

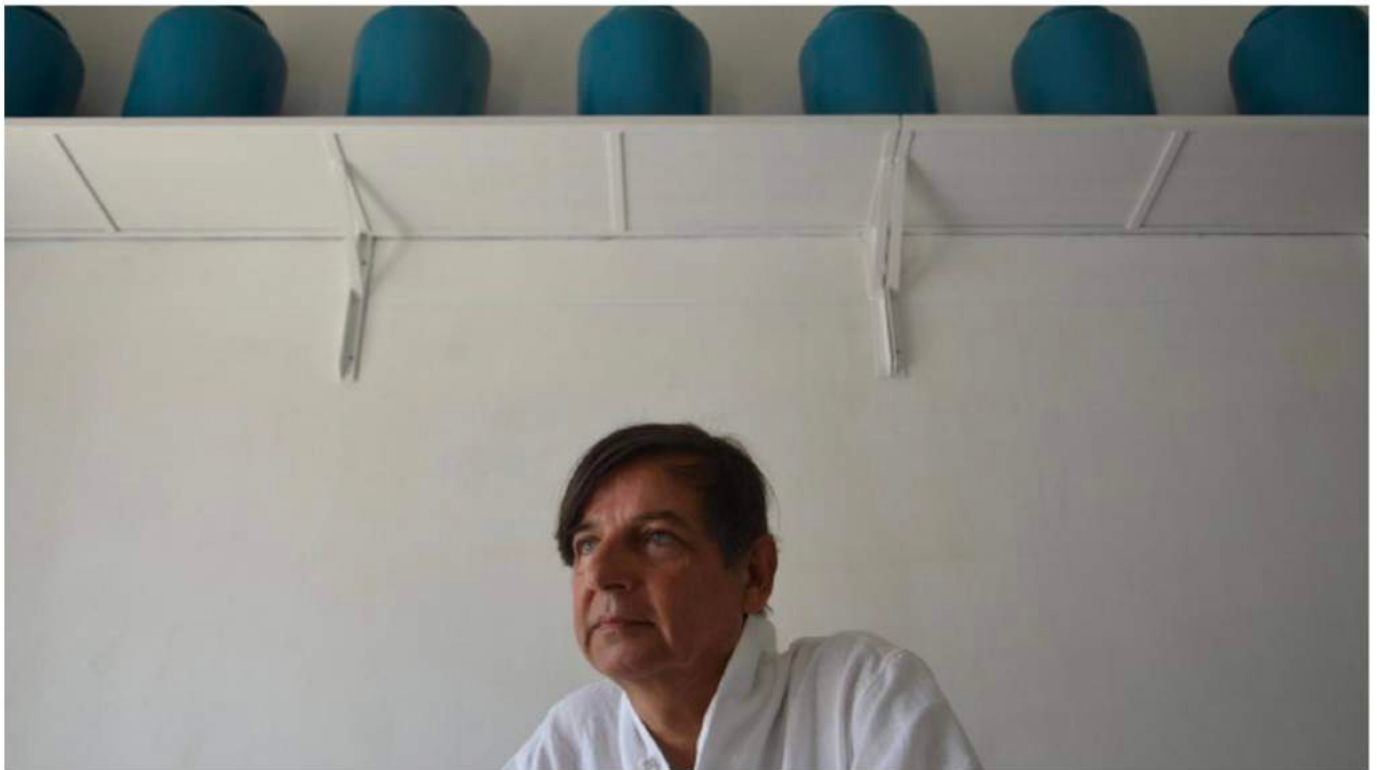
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Melding of histories

C. Raman Schlemmer is driven by twin legacies, of a Western art heritage and an Indian socio-political legacy. He revisits the intertwined entities

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C. Raman Schlemmer, curator of Oskar Schlemmer collection

However illustrious an ancestry it needs continual invigoration to remain relevant. Most often lineages fade with passage of time, notwithstanding their time in history. C. Raman Schlemmer, a German of Malayali descent, has dedicated his life to keeping alive the art legacy of his maternal grandfather Oskar Schlemmer and the socio-political lineage of his paternal great grandfather C. Krishnan Vakyil, a social reformer, who convened a meeting in Calicut (1918) which was presided over by Mahatma Gandhi.

Strangely Raman's two past histories, one of a rich Western art heritage and the other of equally strong Indian ethnicity came together at the Kochi Muziris Biennale. Raman was one of the speakers at the lecture series at the event.

"I have always wished to start an art school in Kerala, especially in Fort Kochi. With this art event it feels more possible," he says, sitting in Pepper House godown, one of the biennale venues.

Raman is an art scholar and the custodian of his maternal grandfather Oskar Schlemmer's art collection, which he lends, exhibits and travels with to different art destinations. He lectures on art and has been commissioner of the Festival of India in Russia, Germany, Switzerland and other countries. He is also the first curator to showcase the works of the Indian Radical artists in 1987, in Geneva, at a show called Alekhya Darshan. The pioneering show of Indian contemporary art had the works of artists Alex Mathew, K.P. Krishnakumar, V.N. Jyothi Basu, K. Prabhakaran and Rekha Rodwittiya.

Raman's Indian ancestry harks back to the defining times of his great-grandfather C. Krishnan Vakyil, who is known for his social reforms. He sent his son C. Unni to study in Germany. C. Paran, Raman's father was during the World War II hidden from the Nazis in Germany as he was 'coloured'.

Carrying forward a legacy

"My father was an artist. He did strong figurative work.

He studied at the Academy of Stuttgart, under the German painter Willy Baumeister. There he met U. Jaïna Schlemmer, the daughter of the artist Oskar Schlemmer. I was born in Berlin." Raman studied art but took upon himself to carry on the celebrated art legacy of Oskar Schlemmer. One of the founding professors of the Bauhaus, a school of art and design, famous for architectural design and the Bauhaus theatre workshop directed by Oskar Schlemmer, his visionary contribution in 20th century avant-garde art is epitomised in his dance creations and stage design.

Schlemmer was banned from working as an artist for his individualistic expression and he died of melancholia. "I felt I had to continue his mission," says Raman and decided to dedicate his life to disseminate Oskar Schlemmer's legacy.

Nurturing Indianness

Though Raman first came to India in 1980, he had a very Indian childhood in Germany. "My mother had seen her husband tortured for being an Indian during the World War, so she consciously nurtured Indianness in me. When I come here I totally become a part of the culture. People here accept me happily," he says, adding that though he leads two completely different lives he is integrated into both.

His art engagements take him around the world. He lectures at universities; curates art shows mainly of his grandfather's collection, lends them to museums and conducts workshops. Raman straddles his two worlds well. In Mullassery, a village in Thrissur district, Raman observes and learns about the culture of his paternal ancestors.

"I get very much involved in the family, land and village affairs, visit our ancestral temple, Achan Ambalam, very close to the house and many other temples in the area."

The Ayyappa festival in a neighbouring village with four thullals has always mesmerised Raman. He keenly watches, follows and documents Theyyam, Kathakali in Kalamandalam, and Krishnanattam inside the Guruvayur temple.

He takes time to go for Ayurveda treatment and in between his social and cultural engagements here he prepares publications on Oskar Schlemmer, his muse.

Illustrious past

C. Krishnan Vakyil, paternal great grandfather of C. Raman Schlemmer was born on June 11, 1867 in Thrissur district. He was an important member of a group which fought for the implementation of the revolutionary social reforms that Sri Narayana Guru preached. He published a paper 'Mithavadi' and opposed the caste system. He worked alongside Mahatma Gandhi whom he invited to Calicut in 1918. He was in the forefront of the Vaikom struggle, for which he provided material support. He converted to Buddhism

The Bauhaus idiom

Oskar Schlemmer was one of the founding professors of the Bauhaus, a school of art and design, internationally famous for architectural design and the Bauhaus Theatre Workshop directed by him. He became known internationally with his 'Triadic Ballett' in Stuttgart in 1922, a dance with Utopian costumes, which move and dance like ambulant architectures and "bear relationship to Kathakali," says C. Raman. The human figure is at the centre of Schlemmer's work and in a continuous dialogue with the space around it, as in 'Egocentric Space Lineature' (1924). Schlemmer was banned from working as an artist for his non-conformist style by the Nazi regime in 1930 and he died of melancholia in 1943.

