

Secret Garden

Vivek Menezes loses himself in Jose Pereira's superb fresco in Borda, Margao.

Hidden away in plain sight, an unknown masterpiece of 20th century Indian art occupies the ceiling and walls of one part of the Chapel of St. Jerome in Borda, on the outskirts of Margao in South Goa. This is the stupendous *Celebration of Food* created by the polymathic New York-based scholar and artist, Jose Pereira. It's a terrific composite artwork, with separate panels depicting sources of Goa's nutritional supply (fishing, rice paddies), and also the result of extraordinary labour in painstaking fresco buono. Just like the Renaissance Italians, Pereira spent many months on scaffolding, applying paints directly to fast-drying plaster.

In some ways, it's fitting no one knows this genius painting because it's much the same for the artist who created it. But before he died at 84 in 2015, Pereira piled up monumental scholarship, with seminal books on music, architecture, theology, history, literature, and Konkani. He had an unquenchable thirst for languages, mastering classical Greek, Latin, Persian, Hebrew and a further dozen modern European languages, besides abandoning promising studies at the J. J. School of Art to pursue a doctorate in Sanskrit.

Pereira was singular in all matters, so it may not be so surprising he chose the hardest medium for his greatest artwork. Fresco buono requires the careful grinding of pigments and their flawless application on a thin layer of wet lime plaster. As the mixture dries, the colours bind. The whole process is extremely laborious – the Borda fresco took repeated trips back to Goa from New York before it was completed.

Puckish and playful in the manner of very great scholars who have completely mastered their material,

Pereira seeded his master artwork with scenes especially dear to him. The traditional ramponkar fishermen are reproduced from sketches made on slow family days on the beach at Colva. One of the women selling vegetables has the face of a neighbour. The magnificent wall-sized depiction of an old-fashioned cowshed has two secrets: lounging in the rafters are Pereira's children, and the figure milking a cow with his back turned is unmistakably Krishna himself.

Knowing my deep affection for this particular panel, Pereira once emailed me this entrancing description, "There is more there than meets the eye. The mural illustrates a passage from a 10th century Digambara Jain religious novelist who wrote one of the verse-prose masterpieces of Sanskrit literature – the *Yasastilakacampu* (AD 959). His name was Somadeva, and he flourished at the court of the Rashtrakuta emperor Krishna III (AD 939-968) [The Rashtrakutas originated in Loutulim in Goa!] Somadeva paints an elaborate picture of a large cow-pen. It is thronged with travellers who are happy at being offered buttermilk; in fact, they become thirsty for milk at hearing the continuous sound of milking. Old women, decked with flowers, sing and churn butter as cows and bulls mate; the bleating of kids breaking free of halters reminds them of their own children. The kids, for their part, are frisky, and mix with the puppies. Cows, crowned with flowers and grass, flow with milk at the sight of the calves, while bulls burn with jealousy as they watch the calves mate. The members of the cow-pen's owner's family milk the cows, churn butter, offer buttermilk to travellers, and watch cows giving birth...My fresco does scant justice to this rich portrait of life in classical India." /



Jose Pereira. *Celebration of Food.* Mural. Borda, Margao. Painted in 1979, 1982 and 1999. Photograph by Vivek Menezes. 2006.