

# Method & Style of the Maestro Colorist Satish Chandra

## Abstract

Satish Chandra is known chiefly for the evanescent aspects of his landscapes, his innovative use of air, light, and color—factors that have prompted critics often to ignore other aspects of his art, such as content, composition, and floral relevance. By blending biography with critical studies of specific paintings, one can show how Satish Chandra challenged landscape conventions by complicating them, juxtaposing creative landscape imagery to idyllic nature scenes and showing the effects of the dense forest and northern plain scenes.

**Keywords:** Evanescent, Innovative, Relevance, Landscape, Juxtaposing, Idyllic, Plain

## Introduction

Satish Chandra was one of the most renowned landscape painters of India. Such was his confidence in his art, and his love for Nature, that he devoted his whole life to painting northern plains, and as special, gentle and dignified a person as his art was uplifting. He rejected the traditional approach to landscape painting and instead of copying old masters he had been learning the nature itself. He observed variations of color and light caused by the daily or seasonal changes.

He began his career painting nature scenes and learned how to paint in plain air, how to recognize subtle changes in weather and lighting conditions, and how to incorporate contemporary developments, such as but real artistic growth depended on his further exploring what came to be known as his iconic style of paintings which included wider, more obviously painterly brush strokes, brighter color contrasts than the Salon judges deemed customary, evanescent lighting effects, and the inclusion of natural subject matter.

Satish Chandra displayed an evident evolution in his painting style throughout his long career. Though he stayed true to the genre of landscape, as his career progressed he began to pay less attention to the details of objects and landscape and more attention to the effects of light and color. He became increasingly fascinated with natural and atmospheric elements.

As time progressed he paid less attention to specific details and more to atmospheric quality created by the natural elements, such as the sun, trees, mountain, village path way, water lily etc. His landscapes embody a sense of imminent change, through a shifting light and strong imprint of season and time of day and also he has brought a new dynamic into landscape painting, reinvigorating it in ways suited to a contemporary sensibility.

## Method & Style

Satish Chandra sits in his studio in deep meditation until the image of a picture stands life-like before his soul. He then sketches it on the blank canvas in thin outline and proceeds directly to the painting. The brush moves swiftly, easily, spontaneously. The colours flow naturally, as if from the depths of his soul, on to the canvas. This reliance on the mental image emphasizes the visionary nature of



**Figure 1: Oil on Canvas**

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Satish's work. Viewers are struck by its haunting, enigmatic quality and many have searched his paintings for hidden meanings.

In his landscapes Satish not only depicts what is immediately visible, but also captures the underlying mood – the essence, the soul – of Nature. His work has a freshness and a spontaneity that springs from his impression of a scene. The subtle luminosity, the reflections and shadows, the casual passers-by and the every movement of the trees and birds are accurately depicted.



**Figure 2: Oil on Canvas**

An optimist, Satish combines realism and impressionism aesthetically so as to assume newer and fresher dimensions – mixing the two in a way unlike any in recent times.

Satish's art is marked by a strong sense of individuality. Says he: "What I paint are my impressions of Nature and 'impressions' are what lie between stark reality and fantastic imagination. My landscapes are not faithful reproductions of Nature as seen by the naked eye. They are representative of the mood a particular sight of Nature evokes in me."

**The Mystic and the Philosopher**

Satish has an extraordinary ability to create not just a three-dimensional effect but a fourth one – of the presence of a 'beyond' – giving the canvas a sense of endless expanse. The countryside rolls way into the distance and the eye drifts towards the far horizon – the land recedes gradually from the foreground – and this impression is enhanced by the sky lightening and finally dipping into a thin strip of white. Yet the viewer remains transfixed, holding his breath, wondering what lies beyond this thin strip of white betwixt him and the unknown. These paintings highlight the vastness of Nature, its tranquility, and yet, bring on a feeling of yearning, of wistfulness.

The mystic Satish, in his soul-searching efforts, moves beyond man and Nature towards a silence so profound that he touches the glory of a greater truth, and realizes the oneness of God and man.

Using the same implements available to the academics – those of light and shade of external and tonal range – Satish fashions 'inspired' portrayals of Nature, which in oils,

possess all the delicacy of an aquarelle. There is a touch of magic, mystery and enchantment in Satish's paintings – that inexplicable extra quality that sets apart a work of art.



**Figure 3: Oil on Canvas**



**Figure 4 : Oil on Canvas**

Satish emphasizes the delicacy of colour patterns and the simplicity of composition. The pigments are so thinly laid, often so diluted, that they flow freely, giving his landscapes the elusive, luminous transparency of watercolours. There is an immensity and vastness allied to his work that gives it subtle and engaging depth.

**A Maestro Colorist**



**Figure 5: Oil on Canvas**

It is through color and admirably textured tones that Satish turns a prosaic vista into a slender poetic vision. He uses warm colors like earthy browns, warm yellows and flaming oranges, placing them alongside blacks, blues, greens and whites. He invests the whole view with a shimmering light – the overall effect gives birth to a feeling of calmness and tranquility, wiping out

restlessness. A flutter of fine brush strokes marks the texture of his oils. The poetic impulse is given free play. Romantic elements find their way into the brush strokes.

"He seek forms through colour and find a peculiar fascination for grey, green, yellow, red and orange, which have a great range and depth of feeling. He like to maintain the character and transparency of colours in order to give freshness, softness and intensity to my painting. Often, I use only one colour in my painting and find it effective in capturing the aura of a scene," says Satish.

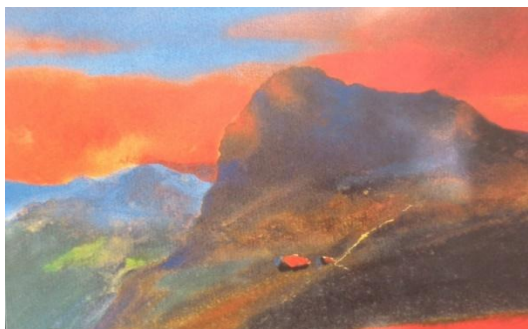
By his careful and skilled use of colour and brush he suggests movement. His canvases contain views of grasslands, rolling fields, trees and open skies; of forests, mountains and rivulets – each vibrating to the play of light. Apart from technical manipulations. Satish varies his colour scheme and always arrives at the required rhythm of harmony, sometimes concentrating on the horizontal sweep and, at other times, visualizing the composition as leading inwards. The various shades of green, bronze and ochre are applied with a gentle, sensitive hand. The landscapes are inventive in detail and succeed in creating a mood.

**A Master of Atmospheric**

Satish lures the sleeping earth into springing up in fire – smouldering orange soil sears into autumn bushes, which themselves spread into tree bursts, the viridian tinged with bronze where the autumn light catches it.



**Figure 6: Oil on Canvas**



**Figure 7: Oil on Canvas**

A slight shift in the viewer's position effects magical changes in the landscape – a marsh and a tree exchange colours; tracks which, from one angle, seemed to be leading out of a copse, begin to point fiercely into it.

He paints trees that live, breathe and sway in the breeze. The show a season, a mood, a state of things. We see a storm, a bare autumn, monsoon and winter. Sometimes they burst into the magic of spring with a myriad colourful flowers smiling in the showers of light that filters through the clouds, filling us with joy, giving rise to doses of delicate feelings and intense passion. A group of feathery trees sweeps towards an arc of tantalizing blue, and the white of light gives depth to a grove. Or then, the leaves, russet and flame-orange, leap upwards like flames. Then again, the trees puff upwards like clouds of smoke into a misty sky-the upward lift is like a steeple, a 'shikhar' or a 'minar', associated with worship.

The vertical lines of trees seem to connect the earth below to the heaven above – the viewer's eye is led to the wide space between these two planes wherein atmosphere is created to depict a certain mood. This space also adds a dimension of time and distance to the painting.

Then the nail brush is used effectively to scrape the colour, yielding a vast ground, allowing the play of wind amid the tall trees, grass or standing crops. But above all, and even more than the clusters of trees in yellow, ochre and brown, it is the sensuous handling of undulating grass and of burgeoning growth – with a startling splash of colour in the tiny flowers and weeds strewn across a slope – which makes Satish's paintings distinctive. It typifies his ability to create a languorous mood.

In his paintings, water flows in crystal streams and rivulets that meander through meadows along green banks. Serene, tranquil, they reflect the mood of the sky above. The weeds and reed-like stems jutting out of the side of a lake are reflected in the water as it shimmers in the light. The breeze caresses and plays with the ripples in the water. A solitary lakeside village is seen in the tranquil spread of the morning. Sometimes cartwheel marks can be seen in the



freshly sodden earth.

**Figure 8: Oil on Canvas**

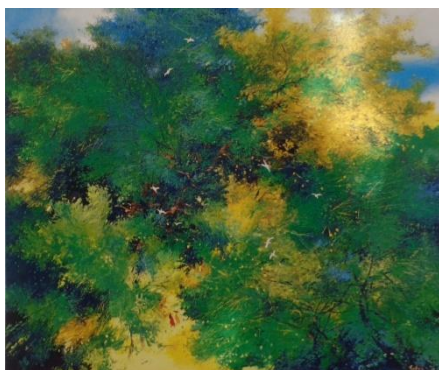


Satish's forests are an ensemble of deftly scuffed foliage, scumbled undergrowth, brambles and long grass that the knife has scratched across the canvas. At times, the large twisted trunks of trees with their roots penetrating deep into the bosom of the earth, and twigs hanging from the branches, give rise to a mysterious and haunting atmosphere, bringing on a feeling of loneliness. The foliage merges with the background of the sky or, in the case of the trees, with space. In open fields, the standing crops wave into a pattern to reach the humble huts.

Human beings (which most landscapists use as a counter-point to Nature) appear occasionally, losing their way in the shrubbery, or moving in the wind like tiny specks. Almost insignificant, they are usually absorbed in some activity – sitting down, bending over, working or even with their backs to the viewer. These figures are tiny in relation to Nature, perhaps to show that man is helpless against natural forces. "I feel that man is minisule compared to Nature – no matter what progress man makes, he can never totally alienate himself from Nature; he was, is and will always be one a part of Nature – this is why in my landscapes, man, though important, occupies a secondary position," says Satish.

The motif is wings, to mark the migration of birds, indicates animal life in this otherwise unchallenged realm of the arboreal.

The mountain ranges Satish paints, often depicting a temple roof fading into the sky, suggest a higher spiritual level of consciousness. In a very visual way, for the viewer, it is now much more than a physical journey: it is the journey of a searching soul. The viewer first travels up the mountain ranges to reach the temple – and then the mind's eye reaches up towards the mountain peaks, into the brightness of the clouds at the summit beyond which his eyes cannot penetrate. Yet he yearns to go beyond the clouds – and his quest for immortality begins.



**Figure 9: Oil on Canvas**

In Satish's paintings, the very sky seems to move with the moving clouds as they flit across, the sun playing hide-and-peek with them. Sometimes, the clouds are bare shadows and at other times, they are luminous, filled with light. At times they are bursting with raindrops. Or then, they look like the softly drooping transparent

wings of fairies in mauve, blue-grey and white, catching, ever so softly, the light of the sun in shades of pink, purple, orange and gold. Satish paints mist and clouds as they cling to the hillocks, huts, trees and plants, making a sea of glowing colours rising up in spirals.

The ever-changing sky is a source of great fascination for Satish. "The sky is the source of light in Nature and governs everything. The quality of light in the sky has a direct influence on the atmosphere and mood in my paintings," says he.

His interest lies in the rendering of a certain quality of light in the invocation of a fleeting mood or moment in time. In his work he captures the magical light of sunset, light on the trunks of trees and penetrating the dark undergrowth, light filtered through the foliage of trees, reflected off the surface of water or muted by the clouds in the sky. Hutments are glimpsed between the trunks of trees, light is diffused and interrupted, shadows are cast. Or then, sunlight filters through foliage of a cluster of trees and is reflected by the river in a superbly tranquil scene. It is not a dull universal daylight that falls on a landscape, but a breathing, animated, exulting light – glowing or flashing or scintillating, according to what it touches; or perishing and passing away, entangled in drifting mist. It is light which sleeps but never dies.



**Figure 10: Oil on Canvas**

Original, creative, throughout provoking and soul-searching, each canvas throbs with the artist's pulse, the gamut of his emotions – and one sees the world as the artist sees it.

Be it a sojourn through jungles, mountains, fields, village lanes or along riverbanks or along the sea coast – the traveler in Satish's paintings is alone. Yet, the vivid green of the trees, and the glowing flame of a campfire or lantern is company in itself, mingling the stranger's desires with the natural beauty surrounding him.

There are times one can walk into a painting – when Satish follows the course of a path to take us into the interior. It requires the active participation of the viewer, who decides at which pace he will travel through the painting – a participation that is physical as well as mental. At other times, the landscape forbids us entry and only offers its vastness for appreciation. The landscape remains aloof, however much we may claim to be well-acquainted with it. Very often he

succeeds in creating an introspective mood – the dark clouded sky enveloping the space of the canvas, with a mere strip of the beach or land presenting a hut or a boat. The blue in its darkness strikes an overwhelming pitch and a strange, strong silence ensues.

Eventually, the silence in a painting is far more eloquent than all the wail and thunder of expressionism. Muses Satish, "Silence can help us get in touch with the innermost essence of our being and we align with the power that manifests everything in the universe." Satish wants to reconnect us to the wellspring of calm that may be dormant within the 'self', that sits there quietly awaiting our arrival.



**Figure 11: Oil on Canvas**

Satish's compositions are visualized from these approachable and unapproachable ends, and this is what gives his paintings a distinct touch.

Most obviously in his images of a desolate moorland – such as that of a blizzard riding down a slate grey horizon – and more subtly in the muffled explosions that bathe the meadows in mustard, one senses the cultivation of a distance between the scenes and the viewer. The cumulative impression of Satish's landscape is one of splendid isolation. We are not allowed to participate in the rites of spring and autumn; we are held apart, remote from a roar and swish that we cannot hear, that are stilled by a sobering touch of grey. And when we see this, our exile from the scenes of sylvan glory, we know that we are not presented with a facile, theatrical encapsulation of Nature for urban consumption, but a deeply poignant knowledge of what we have lost.

#### **Conclusion**

Satish Chandra occupies a unique position in the realm of Indian art. Apart from being a consummate painter with a distinctive visual diction, he has also been instrumental in shaping the art milieu of northern plain. This dual facet is the axis of the research.

Threading the different phases of Satish Chandra's art chronologically, it highlights the artist's abstracted vision.

Despite the realistic connotations, his art successfully sculpts away the apparent references to the objective world to evoke a multiplicity of meanings. The polyphonic value is the result of his abilities as a colorist and skill to strike the right note through a flawless symbiosis between form and

content. His paintings form a precious and outstanding archive of the contemporary landscape of modern decade.

#### **Acknowledgement**

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