

PORTRAITS
OF INDIAN TREES



ARUNDHATI VARTAK

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Catalogue of Exhibitions

Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation
"Portraits of Indian Trees: Arundhati Vartak"
16 September 1999 to 29 February 2000

Chatham College Art Gallery
"Arundhati Vartak's Sketches: Souls of Her Paintings"
31 August to 25 September 1999

James J. White
and Lugene B. Bruno
with essay by Arundhati Vartak

Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation
Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh
and
Chatham College Arboretum and Landscape Studies Program
Chatham College, Pittsburgh
1999

FRONT COVER:

10 *Banyan* *Ficus benghalensis* L.

BACK COVER:

5a. *Mast Tree* *Polyalthia longifolia* Thunb.
(very young—small leaves), 1 March 1997



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The present exhibition (actually there are two—one of paintings at the Hunt Institute and one of sketches at Chatham College Art Gallery) is the Hunt Institute's third of artworks from India. In 1980 we borrowed from four London libraries botanical paintings by Indian artists who had worked under English patronage during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In 1994/1995 the Hunt exhibited contemporary natural-history paintings from Rajasthan, including in the catalogue an essay proposing questions about copied versus original artworks. In spring 2001 our fourth exhibition from India is scheduled—original paintings by Damodar Lal Gurjar of Jaipur, who was featured in the Institute's Rajasthan exhibition. Artworks, old and new, from India have been further documented in two issues of the Institute's journal *Huntia*—9(2) 1996 and 10(2) 1999.

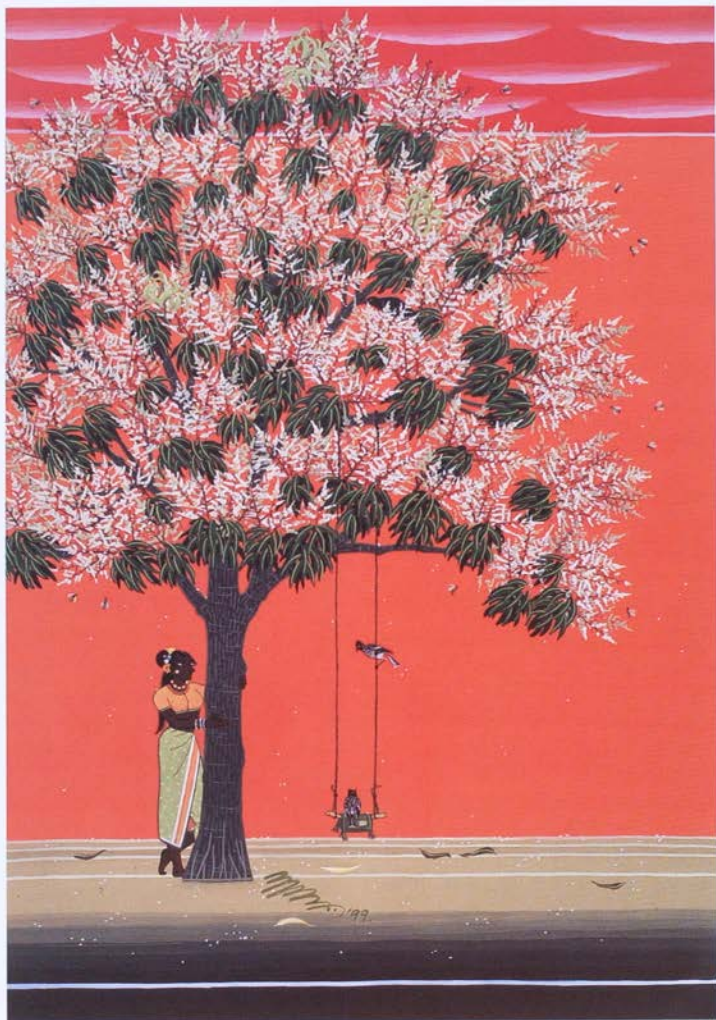
Arundhati Vartak's talent was called to my attention on my first trip to India in 1991 by colleagues at the Bombay Natural History Society and the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India, both in Mumbai, previously Bombay. Kalpana Desai, who is now director of the museum, was particularly complimentary of Arundhati's work. I missed meeting the artist on that trip and again on two subsequent occasions—in 1992 because of my early departure from India (due to the crisis resulting from destruction of the Ayodhya temple) and in 1994 for lack of her telephone number.

In 1995, however, we borrowed her painting of *Neem* for our 8th International Exhibition of Botanical Art & Illustration.

On my last (and fifth) trip in 1996 I was determined to meet Arundhati and received an added incentive to travel to Pune when my Pittsburgh friends Manohar and Shubha Joshi invited me to visit them in their winter home. In Arundhati's home and studio we discussed a proposed article about her technique (scheduled for publication in the January 2000 issue of *The artist* in Great Britain) and an exhibition of her artworks. She pointed out some of the specific trees in her neighborhood, which are the subjects of her paintings.

I wish to acknowledge the splendid cooperation of Behula Vadgama Shah, Director of Landscape Studies and Chatham College Arboretum, who enthusiastically agreed to the Hunt Institute and Chatham College collaborative exhibitions, even organizing a workshop and lecture by the artist. Plant identifications of the paintings were checked by Mr. Naresh Chaturvedi of the Bombay Natural History Society. We are grateful to Air-India (and especially Andy Bhatia) for co-sponsoring the preview reception; the individual donors who made this catalogue possible; Scarlett Townsend for proofreading, and Frank Reynolds for photography.

— James J. White



24 Mango *Mangifera indica* L.

Arundhati Vartak is one of the few artists who combines in her works a perception of the miniaturist and the technique of a modern artist. It is precisely this combination which distinguishes her work from other similar paintings as is clearly evident in about forty recent creations of nature paintings displayed in this exhibition.

From a very young age she was drawn to the vibrating life in Nature, the hustle bustle of the leaves, the distinctive structure of each variety of tree, the big canopies of the typical trees of the tropical climate of India, and the colourful blossoms blooming on the branches or falling down in early morning and spreading a colourful carpet on the ground. Her knowledge of the Sanskrit classical poetic literature, the myths and the legends connected with the trees, and Indian folklore has added a dimension to her understanding of the nature around us. This is expressed through the subtle symbolism introduced at times through colours or through surrounding elements in the paintings.

Her beautiful painting of the Parijata tree, for instance, brings out the traditional belief that Krishna imported it from the heavens, sensitively expressed through the use of grayish blue sky, lending it a heavenly aura. One could enumerate a number of such examples that reveal a relevant cultural context. The bright luminous yellow of the Pippal tree establishes its solar connections while the evening glow around the Banyan tree creates the mysterious

atmosphere it is believed to possess. The seasonal changes are indicated by the presence of the birds and the insects as with the Bahava or the Cassia tree visited by the black bees to enjoy its flowers oozing honey or the presence of the monsoon birds around the Babul tree. The most outstandingly subtle expression is the tribal girl admiring a pair of Bulbul birds on a swing at the beginning of spring. The swing is associated with the festival of fertility when young plants are taken out of the village and worshipped. This young lady in her ripening youth is standing under the blossoming mango tree at the start of spring. The viewer would certainly enjoy these suggestions while having a close look at these charming paintings.

It is indeed difficult to depict the tree in its entirety, and this is where Arundhati has very skillfully adopted the technique of miniature painting. The trees emerge very real by the use of appropriate colours, minute details of the leaves and the correct proportions of each part in relation to the entire structure, enhancing the artistic merit of these paintings a great deal.

I am happy that the Hunt Institute has organized her show and wish her and the Curators, James White and Lugene Bruno, all success.

— Kalpana Desai
Director
Prince of Wales Museum
of Western India
Mumbai



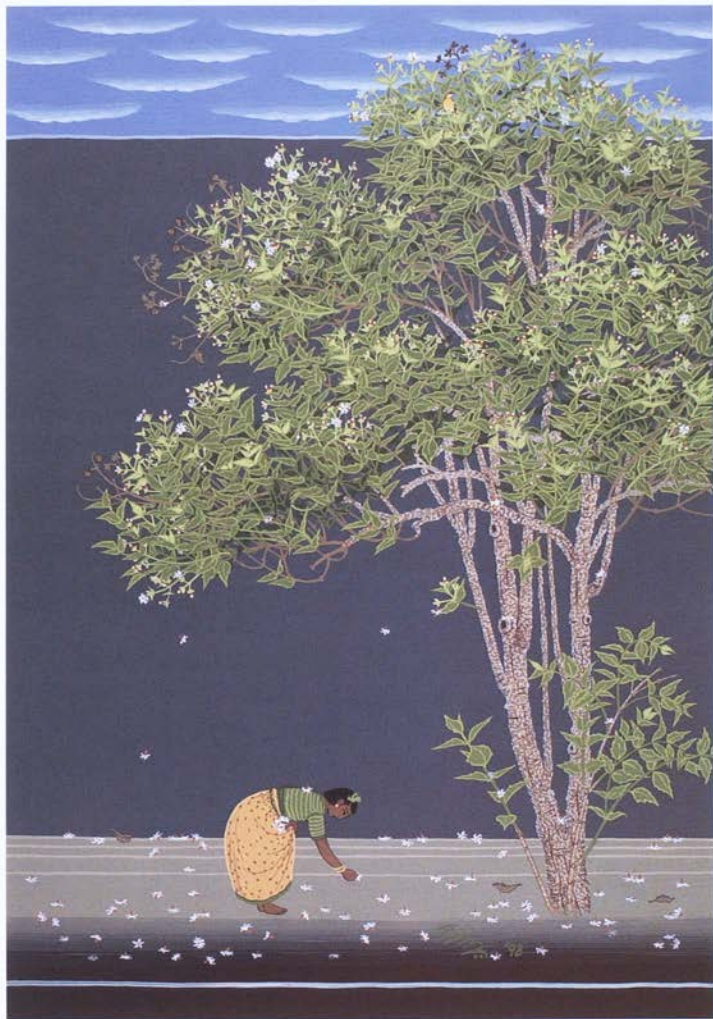
Chatham College is delighted to be collaborating with the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation to present a concurrent exhibition of Ms. Vartak's botanical sketches as "Arundhati Vartak's Sketches: The Souls of Her Paintings" at the Chatham College Art Gallery. This exhibition signifies an important nexus of several of the College's initiatives and programs.

As a liberal arts college we have long promoted the blending of the arts and sciences, and botanical art is certainly one eloquent example of this approach to education. In the genre of botanical art the artist relates to the natural world at both the aesthetic and the scientific level. This is also the philosophy that forms the foundation for the College's environmental initiatives. Through the initiatives of the Rachel Carson Institute, Chatham College Arboretum, and the new Master of Arts in Landscape Studies program, students are given

opportunities to develop personal responses to the study of Nature, grounded in both scientific accuracy and aesthetic reflection and expression.

Through Chatham's Global Focus program, each year the College chooses to focus on one country or region of the world through class study and readings, invited speakers, and student and community activities. During this academic year, 1999 to 2000, the College will focus on the peoples and traditions of South Asia. We are, therefore, particularly thrilled to welcome Ms. Vartak, visiting from India, to Chatham College. She shares with us her fresh and lively sketches giving us an intimate view into her creative process as she works towards the finished paintings.

— Esther L. Barrazzone
President
Chatham College



13 *Parijat* *Nyctanthes arbor-tristis* L.

In cities and villages alike throughout India, trees assume great roles. Regarded as kindly saints, they are revered as heavenly gifts and so have become established in myth, custom and spiritual belief throughout the subcontinent. Admiration for trees can be traced from the early Sanskrit writings of the poet Kalidasa to those of poet-laureate Rabindranath Tagore. Such men lived by the philosophy — expressed so well by native Americans — that the earth does not belong to them; rather they are part of the earth.

Artist Arundhati Vartak from Pune (a city 80 miles from Mumbai in the state of Maharashtra) celebrates trees in her first North American exhibitions of paintings and sketches. She delights in finding references in early literature to trees, and she appreciates their values — aesthetic, economic and environmental — conveying her sentiments in watercolor. Not only does she present a fascinating diversity of trees, but also studies of individual specimens depicted at various times of day and season and with their accompanying birds and animals. For me, the more of them I see, the more I want to see.

Botanical artworks on the opposite side of scientific illustration, Ms. Vartak's colorful paintings nonetheless are the result of hundreds of sketches based on her keen observation of trees

and the critters around them. Her palette may be vibrant in one work, subdued in another. Her work is inspired by miniature paintings of the 15th to 18th centuries. Some persons have noted a distinct oriental, decidedly Japanese, influence. Ms. Vartak endears us to nature by showing us the childhood delight of a mango in full flower, the bobbing tails of squirrels, a dozing cat, squiggly caterpillars, and how to spy on black bees.

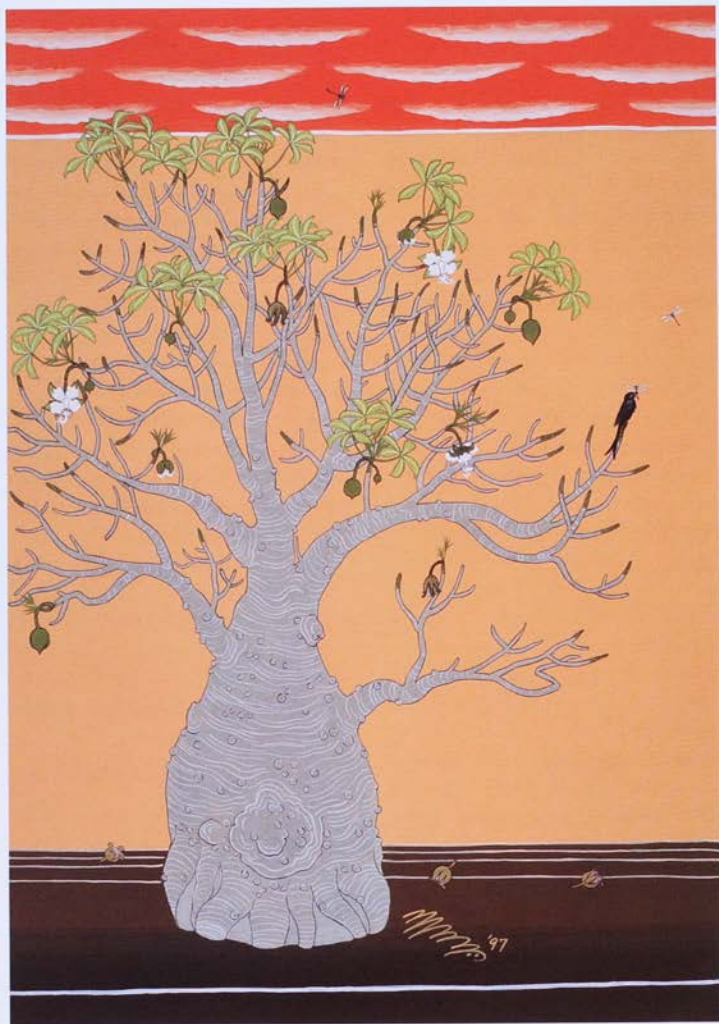
Ms. Vartak begins her painting with a background wash on paper and divides the paper into three bands serving as foreground, background and sky, respectively, the larger background giving emphasis to the portrait of the tree. She uses poster colors for their opaque quality and both imported and Indian brushes. Her repetitions of falling leaves, swaying branches, or clouds might suggest patterns for textiles — even an elegant design for a silk sari.

Kalidasa wrote that to those in the scorching heat, trees offer cool shade and produce delicious fruits. Trees are indeed like good-natured saints. Ms. Vartak adds, "When a tree puts on new leaves, Earth gets a fresh look, and mankind a new hope."

— James J. White



6 Indian coral (*Pongara*) *Erythrina indica* Lam.



25 Baobab *Adansonia digitata* L.

In traditional Indian miniatures "elements of landscape painting" acted only as "incidental backgrounds." To use the words of Dr. Anjan Chakravarty, "Landscape painting never flourished here as an autonomous form of artistic expression." It follows automatically that a tree which is only a part of a landscape was never painted just in order to celebrate its beauty but as a support to augment the sentiments of a human character or as an expression of the mood of a season. "Typed" and "decorative" trees were a natural choice in this situation. Thus, they could have an identity of their own but did not have a "voice." In my paintings, however, the tree is the central character and every other element is in the supporting role. The study of Indian miniatures from an artist's point of view has taught me to appreciate such an artificial or stylized treatment in many different ways. For instance, repetition of forms and patterns can create a soothing effect on the mind just like chanting in music. It can also highlight certain common features of the object that might escape the notice of a casual viewer. Thus, it helps us identify a tree even if drawn as a simple caricature without botanical details.

The style of my tree painting is inspired by Indian miniatures, which are broadly divided into two distinct styles. I have learned a lot from both groups. One group of styles is more realistic and even sophisticated in its approach while the other has an indigenous folk element. The first group comprises the Mughal style, which was directly influenced by the Persian miniatures before the 16th century, and the styles later known as Pahadi (from the hilly regions of Guler and Kangra in North India). This group favors more soft and lyrical treatment in colour and form. The second group comprises the Rajasthani Schools from the desert regions of Mewar, Jaipur, Basohli, etc., which favors more graphic and bold stylization. There is a dynamic balance of colour, shape and line. I have used this kind of treatment in capturing the dramatic and powerful personality of the tree. This group welcomes an occasional use of traditional symbols and even the colour of the background can be symbolic and specific to its school.

In my paintings, however, the "value" or meaning of the background colours keeps changing from picture to picture. They may indicate the season or the particular times of the day or just create the emotional effect that is appropriate to the personality of the tree. My choices of treatment in colour and form depend upon what aspect of the character of the tree that I want to portray. The same tree may appear different at a different stage of its growth. Impressions about the trees can also be subjective or personal and even imaginary. Most of my tree paintings are moderately stylized. I use symbols in a limited measure. Paintings that are more stylized draw a close inspiration, especially from the Mewar School of miniatures. Indian pictorial language is a distinct mode that can be said to be the visual manifestation of the classical linguistic theory of "Dhvani." Dhvani literally means "sound," but the real implication of the term is "resounding connotation" or the "subtle aesthetic suggestion" which transcends the literal meaning. While unfolding more layers of the abstract

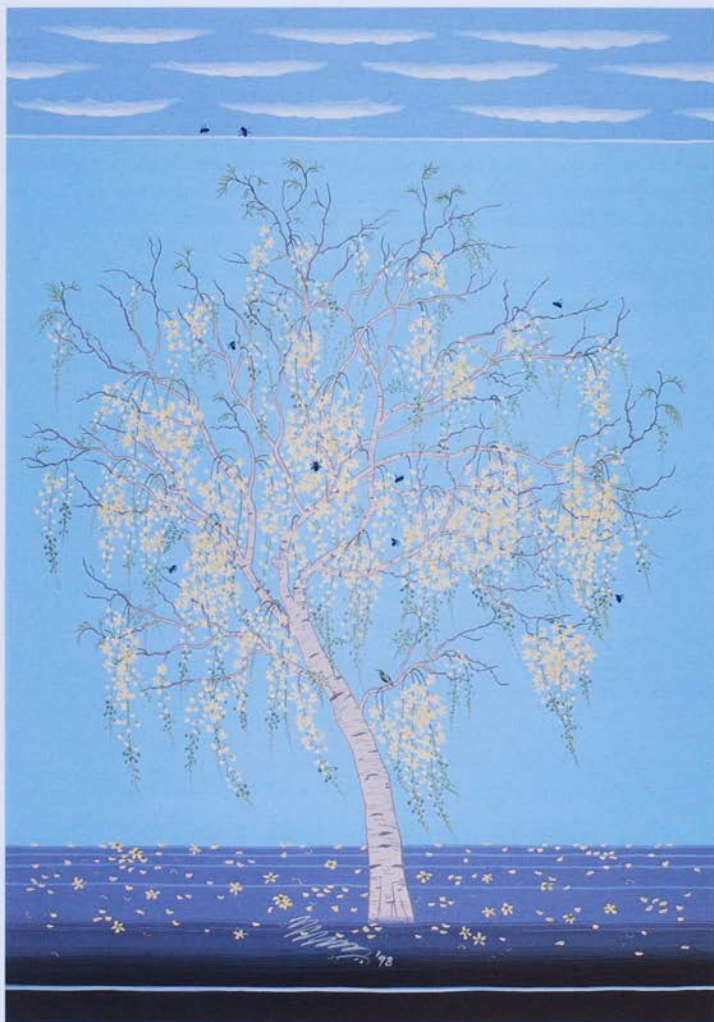
thoughts like mood or the time in which the tree is portrayed, I had to evolve my own "pictorial conventions" like the suggestive colours of the background or the particular "actions" of birds, animals or human beings.

Since most of my trees were never painted by the old artists, I can only imagine how they would have painted them in their own times. Often it is the tree and the season that determines the mode of the painting. Trees...have so many interesting features and look so different and appealing in every season that depicting them just once and in one singular fashion is not at all enough, so I am drawn to such trees over and over again.

— Arundhati Vartak



15 *Tamarind* *Tamarindus indica* L.



17 Bahauca (Indian Laburnum) *Cassia fistula* L.

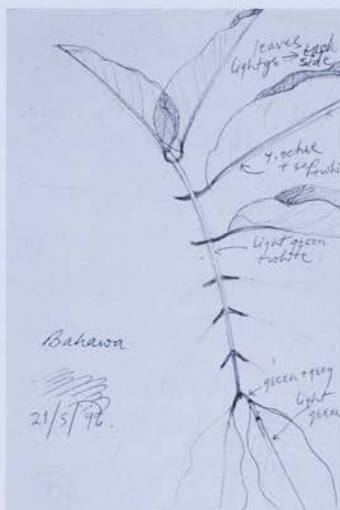
Ms. Vartak relies heavily on her thumbnail sketches and other studies based on intense observations of trees, birds and animals, which she records on hundreds of tiny sketches and deposits in small boxes. A selection of sketches from the boxes serves as a guide to how she will depict a particular tree and how its branches will be shown. "My sketches play an important role," Ms. Vartak says. "I almost visualize the final image of the tree at the time of sketching. Sketches...record not only the exact and minimum characters of that tree, but can also record my immediate impression of the specimen at that particular moment." She does not require intermediate drawings between the sketches and the final artwork.

"I occasionally add 'props' like birds and animals usually seen around the tree. Rural India often provides sights reminding us of the close bond between the tree and the human being. I enjoy recording them. Isn't it surprising that

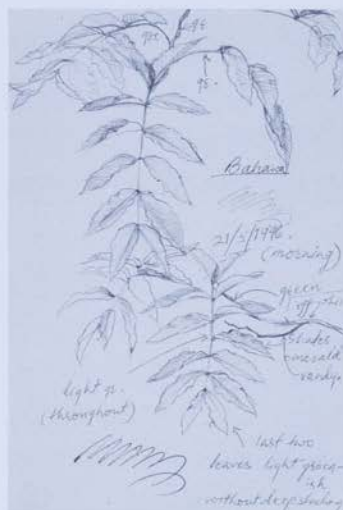
though my tree paintings have a strong statement in colour, the sketches I work upon, are almost always drawn in linear with the help of any handy ball-point pen (blue/black ink) or a felt pen with micro-tip. The colours are registered firmly on my mental plate. After meditating and concentrating on such a mental-but-not-fictitious-image that I have already seen and admired in nature, I set off creating the painting on paper directly. The process I believe keeps the 'spontaneity' in the work and allow a 'space' for capturing a mood. I have the confidence of reproducing the near-perfect shades of leaves and flowers, etc. with help of the short notes or even without them. I think, like any other artist, it is a matter of habit. I understand my trees my way and I 'read' my sketches my way. It works."



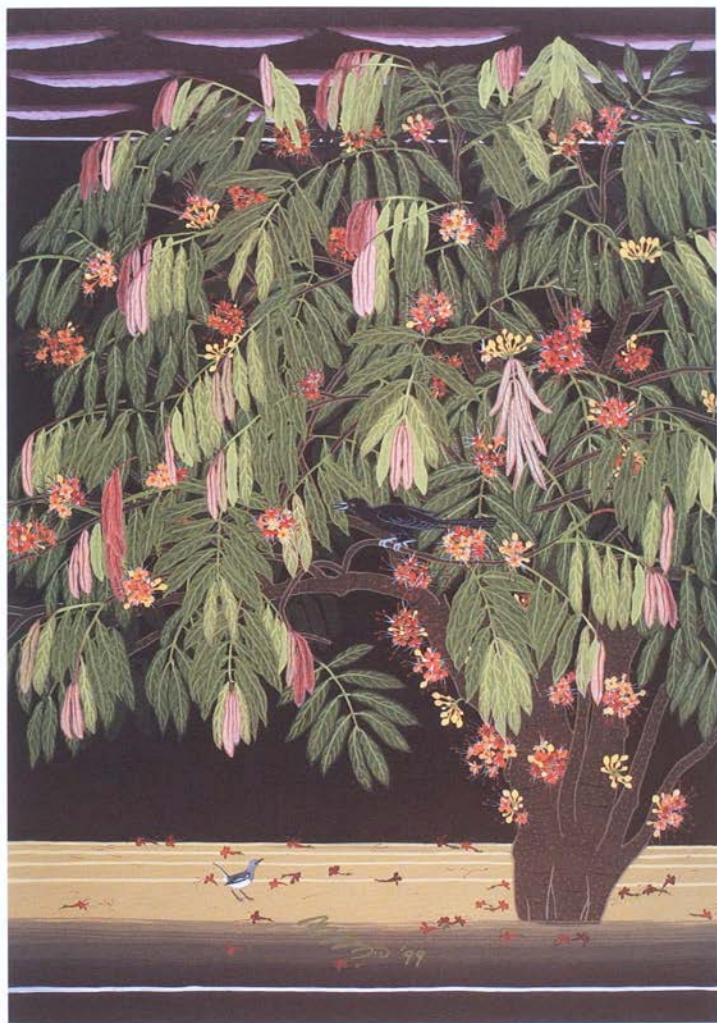
13d. Bahawa, 13 April 1996



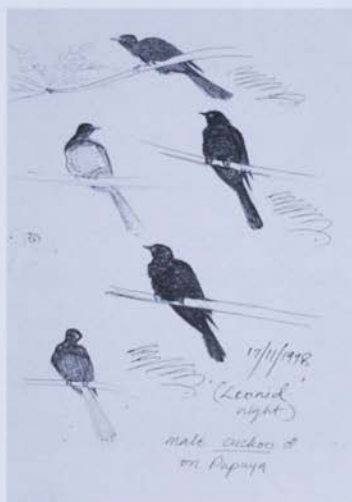
13c. Bahawa [detail with color notations], 21 May 1996



13b. Bahawa [leaf detail], 21 May 1996



23 Red Ashoka *Saraca indica* L.

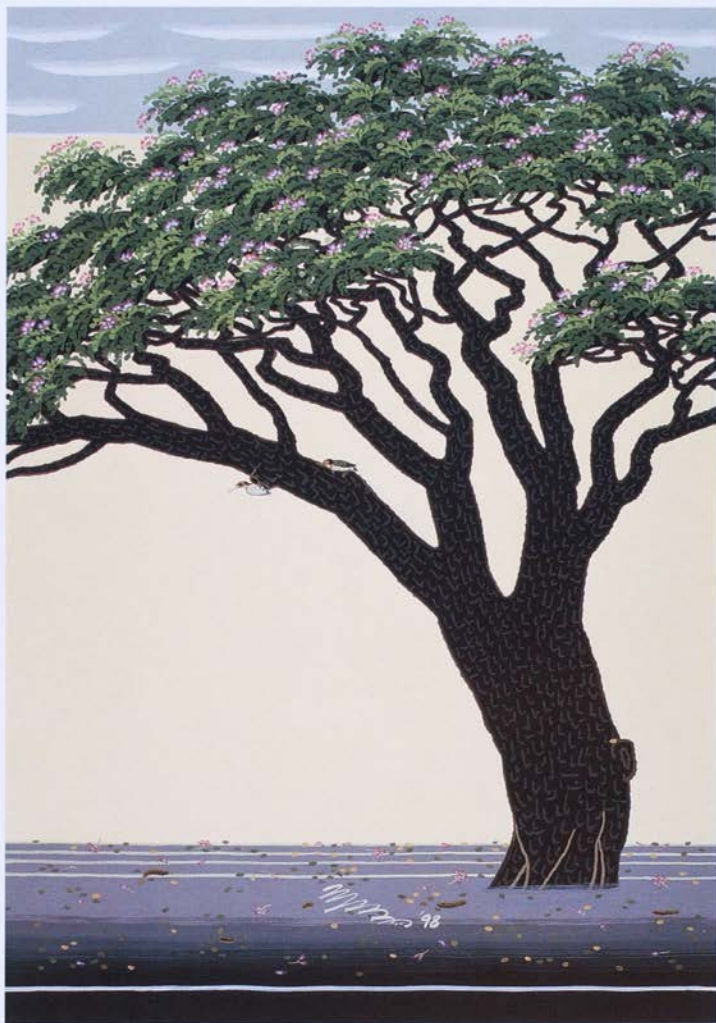


Top:
4a. Red Ashoka, Pune, 27 May 1998

Bottom:
2f. Male cuckoo (five views) on a Papaya tree, 17 November 1998



22 *Babul* *Acacia arabica* Willd.



11 *Rain Tree* *Samanea saman* (Jacq.) Merrill



12 'Golden Champak' *Michelia champaca* L.



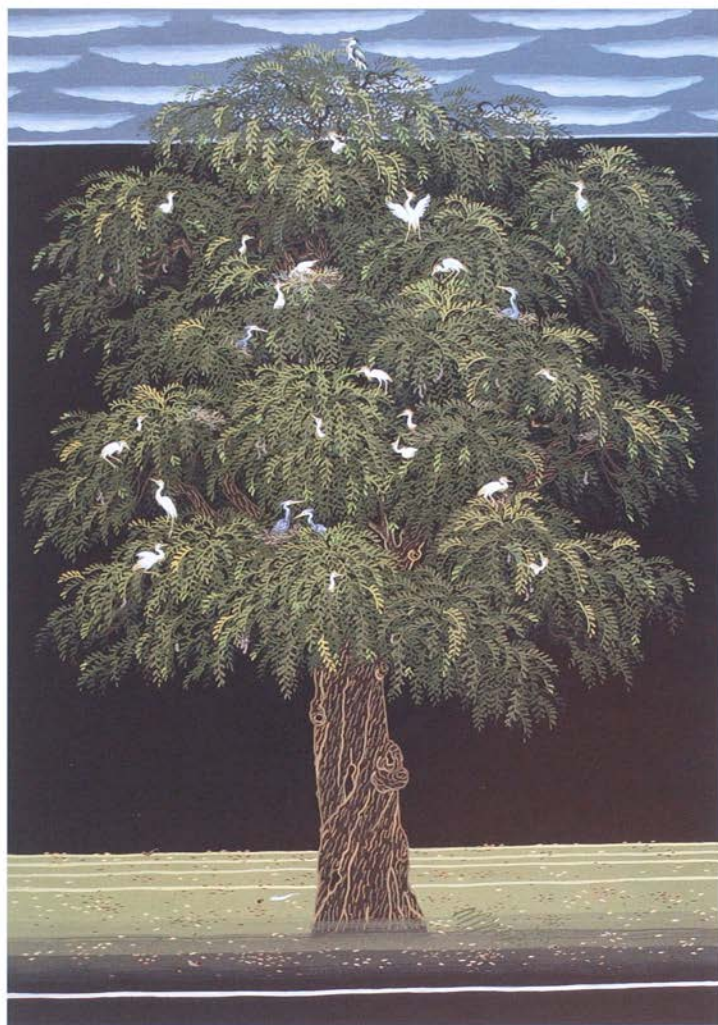
Top:

10c. Golden Champak (detail of leaves),
12 November 1997

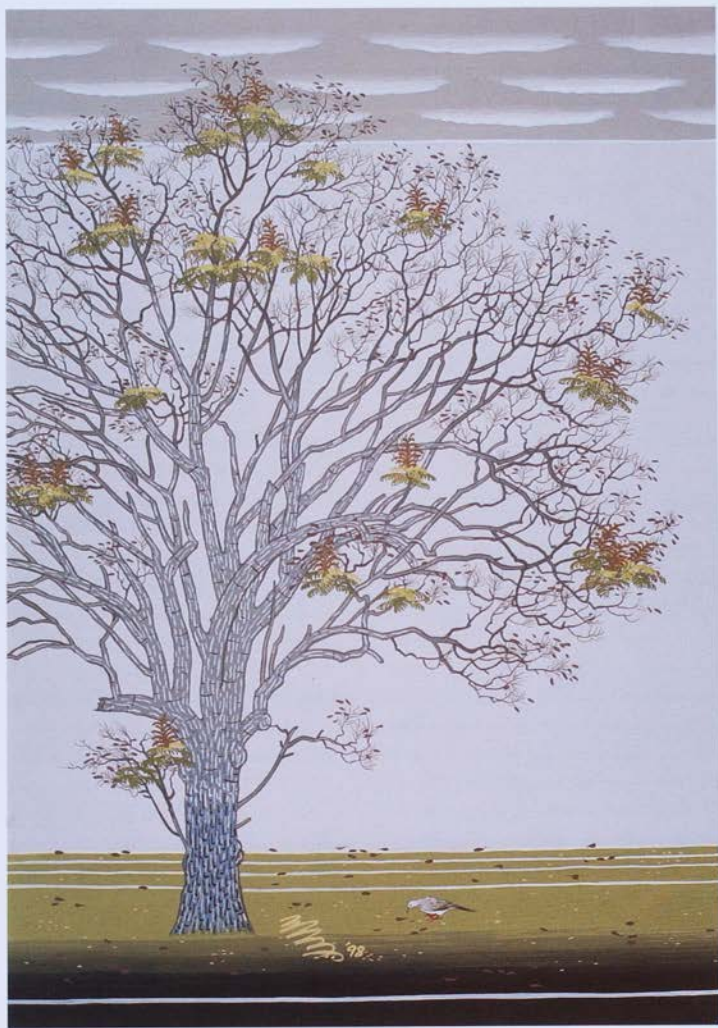
Right:

10c. Golden Champak (detail of blossom)





9 *Tamarind* *Tamarindus indica* L.



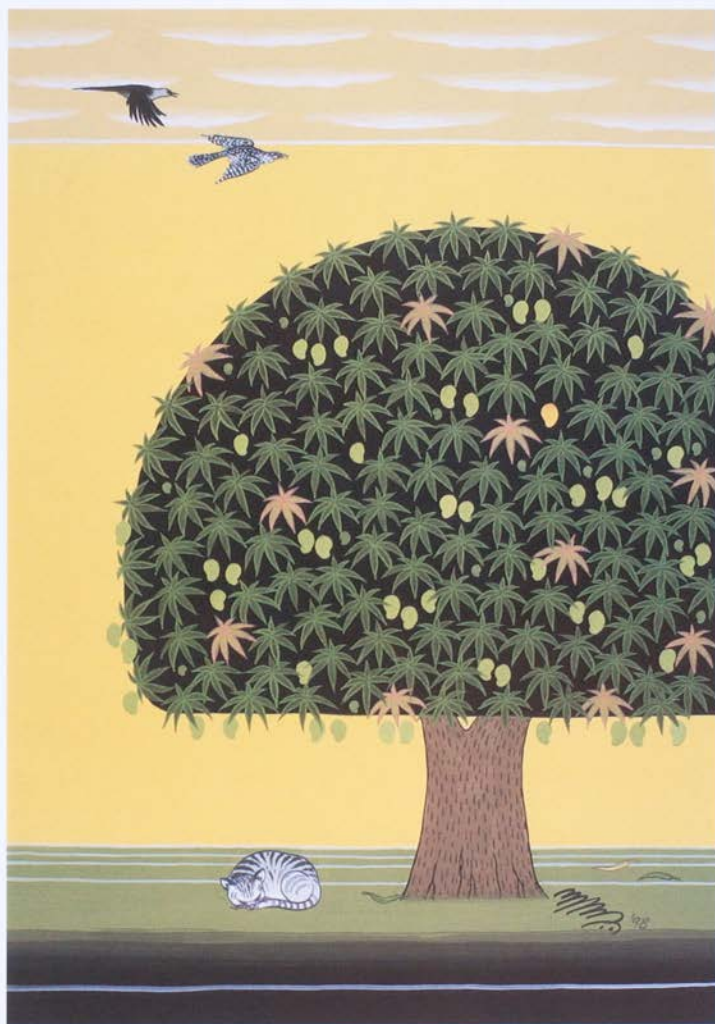
18 Copper Pod *Peltophorum inerme* (Roxb.) Llanos

Ms. Vartak begins a painting with a background wash on paper. Having mentally fixed the outline of the painting, she divides the paper into three bands serving as foreground, background and sky, respectively, the larger background giving emphasis to the portrait of the tree. Except in those paintings in which she wishes to show the mass of a tree, she paints the trunk and branches first and adds additional branches and leaves and fine details afterward. She describes her technique:

First I stretch the wet, super quality cartridge paper on a wooden frame board and let it dry completely. Then I mark with pencil the outlines and three horizontal divisions of the painting lightly. I start with wash over the central part. I prefer shades of yellow for the background for most trees. But sometime the colour of the flower or the particular mood requires me to paint with a mixture of two colours like light green plus yellow, yellow ochre plus brown or cerulean plus black and white, etc. Some obstinate colours refuse to blend at the first attempt. My usual manner of application is applying horizontal bands one below the other starting from the upper left-hand corner. In order to blend the colours well I sometimes have to give repeated brush strokes alternately in the opposite direction. The paper I use is heavy enough and has a smooth surface. The paint does not peel off after such application. Yet I do take care to apply the colour with a light but firm hand and in constant and slow rhythm. It is a skill developed by practice. Once the middle portion is painted evenly, I

breathe a sigh of relief. Very rarely do I use a pencil drawing prior to colouring on my canvas. I work directly adding layer after layer, simultaneously adding the minute details. Even for the pencil sketch I roughly draw the bare minimum like the overall shape of the tree. While working on details I do not forget to put a clean white piece of a lightweight paper under my fist, holding the brush to avoid direct contact with the painted surface. It keeps the painting spotlessly clean till it is finished.

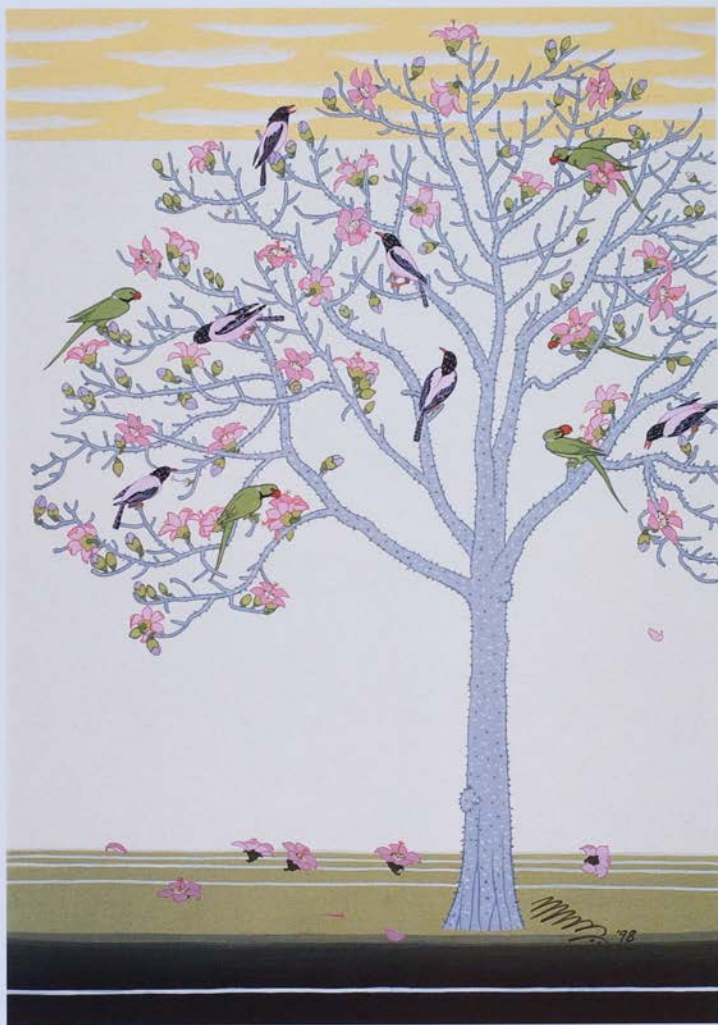
On average 10 to 15 days are required to complete one tree painting. Each of her paintings is 12 x 17 inches and all are vertical. Ms. Vartak carefully considers colors, and she may use almost any color, including red, for the sky or perhaps dark blue for a nocturnal scene. She uses poster colors for their opaque quality and both imported and Indian brushes, and currently she is using some Indian brands (numbers 000, 00, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 and 12). She prefers squirrel-hair brushes for their even width, claiming that the expensive sable-hair brushes — fine for Chinese painting but useless to her — vary too much between the girth (at the bottom) and the tip, which is extremely pointed. The brushes she uses for minute work are not necessarily long lasting but they are long-haired (12–13 mm) and supple for continuously even and delicately curved lines. When purchasing them she takes care to select ones that are assembled perfectly well in order to get an accurate point and line when using them.



5 Mango *Mangifera indica* L.



21 Indian Cork Tree/Akash Neem : *Millingtonia hortensis* L.

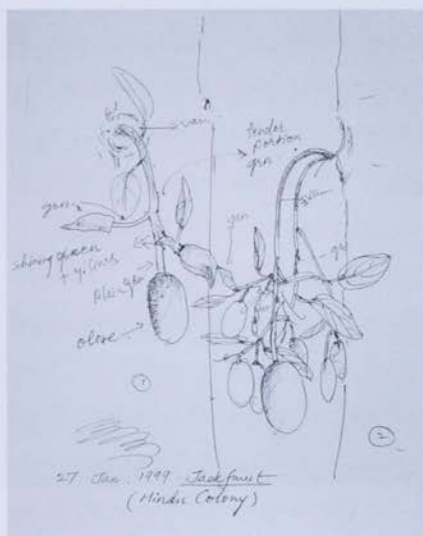


4 Silk Cotton Tree *Bombax malabaricum* Schott & Endl.



Top:
11a. Jack Fruit (Wadala), young tree,
24 January 1999

Bottom:
11b. Jack Fruit [detail with color
notations], Hindu Colony, 27 January
1999

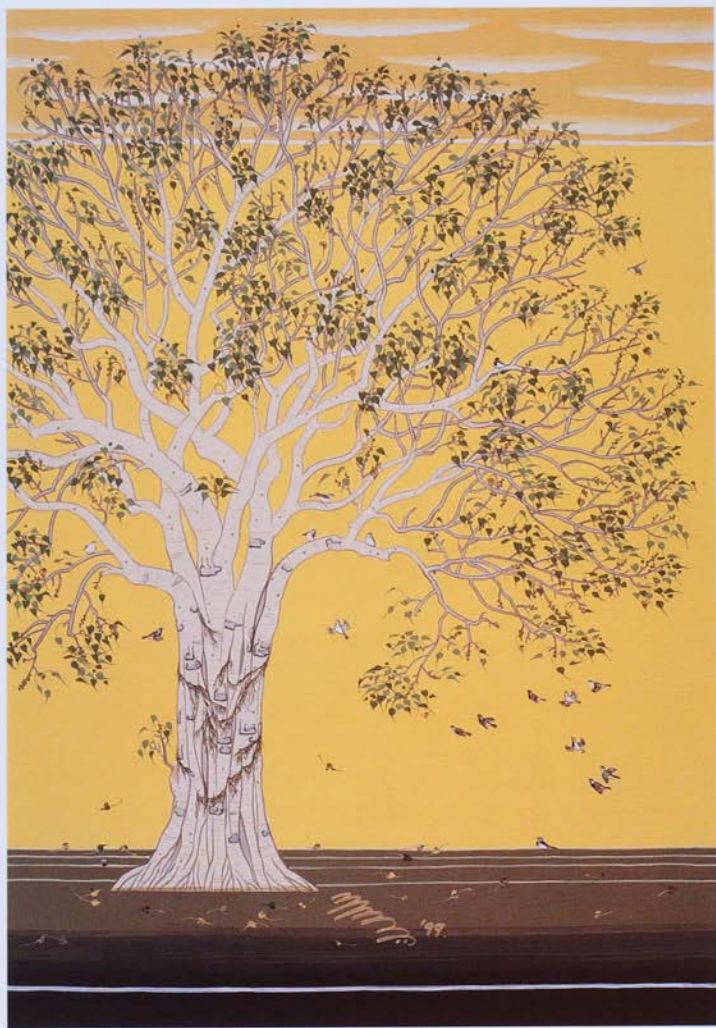




26. Jack Fruit *Artocarpus integrifolius* L.



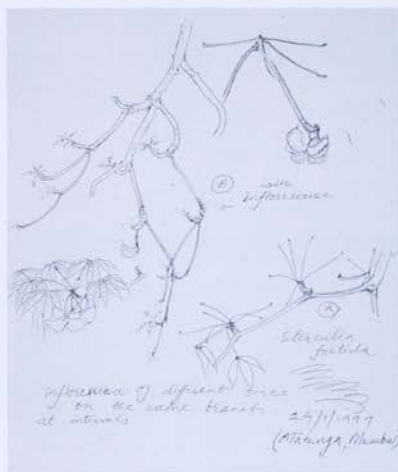
3 *Babul* *Acacia arabica* Willd.



20 Peepal *Ficus religiosa* L.



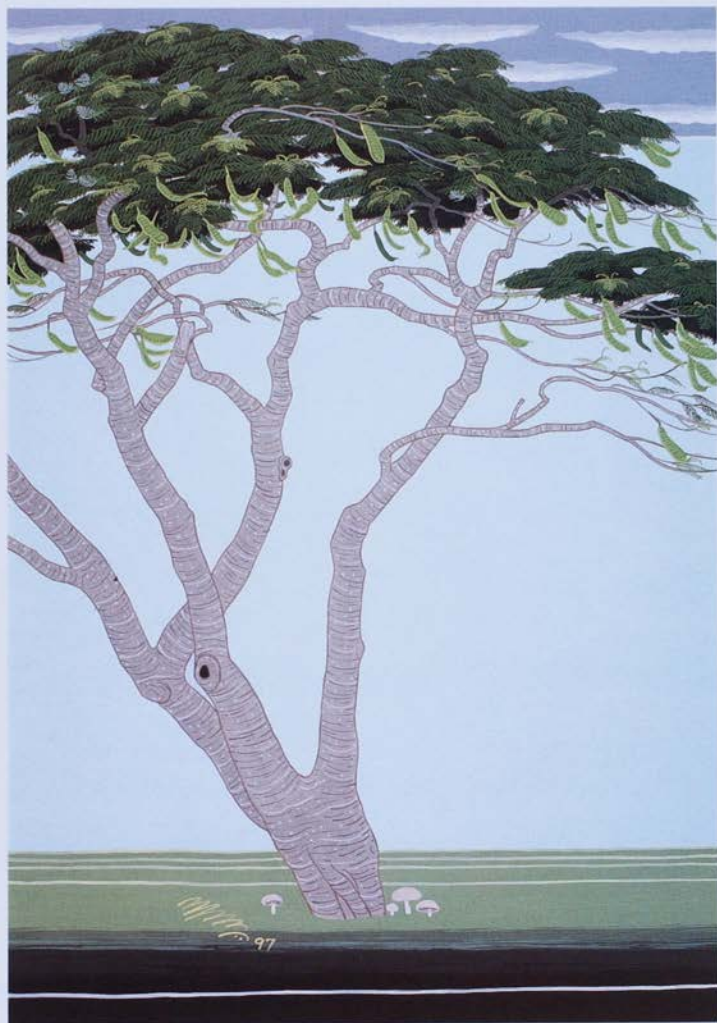
Top:
14a. *Sterculia foetida* (with innumerable fruit pods, occasional leaves and no inflorescence), Matunga, Mumbai, 24 January 1999



Bottom:
14b. *Sterculia foetida* (inflorescence of different sizes on the same branch at intervals), 24 January 1999



16 Pinari *Sterculia foetida* L.



1 Gulmohar *Delonix regia* Raf.



Arundhati Vartak earned her Bachelor of Arts in Marathi literature and psychology from Bombay University. Working in Pune and Mumbai, India, she is inspired by Indian miniature paintings but relies heavily on her thumbnail sketches and other studies.

"Trees had a special place in my heart from the beginning. They were even present in my early poems and in my childhood doodling, and they formed an important part in the memories associated with various places." Her parents and her maternal grandfather, an author of several prize-winning nature books for children, encouraged her love of trees. Frequent visits to her maternal grandfather's home in the beautiful coastal village of Chinchani gave her the opportunity to sketch and added to her growing knowledge of trees.

The artist is also inspired by reading old Sanskrit classics, including the work by the poet Kalidasa whom she says "made use of his deep knowledge of nature to heighten the...effect (of his poetry). The aspirations, moods and physical conditions of his main characters are

often seen reflected in the parallel manifestations of the elements of nature. Appreciating the subtle nuances of Kalidasa's apt similes is like understanding our usual surroundings with an enlightened vision. It also gives us an insight into the Indian approach of looking at nature."

Her artwork has been published on greeting cards and postcards produced by the World-Wide Fund for Nature, India; CRY (Child Relief and You); the Society for the Education of the Crippled; the Bombay Natural History Society; and in various books, magazines and newspapers. She has held one-person exhibitions in Mumbai at the Jehangir Art Gallery, Artists' Center, House of Soviet Culture, and Nehru Centre Art Gallery. Her works have found their way into corporate collections in India, and some of her paintings have been included in the Hunt Institute's 8th International Exhibition of Botanical Art & Illustration in 1995/1996 and in "Contemporary Botanical Artists: The Shirley Sherwood Collection" and its accompanying book.

"Portraits of Indian Trees:

Arundhati Vartak"

Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation

16 September 1999 – 29 February 2000

[All works are poster colour on 12" x 17" cartridge paper. Arundhati Vartak's descriptions of trees are in italics.]

1 Gulmohar *Delonix regia* Raf.

In this portrait of Gulmohar, I have shown tiny mushrooms at the foot of its trunk, suggesting the rainy season. Mushrooms have a shape analogous to that of the canopy of Gulmohar. By their contrasting size, however, they seem to augment the large expanse of the canopy even better. Here I have taken a small "poetic liberty," as it is believed by some that Gulmohar does not allow anything else to grow on the ground beneath it.

The Gulmohar's smooth trunk rarely grows straight, and it gently bends here and there and sometimes breaks into a spray of three to four large boughs at the very root. Upon this artistically sculpted frame the long and slender branches spread into a large canopy...into an interesting variety of patterns created by the numerous curving twigs. In monsoon, Gulmohar puts on its beautiful green covering of leaves. The feathery bipinnate leaf fronds growing somewhat horizontally on the stooping branches give a touch of calm and serenity to its character. The mature lush green leaves are topped with a few groups of tender ones of the parrot green color. As if to join the symphony of green, the bright green seedpods begin to appear on the scene. Before turning hard

and brown, they may twist and turn their long and flat bodies whimsically in various directions. The artist in me likes to allow them some time to mature and "learn to behave themselves." Around the month of February the tiny green leaves turn golden yellow. One by one they begin to fall on the ground in silent drizzle. With the arrival of summer, Gulmohar undergoes a metamorphic change of personality. The barren skeleton is suddenly ablaze with scarlet and orange colored flowers covering its entire crown. It seems to add to the heat in the atmosphere...and the Gulmohar has become a modern symbol of the hot summer season.

2 Rudrapalash *Spathodea campanulata* Beauv.3 Babul *Acacia arabica* Willd.

Like most Acacias, the Babul is also an extremely thorny tree. From a distance, however, the thorns seem to disappear behind the screen of delicate green leaves. Every single Babul tree looks like an independent sculpture chiseled by the dexterous hands of Mother Nature. As the tree grows, the trunk takes some interesting twists and turns. From this rough and rugged trunk, numerous slender branches shoot in upward or horizontal direction creating a contrast of thickness that is pleasing to the eye. Around the month of January, another pleasing contrast can be noticed when the new leaves of parrot green shade appear against the dark, almost black colored branches. During the monsoon the leaves become darker and thousands of tiny yellow flowers like golden drops of sunlight begin to adorn the tips of the Babul branches. The flowers have a delightful fragrance.

I enjoy all of these different manifestations. Birds and animals often lend their own charm to the trees. The Baya weaverbirds prefer to build their colonies on the thorny Babul for safety, especially if the tree is growing near the water. There is an interesting harmony between the wonderful weave of the pendulous nests of Baya and the delicate foliage of the Babul.

4 Silk Cotton Tree *Bombax malabaricum*
Schott & Endl.

This tree has prickles or thorns growing all over its body. Though normally pink, the blossoms of the Silk Cotton flower are occasionally red. The blossoming season coincides with the time when it is common to find the woods engulfed by forest fires, and since the wood is very soft, it is easy prey to these fires. The poet Kalidasa has described the woods in the summer season as covered with flames of forest fire, which seems to be increased or grown in strength by the "flames" of the red Silk Cotton flowers. The more common pink flowers are very showy, large and fleshy, but are scentless. Because they contain a lot of nectar, the tree attracts all nectar-loving birds in the flowering season of February through April. The pink and black feathered rosy-pastors even fly thousands of miles from Central Asia to India to enjoy the nectar of Silk Cotton and Pangara. Interestingly, the colour of rosy-pastors is very similar to that of the Silk Cotton flowers that they adore so much. I was fascinated by this fact, so I treated my canvas more like a piece of folk embroidery where size and proportion of figures matters least. The emphasis here is on colours, pink and green. The

harmony is very pleasing and is exaggerated on the canvas for fun.

5 Mango *Mangifera indica* L.

In this painting, I have shown a cat enjoying a nap in the cool shade of a large Mango tree. The fruits of the tree are about to ripen. In the sky an angry crow is chasing a female cuckoo, whose notorious habit of brood-parasitism is well known. The cat is patiently, but secretly, watching the fighting birds and is perhaps contemplating some wicked plans about their yet-to-be-born young ones; be they either the crows or the cuckoo. The Mango tree here does not arouse any romantic thought. Both the cuckoo and the crow are fond of ripe Mango fruit. The emphasis here is on their rivalry over the mundane affairs of life. To capture the dramatic mood, I have treated my canvas with bright contrasting hues and rather simple graphic forms.

6 Indian Coral (Pangara) *Erythrina indica* L.

The Indian Coral tree or Pangara does not yield any tasty fruits or scented flowers nor does it offer thick cool shade in the summer season. Naturally there is no large cultivation of this tree, and yet it is commonly found in all villages, especially in the coastal region.

The flowering season of the Pangara begins in February, and it may last for two to four months, depending on the weather conditions. The blossoms of the Pangara are peculiar. About three to six scarlet "arrow-heads" shoot horizontally from the tip of every branchlet. The entire tree provides a striking sight in spring when the obliquely rising naked branches adorn their heads with numerous horizontal blossoms of blood red hue.

The flowers of the Pangara are full of nectar and attract a host of birds. Crows are particularly fond of them and even like to build their nests in the forks of the fat, thorny branches of the Pangara. The tree and the bird seem almost inseparable during the mating season.

The leaves of the Pangara are three foliate and grow in crowded clusters near the end of the branchlets. The tree is in more or less a leafless condition when it is in bloom. A few isolated clusters do remain in place, looking like large green balls. All leaves young and mature have a uniform light green colour. An occasional ripe yellow leaf often breaks the monotony and adds charm to the tree. The beautiful pale colour of the bark is slightly tinged with green at the base of the trunk and streaked with long vertical lines of buff colour all over.

7 Neem *Azadirachta indica* A. Juss.

8 Mango *Mangifera indica* L.

9 Tamarind *Tamarindus indica* L.

10 Banyan *Ficus benghalensis* L.

The Banyan tree is truly the most peculiar and awe-inspiring tree of India. Its habit of sending thousands of aerial roots, which eventually turn into thick pillar-like trunks, support the huge and ever-spreading branches of the core tree. The tree thus keeps widening for ages, covering a large area. A few famous living specimens from Calcutta, Gujrat, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar are many years old and cover over a few acres of land.

Indian scriptures maintain that the Banyan is foremost among the tree spirits as "Vaishnavan," or the Lord of the Spirits, resides in this tree. The

popular belief regarding its supernatural power is of great antiquity and is reflected in the folklore and even in the great classical poet Kalidasa's "Raghuwamsha."

It is common to find, even in these days, a crude stone idol of some deity of rather malignant nature daubed with red-lead placed at the foot of the Banyan. In this portrayal of such a Banyan, I have tried to capture the mysterious and sinister mood by painting it against the scarlet glow of the sunset. Apart from its rather grotesque appearance, long life span and forever expanding size, what could have impressed the primitive mind about this tree was its power to produce fruits without the obvious sign of flowers.

11 Rain Tree *Samanea saman* (Jacq.) Merrill

12 Golden Champak *Michelia champaca* L.

13 Parijat *Nyctanthes arbor-tristis* L.

The popular Sanskrit name Parijat actually means "Born in the ocean." From the various references in mythology, it seems that the Parijat tree was imported to India either from a land beyond the seas or from a region like the Himalayas, which itself has sprung up from the ocean.

Like most trees with white flowers, the Parijat also blooms in the evening to be pollinated by nocturnal insects. But as the first rays of the morning sun light up the quarters, Parijat silently begins to shed its flowers one by one. Its Latin name means "the weeping tree of night flowers," and the falling flowers do appear like drops of tears.

It is a pleasant experience to be near a flowering Parijat in the cool hours of morning. I cannot think of painting a blooming Parijat without showing someone picking up its flowers. It is an art to collect as many fresh flowers scattered on the ground without treading your foot on even a single one of them. As you are engaged in collecting, more and more keep falling from the tree. The naturally hollowed stems make the flowers very easy to thread into a garland without the help of a needle. The garlands are offered to God.

The Parijat is often called "an autumnal tree" by Sanskrit poets, but it is commonly found to be blooming profusely during the rainy season as well. For this reason, I have painted my Parijat with the colour scheme indicative of monsoon. An iora, perching on the top branch, is seen in its bright seasonal coat. The Parijat tree looks pretty only during the flowering season when it is densely covered with sharp pointed green leaves. Once the season is over the withered leaves turn a dull brown in colour and remain on the tree for a long period. The drying fruit pods clustered at the end of the branches add their own bit to the unsightly appearance of the tree for the rest of the year.

- 14 Kapitha (Kavath) *Feronia limonia* L.
- 15 Tamarind *Tamarindus indica* L.
- 16 Pinari *Sterculia foetida* L.
- 17 Bahawa (Indian Laburnum) *Cassia fistula* L.
- 18 Copper Pod *Peltophorum inerme* (Roxb.) Llanos
- 19 Pinari *Sterculia foetida* L.

20 Peepal *Ficus religiosa* L.

As the botanical name suggests, the Peepal is the most sacred tree in India. Like the Banyan, it is a fig tree and is known to have a very long life that may at times extend to many hundred years.

The Vedic Aryans used the twigs of the Peepal for procuring the "Sacred Fire" by friction. For them the wood of the Peepal was not just an ideal fuel, but a symbol of the "Fire" itself. The fire element is the earthly manifestation of the solar power. Even today we find a Peepal either inside or in the vicinity of the temples of the deities representing the sun. It was but natural that my portrait of the cheerful Peepal is drawn against a background of bright yellow colour as if to show it happily bathing in the lustrous golden sunlight.

A little before spring, around the month of February, the gentle southerly breeze carries with it multitudes of dry leaves snatched away from the swinging trees. With the arrival of spring, the tree comes to life again. The tender new leaves begin to sparkle with their splendid shades of maroon and copper. As they mature, they gradually turn into leathery green. Thousands of pendulous leaves begin to dance in the slightest breeze.

Flocks of sparrows, constantly bickering and making a great deal of noise, are often seen taking shelter in the numerous branches of the Peepal for shade. Their restless activities add even more life to the tree. Kalidasa describes how the Peepal and Banyan trees near a village became agitated and resonant with the loud notes of such domestic birds as crows, mynas and egrets busy with

their vigorous nest building activities at the onset of the monsoon. In his famous poem "Meghadoota," Kalidasa has painted many enchanting landscapes of rural India in and around the rainy season.

Just like the Banyan, almost every Indian village must have a large, old Peepal tree usually standing at the center of the market area. A popular belief is that the spirit residing in the Peepal acts as a silent witness to all that takes place beneath it.

- 21 Indian Cork Tree *Millingtonia hortensis* L.
- 22 Babul *Acacia arabica* Willd.
- 23 Red Ashoka *Saraca indica* L.
- 24 Mango *Mangifera indica* L.
- 25 Baobab *Adansonia digitata* L.
- 26 Jack Fruit *Artocarpus integrifolius* L.
- 27 Nandanvan
- 28 Neem *Azadirachta indica* A. Juss.
- 29 Bahawa (Indian Laburnum) *Cassia fistula* L.
- 30 Babul *Acacia arabica* Willd.
- 31 Gulmohar *Delonix regia* Raf.
- 32 Mast Tree *Polyalthia longifolia* Thw.
- 33 Paras Peepal *Thespesia populnea* Sol. ex Corr.
- 34 Queen's Flower *Lagerstroemia thorelii* Gagnep.
- 35 Peepal *Ficus religiosa* L.
- 36 Neem *Azadirachta indica* A. Juss.
- 37 Indian Star-gooseberry *Phyllanthus acidus* (L.) Skeels
- 38 Bengal Almond *Treminalia catappa* L.
- 39 Babul *Acacia arabica* Willd.
- 40 Mango *Mangifera indica* L.



1d. Chipmunk [4 views], 8 November 1996

"Arundhati Vartak's Sketches: Souls of Her Paintings"

Chatham College Gallery of Art
31 August 1999 – 25 September 1999

[All of the sketches are felt-tip marker or ball-point pen on various types and sizes of paper. Items 16 and 17 are poster colour on 12" x 17" cartridge paper.]

- 1 a. Sunbird [3 views], female Kalchuri (Indian robin) [6 views], 26 May 1998
- b. [Two views of a wasp], 28 August 1998
- c. Seven sisters [Tail detail and profile of bird], 27 November 1998
- d. Chipmunk [Four views], 8 November 1996
- e. [Three profiles of a cat], 24 March 1997

- f. House sparrow and chipmunk [four views], 14 December 1996
- 2 a. Male and female dhayal or dayal (Indian magpie birds), 28 July 1994
- b. Male purple sunbird in non-breeding season [five views], female purple sunbird, 23 June 1996
- c. Dhayal or dayal (Indian magpie robin), as seen from beneath the antennae watching me, morning 28 May 1993
- d. Female cuckoo enjoying a Papaya fruit, 13 February 1998
- e. Female cuckoo, 11 February 1998
- f. Male cuckoo [five views] on a Papaya, 17 November 1998
- 3 a. Peepal (young tree), 12 March 1997
- b. Peepal [detail of branches]
- c. Peepal [detail of branches], 21 December 1997
- d. Banyan berries, 14 June 1978
- e. Banyan [detail of leaves]
- 4 a. Red Ashoka, Puné, 27 May 1998
- b. Red Ashoka [detail of buds], 23 January 1999
- c. Bottlebrush [detail of branches], 5 November 1991
- d. Bottlebrush [detail], 11 February 1995
- 5 a. Mast tree *Polyalthia longifolia* Thw. (very young—small leaves), 1 March 1997
- b. Mast Tree [detail], 5 February 1998
- c. Mast Tree, 9 July 1998
- d. Gulmohar, 12 December 1996
- e. Gulmohar [detail of pods], 20 November 1997
- f. Gulmohar [detail], 9 May 1993
- 6 a. Copper Pod, 31 May 1996
- b. Copper Pod [with color notations], 29 January 1998
- c. Kailasapati [with color notations], 23 January 1999
- d. Cannonball, Kailasapati [branch detail], at the zoo, 23 January 1999
- 7 a. Screw-pine (Ketaki) *Pandanus odoratissimus*, Chinchani, 4 December 1987
- b. Goats, water buffalo, and shepherd boy, Chinchani, 3 August 1987
- 8 a. [Eight views of crows sketched during the rainy season], Dadar, 16 June, 1 June, 15 June, 12 June, 9 April 1987
- b. [Six views of cats], 2 March 1990, 13 May 1987, 2 March 1990, 13 May 1987, 11 May 1987
- c. [Nine views of chickens], Chinchani, 20 April 1985
- d. [Five views of ducks], Chinchani, 8 December 1987
- 9 a. Silk Cotton [detail with color notations], 6 February 1997
- b. Australian philode acacia, 4 May 1994
- c. Tal-palm, 12 May 1989
- d. Banana [with color notations], 22 October 1997
- 10 e. Banana, 22 October 1997
- a. Golden Champak, Hindu Colony, 2 May 1993
- b. Parasa Peepal (Portia tree), Parsi Colony, Mumbai, 24 January 1999
- c. Golden Champak [detail of blossom]

- d. Golden Champak [detail with color notations], 27 August 1998
- e. Golden Champak [detail of leaves], 12 November 1997
- f. Drumstick, Chinchani, October 1985
- 11 a. Jack Fruit (Wadala), young tree, 24 January 1999
- b. Jack Fruit [detail with color notations], Hindu Colony, 27 January 1999
- c. Jack Fruit (Phanas) [detail with color notations], 24 January 1999
- d. Parijat [detail with color notations], 15 September 1997
- e. Parijat, 12 July 1997
- 12 a. [Neem], Chinchani, 31 May 1993
- b. Neem, Chinchani, 21 May 1979
- c. [Neem], Puné, 1 June 1996
- d. A young Neem, Puné, 18 June 1996
- e. Neem, Puné [with color notations], 17 June 1996
- 13 a. Bahawa, 5 March 1993
- b. Bahawa [leaf detail], 21 May 1996
- c. Bahawa [detail with color notations], 21 May 1996
- d. Bahawa, 13 April 1996
- 14 a. *Sterculia foetida* (with innumerable fruit pods, occasional leaves and no inflorescence), Matunga, Mumbai, 24 January 1999
- b. *Sterculia foetida* (inflorescence of different sizes on the same branch at intervals), Matunga, Mumbai, 24 January 1999
- c. *Barringtonia racemosa* [detail with color notations], 1 April 1995
- d. *Barringtonia racemosa* (at the zoo), 23 January 1999
- 15 a. Papaya, 10 September 1997
- b. Papaya [detail], 10 September 1997
- c. Papaya [with color notations], 10 September 1997
- d. *Plumeria rubra* L. Pagoda tree, Puné, 15 January 1997
- e. [Pagoda tree], Puné [detail], 12 January 1997
- 16 Gulmohar *Delonix regia* L.
- 17 Papaya *Carica papaya* L.

The cuckoos in my garden seem to be madly, badly and hopelessly smitten by the Papaya. Whenever there is a sign of the Papaya fruit ripening, a female cuckoo arrives on the scene and begins to keep a secret watch over it from the nearby trees. When the fruit is finally ripe, she takes possession of the Papaya tree and refuses to leave. The male cuckoo is clearly afraid of approaching the fruit and helplessly sits at a safe distance watching her devour the meal. His occasional weak efforts to steal a bite or two are instantly taken note of by the female cuckoo who attacks him aggressively, giving out a loud shrill call and just driving him away. It is only when she has had her fill that he is allowed to taste the left over.

I like the pale, soft stem of the Papaya tree scaled with beautiful marks of the fallen branches. They create a very interesting pattern. The entire tree looks to me like some dexterously carved piece of wooden handicraft. The cuckoos are a permanent feature; at least when there are ripe Papayas on the tree.



Mast tree
(*Polyalthia longifolia*)
Ther.

Very young -
small leaves
(olive + ch.)
curled up

1/3/97