



A Portrait of a sage: Sri Anandamayi – painted
by Richard Lannoy

The Painting

In the artist's own words: “as I remember her one day in an unusually exalted and withdrawn *bhava*, gazing into some unknown region, possibly in communion with other beings invisible to the ordinary mortal eye. I think the painting's interest – and many have been mesmerised by it – lies in the ability of manipulated paint, especially layered paint, to go far beyond the limitations of the photographic image in its multiple evocation – the metamorphic property of oil paint.”

In the words of Lindsay Clarke: “the noble head gazes meditatively down above the white, passionately-worked, broadstroke brush-work of her robe, filled with understanding and compassion for the joy and pathos of our lives.”



The painting on display



Its position in the gallery.

This painting was completed in 1993 and shown in a public exhibition, a feature of the annual arts festival in Bath, England in 1994. For the timetable of events, the local newspaper placed on its front cover a Richard Lannoy painting (the one hanging to the left of Portrait of a Sage in the above pictures.) His exhibition attracted much interest that year: it was a large and exceptional show.

In describing his art Richard said “I am interested in art which remains rooted in real things and real people..... I select subjects from experience, sometimes long-past and long-reflected upon, when people, circumstance, a trick of the light, the mood of a fleeting instant achieved transfiguration. I am less interested in images proposing mythical otherworldly alternatives or dreams of spiritual otherness in a never-never world, more in metaphors of how we attain intense life in the here and now..... The epiphany of the waking dream..... My pictorial language is a deliberate attempt to slow down the glancing eye and provide, in my subject, a stimulus to a more measured pace of reflection.”

He was always captivated by the mystery of that transcendental dimension which lives at the edge of normality, inspiring a reverence for the unknown.

Quoting again from Lindsay, his long-term friend and collaborator: “For only after one of his paintings has made its initial magnetic impact on the imagination do you begin to understand how your senses have also been penetrated on subtler, more subliminal frequencies – like the light in the pictures which is not overlaid on figures and ground but softly diffused from the deepest layer of the paint. As your respect grows for the care and skill of the work invested in these ambitious canvases, you begin to see that only through long contemplation will they reveal the quieter, more elusive aspects of their mysteries.”

May all who come to see Sri Anandamayi, remembered in paint, gain from their experience. Jai Ma.



The artist with Sw Nirgunananda

The Artist

Richard Lannoy, painter, writer and photographer, first came to India in 1953-54, where he met Sri Anandamayi Ma, who captivated him. He would recall with devotion that experience of processing his first photograph of her in Varanasi, where her image slowly appeared like magic in the chemical processing bath on a sheet of blank photographic paper.

He was given the name Kali Prasad and was in close touch with Br Atmananda over the years, advising her on her publications and providing photographs for them. He also provided several articles for the magazine Ananda Varta, the English version of which she was editor. He would return to India in the 1960s, and his captivating photographs of Sri Ma were published in his large-format book “Anandamayi, Her Life and Wisdom.”

This was his last physical contact with Sri Ma, though in a letter to Br Atmananda he recounts a vivid experience in November 1972, when he was living in the UK. Sri Ma came frequently in his dreams, and one night in the dream she told him to wake up, which he did. He then bathed in her vivid presence. In his own words “It was a simply wonderful, peaceful, luminous night and the effect of it has remained with me ever since. I had the quality of experience as if I had in fact returned to India.”

Later he received regular almost annual visits at his home in Lymington, UK from Swami Nirgunananda, a close attendant of Sri Ma in her last 3 years.

At the end he was surrounded by people who valued him highly, as a remarkably talented man who gave generously of himself to the world, while preserving a secret space for spiritual love. His attachment to Sri Ma was known to all who attended him. He was released from life peacefully and easily, without forewarning on 8th December 2016, surprising everyone.



Sri Ma Anandamayi, photograph by Richard Lannoy.

The Subject

Sri Ma Anandamayi today is widely recognized as a personality of great spiritual eminence. She was born in 1896 and she took samadhi in 1982 at the age of 86 ; these limitations, however, cannot said to have conditioned her utter freedom to be just herself under all circumstances. She was the embodiment of a joyous self-sufficiency, which enraptured the hearts of all who came near her. She was born in a small village called Kheora, in what is now Bangladesh, on April 30, 1896. She was born into a pious, prestigious but non-affluent brahmin household. Her given name was Nirmala Sundari Devi. It is translated as ‘Immaculate Beauty’ which seemed appropriate as the infant grew up to be a lovely child.

The mysterious aloofness of her personality was totally beyond human understanding and yet it was so tempered by her compassionate love for all living creatures that she seemed closer than the most indulgent friend ever could be. Guidance was sought by the learned as well as the simple, the old and also children, people from alien cultures or from traditional backgrounds. Although she travelled incessantly, it was seen that she was at home everywhere and no one was a stranger to her. Throughout the length and breadth of India and also beyond its shores people found her to be, as if the personification of their own inner vision of the Adored one who is most dear to their hearts.

Sri Ma's followers began to understand a little of the meaning of her total detachment and yet an over-flowing compassion for her people. As the years passed the enigma of her personality deepened; from the very moment of her birth she had been fully self-conscious. She was not a *sadhika*, yet the stages of various *sadhanas* were revealed through her body and reached their culmination without her being engaged as a doer, in a very short time span. This might have taken aeons for an ordinary *sadhak*, even for a single path of *sadhana*. She was not a teacher yet people learned from her lucid explanations of various complex spiritual queries put forward even by erudite scholars and contemporary authorities on those subjects. She seemed fully aware of all doctrinal differences, never confusing one with the other in her conversations with learned pandits; yet she had not been initiated into any particular religious order or trained by any yogic instructor. She had not encountered any Guru who could have exerted any influence on her life. In fact she had never retired from the world to become a recluse, neither did she withdraw herself from her kith and kin. She had not performed *sadhana* as it is generally understood in the tradition, yet she could speak with authority on all aspects of the life of a religious quest for enlightenment.

Such are the facts why the word 'unique' is applied for describing her. Sri Ma continued to move around in her own style of unstructured itineraries but she did not always choose her companions. It was a motley crowd which surrounded her. Many times it so happened that many in her entourage did not speak the same language. People from different provinces, different walks of life, mingled together in happy throngs. It was experienced that Sri Ma would accept invitations for religious functions. So the devotees would arrange for Bhagavat Saptah, Durga Puja, Chandipath etc. in their towns. They would pray for her presence at these functions. Wherever Sri Ma stayed, it immediately became the centre for a gathering of thousands. Sri Ma in her compassionate regard for the organisers moved out as soon as things began to get out of hand. There was no central management in Sri Ma's vicinity; whoever was able, took charge for as long as he could. Matters arranged themselves as it were. It is difficult to describe the sheer impromptu nature of management, which took place near Sri Ma. Unless one has experienced it for oneself, it is not possible to credit the utter fortuitous nature of a concurrence of events which seemed to fulfil Sri Ma's *kheyala* (divine inspiration) regarding her travels, companions or at times her places of retreat. In all the major cities Sri Ma visited frequently, the devotees got together to construct one ashram after another but it did not serve the purpose of restricting her movements or providing her with some comforts while she stayed in one place because as often as not she would not visit the ashram at all but go some place else.

One visitor, an Irish journalist frankly asked her, “Am I right to believe that you are God?” Sri Ma answered, “There is nothing save He alone; everyone and everything is but a form of God. In your person also He has come here to give *darshana*”. He persisted, “Why are you in this world?” “In this world?” Sri Ma answered, “I am not anywhere. I am myself reposing within myself”. During the same conversation the Irishman said, “I am a Christian.” Sri Ma answered, “So am I, a Christian, a Muslim, anything you like”.

In general Sri Ma’s inimitable smile disarmed all questions regarding her identity. She once answered a devotee’s query in these words: “What a childish question to ask; people have various visions of gods and goddesses (in me) according to their own predilections. What I was before, I am now, and shall be hereafter. I am also whatever you or anybody may think I am; why don’t you look at it this way: the yearnings (of seekers after Truth) have brought about this body. All of you have wanted it and so you have found it. That is all you need to know.”

Richard Lannoy, a devotee of many years standing has summarised Sri Ma’s ways of being with us in a very telling phrase: “Yet there is a strangeness, a particularity, an indefinable quality which comes so near the limits of the definably human as to make an adjective like ‘human’ quite inadequate when applied to Her case, and ‘divine’ paltry. It is widely accepted that She was, simply, unique. She was, throughout Her life, the acme of effortless perfection”.

In the last days Sri Ma was serene but uncharacteristically seemed to be removing herself beyond the prayers of people around her. Ordinarily she always gave the greatest heed to the words of the Mahatmas, but now to all prayers for her own recovery, she would smile and say, “There is no *kheyala*.”

Sri Ma spent her last days at Kishenpur Ashram. She made no farewells apart from saying “Sivaya namah” on the night of the 25th August; this mantra is indicative of the final dissolution of worldly bondages. She became Unmanifest on Friday evening of August 27th, 1982 around 8 P.M. Her samadhi is at Kankhal, Hardwar at the foothills of the Himalayas.

Sri Ma will ever remain with us in the form of her immortal words, the dearest of which are, “**Ma is (I am) here, what is there to worry about?**” (**Ma Achen, kiser cinta?**)