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India: Balan Nambiar

In the Indian pavilion the Biennale presents the work of Balan Nambiar from Kerala, on the south-west coast. Balan Nambiar is a highly representative artist of such a vast world as India, about which we know so little. He exemplifies the characteristics of the thousand years of tradition that flow in his blood, characteristics that find immediate expression in his art.

Looking at his works, we understand how he has the power of linking the ancient to the modern, tradition to things of the moment, timeless ritual to the imaginative inventiveness of modern man.

The selection of works by Balan Nambiar in this Biennale, paintings, drawings and sculpture, are all centred round the Teyyam rites— a series of popular religious ceremonies, a synthesis of peasant beliefs, handed down from father to son over the centuries in North Kerala, where the artist was born. These rituals give place to an explosion of popular religious sentiment, with the colourful traditional costumes, singing dancing, with colours that express, in a kind of choral yearning, the sense of mystery surrounding human life. Life itself is celebrated by the primary elements, fire, sun, the whole of nature, the energies emanating from her, and the divinities that identified with these forces.

The artist in this region is not only called upon to design costumes, but to interpret this voice that can be heard over the centuries. This is the singularity of his art, the “timbre” of the clear bright colours, the rhythm of the forms, the quest for focal points, foreseen by a geometry quite different from our own (based on Euclid) as for example, the arrangement of ellipses radially, intersecting on different planes.

The plastic modulation in his sculpture is not to be identified with the weight and size of the material, the mass of bronze, in short, it is shaped, rather, like a ribbon which unwinds like the melody of an ancient dance, gently composed in the rhythm imposed by the artist. The movement of the dance is identified in the style of the form, rendering concrete a cadenza, transforming it into a plastic form that is severe and light at the same time like a creation emanating from nature itself.

The artist's drawings indicate even more closely the motifs of the dance which have inspired him, the rhythm, and harmony of the movements, in accordance with a series of symbols that together form the weft of a mysterious tale, a story without words, but one that is vital and moving.

Guido Perocco