



# **THOTA VAIKUNTAM**

## THE TELANGANA ICONS

25 September – 10 October, 2015

Grosvenor Gallery  
Grosvenor Gallery, 21 Ryder Street, London, SW1Y 6PX

**Grosvenor**  
**Gallery**

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GALLERY



## Thota Vaikuntam: The Telengana Icons

The name Vaikuntam instantly conjures a vision of figures, mostly women, clad in brilliantly hued garments. One might argue, as indeed does the artist, that this saturated palette of very vibrant colours is quintessentially Indian. However, to contend that Vaikuntam’s paintings embody characteristics that signify ‘Indianness’ in some manner would be to miss the point. Like his contemporary and southern compatriot Laxma Goud, Vaikuntam is undoubtedly an artist of India’s south. His signature in Telugu script is a subtle reminder of where he lives and hails from.

Vaikuntam’s paintings feature other distinctly regional characteristics, such as the dress, jewellery and body markings that typify Telangana’s men and women. The *sarees* appear to be from Sirsilla, a town in Telangana’s Karimnagar district famed for its handloom industry. The miniscule dots on the *sarees* are also faintly reminiscent of another South Indian handloom staple – the popular Madurai *saree* from Tamil Nadu. While the women wear large nose rings and *‘gentellu’* (a ear ornament that cuts through both the lower and upper ears) and oversized *bindis*, the men often sport the Vaishna *vurdhvapundra* on their foreheads – a stylised, V-shaped mark with a long line in the centre, which generally declares the wearer to be a devotee of Vishnu.

Regionalism in contemporary and modern Indian art (including among the Diaspora) is seldom explicit. One is reminded of the Bengal School’s regionalism as well as, for example, the Sikhism evident in some of The Singh Twins’ work. However, with the Bengal School, there were other idiomatic concerns and later, a socio-

political engagement that overshadowed regionalism, whereas The Singh Twin’s use of the miniature idiom and their overtly globalised perspective also eclipse the regionalism that their paintings sometimes sport. Vaikuntam, by contrast, swims against the tide by countering numerous trends: conceptualism, globalisation and minimalism, to name a few.

Although women dominate Vaikuntam’s canvases, men – when they are present – are no less important, and indeed frequently emphasise the women’s femininity. Note that Laxma Goud’s trajectory was similar to Vaikuntam’s, in that both artists were born in what was Andhra Pradesh, both studied at the Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda at some stage in their training and both returned to their native state to find inspiration. However, unlike Goud, who explored sexuality rather more explicitly, Vaikuntam suppressed his desire to express sexuality for fear of driving away conservative audiences. Instead, in his work, sexuality turns into a simmering sensuality, merely suggestive of eroticism. It is hard to say whether the parrot, the *vahanam* (vehicle) of Kama Deva, the god of sexual love, is present in so many of Vaikuntam’s paintings as a symbol of sexual love, or whether the bird is merely lending further colour and decorativeness to his canvases.

Unlike many Indian artists of his time, Vaikuntam has never shied away from the decorative, a quality that has all too frequently been frowned upon in post-Independence Indian art. In an essay titled “In Praise of Hyperelaborate Art”, suggesting that the pejorative label of ‘decorative’ divides the so-called fine arts

from the arts that are often viewed as repetitive and imitative, Girish Shahane contends, “In the high colonial period, the visual production of conquered nations was deemed to be allied to the decorative arts, and therefore inferior to the perspectival realism of Europe. This attitude faded long time ago, but left its mark on the development of modern Indian art” (2003: 34).<sup>1</sup> Shahane feels that later, along with Victorian morality and Gandhian aesthetics, “the reductionist imperatives of modernism, and an understandable wariness about nativist trappings and traps, took over where colonial prejudice ended, with much the same result” (ibid). Yet, the decorative impulse remains pervasive in India. While he has been criticised for his decorativeness, Vaikuntam has stayed true to his instincts and the visual idiom he reportedly arrived at with some difficulty. Although the planes of flat colour and the emphasis on line might have lent a strictly two-dimensional quality to Vaikuntam’s work, curiously enough, the multiple, juxtaposed planes of contrasting colours and the flowing lines, along with the occasional gradations, in fact suggest modelled form. Despite the obvious distinctions, these suggestions of modelling may be compared to the Kalighat style, i.e. the suggestion of shape through the use of subtle shading at the outlines of forms.

Vaikuntam has also adhered to very personal sources of inspiration. When I first saw his work, I was reminded of Maratha women’s dress and jewellery and perhaps this is no coincidence, as the artist admits to using his mother – a Maratha woman – as an early model. This calls to mind the fact that before the division of the Nizam’s Hyderabad state along linguistic lines, Maratha culture would have been more closely interlinked with Andhra culture. In 1953, India’s States Reorganisation Commission was appointed and in 1960, the reorganisation of the Nizam’s Hyderabad State was completed, with parts of Hyderabad state being portioned off into Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and even Gujarat. In my view, Vaikuntam’s figures show vestiges of Maratha culture, which is after all a part and parcel of the history of Hyderabad. The other influence that is discernible is theatre; Vaikuntam admits to being inspired by the itinerant performers who visited Telangana’s villages during his childhood and youth; and to being particularly beguiled by the female performers. While there is clearly something theatrical about the posture of Vaikuntam’s figures, their performative quality is subdued, so that the figures appear temporarily frozen, as puppet figures might be stilled, almost as though they were posing like *dramatis personae*.

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Shahane, Girish (2003) “In Praise of Hyperelaborate Art” in *Art India: Exploring the Decorative*, Ed. Abhay Sardesai, Mumbai, Vol. 8, Issue 3, Quarter 3, pp. 34-41

In India, Vaikuntam is often hailed as one of the few remaining champions of figurative art; yet, he has equally often been critiqued for being traditionally figurative. It is true that his figurativeness has altered little to reflect the changes in representation that Indian art has witnessed in the past few decades. Questioned about what has regularly been interpreted as artistic repetitiveness, Vaikuntam has responded to the accusation that his repetitiveness may be caused by a fear of abandoning a hugely successful, artistic signature with the contention that he has by no means exhausted the rich inspirations afforded him by Telangana’s rural culture. As cultural homogeneity threatens to obliterate regional richness, there is something mildly comforting about the regionalism that Vaikuntam’s paintings capture, as though his memories and observations of his native Telangana somehow sustain a fast disappearing culture. With the recent division of the state of Andhra Pradesh and the formation of the new Telangana state, this exhibition is a timely exploration of one of Telangana’s foremost artists.

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**Aurogeeta Das** holds a PhD in Indian Art and an MA in Visual Culture from the University of Westminster, London. She has been Chercheur Invitée at INHA, Paris and Co-convenor of the international symposium *From Floor to Ceiling*. Aurogeeta has written for various publications including *Manifesta*, Amsterdam; *Arts of Asia*, Hong Kong; *Wasafiri*, London and *Etnofoor*, Amsterdam.

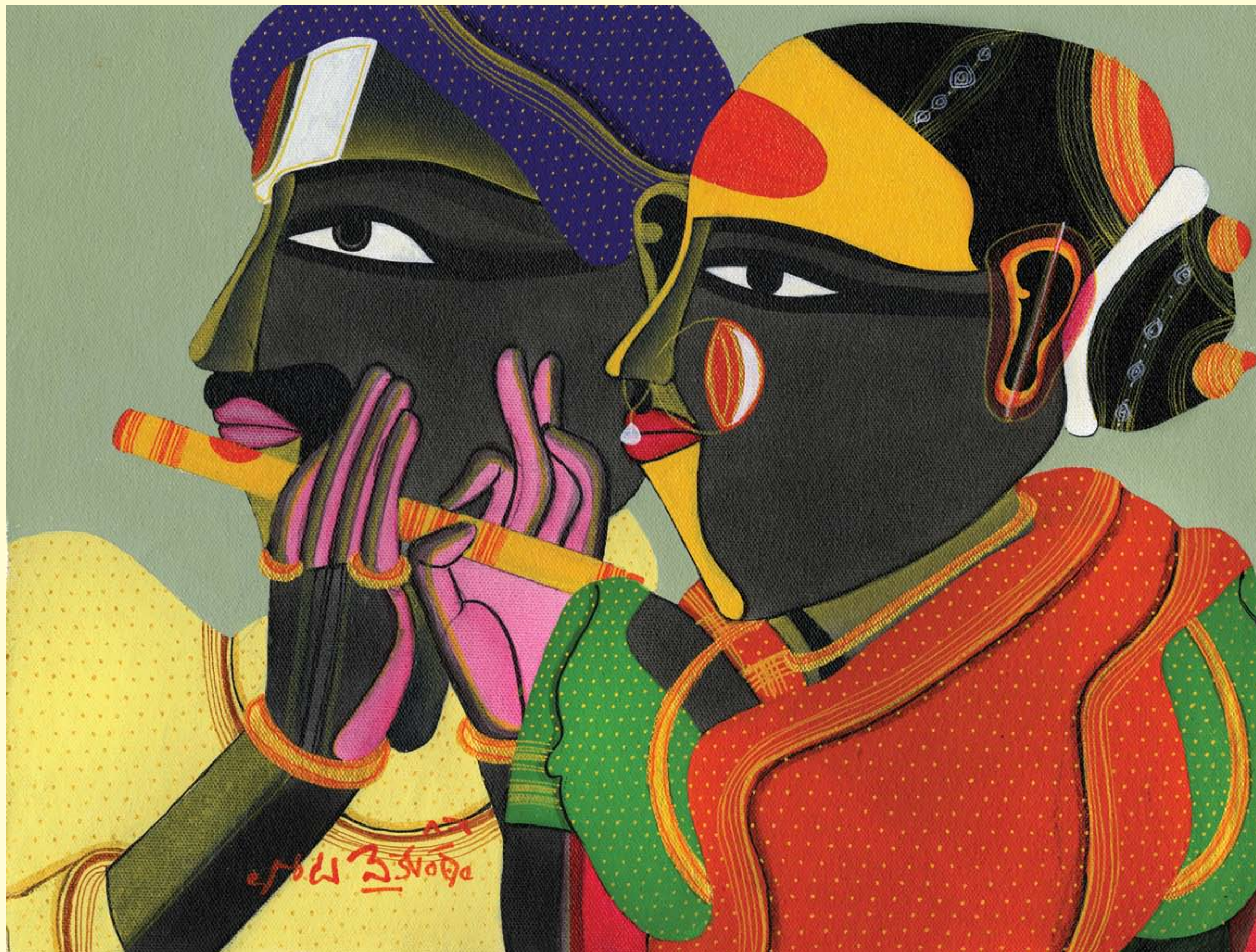
An active member of the UK-based South Asian Arts Group, she has taught at the Universities of Westminster and Hertfordshire. She is currently Guest Lecturer on Indian art at Sotheby’s Institute of Art, London. *Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India*, a US travelling exhibition she co-curated with David Szanton, is set to open at William Paterson University, New Jersey in November 2015.



Couple with a Parrot Acrylic on Canvas 24 x 18 inch 2015







**Telangana Couple 2**  
Acrylic on Canvas 12 x 16 inch 2015



Telangana Couple V Acrylic on Canvas 30 x 20 inch 2015







Telangana People  
Acrylic on Canvas  
12 x 16 inch 2015



Telangana Couple IV Acrylic on canvas 24 x 18 inch 2015







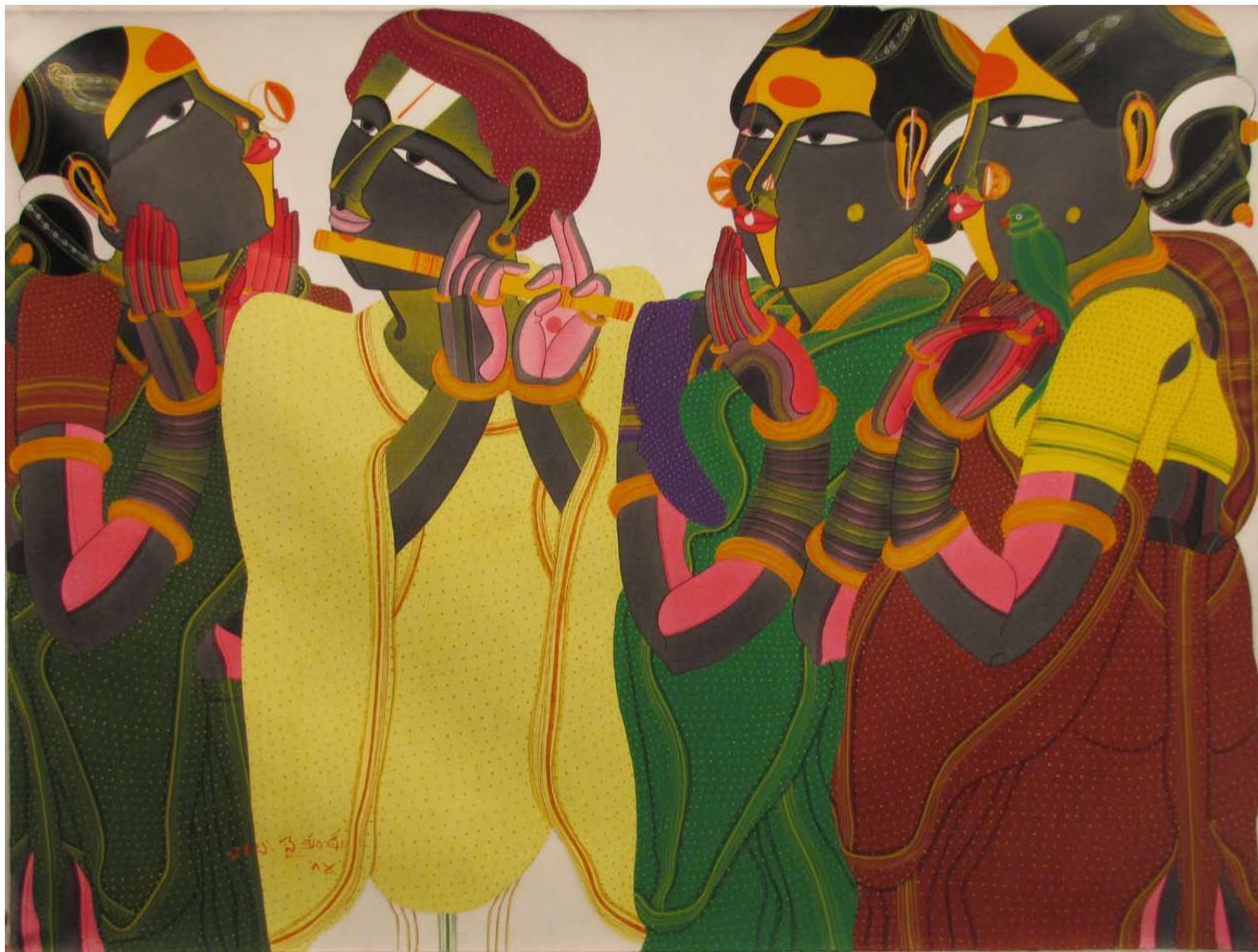
Flute Player Acrylic on Canvas 12 x 16 inch 2015





**Devotees** Acrylic on canvas 48 x 36 inch 2015

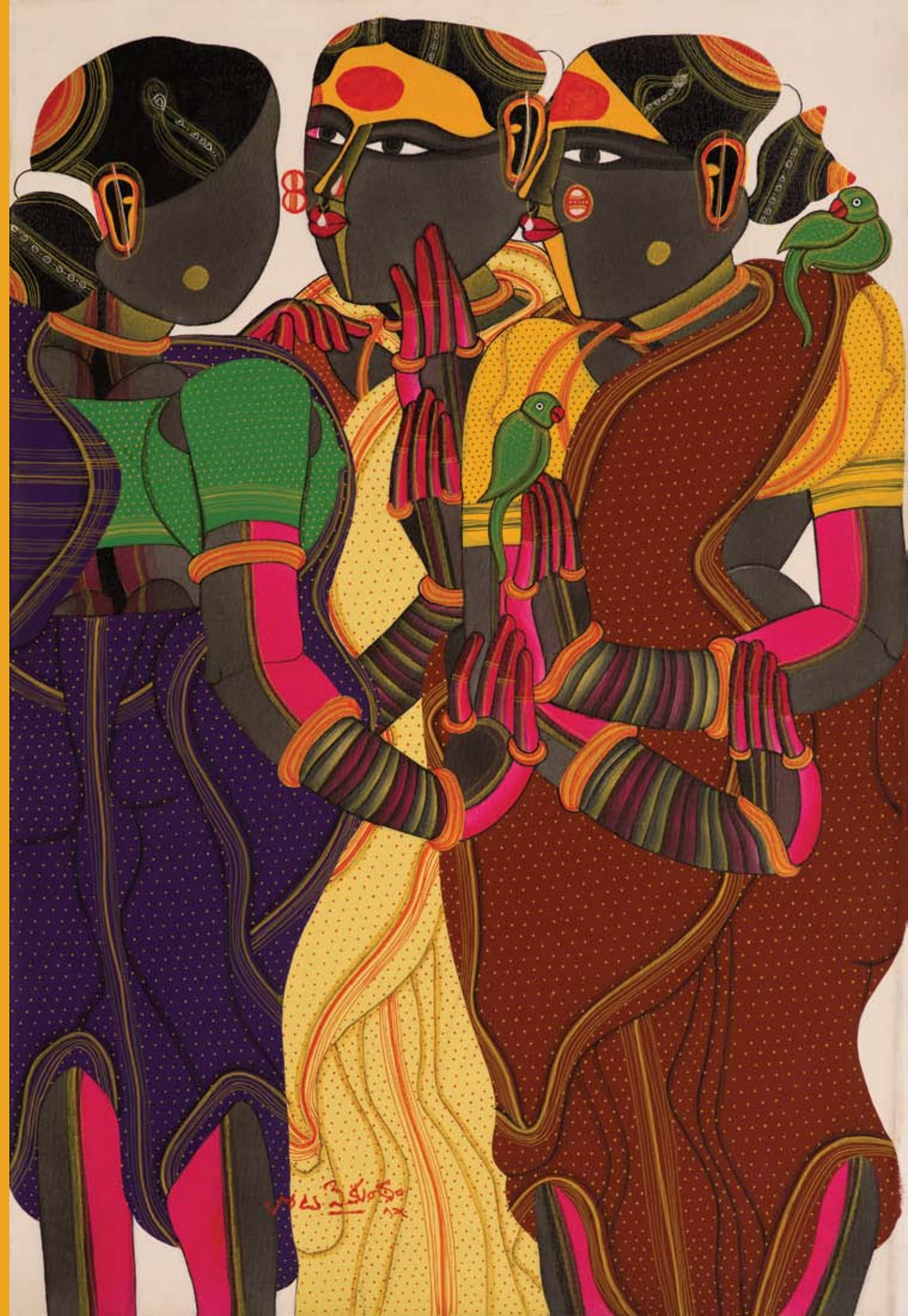




**Telangana Folks II**  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 36x 48 inch 2014



**Gossiping Women** Acrylic on canvas 36 x 24 Inch 2015





Telangana Sisters Acrylic on Canvas 24 x 18 inch 2015







**Musician**  
Acrylic on Canvas  
12 x 16 inch 2015





Gossiping Acrylic on canvas 24 x 18 inch 2015





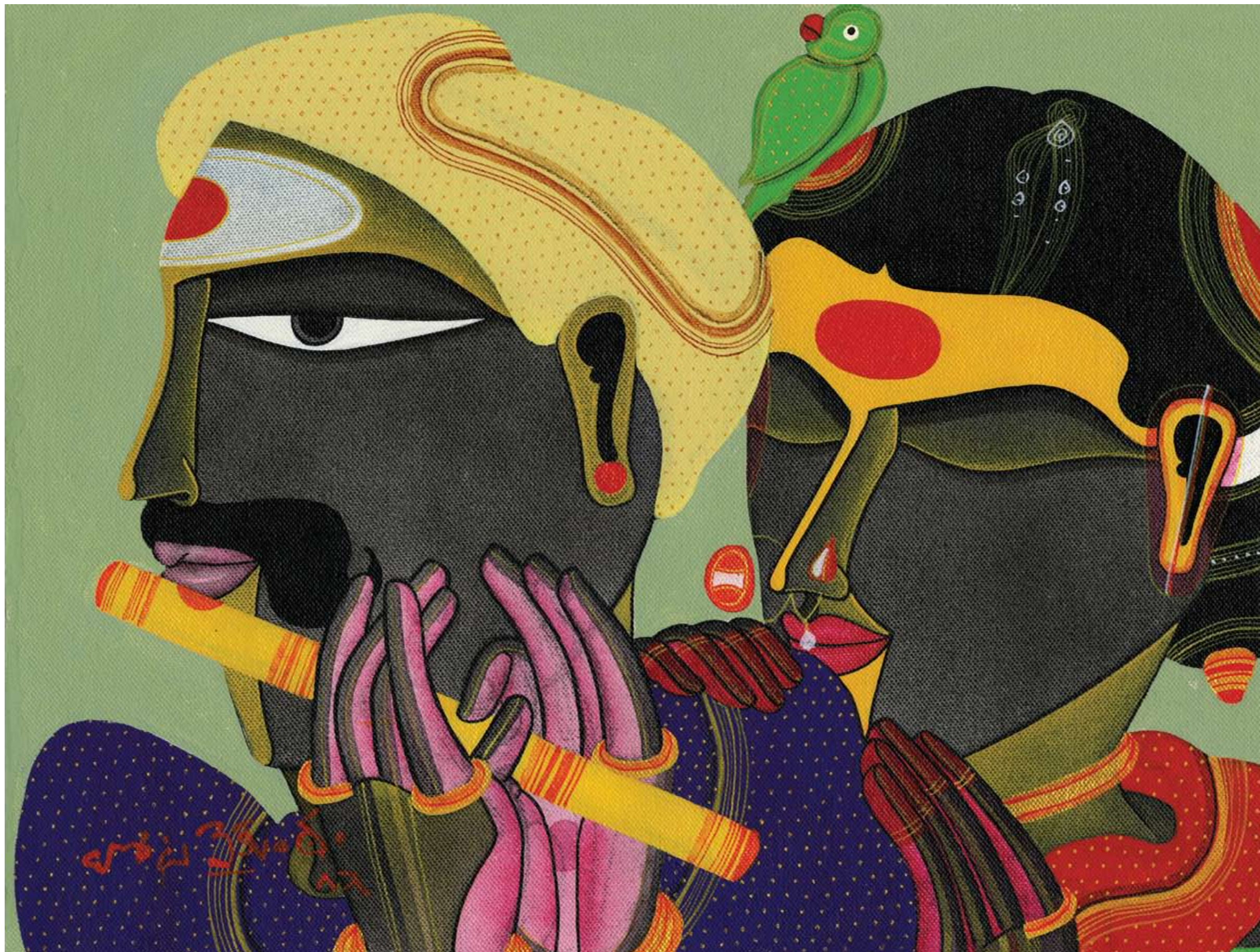
**Telangana Folks I**  
 Acrylic on Canvas  
 24 x 36 inch 2015



Flute Player with Telangana Women Acrylic on canvas 36 x 24 inch 2015







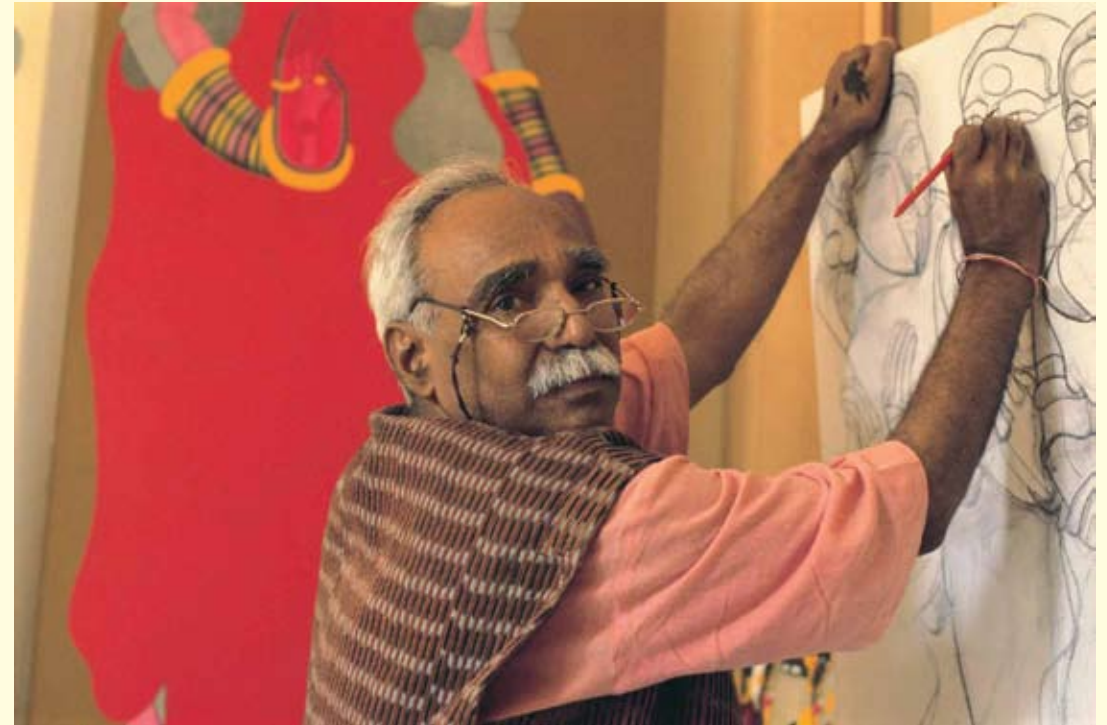
**Telangana Couple I**  
 Acrylic on Canvas  
 12 x 16 inch 2015





Telangana Couple III Acrylic on Canvas 16 x 19 inch 2015





## Thota Vaikuntam

Thota Vaikuntam was born in 1942 in Andhra Pradesh, India. He studied at the College of Fine Arts and Architecture, Hyderabad for his graduation. In 1971, he won the Lalit Kala Akademi Fellowship to study at the Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S. University, Baroda.

He has had over a dozen solo shows in New Delhi, Mumbai and several cities in the South India. His works have also been exhibited in New York, London, Singapore, Birmingham, at the VII Triennale, New Delhi and in Kassal, Germany. He has also participated in various group shows in India and abroad. In 2005, a 'Retrospective Show' of his works was organised in New Delhi by Art Alive Gallery followed by a solo show in London. Recent amongst his selected shows are "Metamorphosis: The Changing World" in 2011, Art Alive Gallery, New Delhi; 'Telangana: Inheritance of a Dream Lost' in 2007, Art Alive, New Delhi; 'Saffron: Vermilion Turmeric' in 2010, Indigo Blue Art, Singapore.

His works are held by various by various National and International Collections, like the Chester and David Herwitz Charitable Trust, USA, Glenbarra Art Museum, Japan, National Gallery of Modern Art, Lalit Kala Akademi in New Delhi, Salar Jalan Museum and A.P.Police Academy, Hyderabad. Hundreds of his other works have been bought by other public and private collections.

A book on his life and works 'Thota Vaikuntam' has been published by Art Alive Gallery. This book is a document of the agony and ecstasy of the legendary contemporary Indian artist. Tracing his evolution of the signature figurative, colossal Telangana beauties, the book is well documented and designed with his personal saga; critical allocation and chronologically arranged arcade of full scale reproductions of his rare charcoal drawings, early sketches, portraits and Telangana figurative.

He won the Bharat Bhavan Biennale Award, Bhopal, 1988 and the National Award for Painting from the Government of India, 1993.

He lives and works in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh.



### Art Alive Gallery

Founded in 2001 by Sunaina Anand, *Art Alive Gallery* is a New Delhi based independent, professionally managed and one of the leading Indian art galleries that promotes and supports Indian Contemporary Art. Since its inception, the gallery has effectively carved its own position in the art world through innovatively curated shows, critically-edged publications, intra-disciplinary events, professionally curated shows etc. The gallery has hosted many solo shows, represented Indian contemporary art at international fairs and events, organised retrospectives of prominent senior Indian artists and has been successfully providing a platform for innovative and experimental art to young Indian artists. The gallery has made its international presence with shows at the Royal College of Arts, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, London and Jebiwool Art Museum, Seoul among others. Art Alive has also presented ‘*A Mystic Journey*’ an exclusive collection of artist Paresh Maity’s watercolour works, as a part of the India Calling! 2010 event in Chicago.

The gallery deals with the works of most of the well known names in Indian contemporary art such as S.H. Raza, Sakti Burman, Krishen Khanna, Anjolie Ela Menon, Jogen Chowdhury, Laxma Goud, Thota Vaikuntam, Manu Parekh, Paresh Maity, Sujata Bajaj, Jayasri Burman, Senaka Senanayake, Maité Delteil, P R Daroz, Raghu Rai among others.

Art Alive has published an extraordinary range of books, including catalogues with critically analytical text; limited edition art portfolios with artist’s signatures like litho works by T. Vaikuntam, Paresh Maity and Jogen Chowdhury. Amongst the publications are sketch on life and art of S.H. Raza, T. Vaikuntam and Laxma Goud in the ‘*Master Series*’ and the first volume of ‘*Faces of Indian Art*’ that offers an inside view into the studio of the artist through the lens of Nemaï Ghosh and profile text by distinguished art writers and critics. Also are monographic books with large reproductions of their works on *K.S. Radhakrishnan* and *Paresh Maity* and *Jayasri Burman*, *Raghu Rai*. Recently, Art Alive has released a publication on eminent artist *Sakti Burman* in collaboration with Skira, Italy.

Art Alive aspires to build visually and aesthetically active visual experience and contribute to the growth of Indian Art. To showcase Indian Contemporary Art, locally, nationally and internationally; the gallery actively venture into collaborative programmes and participate in several national and international festivals and fairs.

### Grosvenor Gallery

Grosvenor Gallery was first established by the American sociologist and writer Eric Estoric (1913-1993) who began to collect works of art when he came to live in England after the Second World War.

Estorick moved to England in 1947 after his marriage to Salome Dessau. In the initial years, the couple developed a major collection of Italian art, which at one time was considered the most important collection of Italian art outside Italy. It was exhibited in major exhibitions including the one at the Tate Gallery in 1956. It was then that Estorick became a full time art dealer and went on to establish the Grosvenor Gallery in 1960, with its first premise on Davies Street. It was the largest and best equipped gallery in England at the time.

In 2000 the gallery moved to Ryder Street. It was still dealing in Modern British and International Art while exhibiting primarily Modern and Contemporary Indian art.

The artist F.N. Souza has been a focus, his first show was *The Human and the Divine Predicament* (1964), followed by *Black Art and Other Paintings* (1966) followed by shows in 1998, 2001, 2002, 2005 at the Tate Britain in London and 2 shows in New York in 2005 and 2008. More recently a show of his was done in 2013 titled ‘F.N. Souza: Black on Black’.

In 2006, Grosvenor Gallery collaborated with Vadehra Art Gallery in New Delhi to form **Grosvenor Vadehra**. The purpose of this collaboration was to promote international art in India and Indian art in the United Kingdom.

Our most recent collaborations include- M.F. Husain – Works from a private collection, 2015, Raza: Pyaas, June 2014, Anjolie Ela Menon, June 2013, S.H. Raza: Bindu Vistaar, June 2012.

Going forward Grosvenor Gallery will continue to focus on showing the best Modern Art from India and Britain and as well as some masterpieces.



