



# A Meeting with Angelo da Fonseca

The elderly woman lifts up the portrait of herself to the light so that she can see it more clearly. She blows onto it, and dust motes rise to dance their Brownian dance in the dim air. Now she is eye to eye with the lifesize image in charcoal and chalk, and it is as though she is staring into a time-distorting mirror.

The face in the drawing is scarcely twenty years old; the living face, over eighty.

The sketched pair of eyes looks out onto the broad dawn of the life to come, an airy and unlimited landscape whose pure sense of possibility causes them to glitter. The living eyes that meet them have a light in them as well, but they have already looked upon all of life — its little triumphs, its real tragedies, its unexpected betrayals — and their more fugitive glimmer is that of a sunset on a monsoon clouded sea.

It is the end of the monsoon season in Goa. Rain hammers off the roof of the place where we stand, runnels of it jetting down, half visible and ghostly through the dust-crusting windows. But in here it is dry, and there are masterpieces lying everywhere around us. Each has its own character, but they are forlorn and forgotten; mumbling geniuses stuck in the waiting room of Art History.

The woman is Ivy da Fonseca, the drawings and paintings those of her husband Angelo. They are all she has left of him; a fatal illness having come for him forty years ago, leaving her to puzzle out the rest of life unexpectedly alone.

But now, through the drawing, she sees herself in

his eyes as though he were here in this room, living and breathing with us.

The twenty year old and the eighty year old are beginning to merge together, and the living woman bursts into giggles like a young girl. It is a private moment of rare joy, and I wonder again how I have come to be here witnessing it, four thousand miles from my home in the sedate London suburb of Dulwich.

Before the beginning of the drama that led me to that little room, I had heard next to nothing about Angelo da Fonseca. I had heard his name uttered in vague contexts by the occasional aficionado of Asian art, but without specifics, without biographical details, and — most importantly — without an image track.

Da Fonseca was an enigma: A Catholic Goan who was an expert on India's indigenous religions; a painter of churches who had been run out of Goa for mixing up traditional Biblical scenes with Hindu, Buddhist and Jain elements. He had become a ghost at the recently convened banquet of Indian Modernism, all of the other guests at which had found themselves the subjects of endless articles, monographs and retrospective exhibitions.

Then, in September 2011, I found myself occupying a seat next to the ghost's widow.

The occasion was the cultural festival held at Panjim's Old Secretariat to mark fifty years of Goa's liberation. The building had originally been one of the palaces of the early sixteenth



century Muslim ruler Adil Shah, and thereafter became the seat of the Portuguese colonial government. A magnificent, half-ruined warren of polished, hardwood floors, wrought iron balconies, and elaborate, tiara-like candelabras, it seemed crammed with the ghosts of Goa's long and complex history. By the time of my visit, the business of unruining the place was well in hand, and plans were afoot to make it an ambitious gallery and arts centre that would showcase Goan culture. I was there to give some public lectures on global movements in art.

The main hall was packed, the microphone boomed and squeaked above the roar of the fans, but the audience seemed to laugh at some of my jokes before presenting me with some of the toughest post-lecture questions I have ever had to answer. Then, when I got down from the stage with the other speakers, I saw a tall man with an impressive moustache assisting a distinguished, elderly lady to walk towards me.

"You," the lady said. "The art historian from London. You didn't mention my husband's works." After learning her identity, I apologized, saying that regrettably I knew far too little about the mysterious Angelo da Fonseca to have ventured anything. We sat down together on two of the plastic chairs. "That's the tragedy of things," she said to me. "Nobody has seen his works, and nobody remembers him. But I will make you see," she went on, her tone confidential, her black eyes insistent. "You must come with me, now. You will see for yourself, and you will decide."

"There are works of his here?" I asked.

"Oh yes!" She said. "There are hundreds of them — watercolours, oil paintings, even some sculptures. On the other side of the river." The man with the impressive moustache turned

out to be VM de Malar, a local writer who was one of the main organizers of the Jubilee celebrations. "You really do have to see them," he said to me. "There's no more complete collection of any Indian artist. It runs from the twenties right through to the sixties, when he died. And it's all been forgotten about."

"And you want me to come now?" I said to Mrs da Fonseca. "This minute?"

"*Tempus fugit*," She said, fixing me with her gaze. "Enough time has been wasted already. Are you game?"

It's not every day that an art historian gets to stick his nose into the virtually intact oeuvre of an inscrutable grand master. I was game all right. I was very game.

Soon, a car containing Mrs da Fonseca and I was crossing a bridge across the great Mandovi River, with its little blue-and-white fishing boats dwarfed by the hulks of great floating casinos. "People here are too morally upright to gamble on the sacred ground of Goa," she says to me. "So they do it on boats instead. Every now and then one of them sinks to the bottom with no survivors." As we reach the opposite bank of the river, she tells me that Angelo's paintings are in the custody of a small group of Jesuit priests who inhabit some sort of research establishment. Some years ago, she had lent them almost her entire collection of Angelo da Fonseca paintings under a trust agreement, on the understanding that they were going to open a gallery dedicated to publicizing his work to a world audience. Shortly afterwards, however, the head of the group had changed, and no progress towards their promise ever seemed to have been made.

"They have done nothing," she said. "Still poor

Angelo's paintings are not on show; still there is no gallery to hang them in." She turned to me then, her eyes seeming to brim with regret. "The world is turning," she added quietly. "I'm afraid I will not live to see him take his proper place in the history of this land."

We arrive at our destination, and are shown into a small office with faded whitewash on the walls. It feels like the reception counter of a hotel in a town with no tourist attractions. There is a small desk with an old computer, with one of those box-shaped CRT monitors, on it. There is a landline telephone on the desk, a paper calendar with the name of a Chinese restaurant on it, and some pencils carefully arranged in a line. The pencils are different lengths, and have been ordered from longest to shortest so that they look a bit like Pan pipes. They have been sharpened, apparently all at the same time, and their points face towards Mrs da Fonseca and I.

The head of the place is seated behind the desk, behind the pencils. He has a balding, line-free forehead, and eyes that do not seem to focus on us fully. As Mrs da Fonseca explains the reason for our visit, he seems to be back in his head somewhere, his mind occupied with the calendar, with procedure, and with a nagging little feeling that the pencils in front of him might not be lined up properly.

But he is surprised to see her. She lives in Pune, four hundred miles away, and seldom makes it to Goa these days. He says, "You haven't given the right amount of notice."

"But I've brought this art historian, from London," Mrs da Fonseca says. "He's only here for a few days."

"Out of interest," I chip in, "how much notice

would be normal?"

He looks at a loss for a moment, then says quickly, "Three weeks."

I look at the empty calendar, and around at the empty hallway. "Sir," I venture gently. "You don't seem that busy. I have a fair bit of experience in archives — we really wouldn't be any trouble. If I write an article about the paintings, there would be publicity; you might attract offers of funding for the collection." *Funding* is normally a magic word for curators everywhere.

He looks at me as though my presence is profoundly inconvenient, and I wonder what it is that we have interrupted him doing. "Things like *publicity*," he says, as though it is a dirty word, "do not concern us here."

"Why should I have to give notice to see my own paintings?" Mrs da Fonseca says. "Your predecessor never asked for it. I look at them whenever I come to Goa, which I'd like to point out is hardly ever, these days."

To my surprise, the man's temper flares, and he raises his voice to my companion. "You cannot expect us to interrupt our work," he barks, "just on a little whim of yours."

"What work?" She demands, taking fire from him. "What work? All these years, and what have you done? Everyone has forgotten about Angelo, while you sit here and ... *work*."

"We are," he says, voice still raised. "We are ... cataloguing them! That — *that* is why you cannot look at them." He seems relieved to have thought of a new reason for not letting us in.

"Couldn't we just have a quick look?" I say to him. "Just an hour? We really won't disturb anyone.

Please. One hour. *Half an hour.*"

"We are cataloguing them," the man says, staring at the pencils. "And so it will not be possible."

Halfway back across the bridge, with the casino ships bobbing on the river, I say to Mrs da Fonseca, "perhaps we should have given him some notice."

"I deliberately didn't give him any," she says. "I didn't even let him know I was coming to Goa. Why? Because he is hiding something. You saw him; he was terrified by the idea that we might put our heads around the door of that room. Something is wrong."

Back at the Secretariat, I leaned on the balcony rail with VM de Malar, looking across the river in the direction I thought the paintings were in. "It isn't right," I said to him.

"Ah, that famous British sense of fair play," he said, chuckling. "Not always applied very consistently."

"Not usually applied very consistently, if you look at history," I said.

"But look," he said, "something's happening."

We had left Ivy da Fonseca sitting on a chair further down the balcony to rest. Now, a group of journalists who had come to cover the festival was beginning to gather around her instead. As VM and I drew nearer, she was saying to them, tears in her eyes, "Shouldn't a poor widow be allowed to see her dead husband's paintings, which she has removed from her home so that other people can enjoy them?"

The journalists were all nodding. They all had their notebooks out.

"Where does it say in the Bible," Mrs da Fonseca went on, "that you should mistreat the poor widows of the world?"

The journalists all shook their heads, and scribbled away.

"Oh my," VM said.

Now, I should have been able to sleep very well that night, because I had a very special place in which to lay my head. The great novelist Amitav Ghosh, when he found out I was coming to Panjim, insisted that I stay at his house in the nearby village of Aldona. He was going to be away in New York, he said, and I would be able to enjoy its tranquil atmosphere solo.

Amitav and I both shared a connection with Myanmar. I had lived there for four years from the end of the nineties, he — of course — had penned what is still the most famous book ever written about the place. I am privileged these days to think of him as a friend.

But in 2011, when he issued his invitation, we hardly knew one another. I had met him at a conference at the Divinity Schools at Oxford. He had given the keynote address; I had given a very tedious paper on the Ajanta frescoes. He congratulated me on it anyway, and I — star struck of course — gave him a carefully stapled photocopy of an article I had written, never thinking he would find time to read it. But he did read it, and we began to correspond with one another on quite a regular basis. Still, I was a virtual stranger, and to give me the keys to his house was a kindness far beyond my existing definition of the word.

And so now I found myself whipping through the

in a customized Suzuki taxi. Amitav had sent his favourite driver, a young Goan named Sanjay, to pick me up. Sanjay had spent time in the Emirates as a chauffeur, and he drove the little Suzuki as though it were the Monaco Grand Prix. We shot through a village with a little white church occupying the centre of the road, the way parting so that the traffic flowed around it. It had a European-style Gothic arch at the front, but I thought it looked more like a Hindu temple than a church, and I said this to Sanjay.

“That’s the way it is here,” he shouted across to me over the buzz of the tires on the tarmac. “When the Portuguese came, they knocked down the temples. They made local builders design churches, and local sculptors make crosses. The people came to the same place; they chanted different things, went away with different books. But did they think different? Perhaps a bit different. But the Catholic priests — maybe they started to think a bit different too. They are not like in Afghanistan, uh?”

From my experiences earlier that afternoon, I was not so sure.

Amitav’s house had more than a touch of the Gothic about it as well, with its long, central hall of pointed arches and its furniture all of dark, heavy wood. Amitav’s housekeeper Candida, a kindly Goan lady who was perhaps in her fifties, welcomed me with a chili omelet, which she served at the head of Amitav’s long dinner table. The table was clearly designed for a party larger than one. Amid these surroundings, I felt for a moment like mad King Ludwig of Bavaria, dining all alone in his banqueting hall. I said to Candida that I would sleep in one of the guest rooms, but she had already made up the master bedroom, and ushered me into a beautifully decorated place with a four-poster bed at its centre.

Once again, I felt immensely honoured. Not to mention immensely lucky.

And in these conducive surroundings, as I have said, I should have rested extremely well. But my mind was unable to settle down to sleep. It flitted off constantly to some deep, imaginary part of that place with the faded whitewash on its walls — a barricaded room stacked from wall to ceiling with moldering and unsuspected masterpieces.

Mid morning the following day, the telephone rings and it is VM de Malar. “The game’s afoot,” he says. “Mrs da Fonseca and you are all over the newspapers. The journalists were more interested in her story than they were in the blessed festival. “Oh?” I say over another chili omelet. “And what’s the upshot?”

“The upshot is that it has freaked out the boys across the river. You’ve now been cordially invited to look at the paintings. But they want five days.”

“Why five days?” I say.

“At a wild guess,” he replies, “I’d say they’re hoping you’ll have gone back to London by then.”

I am supposed to go back to London in three days.

I have classes scheduled at the university.

I go up onto Amitav’s balcony to think.

It is an extraordinary, longbow-shaped balcony up a flight of steps at the back of the house, with cast iron railings that are hot under a cloudless sky. It reminds me exactly of the stern of an ocean going vessel, and in fact there is an old diagram of a sailing ship pinned to one wall. I sit on one of the wicker chairs, and look through the trees to where

the land drops away towards a bend in the river. A bee buzzes somewhere in the warm, earth-smelling air. It sounds like a big bee. The bee stops buzzing, and I look to make sure it hasn't landed on me secretly. It does not appear to have. I look again. The bee is definitely not there. Instead of the sound of the bee there is now vague singing and a drum tapping, probably from a radio somewhere through the trees. With the earth smell, there is also a little woodsmoke from the cottage where Candida lives, away to one side of Amitav's house.

The singing has stopped, now the only stream of sound is the flow of wind passing among the leaves of the trees. Punctuating it intermittently are bird calls — a cheeping; a kind of quacking; now and again a chicken in the distance. There are others, harder to describe. None of the birds can be seen, though I look for them among the leaves. A dry leaf falls and I hear it crisp to the ground; I go forward to the railing and can see it, a twist of brown on a bed of thin, curling grass. The buzzing bee is back and now I see the bee because it collides with one of the mosquito screens and drops to the sandstone floor. Not a bee, but a wasp, perhaps. It is as long as two bones of my little finger, and not yellow but shiny green or turquoise, like a bead of petroleum against the sandstone. Its long legs are skittering about, surprised at the sudden interruption to its flight. It recovers suddenly and is away again; a green bullet now. Two birds, W-shaped, glide over, but the sky is too bright for me to know their type or colour; my blue eyes, designed for plainer and gloomier places, are not right for the job, and they bruise themselves against the light.

This must be *Angelo da Fonseca's* light, I think to myself, and these must be *his textures* and *his colours*. And also *his sounds*, which might still somehow be palpable, though impossible to hear,

in his paintings.

I go downstairs to the telephone and suspend my flight to London.

That evening, I was sitting in Amitav's lounge and trying to get some writing done, when there was the noise of an engine outside and a loud rapping at the door. I opened it to see Cecil Pinto, a bomb-proof looking Goan who I had met at the Golden Jubilee festival, and who appeared to be able to drink all other Goans under the table. "Amitav told us you were here," he said, and gestured to the back seat of the bike. "Get on — we go to the Institute. We drink."

I got on.

The Aldona Institute reminded me exactly of the Miners' and Mechanics' clubs in Cornwall, England, where I had spent a good deal of my youth. It was a Spartan, all-male environment with no attempt at interior décor or style, and where the only things to do were to drink debilitating amounts of alcohol and to play cards.

Not many people had opted for cards.

Cecil said something to the bartender, and a small bottle of whiskey and a small jug of something else appeared. I surmised that the whiskey was for me, but it was the something else that I was interested in. "Wait," I said to Cecil. "What are you having?"

"Ah, this is feni. You are a foreigner and you won't like it," he said regretfully.

"That is almost certainly true," I said. "But humans can adapt; it's the only advantage we've got over things like lions. Feni for me as well."

Feni turned out to be made from the fruit of the

cashew tree, of which there are many in Goa. Not from the nut, with which everybody is familiar, but from the ballooning, bell pepper-like structure that encases it. Traditionally, the fruit are crushed, often with bare feet, very much like grape treading in Europe. The juice flows out. It is collected, fermented and the alcohol distilled. The end product is something like tequila, but has a character of its own. By itself, it tastes merely bad. But with a squeeze of lime and a drop of water... well, like most firewater, it gets better the more of it you drink.

I learned all of the above from Mr Pinto, who I later discovered was a respected authority on the subject. We were sitting with Rahul Srivastava, another friend of Amitav's who was an urban theorist. He was well known in his field, and was originally from Mumbai. "I wasn't sure about this stuff when I first moved here," he said to me, filling his glass. "But now I drink it all the time — I think I actually *like* it."

Rahul wasn't the only knowledge-economy type lurking in Aldona. I had also met several movie people including the production designer Aradhana Seth, and a handful of other university people. "There's a very high concentration of creativity in this tiny little village," I said over my feni. "You're not going to tell me all the villages in Goa are like this."

"Amitav moving here changed a lot," Rahul said. "And these days it's just snowballing. Property prices around here have gone out of control." "With everything that's going on at the Old Secretariat and the talent pool you've got in Aldona," I said, "you might end up with a renaissance on your hands."

The next night we drank more feni, and the next, and the next. Finally, on the morning I was

scheduled to see the paintings, I woke up to the sound of Sanjay, the driver, banging on the shutters of Amitav's bedroom. "Yaar, Rupert! You coming?" He shouted through the louvres. "We'll be late, uh?"

I was not in a good way. I felt as though I had been run over by a Tata truck. Then I remembered having challenged Cecil Pinto to a bout of arm wrestling the night before, and almost having my arm wrenched off.

"For England," I said to myself, and got into my linen suit. I was sweating high-grade feni, and must have smelled like a distillery.

The piles are high, and most of the works are unframed, their surfaces often shielded from one another only with bits of greaseproof paper, and sometimes with nothing... The extent of the squalor shocks me.

At the place with the faded whitewash and the row of sharpened pencils, some sort of re-set button appears to have been pressed.

The head of the place is sporting a fixed grin, and this time even shakes my hand. "So good of you to come," he says to the two of us.

"Our pleasure," says Mrs da Fonseca. "So kind of you to invite us."

"You must have finished cataloguing the pictures," I suggest.

"No, we're still cataloguing them," he says. "But that can carry on while you look at them. You can stay for three hours today, and three hours tomorrow, because the girl doing the cataloguing will have to be with you in the room constantly." Mrs da Fonseca rolls her eyes. Still smiling, the man whispers to her, "you didn't have to go to the

newspapers.”

“She didn’t go to anyone,” I chip in. “They came to her. It’s probably got something to do with karma.”

He leads us up some stairs to a wooden door. Behind the door, I know, are the paintings. I take a deep breath. The door opens into a small, dusty room.

The paintings are not stored in a conventional way. Some are piled on wooden chairs, some are piled on a sideboard, and the rest are piled on the floor. The piles are high, and most of the works are unframed, their surfaces often shielded from one another only with bits of greaseproof paper, and sometimes with nothing. Obviously I had not gone there expecting the plush and regimented archives of a place like the Bhau Daji Lad in Mumbai, but even so, the extent of the squalor shocks me.

“My god,” I say to Mrs da Fonseca. “It looks like a suicide bombing.”

“This is exactly what I was worried about,” she replies. “And they’ve had five days to clear up.”

But finally we are here with the paintings. *And what paintings they are.*

Everywhere lie works of extraordinary beauty, and I want to go to each one, and hold it up to the mean light that is filtering through the dusty window panes. Fortunately, Mrs da Fonseca’s attitude is more disciplined — she wants to do things chronologically.

Angelo was born into an aristocratic family on the island of Santo Estêvão, and always maintained a spiritual connection with the riverine topography of Goa. Even years later, after he had moved away

to Pune, he still mixed mud from the Mandovi River with his paints, to put something organic into them from his homeland. Not surprising, then, that most of his early watercolour works from the twenties are landscapes. There is something of Cezanne about them, and we lift up page after page of blocky and architectural scenes, many of them featuring Hindu temples amid the scenery.

Then follow intricate watercolours in the style of Mughal miniatures — musicians, dancers. These are from the years when Angelo studied under Abanindranath Tagore at Santiniketan, and their diagrammatic perspective shows a pervading influence from the Bengali master. “He never forgot about Abanindranath,” Ivy da Fonseca says to me as we look at them. “But he was never *abstract* enough for those people, and he didn’t stay for a long time over there.” Before going to Calcutta, Angelo had studied at the more academic, Western-influenced J.J. School in Mumbai. Even in these works from his Santiniketan period, I can detect a continued, subtle pressure exerted by the early Renaissance in Italy.

After he returned to his hometown and began to paint Christian subjects again, this “Italian” tendency came out more and more, and some of the paintings have the grace, delicacy and charm of Fra Angelico. I say this to Mrs da Fonseca. “Yes,” she replies, recognizing the name immediately. “Angelo loved Fra Angelico. He thought him the most spiritual of all the European painters. He always said Fra Angelico should have been born in India.” Among these works, we find beautiful, delicate girls, as light as a feather, looking like heavenly dancers from the Ajanta caves; there are women in the wilderness, like those seen in Rajput work.



But I begin to see that something really dreadful has happened to many of the watercolours.

Frequently, they have been glued crudely onto cardboard backing using the type of paste one would normally only use to stick up circus posters.

“Were they like this before?” I ask Mrs da Fonseca.

“No,” she says. “Angelo didn’t like to use glue, because it contracts.”

“Worse,” I say, “it soaks into the cartridge paper and bonds to its fibres, then you can never get it off.” I note that contraction of the paste has indeed occurred, and the surfaces of many beautiful works are badly distorted and ruffled. On some of the paintings’ surfaces, I can even see smudges where it appears that whoever applied the glue had tried to smooth the paper out *by rubbing the painted surface*. Whenever I see the damage caused by such frankly brutal handling of these delicate and irreplaceable works, I feel physical pain and not a little anger.

Now I see a large painting on canvas sandwiched between framed and glassed watercolours, with at least three of these heavy objects piled on top of it. The corner of the bottommost frame appears to have snagged the surface of the canvas and made a hole in it. I begin to lift the frames off, and the girl who is there to keep an eye on Mrs Fonseca and I comes over and attempts to drag the canvas out of the pile sideways.

“Don’t do that,” I say. “Mrs da Fonseca, tell her not to do that.”

She tells her, and the girl helps me instead to lift the frames off the large artwork. I can see that the paint on the canvas is scraped in many places,

probably from having been dragged repeatedly against other surfaces. “Look at the damage to this,” I whisper to Mrs da Fonseca. “We’ll be lucky if there’s anything left of the pictures after that girl’s finished cataloguing them.”

Mrs da Fonseca sighs. “She’s from a village,” she whispers back. “She doesn’t have any training. What is one to do?”

At this point, there doesn’t appear to be much we *can* do. We are also painfully aware of our time limit, so we continue our exploration of the artworks. The one we have just discovered is an image of the Virgin Mary, but seated cross-legged, and with one hand holding a lotus flower. It looks very much like an image of the Boddhisattva of Mercy, Avalokitesvara, exactly as if it had been painted by Piero della Francesca, or another of the great Tuscan painters — yet another globalized artwork from this most cosmopolitan of all Indian artists.

But not everybody liked Angelo’s cosmopolitanism. The painting we are looking at is typical of the things he made after returning to Goa from Santiniketan, and his inclusion of elements from diverse religions got him accused of all sorts of things. “Being Christian in Goa in those days was all tied in with colonialism,” Mrs da Fonseca said. “They didn’t like anyone who tried to say that Christianity had similarities with Hinduism, or that it could even be seen as continuous with other religions in India.” Some even saw Angelo’s work as politically dangerous. He was criticized, belittled and threatened, and in the end departed in secret for the city of Pune to start over.

Pune was where he would meet his future wife.

For a long time it didn’t look as though Angelo

would marry anyone. He was a detached, unworldly character who preferred meditation to conversation. When he moved to Pune, he even joined an ashram and lived there for several years. It wasn't a Hindu ashram, but an Anglican one, set up by an eccentric scholar from Oxford University. It combination of Christian and Hindu tradition must have been just what Angelo was looking for. "He was happy there," Mrs da Fonseca remembers. "He didn't have to talk to anyone, and he didn't have to worry about his meals or housekeeping. He could just paint, and paint."

Angelo started receiving a lot of commissions during this period to create church frescos, which he painted in characteristic style using only red Goa mud from the Mandovi River, bound together with Windsor and Newton gum Arabic. It was while he was at work on one of these that a beautiful young schoolteacher began to come to sit and observe him every day at work. The future Mrs da Fonseca was fascinated by the artist perched up on his ladder, laying onto the white wall these sinuous stripes of red that gradually, as though by a magical process, turned into a tightly composed and complex scene. "At the time, I didn't understand much of what he told me about the paintings," Mrs da Fonseca tells me. "But it was lovely to watch him up there creating them."

Angelo's natural shyness meant that things developed slowly, but after a while he began to take her to look at historical sites around Pune such as the ancient Pataleshwar Cave Temple and the palace of Shaniwar Wada, and also to share with her his growing collection of Hindu sculptures. "He found a lot of them in ditches near ruined temple sites," Mrs da Fonseca said. "He was always digging for things."

Soon, people at the Ashram noticed that the

painter wasn't eating properly, or even painting very much. Angelo da Fonseca was in love.

Then I see the frames. Dumped outside on the rain-washed balcony are a large number of dark wooden frames, gilt frames, and also some larger surrounds in carved and painted wood.

After the couple got married in 1951, Angelo's style began to change. The paintings become more personal, more meditative, and with less obviously Christian content. "I told him to stop accepting commissions from priests," Mrs da Fonseca explains to me on our second day in the little room with its piles of pictures. "Some of them were telling him what to paint and how to paint it — that wasn't good for his development as an artist. I told him just to work for himself, to paint what he wanted to, and however he wanted to."

As we pick our way through the paintings, I realize that Ivy da Fonseca is re-living her life with Angelo in front of my eyes, that the images are like lantern slides of the couple's life together.

Now begin to appear many intimate images of family life — Ivy seated at her dresser; a portrait of the couple's newborn daughter, Yessonda; a later image of Yessonda gazing nonchalantly out of the living room window. They are not done in Angelo's polished "Fra Angelico" style, but in loosely applied pastels that remind me far more of Degas or Renoir. They are some of the freshest and most beautiful of all the works, and it strikes me that they have been overlooked because of their secular content. It strikes me suddenly that all along, the problem with Angelo da Fonseca in the history of art is that he has been marginalized as a "Christian artist" rather than accepted as an important contributor to Indian Modernism more



generally, and is an artist of interest to everybody. This is something that would have been inconceivable in the cases of comparable European painters such as Maurice Denis or Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, who have always been categorized according to their style, technique, and their associations with other artists rather than according to their preference for motifs drawn from the mystic fringe of Catholicism.

When I lay eyes on Angelo's mature works, the full tragedy of his early death during the Pune meningitis outbreak of 1967 affects me with great force. By the mid sixties, he had begun to take a new direction, working with slick concoctions of various pigments mixed with gum Arabic, and applied to hardwood panels instead of to paper or canvas. The resultant surface resembles that of highly finished oil paint — think Lucas Cranach now, no longer Fra Angelico.

There are a number of these works piled onto a stool near the door, with newspaper laid between them to separate them. They have a new, abstract quality, and a kind of visionary confidence that suggests Angelo was drawing on a deeply-felt inner inspiration rather than reworking tried (and tired) themes out of the scriptures. One work that particularly catches my eye is an extremely sadhu-like John the Baptist standing amid a Maharashtrian landscape of hallucinatory sharpness. Fingers inside a pair of white cotton gloves that I have bought in Panjim for the purpose, I carry the piece by its edges to the little balcony of the room to get a better look at it in the light.

Then I see the frames.

Dumped outside on the rain-washed balcony are a large number of dark wooden frames, gilt frames, and also some larger surrounds in carved

and painted wood. I had noticed before that many of the watercolours had been put into generic, Ikea-type, plain pine frames, but had assumed that this was out of necessity, not to replace the ones they originally inhabited. "Are these old frames out here the ones that Angelo used originally?" I ask Mrs da Fonseca.

"Yes," she confirms, putting her head around the door. "These were the type he liked." Now she points to a large-sized one that has been prettily carved using Angelo's trademark design based on the shape of a lotus. "That one he had made especially, and he painted it himself."

Why would anyone discard a frame that an artist has designed and coloured specifically to complement a particular artwork? One finds this kind of dedicated frame often on paintings by nineteenth century artists such as Ingres and Rossetti — they are considered an integral part of the artwork, and to separate them from the painting would be unthinkable. To remove this one of Angelo's and chuck it out like a piece of trash is to add insult to the many injuries already inflicted on the poor artist's work.

And then mine and Mrs da Fonseca's time is up, and we are told we have to leave the dusty little room. As we pass by the little office with its sharpened pencils, I attempt to be diplomatic with the head of the place. "These artworks are very fragile," I say to him. "The person entrusted with their cataloguing needs to take care in the way they are handled."

"One of our number here is currently undergoing training in picture restoration," he tells me. "I am sure we will be able to fix any harm that has been done."

Far from reassuring me, this chills me to the bone.



Knocks and scrapes are one thing, and can at least be mitigated by an experienced professional restorer. But a botched restoration of a painting by a well-intentioned amateur will ruin it lock, stock and barrel, and forever.

A few days later, I was jolted and bumped awake, and then kept awake by the sound of an argument raging in Hindi. I was lying in a small compartment about six feet by three feet, screened on one side by a curtain of some lurid red material.

Ivy da Fonseca had talked me into going to Pune with her to look at Angelo's last paintings, but she didn't like aeroplanes. That was how I came to find myself on a twelve-hour sleeper bus, zig-zagging the hairpin bends of the Deccan Plateau's steep edge in the middle of the night.

I stuck my head downwards (for I was on the upper bunk) and whispered, "Are you all right, Mrs. da Fonseca?"

"Ye-es," she laughed from the bunk below. She seemed to be enjoying the ride more than most of the other passengers.

The argument in Hindi was about Johnny Walker.

Due to taxation differences, alcohol is much cheaper in Goa than it is in neighbouring states, and the police were keen on busting people who tried to bring large quantities of it with them when they crossed the frontier. One of the students who had boarded the bus at Mapusa had been carrying a military-style kitbag that clinked a great deal, and the Maharashtra border police had sniffed out his cache with commendable efficiency. The ensuing argument was not about criminal charges, but about how much of this haul the student was prepared to give the police so that none were applied. There were two

officers, and in the end it was decided that they would take two bottles of Johnny Walker each, and the student would keep six.

But then the bus driver chipped in.

His conscience would not, he said, allow him to sit idly by and witness such a colossal perversion of justice taking place under his very nose. The student reluctantly parted with one more bottle, which the driver said he would only use for medicinal purposes, and we were on our way again.

When next I woke it was dawn, and the craggy, boulder strewn Western Ghats were now to the West, pinkly catching the glow of the morning sun as it rose on the other side of the bus. I think of Angelo making this journey in secret, his hopes of making a career as an artist in Goa shattered. Though he turned his back on his homeland, however, he would never be able to leave it behind. The Mandovi River mud he carried with him to mix into his paints was symbolic of the way particularly Goan interactions between the various religions of India would continue to inform his work at a profound level.

In Pune, I stayed at Ivy da Fonseca's home, where I met her constant companion, Genny Roberts. Genny was a devout Christian, but, like Angelo himself, highly capable of seeing the innate continuity between all spiritual beliefs. She went to church daily when I was there, but also spent time with the Hare Krishnas and Hindus, as well as arranging for me, a Theravada Buddhist, to visit the ancient meditation caves of Bedse and Karla, which were a considerable distance away by car. If Genny Roberts had a fault, it was only that of wanting to do too much for the people around her. I was very glad to see that Mrs da Fonseca had a person of such great integrity to keep her company.



The Jesuit seminary of De Nobili, where Angelo did some of his most impressive fresco work, used to be some distance outside Pune in a deserted area of countryside. The city's rapid growth means it has now been engulfed by the steady onslaught of pariah dogs, high-rise condos and used car lots, but it somehow maintained its serenity, and its quiet stone-faced halls were a cool and welcome refuge from the dynamic morass of Maharashtra's second largest city. Walking in its gardens, Mrs da Fonseca, Genny Roberts and I met a kind old Jesuit, a highly educated man and an expert on Asian religions, who showed us some of the frescoes and helped me to contextualize their Hindu elements. The De Nobili frescoes are some of the most transcultural of Angelo's works, with elements combined from all the main religious traditions of India, but suffused still with the placid, all-pervading atmosphere of fifteenth century Tuscany.

The greatest revelations of all turn out to be right there in front of me, in Mrs da Fonseca's own living room. They are Angelo's last paintings, done in 1967.

I catch sight of the largest of these the first time I go through the door. A riotous, expressionistic surge of colour on three panels, like a mediaeval altarpiece, it sits there perched on a high shelf.

"Good that you spotted it," Mrs da Fonseca says, seeing me staring at it and nodding. "After all, the style is quite different to the early things. He called it *The Apocalypse*." She tells me about the time a visiting Goan art historian sat on her sofa for two hours without commenting upon this colossally important work, and so left without knowing it was even by Angelo da Fonseca. "I don't want to have to do all the work," she explains. "If you people can't see what's right in

front of your faces, I'm not going to wave it about in front of you and do a dance."

*The Apocalypse* is probably Angelo's most transcultural painting. The figure at the center facing the rising dragon's heads and the swirling flames evidently refers to a passage from the Biblical book of Revelation, but the figure can equally be read simultaneously as Sita from the *Ramayana*, and as *Avalokitesvara*, the Mahayana Buddhist deity of compassion. It thus represents the culmination of Angelo's synthesis of elements from different religious traditions into a potent personal mythology entirely detached from any specific creed.

"Did Angelo know he was dying when he painted this?" I ask Mrs da Fonseca.

"No he did not," she says with sadness. "The meningitis took him away from us very quickly. He began to feel ill, and within two days he was with God. It was so unexpected. He painted *The Apocalypse* not because he was afraid of death. No, it was because that year he had become worried that the world was descending into the end times. He had experienced a kind of vision, that everything humanity had achieved would soon be consumed by fire." It is hardly surprising that he felt that way in 1967, I say to her. The flare-ups in Kashmir, the 1967 Arab-Israeli War in the Holy Land, and the continuing hostilities in Vietnam had a lot of people around the world coming to the same conclusion.

"But he also had hope," Mrs da Fonseca suddenly adds. She goes out briefly, and comes back into the room unwrapping something small. "This was also made in 1967, at the same time as *The Apocalypse*."

The thing she holds out is an exquisite little painting on wood of an angelic figure floating in

air, its halo blazing with light. It is titled *Morning Star*, and there is a piece of paper attached to its back with the pencil inscription “not for sale.”

“The hope is much smaller than the fear,” I say, looking at the two works together. “But there it is, glowing like a beacon.” I am overcome with emotion, and hold *Morning Star* up above the larger painting. “It might almost have been meant as an addition to *The Apocalypse*,” I add, “to hang above it as a redemptive message. But we will probably never know.”

“We never will,” Mrs da Fonseca agrees. Then she says, “You must accept that one, the *Morning Star*, as my gift. You must take it back to London with you.”

Stunned, I say, “I can’t possibly. It is far too precious a thing.”

“If you don’t accept it,” she says craftily, “it might end up along with the others in that little room in Goa. You wouldn’t want that.”

I agree that I wouldn’t want that.

“Do as I have said, and take it with you,” she tells me.

So it came to pass that I made the long trip back to London with a guardian angel wrapped up in my satchel.

On the aircraft, looking at the desert landscapes of Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Qatar through a porthole, my mind kept drifting back to that dusty little room full of paintings on the other side of the Mandovi River.

I was puzzled.

The countries slipping by underneath were all building ambitious museums and galleries, humidity controlled, state-of-the-art, and

designed by prestigious international architects. But they had little, very, very little of their own art to put in them. They were mainly solving this problem by borrowing things from the Louvre, the Guggenheim, and the British Museum to fill up their plush but empty new institutions.

In Goa, the problem seemed to be exactly the opposite.

I had seen there the entire oeuvre of a world-class historical painter, moldering away uncared for, unwritten about, and with no suitable place for its display.

The people of Goa, and particularly the artists and writers of Goa, must begin to see Angelo da Fonseca’s work as their possession, their inspiration, and their heritage, and must intervene on its behalf. These paintings are a vital early embodiment of the transcultural, globalist atmosphere that makes today’s Goa such a vibrant, diverse and forward-looking region. When they are ruined beyond repair (which is only a matter of time), something that could have become a central pillar of contemporary Goan culture will be gone with them.

When the damage is done, there will be no restoring; there will be no bringing back. The opportunity will be gone. Then, not only Goa, not only India, but the world, will have lost something of very great value and beauty.

But I am an outsider, and who am I to say what should and should not be done? My suggestions are far too easily dismissed as the whinings of an interfering *firangi*.

I can do nothing but hope that Goa perceives through these words what it stands to lose — *what it is already in the process of losing*



