

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

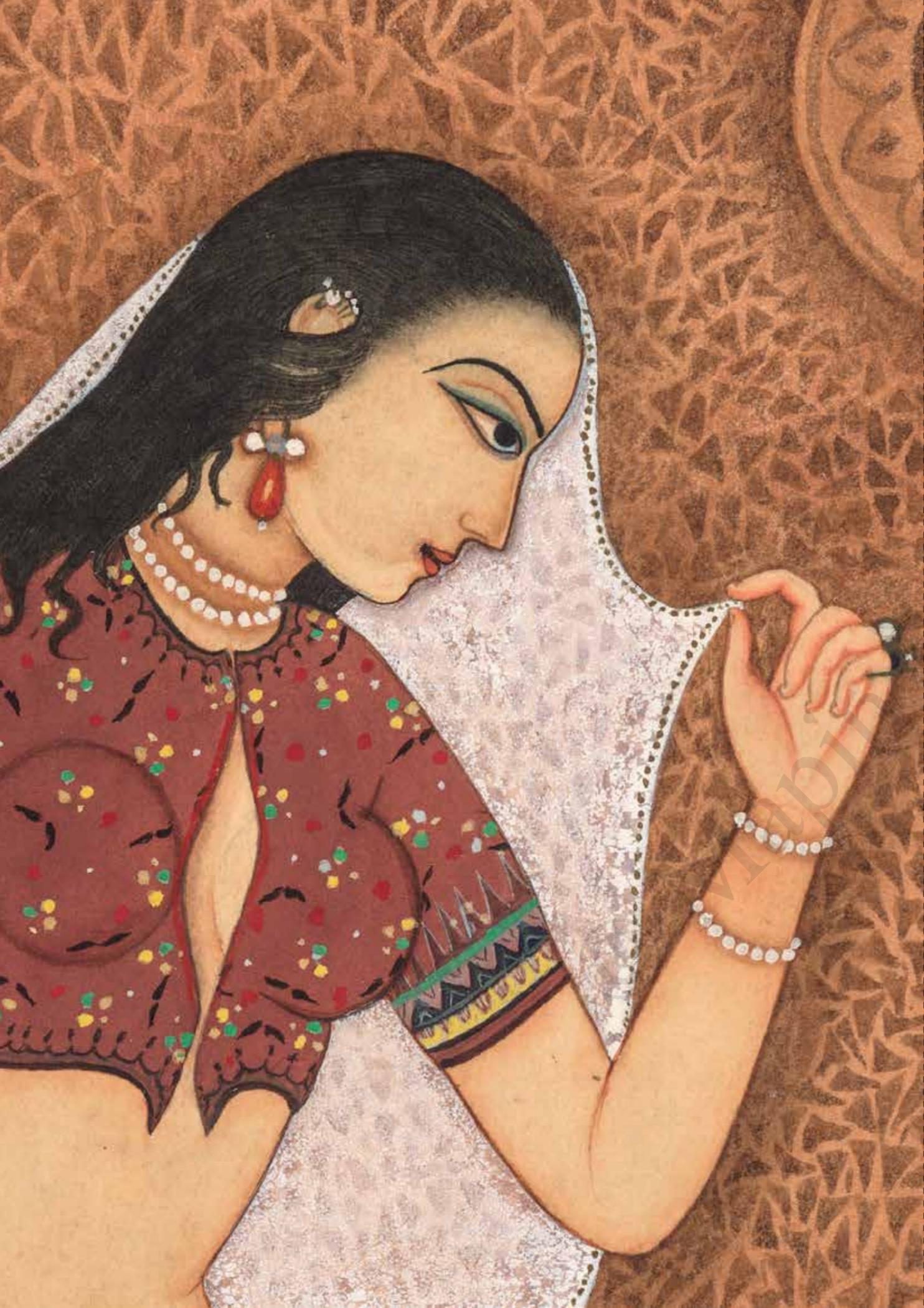
This book has grown out of a chance encounter in New York with Y.G. Srimati's partner, the artist Michael Pellettieri in 2008, the year after the artist's death. In the course of looking for a home for Srimati's prized musical instruments—four entered the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection—Michael and I met, and the conversation turned from music, to dance, to painting. I was invited to view Srimati's painting in the apartment on the Upper West Side that Michael shared with Srimati for three decades. Impressed by the finesse of these works, engaged by the classical subject matter, and moved by the resolutely unfaltering vision of an Indian style they exhibited, the fate of these paintings became a shared concern. Over the coming months, our conversation moved first to how we might secure a number of paintings for The Met, and then, to develop the idea of an exhibition that might celebrate Srimati's work. Through a combination of purchases and generous gifts, six works entered The Met's collection. All are included here. The exhibition, *An Artist of Her Time: Y.G. Srimati and the Indian Style*, went on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in December 2016 and closed the following June (figs 1, 2). Featuring 25 works, the exhibition received wide media coverage and critical acclaim: Holland Cotter described it as “this beautiful and important small show” in his review for *The New York Times*, while *Apollo* reviewer Louise Nicolson called it an “unexpected gem”.

In the preparation of this book I take pleasure in recording my gratitude to Michael Pellettieri for allowing access to Y.G. Srimati's estate, and for undertaking much of the archival work with her personal diaries, exhibition catalogues, performance programmes, press clippings and related ephemera. Sita Ramachandran, Mrs. Y.G.P., and Y.G. Rajendra are thanked for assisting with critical dates in Srimati's life. Kalyani Madhura Ramachandran, research assistant to the exhibition, provided sterling support. Finally, I am indebted to Betty Zimmer, a close friend of the artist who first met Srimati performing at the New York chapter of the Vedanta Society, in the 1970s. It was Betty who first proposed that a book be prepared to record Srimati's contribution to modern Indian art, and to bring her to the attention of Indian audiences who had not had the opportunity to enjoy her paintings. Bipin Shah at Mapin Publishing responded enthusiastically to the project and his editorial, production and design team brought this to fruition in record time. The Metropolitan Museum of Art generously shared photography of those works that featured in the exhibition. Additional photography by Jeanette May Studio. To all I record my appreciation.

John Guy  
New York  
February 2018



Figs 1 and 2  
Installation views of the  
exhibition *An Artist of Her  
Time: Y.G. Srimati and the  
Indian Style*, presented  
by The Metropolitan  
Museum of Art, New  
York, 19 December 2016  
to 5 June 2017.



## EARLY YEARS 1946–1952

Srimati probably began painting in earnest around 1942, in her mid-teens when, following the unexpected death of her father, the family moved from Bengaluru to Chennai. She developed an early mastery of watercolour and pursued this as her preferred medium through her fifty-year career as a painter. With the support of her elder brother and mentor Y.G. Doraisami, she secured the finest materials available to her in Chennai, working in Winsor and Newton paints on J.B. Green and J. Whatman art papers. Again, when she moved to New York, she sourced high quality art materials and papers. These have served her art well, resisting better than most the ruinous effects of a monsoonal climate on works on paper.

The early portrait studies of women from this period display an early aptitude and ease with the watercolour medium (pl. 1, 2 and 4). The technique she developed was personal and idiosyncratic. First, she prepared a careful under-drawing directly onto the sheet, correcting and refining as she resolved the composition. Colour was then first applied as large-area washes, which were then manually scrubbed back and reapplied, building a complex tonality and depth that a simple direct watercolour technique could not achieve. Her control of these large colour washes is remarkable. These technical innovations evolved through rigorous practise and application, rather than as the result of formal tuition.

Srimati routinely didn't sign or date her works, and so placing much of her early collection is problematic and dating often circumstantial. In later years, encouraged by dealers and collectors, she would on occasions sign and date a work retrospectively. The earliest works are a series of studies of women, in which her growing command of her medium is already evident. *Woman with Medallion* (c. 1943–44), a work from this period, hung at the family house at Sait Colony, for decades (pl. 1). Srimati's engagement with themes that explored everyday life in rural India was shared by a number of other painters of her day, most notably Yagnesh Shukla, N.S. Bendre and Amrita Sher-Gil. Together, they sought to identify themes that belonged to India and so distance themselves from dependency on British art models in the pursuit of an Indian modernism.



## THE BENGAL SCHOOL AND JOURNEY FROM AJANTA

Undoubtedly shaped by her youthful experiences of the political process that secured India's independence, Srimati identified as her favoured subjects traditional themes that expressed Indian sentiments, especially those that reflected the great pantheon of Indian religions. Through her highly controlled and softly modulated use of watercolour washes, Srimati was able to build, startlingly early in her career, on the poetic and somewhat lyrical styles developed a generation earlier in India under the mentorship of Nandalal Bose. While ultimately rooted in British watercolour traditions of the late-Edwardian age, Abanindranath Tagore, Bose and others repurposed this aesthetic, mixed with a touch of Chinese and Japanese ink-painting techniques, to serve a new agenda—the strident assertion of an Indian identity through art.

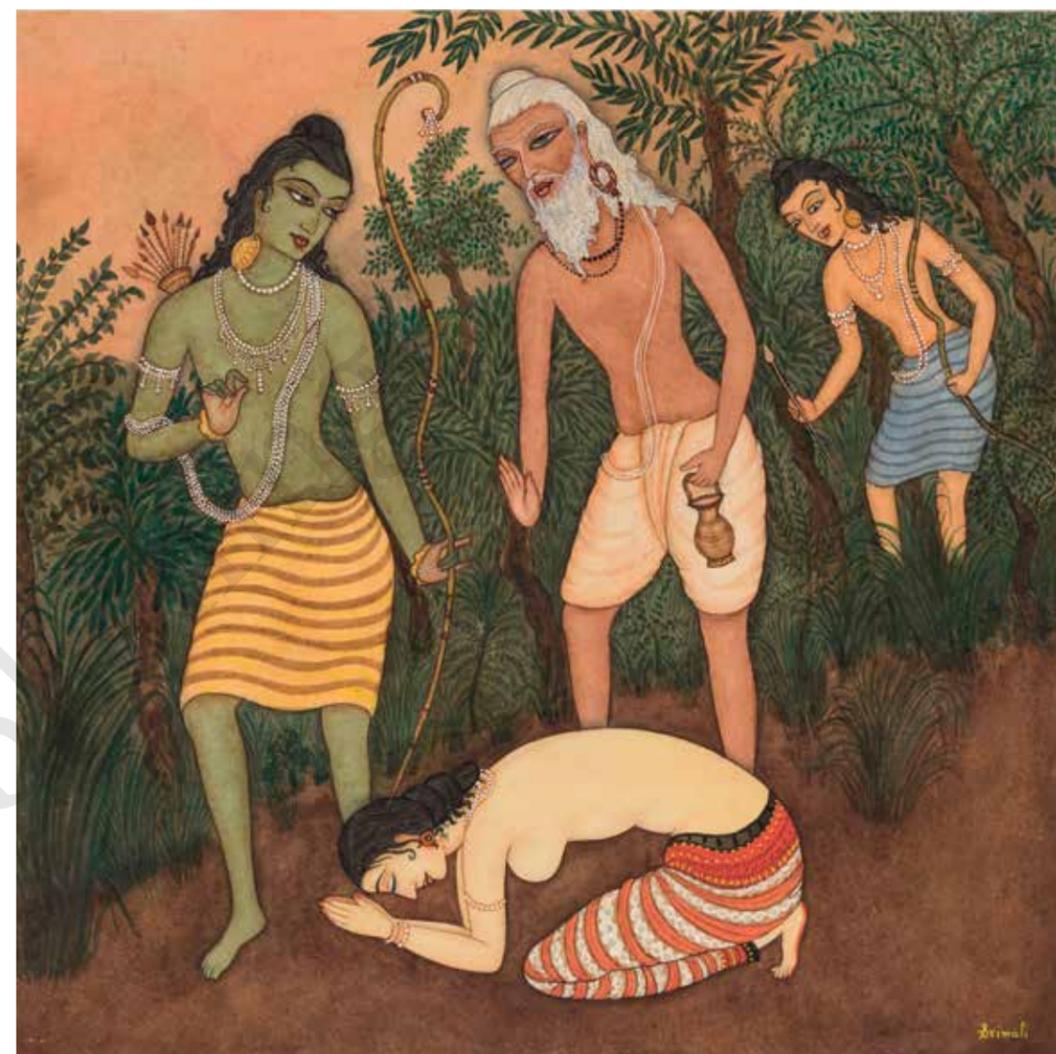
Srimati used figure-types of the fifth-century murals at the Buddhist rock-cut cave monasteries as the basis for a series of paintings that explored and celebrated the art of India's past. In this, she was following the teachings of Bose and, a generation earlier, Abanindranath Tagore and E.B. Havell at the Calcutta School of Art, who first advocated looking to India's past for appropriate Indian subjects. Earlier generations of Indian artists, who had trained in the British schools of art in India, often undertook meticulous copies of ancient Indian murals; the Buddhist cave complex at Ajanta was a favourite. Srimati and others sought to invert this paradigm and so assert the classical tradition of Indian painting as a vehicle for new Indian art. In this quest, the antiquarianism interest of the British schools of art was displaced by an exploration of early Indian art and its seeming continuities and relevance down to the present. To be dismissive of this traditionalist position as derivative and illustrative was to miss the point. Srimati pursued this style rigorously and with a singular vision, devoting her painting to the same cause as her performance of dance and music, to the celebration of Indian traditional art forms.



### 17 Durvasa Cursing Sakuntala

Watercolour, 34 x 51 cm  
Chennai, c. 1950–52  
Collection of Michael Pellettieri

The events depicted in this painting occur in the *Mahabharata*, and were dramatized in the fifth century by Kalidasa in his play *Abhijnanasakuntalam* (The Sign of Sakuntala), a tale of love, anger and spells. The beautiful Shakuntala, living in a forest hermitage, is seduced by the king Dushyanta while on a hunting expedition. He gives her a ring as a token of his love. When Shakuntala, lost in daydreaming, fails to extend hospitality to the passing sage Durvasa, he curses her, saying that her lover will forget her. Only sight of the ring would trigger his recollection. Srimati chooses to depict the moment of Durvasa's curse to create a stylized and evocative rendering of the defining moment in this drama's narrative: Durvasa is seen aroused in anger, gesturing his spell, whilst Shakuntala sits lost in sorrow, wearing the ring. The translucent *dupatta* drawn across her torso serves as a metaphor for her modesty.



### 18 Rama Lifting the Curse on Ahalya

Watercolour on paper, 30 cm x 30 cm  
Chennai, 1950–52  
Collection of Michael Pellettieri

Srimati's telling of the story from the *Ramayana* of Ahalya, the beautiful young wife of the sage Gautama Maharishi, who permits Indra to seduce her. The lovers are cursed by the sage, and only when Ahalya extends hospitality to Lord Rama during his forest exile, is the curse lifted. Rama forgives the repentant Ahalya kneeling before him, witnessed by her sage husband and Lakshmana. The devotional power of this story is captured by Srimati in this painting, animated by the formal use of theatrical gesture. The kneeling posture assumed by Ahalya directly draws on devotee figure-types depicted in Amaravati sculptures of the second century C.E., displayed in the Government Museum in Chennai and known to the artist.