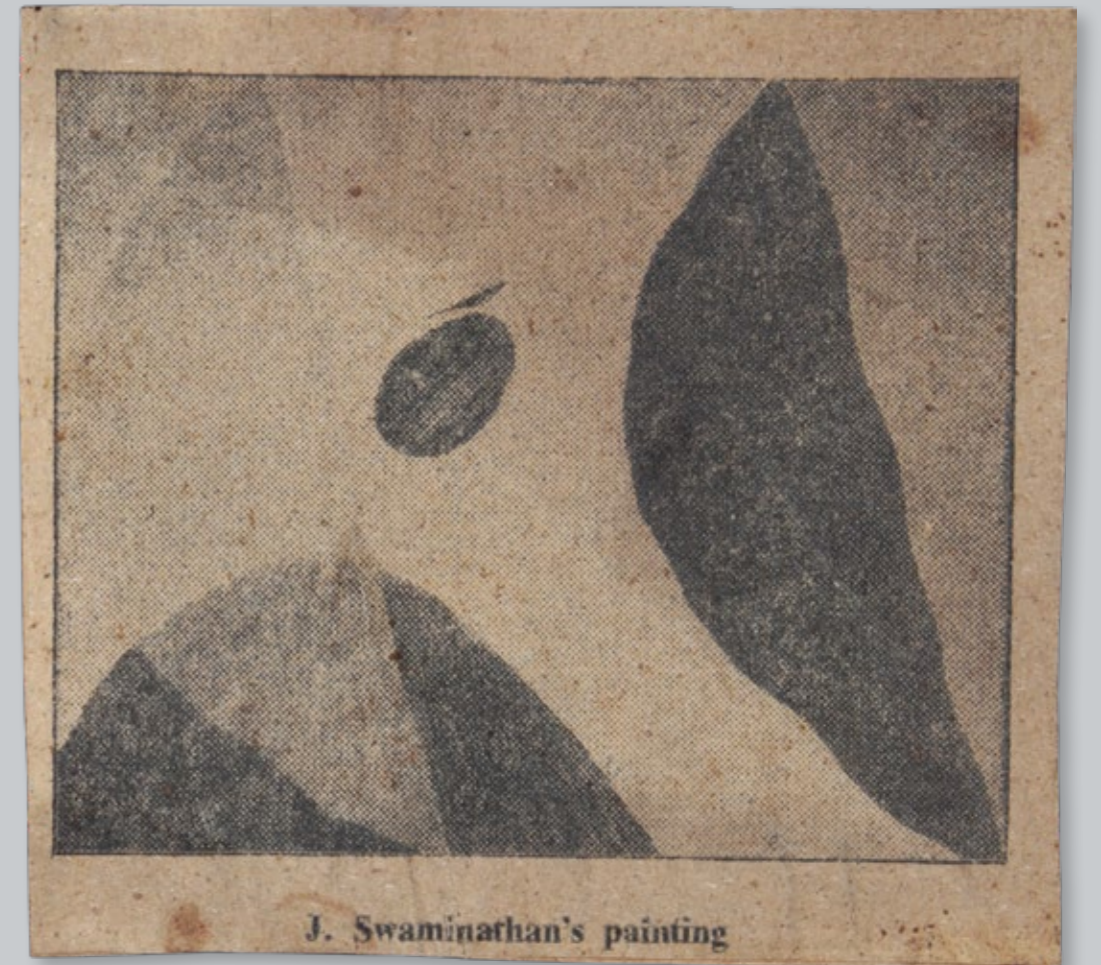
Gaston Bachelard condemns as trying to explain the flower by the fertilizer.

But what ultimately will rescue Swami from the unfruitful dependence on too much programmatic imagery a la Indian tradition will be his fine sense of abstract design and colour and a still greater liberation from precise pictorial formulae. If one can judge from this show, notwithstanding the verbiage in the exhibition catalogue about de-materialising nature (whatever that might mean) Swami's imagination is intact and growing and will lead us ere long to the portals of a truly magical wonderland.

## Swaminathan's fairy land

New Delhi:

Glendower: "I can call spirits from the vasty deep."



J. Swaminathan's painting

## MADHYA PRADESH: COMING FULL CIRCLE

The Roopankar Museum of Fine Arts received support and a free reign from the government, headed at the time by Chief Minister Arjun Singh, as well as critic Ashok Vajpeyi, who served as the Secretary of Culture. Swaminathan recalls, “I had conceived of the museum as a composite museum of urban, folk and tribal art. While the notion of modernism may exclude the folk and the tribal, contemporaneity seen as the simultaneous validity of coexisting cultures may be all inclusive, especially in India where we have such strong and living traditions of folk and tribal cultures.” (Swaminathan, Kapur, Patel et al, p. 12) In his quest to collect art from every part of the state, he involved art students and local artists. The museum and arts centre thrived, and Swaminathan served as a trustee of Bharat Bhawan and director of the museum until 1990, when the state regime changed and became less supportive of his vision and endeavours.

Swaminathan’s time in Madhya Pradesh inspired art which recalled his earlier works of the 1960s. “The live and vibrant contact with tribal cultures triggered off my natural bent for the primeval, and I started on a new phase... If my work of the early sixties anticipated the journey of the eighties, my present phase recapitulates my beginnings. At sixty five, it is full circle or is it?” (Swaminathan, Kapur, Patel et al, p. 13)

According to Krishen Khanna, “He was fascinated by the manner in which tribal perceptions created symbolic forms... The paintings of the last phase of his life were concerned with the passage of a sign on its way to becoming a symbol.” He abandoned “conventional” techniques, creating a wax-based medium “which was a carrier for natural pigments, red and yellow ochre and charcoal dust,” using rollers to adjust the intensity of colour.

In later years, Swaminathan also experimented with sculpture and stone carving, and a monument in tribute to the poet Iqbal – created in collaboration with Robin David in Bhopal in 1985-86 – is a significant example of his work in this medium. In addition to being a member of boards including the Indian Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC) and Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), he was also chairman of the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sanghralaya (National Museum of Man), a commissioner for the Adivasi art exhibition

at the Festival of India in Japan, a member of the Crafts Museum Committee, and a jury member for the National Feature Film award. He continued to write poetry and articles. His final art exhibition before his death took place at the Vadehra Art Gallery in New Delhi in 1993.

Jagdish Swaminathan passed away in 1994 in New Delhi. The same year, he was posthumously awarded the prestigious Kalidas Samman award by the government of Madhya Pradesh, which also organised an important exhibition of his work at the Bharat Bhavan in 1995. As Krishen Khanna reminisced, “...his success never altered his life style [sic]. He continued to live in his working space which was always crammed with stretchers, cans of beeswax, oils of various description, powdered pigments, tubes of paints, brushes, knives, rags, finished and unfinished paintings... His friends who came to see him had to navigate carefully till they reached some place where they could settle for a prolonged convivial evening with much promise of discussions on poetry and sparkling good humour.”

**“One of Swami’s lasting contributions, both aesthetically and institutionally, is this postcolonial aesthetic that he tried to evolve and articulate, the aesthetic which believed that the folk, tribal and urban arts are equally valid versions of the contemporary.”**

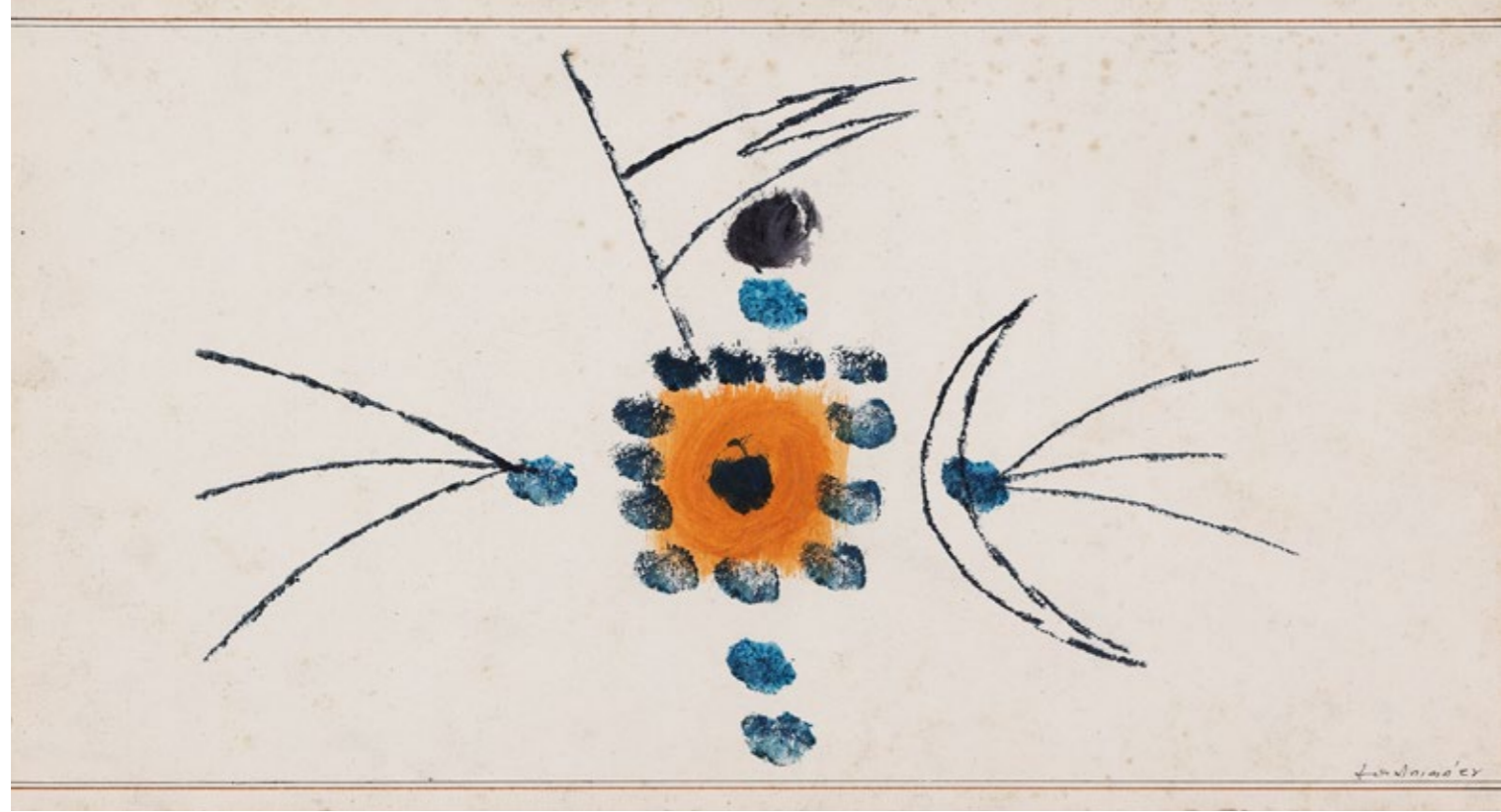
– ASHOK VAJPEYI



19  
**Untitled**  
1984, Watercolour on paper, 13 x 21 in (33 x 53.5 cm)  
From a Private Collection, Mumbai



20  
**Untitled**  
1982, Watercolour on paper, 16.75 x 21 in (42.7 x 53.1 cm)  
From a Private Collection, Mumbai



21  
*Untitled*

1984, Watercolour and ink on paper, 12 x 21.25 in (30.5 x 54 cm)



22  
*Untitled*

1982, Watercolour on paper, 10.75 x 15.25 in (27.5 x 38.8 cm)

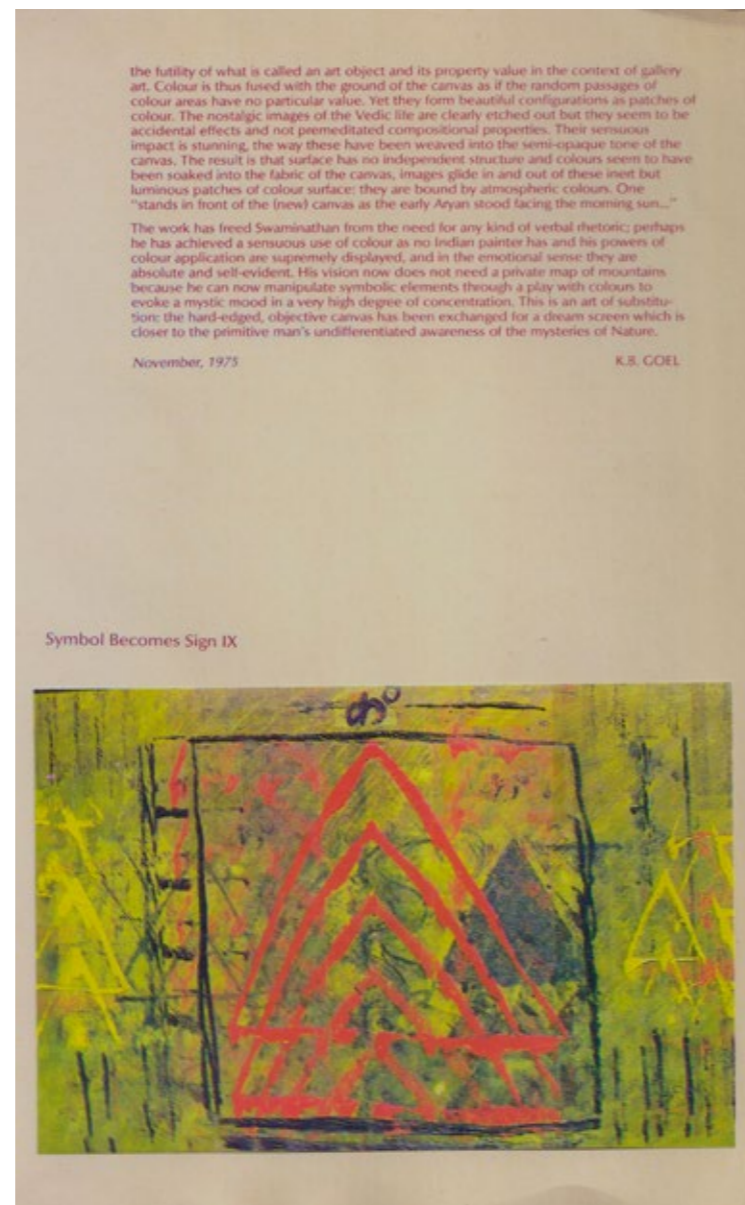
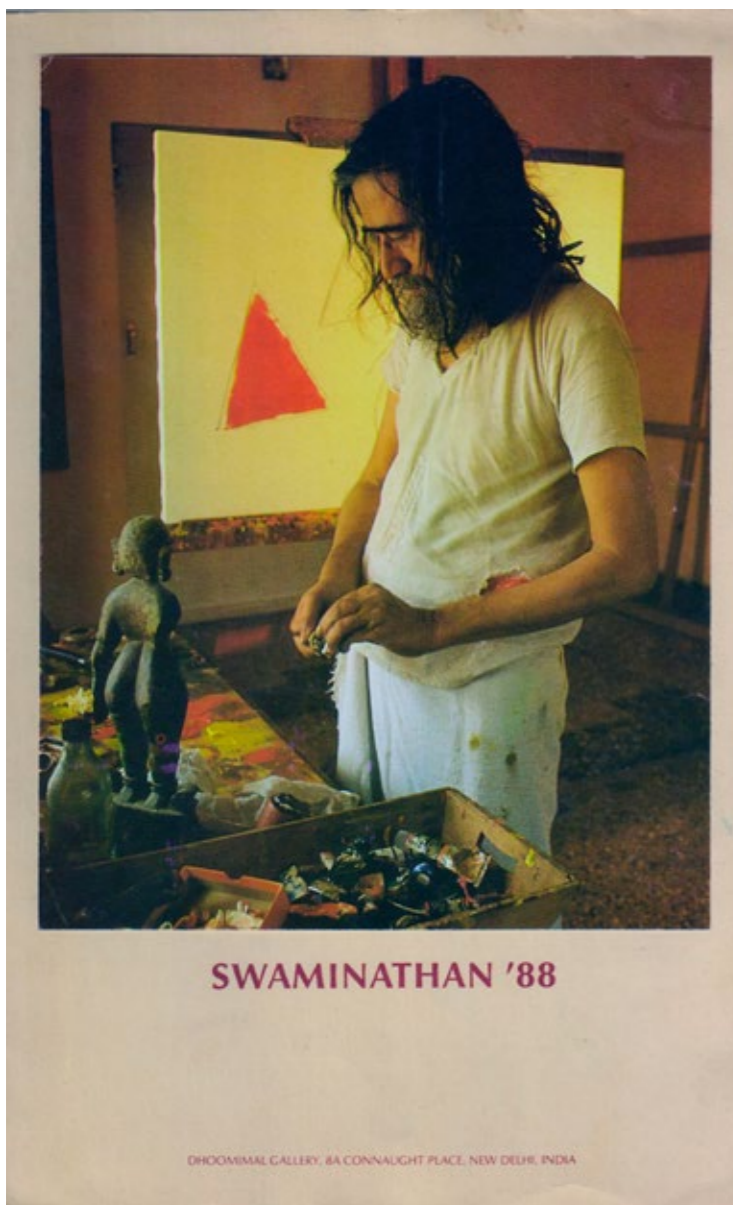


23  
*Untitled*  
1982, Watercolour on paper, 11.25 x 15.5 in (28.7 x 39.3 cm)



24  
*Untitled*  
1981, Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in (91.5 x 121.8 cm)  
From the Collection of the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art

The present work published in the exhibition catalogue of  
*Swaminathan '88*, Dhoomimal Art Gallery  
Image courtesy of Dhoomimal Art Gallery



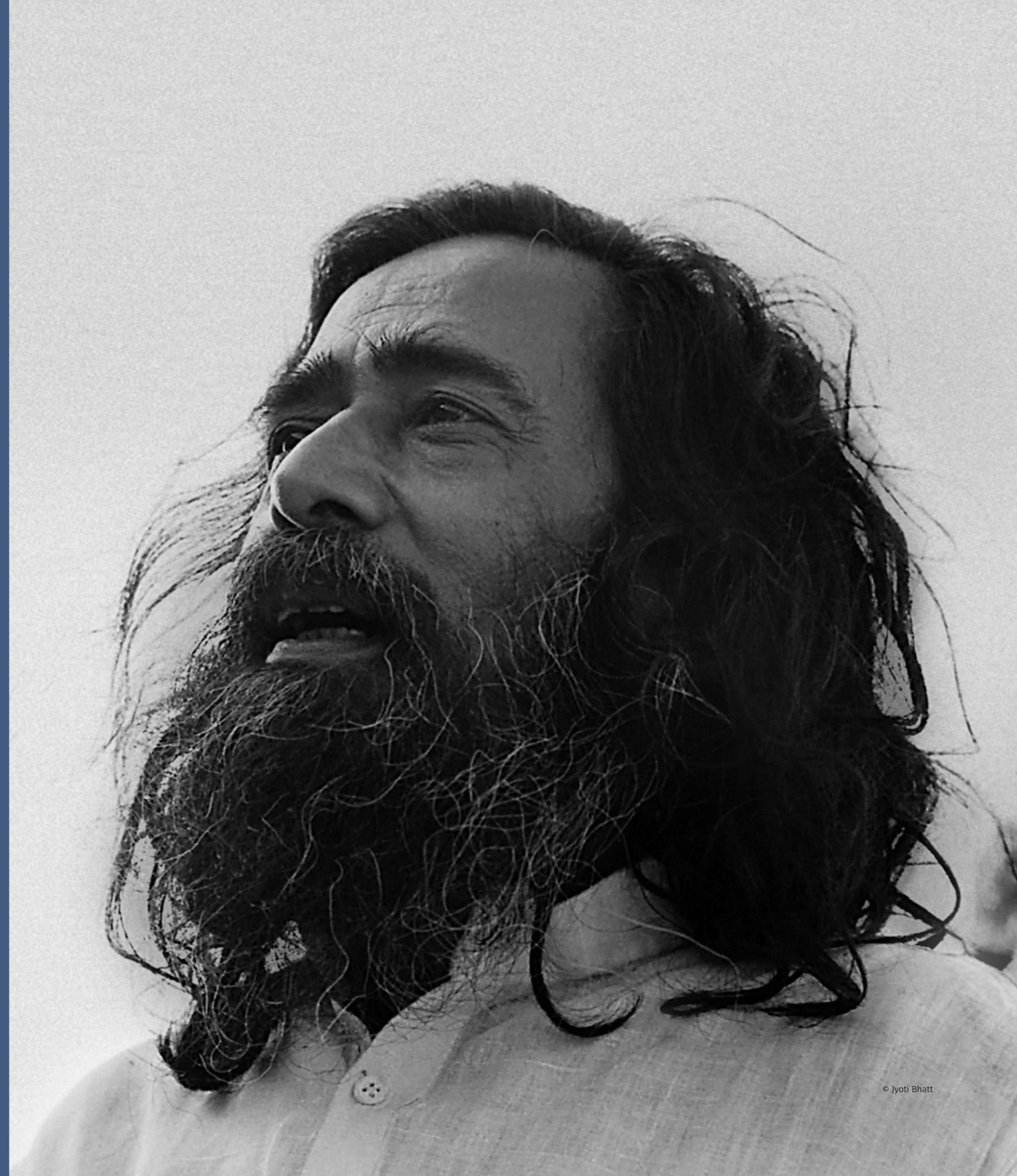
25  
**Untitled**  
Circa 1980s, Oil on canvas, 32 x 45.75 in (81.3 x 116.5 cm)  
From the Private Collection of Uma Jain

“...Swaminathan is an artist who rhymes the movement of the eye and the hand and turns it into the movement of the signifier through an iconic image; through a dissembling decodeable language.”

– GEETA KAPUR

“His application of paint whether by a rag or brush was impeccable. I have known him to razor down a tiny knot on the canvas as it would have interfered with the evenness of colour of an intended area.”

– KRISHEN KHANNA

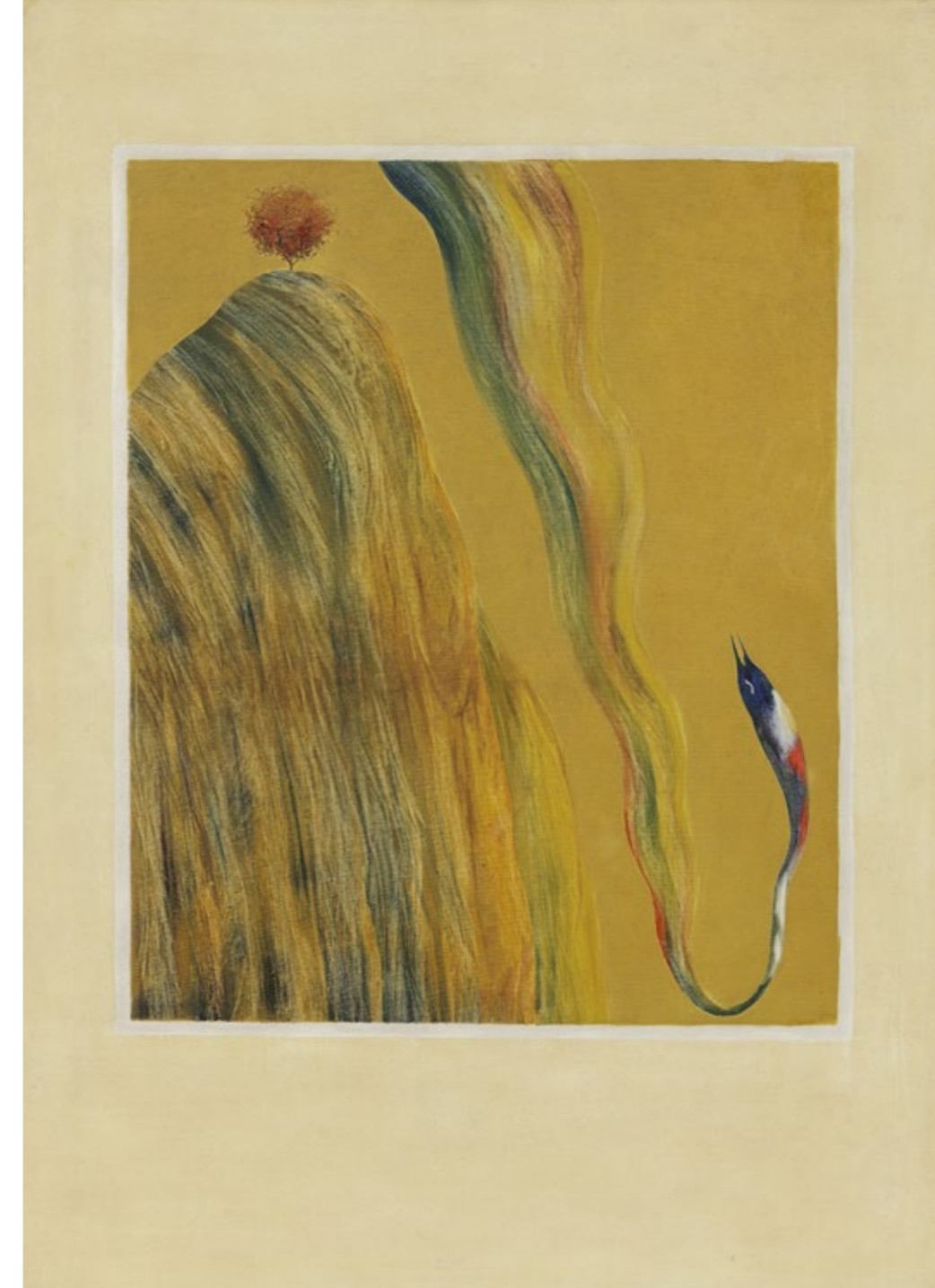


“[Indian] painting was never meant to “represent” reality in the naturalistic, “objective” sense, it was the cogent and poetic rendering of ideal truth in terms of two-dimensional space.”

– JAGDISH SWAMINATHAN



Uday Jain and a guest with the present work on display at the *Homage to J. Swaminathan* exhibition at Dhoomimal Art Gallery, New Delhi, February 2008  
Image courtesy of Dhoomimal Art Gallery

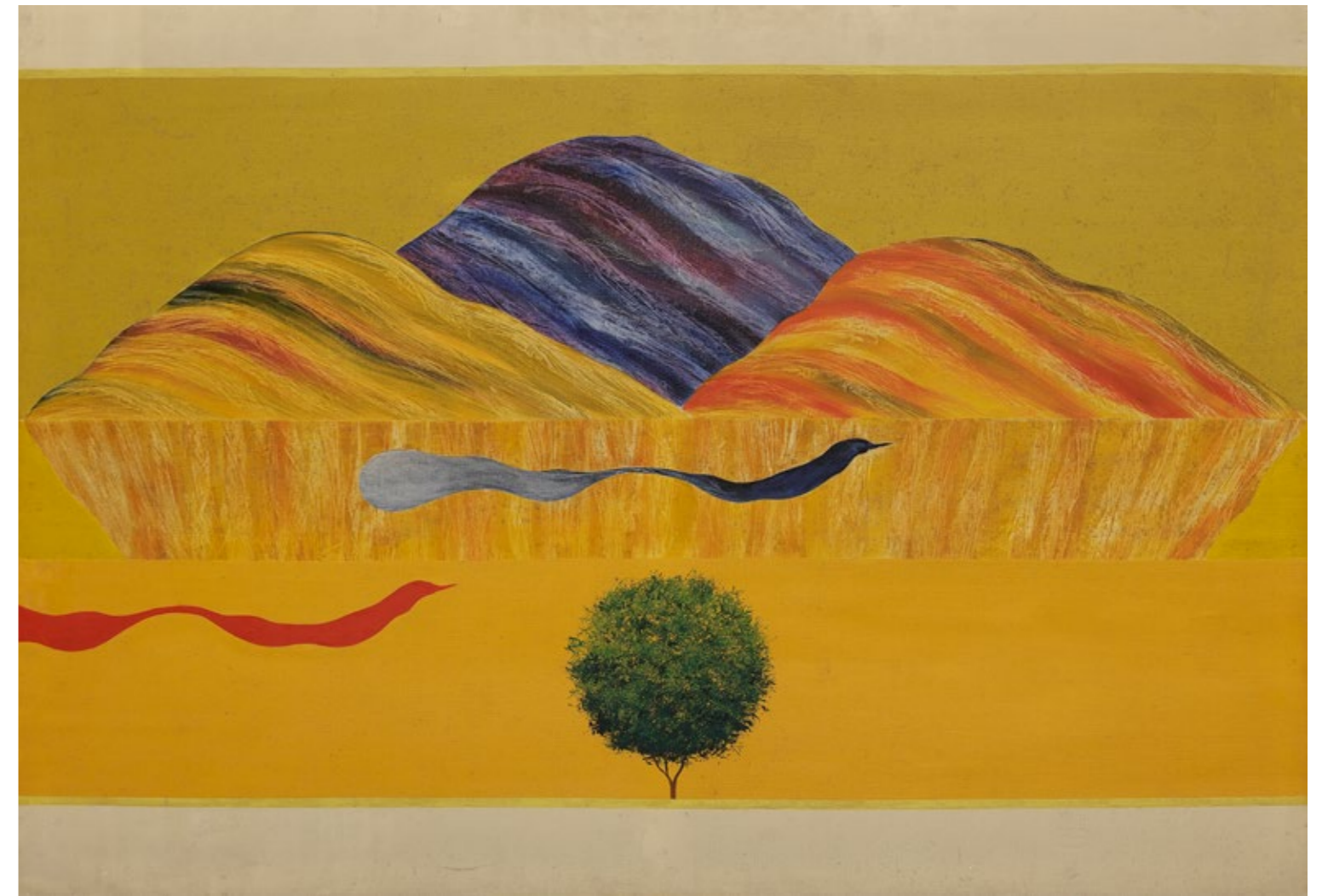


26

*Untitled*

Circa 1980s, Oil on canvas, 44.75 x 32 in (113.8 x 81 cm)

From the Private Collection of Uma Jain



27

*Untitled*

Circa 1980s, Oil on canvas, 45.25 x 65.25 in (115.2 x 165.7 cm)

From the Private Collection of Uma Jain

# Pictures with a quiet radiance

Valery has pointed out the profound similarity between the problem of inspiration and effort in art and of grace and works in theology. About the latter, Aquinas offered a fine solution. Grace is like the light which enables you to see; but you will not see if you turn away your face.

Coming back to art, if you contemplate the radiant world, you can see a fresh marvel taking birth with a shift in every degree of the angle of incidence of light. That is how Monet was able to paint hundreds of haystacks or of water lilies, each one different. But this insight can be as cruelly abused, as Yoga has been abused for sexual virility.

Several years ago, J. Swaminathan went back to a few primordial forms—mountain, river, a tree on a hill, a lone bird in flight—and came up with lyrical visions of the morning of the world. Then followed an unhappy phase of self-plagiarism, of mechanical permuta-

tioned source of light, the pictures are filled with a quiet radiance and the shadows—of trees gently cascading down a flight of steps, of a passing bird in a pool—are not cast by the sun but by a kindly remembrance of that great source of light and shade. There are musical recalls of tradition here. The tidy ovals of the foliage of trees recalls Basohli and their connotations of colour the Decani Vasanta Raga. The flora have managed an unfading spring in these stylised shapes

in our old brocades and silks also. But the sensibility is modern. Invisible sheet glass seem to slide in front of the scene, as in Prabha Shah's Rajasthan landscapes, and the colours of leaves and flowers subdue to softer tints; and there is fine play, symmetrical and asymmetrical, with the control of the tonal strength of the spectrum.

One fervently hopes that these immaculate images will not be pushed on to a production belt. Krishna Chaitanya

## Exhibitions

tions of the pictorial elements, that must have been profitable but scarcely creative. This reviewer had to point out in these columns that, for a faster and bigger turnover, the job could be turned over to the computer with advantage. There were similar reactions on the part of other critics and these provoked some Billingsgate retorts. But the dormant integrity of the artist has reasserted itself in the latest works (Dhoomi Mal Gallery). All credit to the painter that he has not abandoned his images but has managed to incarnate a new loveliness through a deeper meditation on their lyrical, rather than business, possibilities.

The compositions have become idyllically simple and the colouring is exquisite. With no indi-



"IMAGE I" by J. Swaminathan

## Innovative devices mark Swaminathan's work

ALL 14 of J. Swaminathan's new works (Dhoomi Mal Gallery) are aptly titled 'Images'—images in line with those which moved this writer when they were first incarnated more than ten years ago. And being moved, I expressed my gratefulness for what were moments of uplifting joy. The painterly earlier, very natural search had suddenly brought him not only into a quiet command of his medium but, more importantly, into full-comprehension of his latent aesthetic vision. The vision appeared to be a perennial and essential one—no matter the plurality of aesthesis or rather the multivalence of emotions to which a moody mankind turned. The important value this artist emphasised through his art was an innocence which still lay fresh beyond the stormy passage of mundane experience. This earlier, guileless quality was expressed through a hallowed light with a purity

as conveyed through some of India's music, as in much of the earlier Indian space art; an art which hugs the necessary dream, the one which makes a profane life worth its chaos. The present work expresses the foregoing with a well-matured craft and innovative devices: a breaking up of pictorial space, the addition of picturesque details from the sacred vocabulary. Nos. 5, 6 and 11—among others—still perform the vision eloquently. Sometimes, however, in this view, the overall effect becomes a bit too studied; here the inventive and designing faculties—all too necessary adjuncts to the creative process—would seem to overdo the bordering, laddering and mounting touches. Also colour tone tends to a certain amount of over-richness. But these snares—in the course of a long artistic journey—befall all art, and yet it is no worse for it in essentials. At the least some artistic history was made on the Indian scene, when this plucky artist questioned a routinised modernity.

Images courtesy of Dhoomimal Art Gallery



28

Untitled

1983, Oil on canvas, 29.25 x 37 in (74.5 x 93.7 cm)

From a Private Collection, New Delhi



29  
*Untitled*

Circa 1980s, Serigraph on paper, 18 x 13.75 in (46 x 34.8 cm)



30  
*Untitled*

Circa 1980s, Serigraph on paper, 18 x 13.75 in (46 x 35 cm)



31

*Untitled*

1982, Oil on canvas, 32.5 x 42 in (82.5 x 106.8 cm)

From the Private Collection of Resham and Ashish Jain, New Delhi

FRIDAY, 18 APRIL 1986

# Patriot Leisure

## Swaminathan's concern with reality of image



An exhibition of recent paintings by J Swaminathan at the Dhoomimal Gallery shows his primary concern with the reality of the image which takes birth on the two-dimensional surface of his canvas and not the so-called image of reality. He has, for the last many years, been preoccupied with problems of structuring space and the motifs of the bird, the tree, the rock and steps which, as he says, "leading to God knows where".

These motifs obviously have achieved a significant symbolic

value or the reality revealing aspect in his paintings by the will of his imagination.

The immobility of the rocks and hills, perhaps, signifies the limitations of human being who is bound to earth — subjected to his fate by the laws of nature. And the bird becomes the symbol of the mind that can roam around anywhere, in time and space, and soar to any heights.

Both the bird and the flying rock — in his paintings — portray man's urge and aspiration to free himself from the shackles of limitations. The root metaphor here is of a depth in which the important factors for art are down, out

of sight, in the reservoir of the unconscious and become embodied as symbols in the artist's work.

He presents the immediacy of the art symbol, which becomes the expressive form of his compositions or "images" as aesthetic prehension.

Swami has created, in each painting, a new conjunction or an interplay of these motifs which lend his paintings a certain resonance and yet an unexpected freshness to the essence of his experience.

Swami has evolved a formal concept to express a level of his aesthetic perception. His paintings are portrayal of impressions different from that of the portray-

al of things. They are an expression in terms of pigments and brush, featuring the medium of his painting to concentrate on the colours and the timbres of tones of his pigments. The shapes of the intensely pigmented surfaces count, not only as contours of earth and air or sky but as well controlled suggestive elements of space.

There is more reliance on the power of colour as psychological energies. It collaborates with the shape to become a content to express freer expanses in the aesthetic space of his pictures. Recession in space is suggested by subtle vertical placing of spatial areas in conjunction with the rising contours of the shapes of steps.

The feeling of depth is further heightened, in some of his paintings, by horizontal planes placed in perspective or overlapping rocks or a rock placed at an angle and the birds flying in varying directions providing a delicate thrust into space.

The subtle dynamic tensions are realized throughout the picture by skillful laying of pigments, their purity and luminiscence, animated by muted colour expanses, with subtly juxtaposed flying birds, the trees and rocks.

Vibrating texture in the masses of trees and carefully laid long brush strokes, with sparse paint, to model the surface of rocks and hills, adds a shimmer of life into these forms.

Swami's paintings are forms of feeling and establish resonance with our thought energy or imagination.

Open till 25 April.

— P N Mago



An oil on canvas by J Swaminathan titled "Image-O"

Image courtesy of Dhoomimal Art Gallery



32

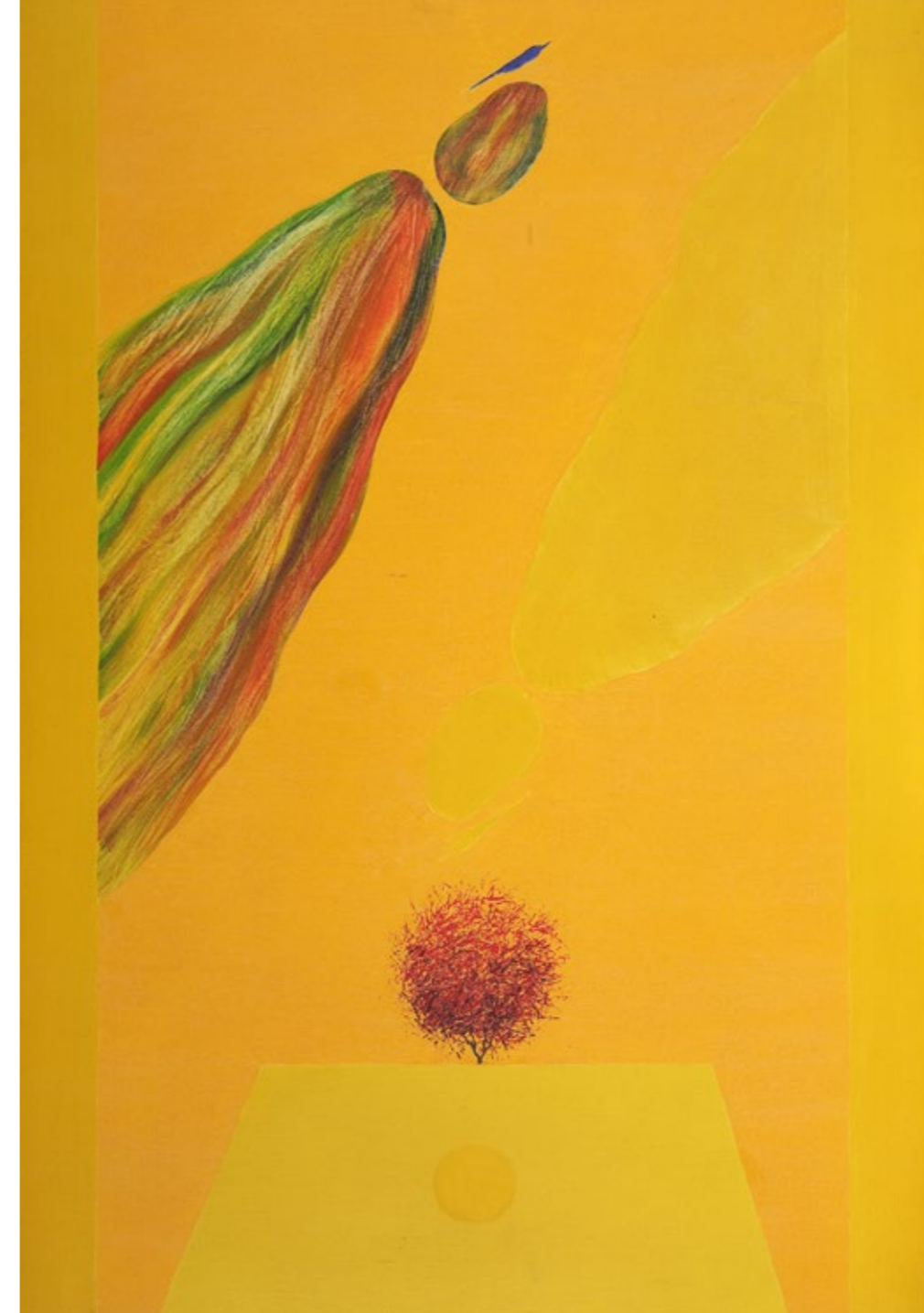
*Untitled*

1985, Oil on canvas, 31.75 x 45.5 in (80.7 x 115.8 cm)

From the Private Collection of Uma Jain



33  
*Untitled*  
1986, Oil on canvas, 30 x 20 in (76 x 51.1 cm)



34  
*Untitled*  
1986, Oil on canvas, 45.25 x 31.25 in (115 x 79.4 cm)

From a Private Collection, Mumbai



# “What yellow means to me”

Swaminathan's yellows speak of golden births, his reds of passionate and packed energy, tapped and released with his images.

## The Roving Eye

by Lakshmi Lal

SUMMER blazed at Pundole Art Gallery with a frontal assault of primal yellows and reds — J. Swaminathan's latest work. Fifteen oils pulsate with the vibrancy of colour giving birth to image in a sea of geometry which is at times suffused, at times clearly marked.

The viewer snaps awake in instant response. The turmoil of colour meeting, at times confronting, image in the space of Swaminathan's visual fields of perception begins to settle into the ease of order—energy, heat and light fuse as the artist plays at the game of creation.

His geometry first, as it seems to form a base, bearing, containing. It is Swaminathan's way of projecting infinity. "It is difficult to express infinity. One can do it with geometry." Squares, rectangles and bands mark off and at the same time delimit space, suggest its immeasurability. And leading to his next instrument, the image, this relates. "It is the space in which they are, more than them, that concerns me."

The image, for all that, is a key tool. "What is an image? Everything is an image once you use it." And as he writes in his catalogue, "To arrive at the reality of the image is the most challenging factor that the artist faces... the compulsive need to arrive at the reality of the image."

It is the image indeed that unlocks the mystery of truth and

there is no need to hop from one set of images to another. "To bend, to contemplate, to repeat" is the laid-down Indian way to revelation and to my mind Swaminathan's defence of his repetitive, limited stock of images is needless. Movement is not necessarily progress nor stillness a static state. The storm has an eye, gravity a centre, the wheel a hub.

With bare economy of variation his images tell their story — the bird at most wriggles or snakes out a phrase, the tree roots upward, steps forward or looks at itself receding, doubled in symmetry. Or it stands by

itself taking over the whole red sky dispensing with all fellow images except the still and flying bird. Swaminathan's images shift, setting up links, tensions, relationships, currents, changing focus, attitudes. And with each shift, however slight, the story moves, an episode is born. And here I might mention Swaminathan's strong views on "narrative" painting. "Changing your images to tell different stories is dangerous. It brings in elements that might not belong to painting." I could not agree with him more. Often, narrative paintings turn out to be contrived arrangements.

Swaminathan's attitude to an image is reverential. "An image has more meaning than you can ever pour into it," he said combatively when I suggested that an image is the enclosing one pugs into it. The world around us is a play of images and the image, especially for the artist, is the reality — to be prized out, painstakingly, constantly. His specific images, of course, were born of his environment — the bird, the rock, the tree, for he lived in the mountains, grew with sky and tree and mountain spaces.

His paintings speak clearly. Statement follows statement, each

Swaminathan's visual metaphysics is his yoga, his methods are beyond doubt the way of the Indian mystic and his palette speculates round and round, in and out, far, near and deep within, in the manner of our great forest questioners.

one a sutra, a chant of colour and image, shorn of superfluity, brief, precise and unambiguous. It is a clean path to infinity, cleared by him through the contemplation of his personal stock of images.

"The image is the punctuation in the metrics of painting," he declared and this led me to his other strength — colour.

"Colour? I can do anything with colour. I pick from my palette and keep going. The colour takes over." It could be any colour; anything, almost, could trigger a choice which he then sticks with. "It could be a colour like my wife's saree, anything. I don't think I have fully understood what yellow is saying to me," he concluded.

Swaminathan's yellows speak of golden births, his reds of packed and passionate energy, tapped and released with his images. And for this moment, he sees red, he sees yellow, his canvases afire with heat and light. Browns, greens and blues play to their ringing tunes — his jewelled bird, his burning bush, his veined or coloured peak. And I am sure it is no coincidence that these five tally with the Upanishadic rainbow — spectrum of revelation.

Swaminathan's visual metaphysics is his yoga, his methods are beyond doubt the way of the Indian mystic and his palette speculates round and round, in and out, far, near and deep within, in the manner of our great forest questioners. It is a reaching out with the tools at his command — paint, canvas and distilled image — for truth. His steps lead to this, his tree grows towards this, his peak touches this, his space seeks to emulate this. In this process tree, rock and bird, insect, man, teacher, pose on the mystic's razor-edge. At the relaxed pin-point of high tension, Swaminathan rests, holding his vision in equilibrium, casting his spell, his mantra of colour and image, letting them work their magic of enchantment. We come away affected, flooded with colour, our senses steeped, our responses quickened and directed. There is not much more that we can ask of art.



35

Untitled

Oil on canvas, 31.5 x 45.5 in (80 x 115.5 cm)

From the Collection of Sushma Jain



36

*Untitled*

1991, Oil on canvas, 31.75 x 45.75 in (80.5 x 116.5 cm)

From the Collection of the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art



Group 1890  
© S Kallidas  
Image courtesy of Gallery Espace

# JAGDISH SWAMINATHAN

(1928 – 1994)

1928	Born in Sanjauli, Simla, Himachal Pradesh
1942	Matriculated from Sir Harcourt Butler High School, New Delhi
1948	Briefly joined the Communist Party of India, where he worked as a journalist and art critic for <i>Left</i> magazine until the mid-1950s
1955	Married Bhawani Pande
1956	Started working at People's Publishing House as a translator and editor, and joined evening classes with the Art Department at Delhi Polytechnic, New Delhi, where one of the teachers was Sailoz Mookherjea
1958	Joined <i>Link</i> , a weekly news magazine, and reported on South and South East Asian affairs and art reviews. In the fall of that year, went to Poland on a scholarship to learn printmaking at the Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw
1960	Exhibited at a three-man show with Piyare Kishan Razdan and Narendra Dixit, inaugurated by M F Husain
1962	Founded Group 1890 in August with artists G M Sheikh, Jeram Patel, Himmat Shah, among others
1963	The first and only exhibition of Group 1890 in New Delhi, inaugurated by Jawaharlal Nehru and introduced by Octavio Paz
1965	Exhibited at Gallery Chemould, Mumbai
1965	Exhibited at Tokyo Biennale, Japan
1965	Exhibited at the <i>International Exhibition of Indian Graphics</i> , organised by UNESCO, Poland
1966	Swaminathan started the short-lived journal <i>Contra '66</i>

1968	Exhibited at the 1 <sup>st</sup> International Triennale, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, where he received an honourable mention  Awarded Jawaharlal Nehru Scholarship to work on his thesis "The Significance of the Traditional Numen in Contemporary Art"
1969	Invited to serve on the international jury for the São Paulo Biennial
1971	Exhibited at Gallery Chemould, Mumbai
1981	Invited by the government of Madhya Pradesh to set up Roopankar, an art museum, at Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, where he served as the director until 1990  <i>Sculpture in Fiberglass</i> , Art Heritage, New Delhi
1982	<i>Sculpture in Fiberglass</i> , Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai  Exhibited at Contemporary Art Gallery, Ahmedabad
1986	Exhibited at 1 <sup>st</sup> National Biennale, Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal
1987	Exhibited at <i>Festival of India</i> , Moscow
1988	2 <sup>nd</sup> National Biennale, Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal  Exhibited at Dhoomimal Art Gallery, New Delhi  Exhibited at <i>Seventeen Indian Painters</i> , Gallery Chemould and Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai  Exhibited at <i>Festival of India</i> , Takaoka Municipal Museum of Art and Meguro Museum of Art, Tokyo
1990	Exhibited at Shridharani Gallery, New Delhi and Gallery Chemould, Mumbai
1992	<i>Collaboration/Combines</i> , Shridharani Gallery, New Delhi; Jehangir Art Gallery and Gallery Chemould, Mumbai

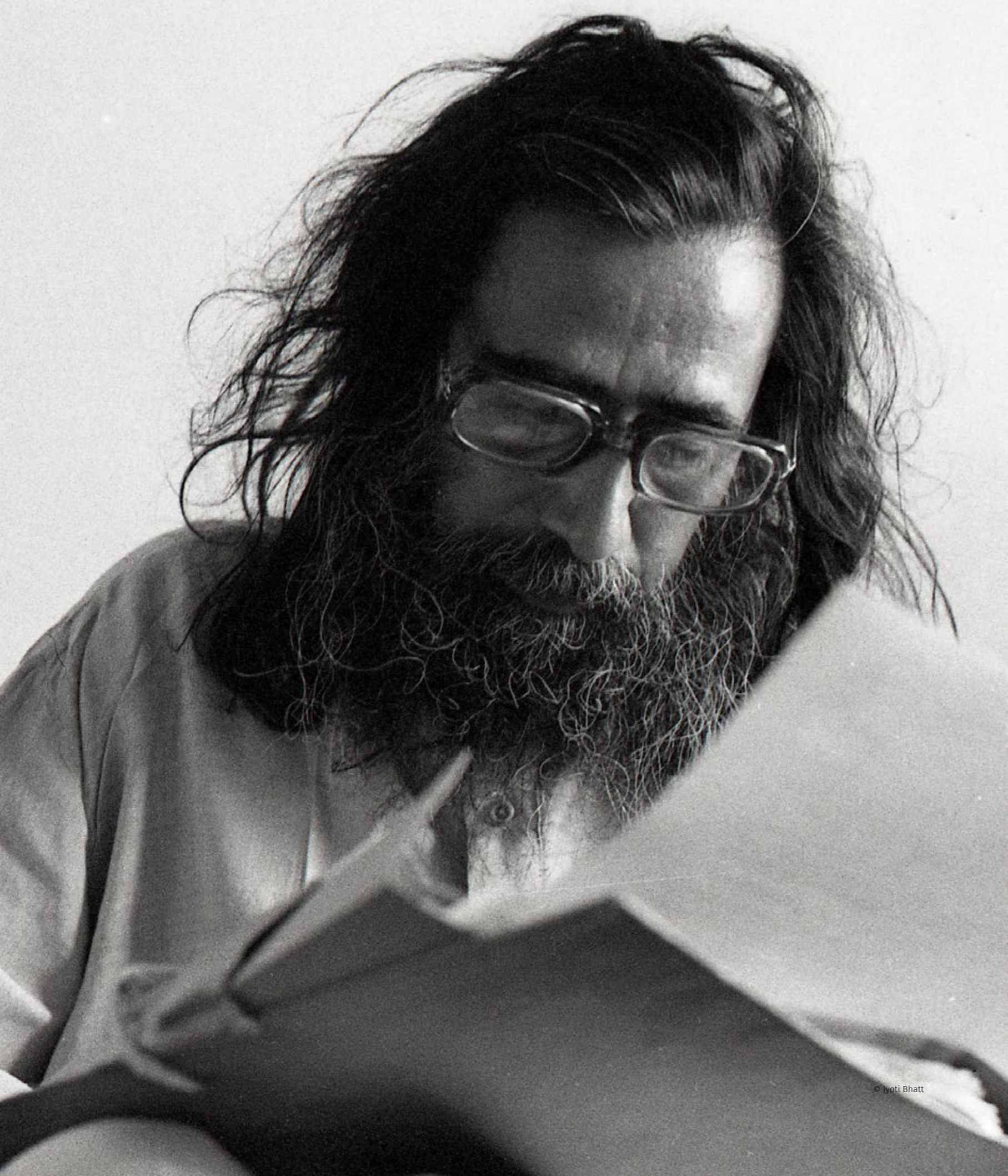
1993	Exhibited at Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi  <i>Memorial</i> , All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, New Delhi
1994	<i>Map, Monument, Fallen Mortal</i> , South London Gallery, London  <i>Works with Paper</i> , Contemporary Art Gallery, Ahmedabad  <i>House/Boat</i> , Oboro, Montreal
1994-95	<i>Riverscape</i> , Birla Academy of Art and Culture and Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai

Swaminathan passed away in New Delhi in 1994. The same year, he was posthumously awarded the prestigious Kalidas Samman award by the government of Madhya Pradesh.

The following is a list of shows where his works were posthumously exhibited.

1996	<i>House/Boat</i> , Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, and Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver
2005	<i>Ashta Nayak: Eight Pioneers of Indian Art</i> , Aicon Gallery, New York
2008	<i>3 Masters Briefly</i> , Akar Prakar, Kolkata  <i>Moderns</i> , Royal Cultural Centre, Amman, Jordan organised by Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi in collaboration with Embassy of India, Amman, Jordan
2008-09	<i>Paz Mandala</i> , Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi
2009	<i>In Search of the Vernacular</i> , Aicon Gallery, New York  <i>Bharat Ratna! Jewels of Modern Indian Art</i> , Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

2010	<i>Manifestations IV</i> , Delhi Art Gallery, New Delhi  <i>Modern Folk: The Folk Art Roots of the Modernist Avant-Garde</i> , Aicon Gallery, New York  <i>From Miniature to Modern: Traditions in Transition</i> , Rob Dean Art, London in association with Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai  <i>Figure/Landscape - Part One</i> , Aicon Gallery, New York
2011	<i>Masterclass</i> , Dhoomimal Art Gallery, New Delhi  <i>Roots in the Air, Branches Below: Modern &amp; Contemporary Art from India</i> , San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose  <i>Manifestations V</i> , Delhi Art Gallery, New Delhi  <i>Ethos V: Indian Art Through the Lens of History (1900 to 1980)</i> , Indigo Blue Art, Singapore  <i>Adbhutam: Rasa in Indian Art</i> , Centre of International Modern Art (CIMA), Kolkata
2012	<i>Through the Ages: South Asian Sculpture and Painting from Antiquity to Modernism</i> , Aicon Gallery, New York  <i>Transits of a Wholetimer   J. Swaminathan: Years 1950-1969</i> , Gallery Espace, New Delhi
2014	<i>Immutable Gaze Part I: Masterpieces of Modern and Pre-Modern Indian Art</i> , Aicon Gallery, New York





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