



K. S. Srinivasa Murthy, a native of Bengaluru, has been involved with the visual arts for the past three decades, both as an artist and a writer. Writing primarily in Kannada, with a specific interest in art language, he has translated the writings of Paul Klee (*Adhunikale* 1991) and K. G. Subramanyan (*Ata-Mata* 2002). His publications reinforce this emphasis on visual vocabulary to secure a broader context for art practice and its contributions to the Kannada cultural history. His numerous books include *Jeeva Mela: Kannada Samskriti Matthu Rumale Chennabasaviah* 2010, *Kanna Kaanike: Rajya Kalasamnive-shadalli Adhunikale Samvedane* 2001 and *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Srijanasheelateya Samajika Ayama* 1995; essays for the exhibition catalogues of leading artists S. Sham Sunder 2004, Stefan Bohnenberger 1999, Ramesh Kalkur 1998, Sheela Gowda 1993 among others. Murthy has also contributed articles and essays for several little magazines and journals including *Shudra*, *Ankana*, *Desha Kala* and *Nandan* (Santiniketan). His art reviews are published in *The New Indian Express*, Bangalore (1999-2001) and *Frontline*, Madras (2002-2003). *Saitaadaru Bedave Swamy Namage* 2009 is his recent poetry collection and *Singapura: Bangarada Madilu* 2003 is his travelogue.

Currently living in Singapore, Murthy is practicing Chinese calligraphy and Ink Painting in the *Gong bi* method under the illustrious calligrapher-artist, Kee Meng Cheng, a student of the late Pan Shou. He holds a Certificate (2006, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore) in the *Xie yi* method, as a student of the well-known artist, Chen Shi Jin. He is also trained in drawing at the University of Iowa, USA (Fall 2002 and Fall 2003).



Varna Mythri The Art of Rumale Chennabasaviah

# Varna Mythri

## The Art of Rumale Chennabasaviah

With an essay by K. S. Srinivasa Murthy

RUMALE CHENNABASAVIAH is one of the major artists of Karnataka from the 1960s through the 1980s when the idea of the modern was characterised by an emphasis on stylistic identity and innovative formal techniques. His distinctive perception and articulation of the modern sensibility developed through his introspective approach to art practice. His paintings capture the ambience of Bangalore; the colours and forms that dominate his paintings are still visible in parts of the city and represent an ideal world that is inclusive and complex. The artist in this urban idyll is a concerned citizen, active in society, politics and spiritual practices and seeks physical rejuvenation. A staunch follower of the Mahatma, Rumale pursued the Gandhian path from a young age. His experiences as a Satyagrahi inflected his writings and directed his approach to art.

*Varna Mythri*, one of Rumale's major paintings, captures his preoccupation with achieving a literal and a metaphoric harmony through colours.

The current retrospective and publication form a tribute to this vision of the artist. □

A handwritten note on a piece of paper with a hole punch at the top. The text is written in cursive and reads: "Dear Sir,  
As a watercolorist of  
Many years, may I congrat-  
ulate you on such beautiful  
works. Have you tried for  
an Exhibition in Australia?  
There are some galleries in  
Sydney who I know would  
be interested. Again, thank  
you for beautiful work.  
Edward L. Smith  
Sydney, Australia"

17c. Edward L. Smith

A handwritten note on a piece of paper. The text is written in cursive and reads: "I am very happy to have had a chance to see Shri Rumale's  
watercolours; many of them have striking originality &  
freshness that one cannot miss.  
K. G. Subramanyam  
13/4/84."

17d. K. G. Subramanyam

17. A few extracts from the visitor's book maintained by the artist in his Gallery.

all other art forms . . . So the time has come for artists to think about their future". Rumale is not referring to the artists' economic conditions here. He adds, "We are at crossroads in the field of art. It is necessary to nurture every art form that is essential for the cultural development of the State. Moreover, the self-absorbed art forms must be discouraged. No one form must be allowed to dominate." The artists generally believed that it was the responsibility of the artist to prepare his/her audience. They made considerable efforts in that direction, enlisting also the media for support. However, the few reporters and freelance writers who wrote on music, dance or art had no direct influence on the public, nor could they adequately articulate the artists' specific persuasions.

These were the conditions of modernity in which Rumale set out to create and cultivate his audience (see Appendix). He invited people to visit his Gallery and gathered their opinions in a visitor's book which he cherished (Fig. 17a to d). The book provides a range of responses reflecting the aesthetic and ideological outlook of his audience between 1960 and 1988, the period during which Rumale was fully engaged in art practice. The visitors included distinguished artists, administrators and political leaders, who recorded their impressions, possibly at the artist's request. Obviously, Rumale was not a self-absorbed or reclusive artist. He was serious about his social commitments as well as deeply drawn to spiritual concerns. He initiated several institutional changes that have enriched our cultural life. He modestly described his contributions to the art

field as a *seve* (humble service). He believed that the 'fires' of the freedom struggle would not only purify him, but also would strengthen and invigorate his art. He writes, "A true artist has to go through the litmus test of the Independence Movement. If I can do that, my art and writings will turn out to be more vital" (Fig. 18). Hadapad, in his tribute telecast on Dooradarshan a few days after the artist's death, described Rumale as a *margadarshi kalavidaru* (the artist who shows the 'Way') (Fig. 19). This is high praise indeed, but befitting an artist who had a vision for the place of art in the public domain.

### In search of a method

Rumale was preoccupied with an appropriate method or direction in art and life, from a young age. Apart from expressing certain practical difficulties in training himself, he has not specified in his writings what constituted a method for him. It is in his approach to painting that we discover a few leads suggesting that the means were as important for him as the ends. Although a simple man in his personal life, Rumale loved to work with the best of materials and only used specific imported brands of paint. One of the elements of his art practice, recalled frequently by the artists who knew him, was his preference for 'distilled water' for watercolour painting, instead of tap water. In addition to the 'purity' of the medium, the manner in which he maintains the colour identities of the pigments and their transparency

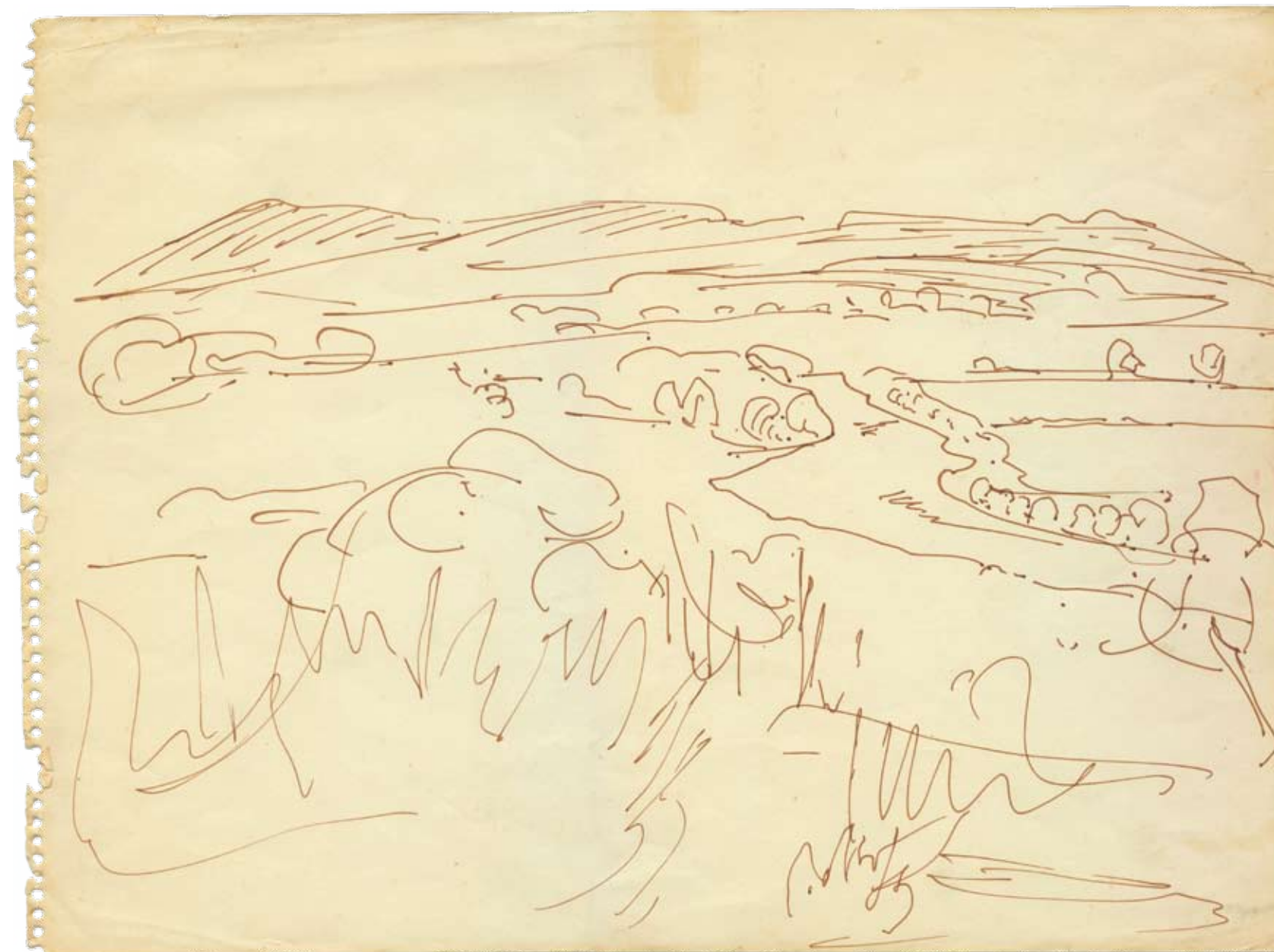
A handwritten page from a book, written in Kannada script. The text is written in cursive and appears to be a personal note or autobiography. It starts with "ಮುಖ್ಯವಾಗಿ ನಾನು ಕಲೆಗೆ ಸೇರಿದ್ದೇನೆ" (I have entered art mainly). The page is numbered "5" in the top left corner. The handwriting is clear and legible.

18. Rumale Chennabasaviah, the Autobiographical Note, p. 5

*Drawings*



Untitled  
c 1960, Pencil and Pen on paper, 36 x 56 cm, COLLECTION Rumale Art Gallery

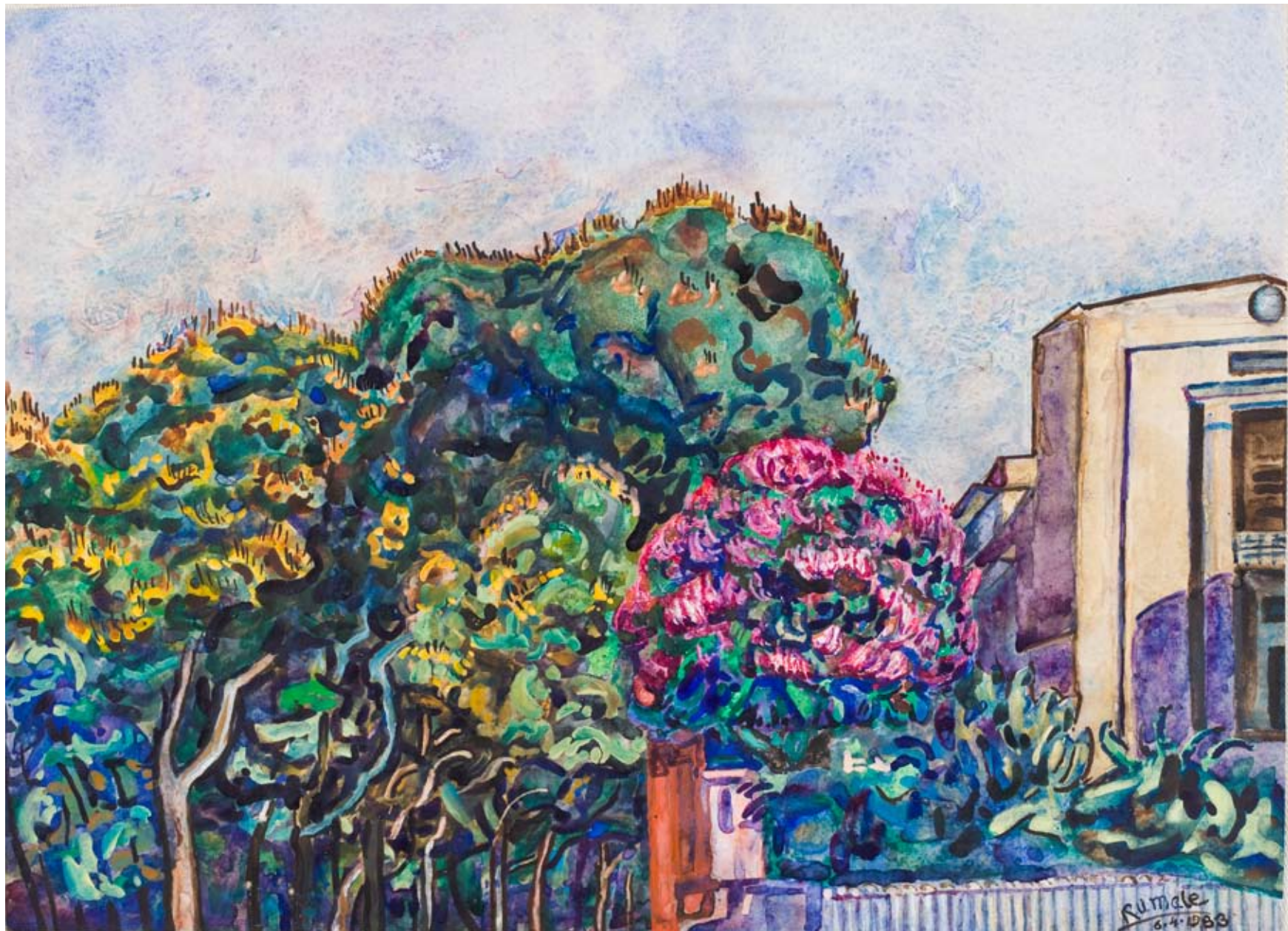


Untitled  
c 1970, Pen on paper, 25.5 x 34 cm, COLLECTION Rumale Art Gallery

# Painting Nature

*RUMALE embraces the sensory stimuli through forms, shapes, colours and textures. He takes every possible opportunity to record his encounters outdoors involving secular and religious motifs, manmade fountains and the natural vegetation etc. But he is not interested in the momentary aspects of nature. Light is essential but the shadows are incidental. Human presence is limited to a few coloured dabs.*

*Through certain still and dynamic forms, rigid and playful shapes, controlled and liberated brushwork, he foregrounds a profound tension. All action is stilled – no flying birds, wind-swept trees, or morphing clouds. Big and small, ordinary and the rare – all of nature's variety appear to transcend the fleeting to signify a more lasting if not an eternal value that the artist seeks in nature. Rumale's paintings reflect a dynamic equilibrium through his meditative approach.*



*Tree in Bloom, K. R. Circle [Bangalore]*  
1983, Watercolour on paper, 28.5 x 39 cm, COLLECTION Rumale Art Gallery



*K. R. Circle, Bangalore—A Collage*  
1979, Watercolour on paper, 66 x 98.5 cm, COLLECTION Rumale Art Gallery

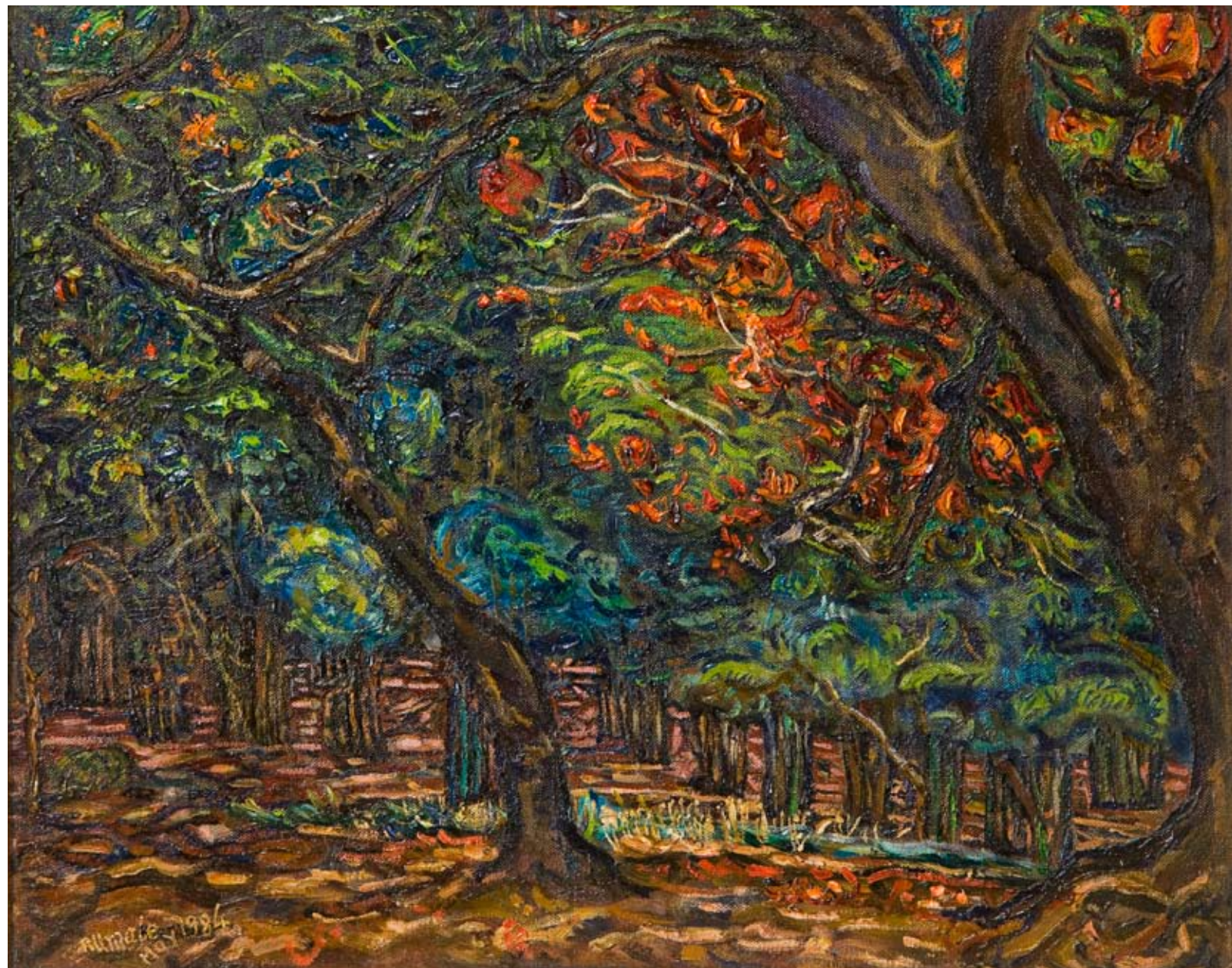
# Return to Art

*IMMEDIATELY on completion of his 'Higher Exams' in art from Kalamandira in 1930, Rumale joined the Satyagraha movement, much against the wishes of his elders. Sacrificing a successful public life in his early sixties, later, he embarked on a course of intense self-study in painting. Besides learning from various manuals and making copies of European artists' works, he also began to paint directly from nature.*

*Regularly painting outdoors, the artist sought out specific places, especially in Bangalore. He would then work on the spot, building up his image slowly and returning to the scene day after day, till he completed the picture. He was very careful about the conditions of light and took care to maintain consistency by working at the same time every day. The changes in nature were not important for his particular artistic persuasions.*



*Unknown Soldier Statue, opposite GPO, Bangalore*  
1978, Oil on canvas, 37.5 x 57.5 cm, COLLECTION Rumale Art Gallery



*Gul Mohur and Bamboo Grove, Cubbon Park [Bangalore]*  
1984, Oil on canvas, 39 x 49 cm, COLLECTION Rumale Art Gallery