

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

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Y. G. SRIMATI

Through June 18. Metropolitan Museum of Art; 212-535-7710, metmuseum.org.

Global modernism is gradually finding a place in the permanent collection galleries of the Museum of Modern Art, notably with the recent installation of work by artists from Iran, Iraq and Sudan in response to President Trump's executive order regarding immigrants. Yet certain international artists may lie too far outside the MoMA-approved notion of modernist style to be candidates for inclusion. Among them is a group of South Asian painters who created lyrical, smooth-lined paintings that merge European academicism with Indian content.

Y. G. Srimati (1926-2007) was one of these artists, as seen in the beautiful and important small show, "An Artist of Her Time: Y. G. Srimati and the Indian Style," at the Met. Born in Mysore and raised in Madras (now Chennai), Ms. Srimati studied several classical South Asian art forms, becoming an expert instrumentalist, vocalist, dancer and painter. Deeply involved in the Gandhi-led anti-colonialist movement, she repurposed the illustrational naturalism taught in British-founded art schools by filtering it through older indigenous styles like those found in the sixth-century Buddhist murals at Ajanta and in Rajput miniatures.

All these ingredients merge in the handful of watercolors brought together, from the Met's collection and loans, by John Guy, the museum's curator for the arts of South and Southeast Asia. The earliest pictures are impressive formal accomplishments in a difficult medium. And in work spanning 40 years, Ms. Srimati's choreographic take on naturalism makes everyday subjects — a woman dressing, a family riding to market — look heroic, and images of deities and saints look approachably human. In the end, she's a devotional artist, in the religious or spiritual sense: Her 1947-48 painting of the Hindu goddess Saraswati was originally displayed on her family's home altar. And this is yet another factor likely to keep her from mainstream modernist acceptance. Religious art is still something that MoMA, and other Western-centric modern museums, have no idea what to do with, though the time may come when they will.

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