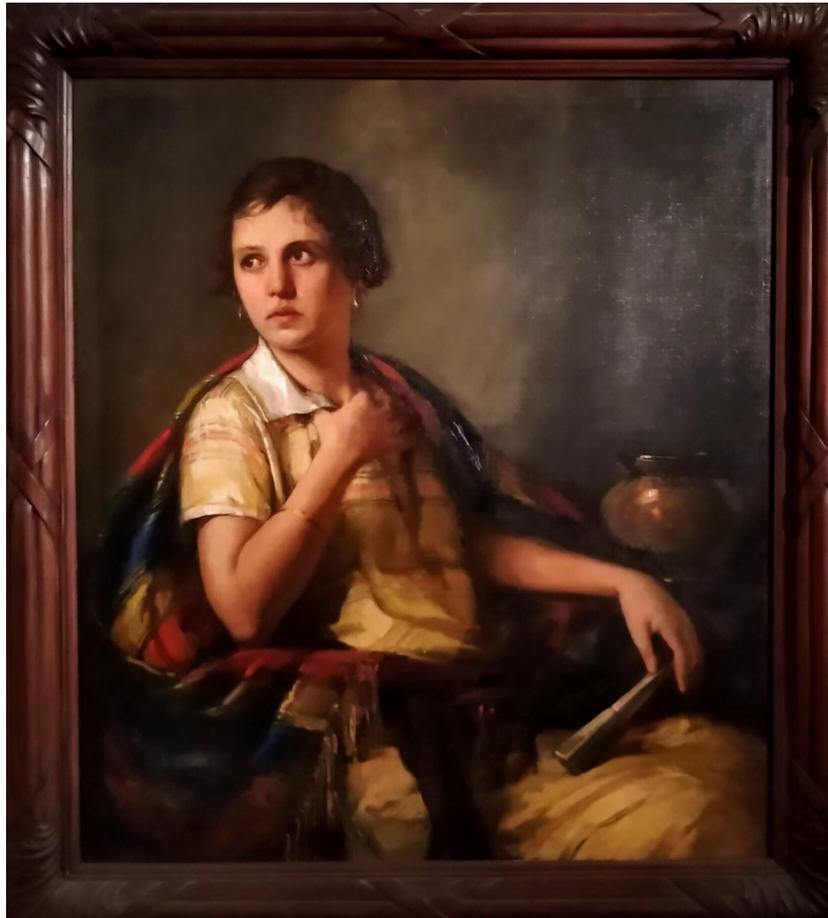


Miss Ferns and I: Encountering a Literary Foremother

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Miss Ferns lived in the suburbs of Mahim in Bombay around the nineteen twenties. In 1925 she posed for a portrait in oils by a gifted artist who taught at the JJ School of Art and was her neighbour. The only other thing we know of Miss Ferns is that she was a writer.

I encountered Miss Ferns in the Fundação Oriente Art Gallery housed in a quaint heritage building in the Fountainhas area of Panjim that is often referred to as its 'Latin Quarters'. One enters the gallery in the shade of a frangipani tree that has been wind-sculpted to look like installation art, a dramatic prelude to a capacious white gallery space humming with air conditioners and distracted visitors in clustered rooms. But before we meet Miss Ferns, we

are coaxed by the display to read the biographical details of the artist who painted her, followed by his revealing self-portrait. We are instantly in the folds of a painterly imagination as we walk around - lovingly stylized images of the artist's family, people he knew, patrons who paid, thinkers he admired, abstract concepts metaphorised into human bodies, all in a style that evokes and plays with the high-portraiture tradition of nineteenth century Europe – when oil painters had figured out how to make flesh and emotion meet under their palette knives, how to amplify it beyond stylized stillness into the throb of daily passions.

At the first angled turn of a wall, we turn around and look straight at Miss Ferns. The only other occupant of that wall, at some distance, is a vibrant crimson-gold portrait of Lady Meherbai Tata, a painting that is unafraid to be lush and rich. Nonetheless, Miss Ferns holds her own, neatly contained in a hefty wood frame. The little white card beside her frame reads:

Miss Ferns, A Writer 1925

Oil on canvas

33 x 29 ½ inches

A writer? A woman living in the Bombay of the twenties and claiming the profession of the pen – a literary foremother, the thought comes to mind at once. But what did Miss Ferns write? Did she manage to publish? Did she have an income and a room of her own, as her contemporary Virginia Woolf argued was the least that a woman needed to become a writer? How else to escape being trapped by engulfing domesticity and/or the patronizing prejudices of the canon? Apart from the little white card and a citation somewhere of an interview with the artist's daughter who claims the model is a neighbour, we know nothing else about Miss Ferns, and so we turn to the painting once more.

Who is Miss Ferns? She sits against a resolute dense grey background, in a wooden chair with straight armrests, her body points to the right of frame, but her neck and head is sharply turned away from the rest of her, looking out of the frame in the opposite direction. A source of light suggests a window or door, but two things are unmistakable. There is something attentive and furtive about Miss Ferns – you see it in her eyes and you see it in her right hand that is folded at the elbow to rest between her neck and chest, thumb digging inside a white collar. Was she a reluctant model? Perhaps her writing self was stirring within her, unwilling to be frozen by an artist who has replaced the taut pen in her other hand with a limp folded

fan, the sort that went to operas or worked in airless rooms. Perhaps the artist had promised a self-assured likeness, but could not resist grabbing this stolen glance, when a private thought bubbled to the surface, for Miss Ferns must have never aspired to be a muse, only to create as much as she could, create as much as the reputed painter who gazes at her.

One moves around the canvas hoping to catch Miss Fern's eyes but it is impossible – her eyes are fixed into a near distance, her full lips slightly open in anticipation. The eyes are alert, worried, and cannot hide her erudition, her intense thinking. It is a stark foil to the innocence and youth she exudes. One guesses that this Miss, who has managed to resist marriage thus far, is likely in her twenties. She has cut her hair fashionably short, but the limp strands that frame the forehead speaks of the damp humid coastal weather that does its own styling. She wears her precious gold hoops for the occasion, and a gold bangle that family tradition may have bequeathed. Her dress is a modest yellow with horizontal lines – she must have thought it suitable for a working girl intent on making a reputation by her pen. She seems less convinced about the thick shawl that is gently sliding off her shoulders, clearly all wrong for a weather that hints fans and damp hair. One surmises that the artist coaxed it on Miss Ferns, just for a bit of gravitas, and of course for the burst of colours - the fabric is made of jewel hues of blue, red, gold, with tassels hanging indolently on the armrest – and feels set apart from the earthiness, the candour of a novice writer.

Perhaps it makes Miss Ferns uncomfortable, this posing for us, the stillness, the time spent away from the ideas incubating in her. The open window, the diffused summer light bouncing off the giant mirror of the Arabian Sea, is in her eyes. She thinks of the writing she has left at her table, missing a few crucial words. Restless fingers work at the collar, buttoning, unbuttoning, as Miss Ferns continues to look away from both artist and viewer.

Postscript: 'Miss Ferns, A Writer 1925' is an oil painting by Antonio Xavier Trindade (1870 – 1935). Trindade was born in Goa and moved to the city of Bombay for an education at the JJ School of Art, and continued to teach, paint, and raise his family in that city. Despite his felicity with his craft, and some accolades from his contemporary audience, Trindade was at risk of being lost to posterity but for the tireless efforts of his family (his daughter Angela Trindade was also an artist whose works are on display at the same gallery) and discerning patrons who have managed to house his works in Goa where his journey began. This has also

given us an opportunity to enjoy the nuanced and superbly executed portrait of Miss Ferns – the articulation of light, composition and skin tones made precise to the theme – and to help us think about recorded and unrecorded lives from those nearly-forgotten times and spaces. The Trindade Catalogue of 1996 claims Miss Ferns to be European because of her fair skin, short hair and western clothes. The art critic Fatima da Silva Gracias responds to this stereotype in her book Faces of Colonial India: The Work of Goan Artist Antonio Xavier de Trindade (2014) by pointing out that Miss Ferns is likely a Goan Christian – ‘Ferns’ being a common Anglicized version of the popular Goan surname ‘Fernandes’. My gratitude to Miss Ferns is immense, for being a writer, for inspiring me to fiddle at my collar, as also to the charm and hospitality of the Fundação Oriente Art Gallery, Panjim.