

Brush with Fame

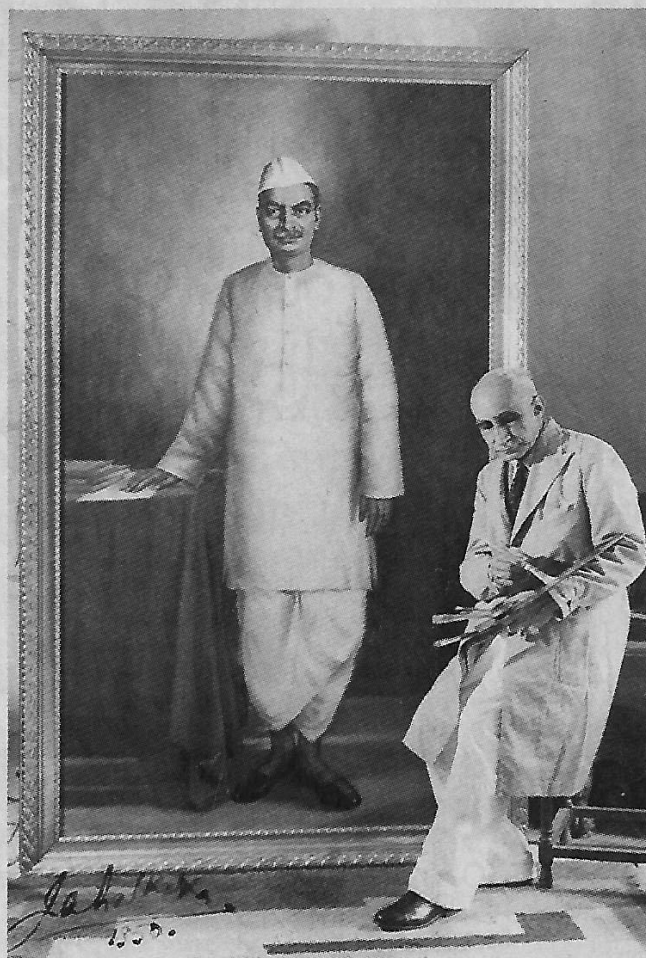
Meher Marfatia

Leading portrait painter Jehangir Ardeshir Lalkaka's works feature at Rashtrapati Bhavan, Parliament House and many ancestral homes

The visages of rajahs and maharajas, viceroys and governors, were captured in every regal detail by the deft strokes of his brush. His portraits of public figures adorned palatial mansions throughout the country. Indeed, the works of Jehangir Ardeshir Lalkaka were so dramatic, they earned him the distinction of being considered our leading portrait painter in the first half of the 20th century.

What possibly gave Lalkaka that certain edge over contemporaries endowed with similar skills was the finesse he imparted to his style in later years. Progressively in the course of his career, his pictures came to be marked by the manner in which he focused light on a figure, as well as the overall elegance with which the finished effect was rendered. Granddaughter Anahit Wadia proudly points out as an example a portrait of Queen Alexandra (specially commissioned by the Government of India in 1930 along with one of King George V in coronation robes, this stands today in Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi) in which her delicate skin is strikingly clear and visible beneath the lace on her arm.

Daughter of the artist's son, Rear Admiral Sarosh Lalkaka, Wadia offers interesting anecdotes from her grandfather's life—her parents chipping in with incidents too far back for her to recall.



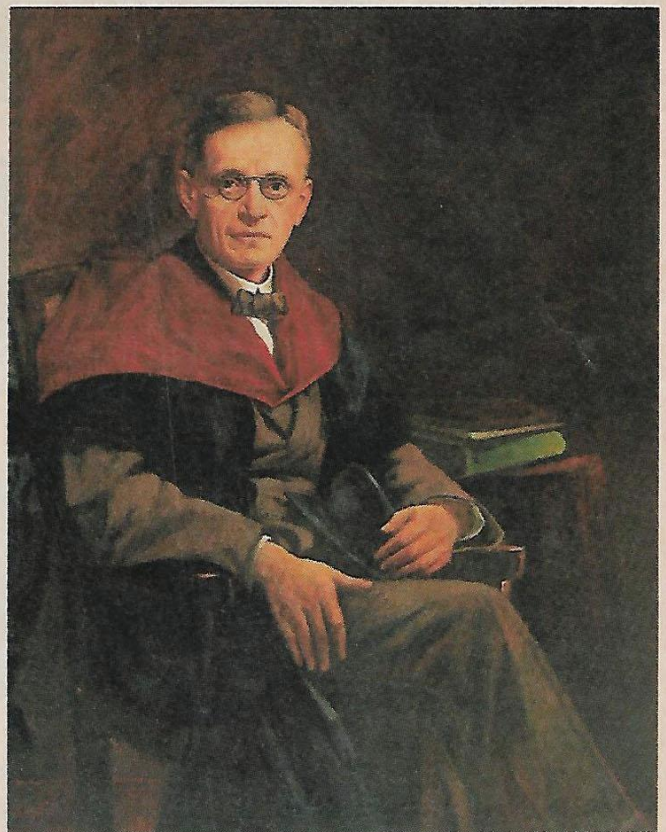
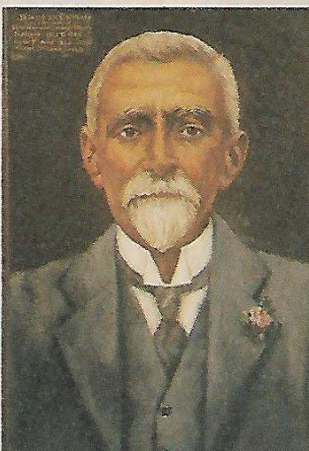
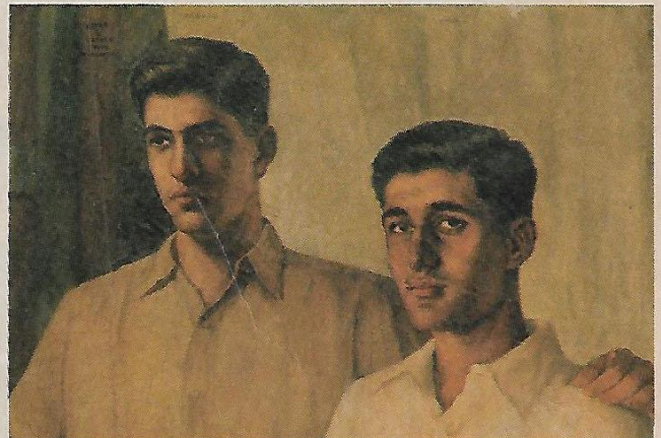
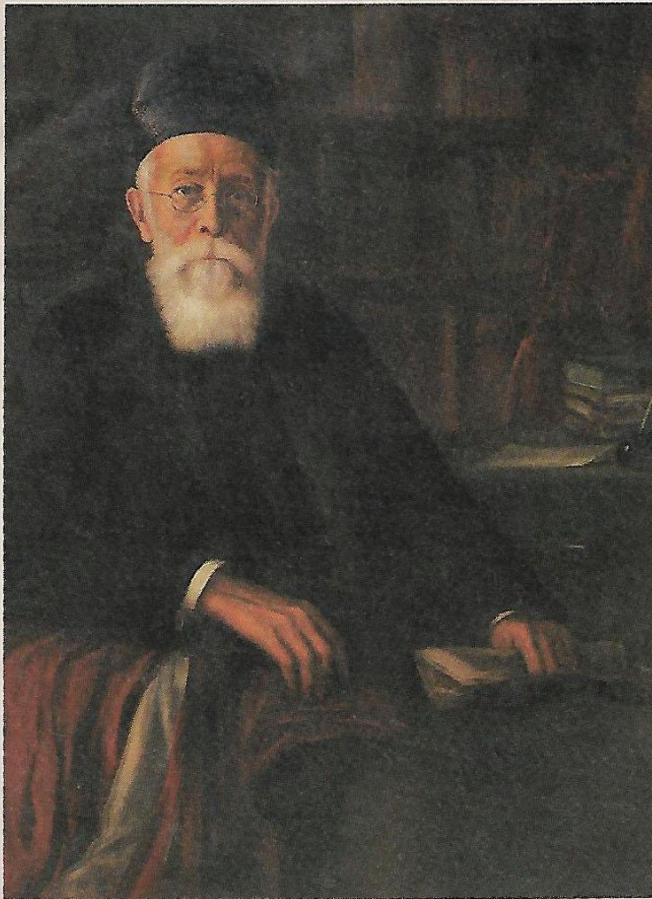
Born in 1884 in Ahmedabad where he schooled, Lalkaka joined the Elphinstone College in Bombay before going on to the Sir J. J. School of Art in 1903. After studying here under Cecil Burns for four years, the promising young man caught the keen eye of his grandfather Sir Navroji

Vakil who, discerning immense artistic aptitude, sent Lalkaka to Europe.

The years there proved extremely beneficial. Attending St John's Wood and Westminster Schools of Art, Lalkaka assiduously spent five years learning portrait painting in London and Paris under eminent masters like A. Stanhope. Art galleries and museums there fired his imagination—he confessed to having been profoundly affected by the works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Rembrandt and Velasquez. Having travelled extensively on the Continent, he returned to India in 1913 and set up a studio at Chowpatty in Bombay.

Work soon started pouring in. Actually, the initial assignment came while he was still a student in England, from Shrimant Raja Sahib of Aundh. The result must have been a study so accurately essayed that, on wandering into Lalkaka's room at Chowpatty, Raja Sahib's little grandson—no more than about three or four years old—raised a chubby finger to the frame and exclaimed in excited Marathi, "Hé Dada! (This is grandpa!)"

Among the other personalities Lalkaka was invited to paint were Mahatma Gandhi, Sir Pherozeshah Mehta, Sir Dinshaw Vatcha, Rajendra Prasad, the Nawab of Rampur and Lord Brabourne. His best portraits may be presently seen at



Rashtrapati Bhavan, Parliament House and the Rampur State Galleries, besides a fair number scattered widely through handsome ancestral Parsi homes and fire-temples in Bombay.

What was truly remarkable about Lalkaka's creative persona was his uncanny ability to look beyond the charmed circuit of royal and political celebrities, to touch the common man and his world. The affable gentleman-artist who never failed to step out in an immaculately pressed suit,

complete with a carnation, delighted in the expressive face of the humble cobbler, barber, tailor or farmer. "Any face he found interesting became a valuable subject; 'Chalo tumhara chitre nikaléga (Come on, let's paint you)' he'd say," son Sarosh reveals. Accordingly, his "sitters" hailed from various walks of life.

A touchingly amusing story is affectionately told by his daughter-in-law Roshan. Once, captivated by the face of a traveling fakir he came across in Banga-

Facing page: Lalkaka with painting of former President of India Rajendra Prasad

Clockwise from top left: Portrait of Dadabhai Naoroji; the artist's sons, Cawas and Sarosh, A. L. Covernton, principal of Elphinstone College and Lalkaka's in-laws Ratanbai and Jamshedji Kharas



lore, Lalkaka brought the poor mendicant to his house. There, revelling in the delicious aroma of lunch being routinely prepared in the well-stocked kitchen which wafted over to where he posed, the fakir longed for a meal. Kind to a fault, Lalkaka invited him to eat — only to discover that thereafter his “sitter” would return regularly for prolonged sessions!

Friendly and humorous, a lover of all the good things his privileged life extended him, Lalkaka had a passion for music — and sang to the accompaniment of his own dilruba. He was elected a Fellow of the prestigious Royal Society of Arts in 1949.

A relatively lesser known fact about Lalkaka's art concerns his repertoire of landscapes. Sketching a series of these on regular summer visits to picturesque hill stations, he covered a fair amount of the breathtaking scenery in Ootacamund, Mussourie, Kashmir, Ranikhet and even Ladakh. Nevertheless, these were seldom simply landscapes; with his fascination for physiognomy, the scenes were peopled. From local tillers to Bhutanese weavers, it was the human factor that held his attention. Be they subdued pencil and wash drawings or ebullient watercolors, his



works were inspired by the inhabitants of the place he chose to paint.

Apart from these, Lalkaka's Bombay sketches should also appeal to those reveling in the historic beauty of this city. *Harbour from Malabar Hill, The Museum Gate, Corner of Victoria Garden, The Rocks at Nepean Sea Road and Versova with Juhu in the Distance* are settings that appear almost unrecognizable to the eye today. In fact, Nepean Sea Road was where he set up a studio following the one at Chowpatty, before ultimately leaving for Bangalore.

Lalkaka amply repaid his debt to the Sir J. J. School of Art which had served as the introductory institution fostering his talent: in 1932 the Governor of Bombay appointed him the first Indian to head the school as its deputy director. Thus, a flourishing private practice was relegated to second place for at least four years, on completion of which Lalkaka found him-

The gentleman-artist never failed to step out in an immaculately pressed suit, complete with a carnation



The artist at work, water color sketch by Lalkaka and at a family navjote (from left): Jehangir, Roshan, Sarosh, Anahit, wife Tehmina, Cawas and grandchildren Cyrus and Sehnavaaz

self the proud recipient of the award of Their Imperial Majesties' Silver Jubilee Medal.

The veteran artist saw a bright future for Indian art and artists on the country's achievement of Independence. In a public talk addressing the issue, he voiced his firm belief that the artist primarily owed a duty to society, best discharged by ensuring that works of art were seen by the largest possible number of people. Accessibility of art, its message and meaning, “should permeate every side of public and home life,” he observed.

Lalkaka had, as well, predicted an amazing evolution in the field of modern Indian art. Sheer imitation of classicism was inadvisable, in his opinion. The old masterpieces of Ajanta and Ellora, the exquisite renderings of the Mughal and Rajput miniatures should ideally function as inspiration; but art ought to be a living force, not dead imitation.

When Lalkaka died in 1967, Bachoo Dadyseth wrote in his obituary: “The record of his career may be described in just one word. Brilliant.” Lalkaka lives on through his evocative works for his family, his friends and for posterity.