

They joined the fight

Painter-writer J Swaminathan and writer-artist Richard Bartholomew were two key, and lively, figures of the Delhi art world of the 20th century. Their sons seek to rescue their legacy

One was an eminent painter who started out as a journalist and remained, through his career, a writer who penned incisive essays on aesthetic and cultural debates in left-wing journals in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. The other was the preeminent art critic and newspaper reviewer of those decades, and an artist who painted (early on) and (later) took beautiful, intuitive photographs of his family, his artist friends and life around him.

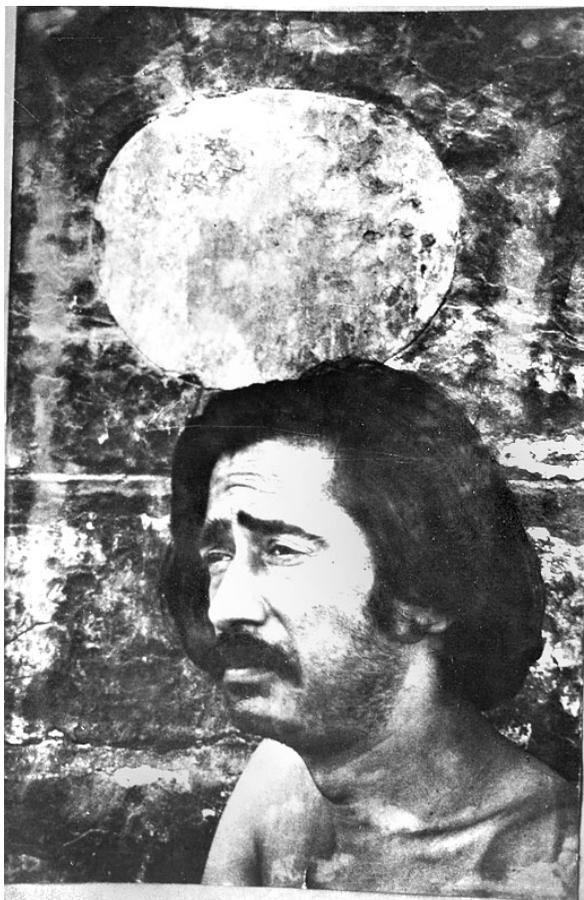
As painter-writer and writer-artist, J Swaminathan and Richard Bartholomew, respectively, their careers converged not just in time, but also in the concerns that animated their rhetoric. Both were key figures in art circles in Delhi, which was then emerging as an important centre for art, with the Delhi Shilpi Chakra group, on the one hand, and official institutions such as the Lalit Kala Akademi and All India Fine Arts & Crafts Society, on the other. Together, they were privy to defining moments in the history of Indian art since Independence, supped with and knew well all the principal actors, and joined in the debates, controversies and politics of the era.

Bartholomew died in 1985 and Swaminathan in 1994. Both are largely forgotten today — or, at any rate, the full range and complexity of their life's work is little known — and their writings lie buried in archives, dusted off only by scholars of art history. But their sons are now endeavouring to change that, digging through their archives and presenting selections from them in a bid to re-claim their fathers' legacies and relevance for the present.

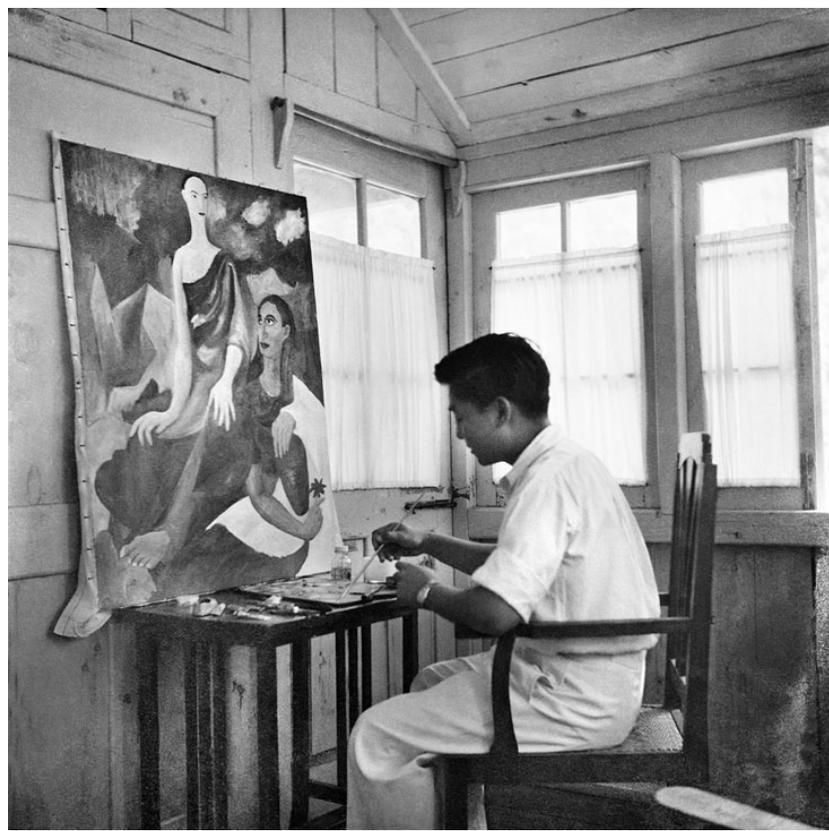
On September 26, Pablo Bartholomew will launch *Richard Bartholomew — The Art Critic*, a volume that presents a large chunk of his father's writings. It has, says Pablo, been 15 years in the making, with the initial selection made by his mother, theatre-activist Rati Bartholomew, and Carmen Kagal, a former managing editor of SPAN magazine.

In a moving afterword, Pablo Bartholomew writes of overcoming several dead ends — a family associate who was in the gallery business and a publisher who took all his works and held on to them; another who thought he would wrangle a few works by his father's friend, a hugely saleable artist, in exchange for doing a small book — to finally get around to financing the book's publication himself, putting, he says, "money where our mouths are". The book is, for Pablo, a well-known photographer himself, part of a sustained engagement with his father's *oeuvre*, which resulted in 2009 in the exhibition of his photographs in New York, Mumbai and Delhi and a book (the sale of these, and some of Pablo's own work, have helped to fund the book).

"Transits of a Wholetimer", the exhibition at Delhi's Gallery Espace, is curated by S Kalidas, Swaminathan's son, and presents a "wedge" from the artist's archives — drawings, sketches, illustrations, photographs, paintings (including some prints of early works that have been difficult to source in the original), letters, catalogues and essays, from 1950 to 1969. These were the "crucial two decades of his



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© THE ESTATE OF RICHARD BARTHOLOMEW

Kishore Parekh's portrait of Swaminathan (left); Richard Bartholomew (above) painting at his summer studio in Almora, 1957

[Swaminathan's] life when he makes the transition from being a leftwing political activist to a journalist-critic-artist and then to a full-time artist", writes Kalidas in his detailed catalogue. Thus, the exhibition limits its scope to just before Swaminathan embarked on his Bird-Tree-Mountain phase of paintings, which he is best known for today, and his engagement with tribal art, which many consider his seminal contribution

to modern Indian art. Swaminathan adopted elements and symbols from folk and tribal art in his paintings, devising a mode of "indigenous modernism" to counter the West-inspired modernist idiom of artists like Raza, Souza and Husain. But more importantly, as founder of Roopankar museum in Bhopal's Bharat Bhavan, he was instrumental in bringing tribal artists into the museum-gallery fold, exhibiting their works along-

side that of feted urban masters.

"Essentially an art-historical display" all the works at the show have been loaned from family, friends and long-time collectors such as Mukund Lath. "It was Renu Modi's [Gallery Espace's director] idea. My father had his last exhibition with her and she was keen to have this, which

is quite incredible since none of the works is on sale," says Kalidas. He is working next on digitising his father's writings which include *Contra 66*, a journal Swaminathan started in 1965, and which had everyone from Octavio Paz (then in Delhi as Mexican ambassador) to M F Husain and Andre Breton contributing to it. Some of Swaminathan's more contentious pieces were published in *Contra 66* and for these, Kalidas writes, "he conveniently gave me (all of ten years of age at that time) the byline!"

The careers of Swaminathan and Bartholomew may have overlapped, but they disagreed more often than they agreed, their polemics dictated by their politics. While Bartholomew was largely apolitical, a poet and a humanist who believed in art's redemptive function in the life of man and nation, Swaminathan was a CPI apparatchik as a young man, and though he left the party in the 1950s, remained a feisty polemicist who claimed to have "brought some of the revolutionary's ruthlessness into art". There were, writes art historian Geeta Kapur (introductory essay in *Richard Bartholomew*), "spirited battles — high-voltage repartees, a show of guts and even a bit of gore. Even those of us who witnessed the sophisticated polemic between Richard and Swami, their cut and thrust of words, would find it hard to say who won."

"Transits of a Wholetimer", September 8-October 6, Gallery Espace, New Delhi; Richard Bartholomew — The Art Critic, An Insider's Account of the Birth of Modern Indian Art, published by Pablo Bartholomew, 640 pp, ₹3,000, www.richardbartholomew.info/artbook



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(Clockwise from left) Richard with wife Rati and friend Ram Kumar, the painter (in sweater), in Almora, 1955. M F Husain painting live in Delhi, 1968; the show was Bartholomew's idea. Portrait of Swaminathan's wife Bhawani; he first saw her at a Delhi election meeting for the 1952 election. Swaminathan wrote the manifesto for the Group 1890 artists