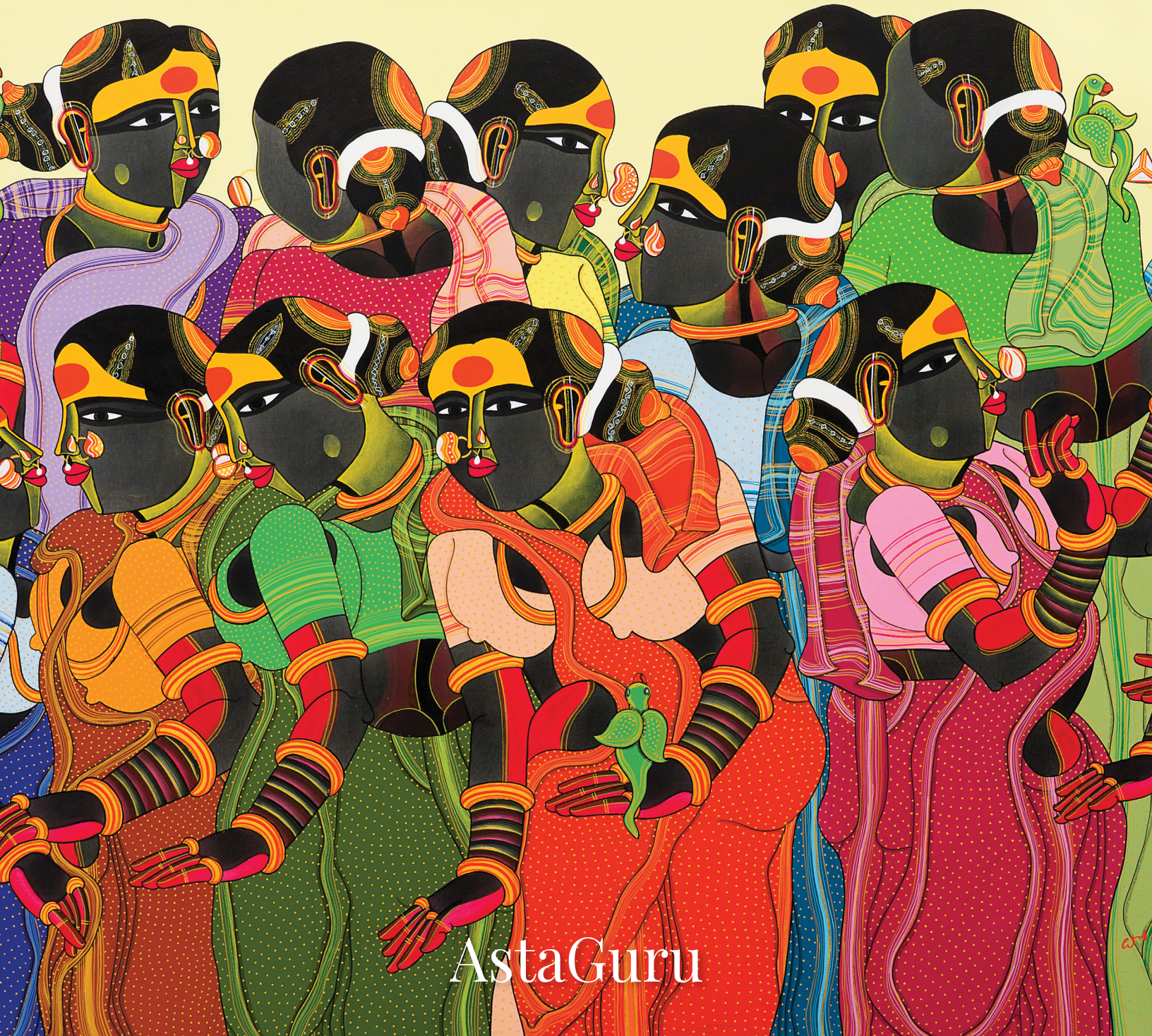
# INNER SANCTUM

## *THOTA VAIKUNTAM*



AstaGuru

# INNER SANCTUM

## *THOTA VAIKUNTAM*



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# AstaGuru | Singapore





# FOREWORD

It is a privilege to welcome you to *Inner Sanctum*, an exhibition bringing together paintings and sculpture by Thota Vaikuntam, one of the most beloved figures in modern Indian art. For more than five decades Vaikuntam has returned again and again to the people of his native Telangana, and in doing so he has created a world so distinctive that collectors recognise his work at a single glance.

The opening of our Singapore gallery marks an important chapter for AstaGuru. Following our first international office in London, Singapore gives us a home at the heart of Asia's collecting community, and a place to share the richness of Indian art with audiences who have long valued the cultural ties between South and Southeast Asia. It feels fitting that one of our first exhibitions here should be devoted to an artist so deeply rooted in place, whose work nonetheless speaks so readily across borders.

Vaikuntam's women, with their kohl-rimmed eyes, vermilion bindis and saris of saffron and indigo, are not idealised beauties but figures of strength and self-possession. His men, whether devotees, musicians or cowherds, carry the same quiet dignity. Through a disciplined economy of line and an unapologetic love of colour, he has given the rural life of the Deccan a monumental presence on canvas.

The works assembled here range from intimate devotional images to a sweeping twelve-foot panorama of a cowherd among his cattle, alongside a bronze figurine in his signature style.

I extend my gratitude to Thota Vaikuntam, whose art continues to inspire us, and to the collectors, colleagues and team members who made this exhibition possible. We are delighted to share it with you.

*Vickram Sethi*
*Chairman, AstaGuru*

# INNER SANCTUM

## *THOTA VAIKUNTAM*

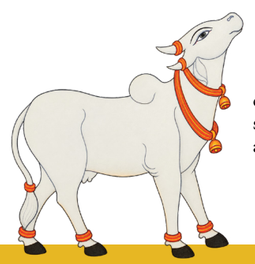
Few modern Indian artists have created a visual world as instantly recognisable as Thota Vaikuntam's. A dark-complexioned woman with almond eyes, vermilion bindis, elaborate jewellery and richly patterned saris of his figures have become so closely associated with his practice that collectors often refer to a work simply as 'a Vaikuntam'. Yet, beneath this familiar vocabulary lies a more profound inquiry into the self: how communion with a living cultural tradition shapes identity, and how its vernacular idiom, imbued with the sacred, becomes an expansive and restorative metaphysical world.

For over five decades, Vaikuntam has returned to the people and cultural landscape of rural Telangana. Mothers and daughters, musicians, devotees, priests and cowherds recur throughout his work, not as ethnographic subjects or picturesque remnants of a vanishing rural life, but as figures through whom he examines identity and belonging. His village is not merely the place he paints. The village becomes his cosmos: where folkways sanctify the everyday and make home an enduring idea.

Born in 1942 in Burugupalli, in the Karimnagar district of present-day Telangana, Vaikuntam grew up in a largely self-sufficient village, where daily life followed the rhythms of agriculture, kinship and the temple calendar. His earliest encounters with performance came through travelling theatre troupes and puppeteers who brought mythological narratives to village audiences. Vaikuntam was captivated by the performers' transformations through costume, make-up, jewellery and gesture, particularly by men who assumed female roles with remarkable conviction and grace. He began sketching these figures, attentive to the painted faces, elaborate adornments and theatricality of their assumed identities.

The experience left more than an archive of visual impressions. It introduced him to the possibility of identity as something inhabited and performed. The body could become a vehicle for transformation; gesture could communicate what words could not; adornment could alter the very presence of a person. These early observations would find an enduring place in his paintings, where the boundaries between the everyday and the divine, and between masculine and feminine modes of expression, are often less fixed than they first appear.

Against his father's wishes that he join the family business, Vaikuntam left for Hyderabad to pursue art. He completed a Diploma in Painting at the College of Fine Arts and Architecture in 1970 before studying painting and printmaking at the Faculty of Fine Arts, M. S. University, Baroda, completing his studies in 1972. Baroda's art school was then an important site of debate about the possibilities of modern Indian art. The guidance of K. G. Subramanyan proved decisive. Encouraged to look beyond the conventions he had absorbed through Western methods of representation, Vaikuntam was directed towards the resources of his own cultural experience. He returned, in his imagination and in his drawings, to the women and people of his village.



This was not a retreat from modernity. It was the beginning of a modernism grounded in vernacular expression. Vaikuntam found that he did not need to borrow an unfamiliar visual vocabulary to make his work contemporary; the forms, performances and aesthetic traditions around him offered ample material for invention. His early charcoal drawings of village women, with their assured contours and frank attention to the body, marked the emergence of a language that would become his own. His first solo exhibition followed at Kalabhavan, Hyderabad, in 1973.

The years that followed were not without financial difficulty. Vaikuntam supported himself partly through work in Telugu cinema, serving as art director on films including *Maa Bhoomi* (1979), *Daasi* (1988) and *Matti Manushulu* (1990). His work on *Daasi* brought him a National Award. The experience further sharpened his understanding of costume, textiles, jewellery and the expressive possibilities of staged environments. By the 1980s, his paintings of the people of Boorugupalli had begun to assume their definitive form. Recognition followed, including the Bharat Bhavan Biennale Award, Bhopal, in 1988–89, and the Lalit Kala Akademi's National Award for Painting in 1993. His work has since been exhibited widely in India and abroad, and the 2024 retrospective *Redefining the Cultural Gaze* at Art Alive Gallery, New Delhi, surveyed his practice from the 1980s to the present.

At the centre of this practice is a sustained act of looking. Vaikuntam's village is neither an idyllic pastoral nor a social document. Its inhabitants are accorded a presence that exceeds their immediate circumstances. His figures face the viewer with a composed, often imposing frontality; their bearing recalls the stillness of sculptural icons, while their gestures retain the immediacy of lived experience. The women, in particular, possess a poise that is at once familiar and ceremonial. Inspired by his mother and the women among whom he grew up, Vaikuntam gives them an authority that does not depend on status or material wealth. Their direct gazes, assured postures and elaborate adornments evoke a local ideal of beauty shaped by the customs and devotional life of Telangana. They are not passive subjects of admiration, but figures who command the space they occupy.

The theatre experience from his childhood remains visible in the way these bodies communicate. A raised hand may recall the *Abhaya Mudra,* the gesture of reassurance and fearlessness found in devotional imagery. A musician's poised fingers, the inclination of a head or the turn of a shoulder can carry the expressive charge of a performed gesture. His men may appear as devotees bearing the *namam* of Vaishnava faith or as musicians; his women possess a monumental presence that unsettles conventional distinctions between domesticity and divinity. Strength and delicacy, masculinity and femininity, are not mutually exclusive categories in this world. They are qualities that move across bodies and identities.

This elevation of the everyday to the sacred is also achieved through a distinctive handling of form. Vaikuntam is first and foremost a draughtsman. His economical yet fluid, seemingly unending line gives the figures a sense of continuity that exceeds the boundaries of the canvas, allowing the particularities of place to open onto a larger, boundless world. Contours define volume without relying on conventional modelling, while expanses of flat colour detach the figures from specific settings. The compositions become less concerned with depicting a particular moment than with establishing a presence that seems to exist outside chronological time. His figures are rooted in a recognisable community, yet they inhabit a space that is at once theatrical, devotional and almost cosmological.

Colour and ornament are integral to this construction. Vermilion, saffron, turmeric yellow and green are set against grounds of ochre, olive, cream and burnt orange. Patterned saris, nose rings, necklaces and stacked bangles are not incidental embellishments; they form a vocabulary through which cultural identity is made visible. The grey tones in which many figures are rendered also recall the stone surfaces of temple sculpture, lending their bodies an iconic stillness. Vaikuntam does not turn ordinary people into deities by removing them from their humanity. Rather, he locates the sacred dignity of the human figure within the world it already inhabits.

The works presented in *Inner Sanctum* bring different dimensions of this universe into view. A depiction of Ganesha recalls the intimate visual language of household shrines, while a solitary devotee bearing the discus and conch evokes the processional traditions of the Telangana countryside. Flute players and their listeners suggest the devotional world of Krishna and the gopis, without losing their grounding in village life. A monumental twelve-foot canvas of a cowherd among his cattle transforms a pastoral subject into a rhythmic field of repeated forms. The bronze *Woman With Veena* carries the frontal poise and contoured presence of his painted figures into three dimensions.

Across five decades, Vaikuntam has remained committed to this visual world. At a time when artistic development is often measured through stylistic rupture and reinvention, his practice proposes another model: one of sustained discovery. His vocabulary has not remained static; it has been refined through repeated attention to line, colour, gesture, composition and the human figure. The achievement lies in how sustained attention sanctifies the domestic and the quotidian, transforming the vernacular into a metaphysical realm.

For audiences in Singapore and across Southeast Asia, Vaikuntam's paintings offer both a particular cultural encounter and points of wider recognition. The traditions of adornment, temple imagery, ritual performance and domestic devotion that inform his work may resonate with visual cultures familiar across parts of Asia, even as the specific histories and customs of Telangana remain distinct. The point is not to collapse distinct traditions into a common aesthetic, but to recognise how the threshold of the *Inner Sanctum* finds resonance in shared customs of devotion, adornment and the sanctification of everyday life.

Singapore's own modern art history offers a useful point of comparison. The Nanyang artists negotiated identity through encounters with a new landscape, seeking a visual language that could hold together inherited traditions and their adopted home. Vaikuntam's trajectory offers a different, though not equivalent, proposition. Having travelled beyond his village for his education, he found his artistic bearings through a return to the place from which he came. His is an art of persistent, deliberate return, where looking closely at one's own inheritance becomes a daily ritual, sanctifying the familiar into an enduring inner world of rootedness.

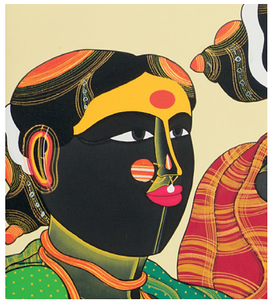
*Inner Sanctum* takes its title from the intimate signs of identity and devotion that recur in Vaikuntam's work: the *kumkum* on the forehead and the kohl that defines the eyes. Small marks, they hold entire worlds of ritual, adornment and cultural memory. In his paintings, home is neither a fixed geography nor a recollection preserved in time; it is a living inheritance, continually renewed through the act of return. The village becomes both refuge and cosmos, its familiar forms sanctified through the artist's sustained attention. For Vaikuntam, to return home is not to retrace one's steps, but to discover, again and again, the infinite within the familiar.

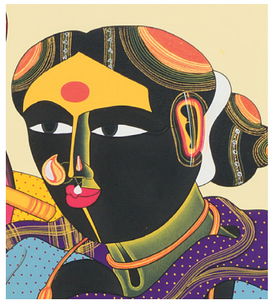


**UNTITLED**
72 x 48 in (183 x 122 cm)
Acrylic on canvas
2020
Signed & Dated: Lower Right

Five figures crowd the picture plane in this monumental canvas, their bodies overlapping like a gathering at a village festival. At the centre stands a turbaned man in saffron, a flute raised to his lips, while the women around him turn their heads, half-listening, half-conversing. A young girl in a striped green traditional attire stands before them, her raised palm echoing the gestures of the adults. Vaikuntam's signature vocabulary is fully at play: kohl-rimmed eyes, vermilion bindis, stacked bangles and the crisp, contoured folds of saris in emerald, madder red and indigo. The ochre ground removes any sense of place, so the scene becomes less a narrative than a celebration of community and music. In their coming together, the figures evoke the restorative power of communal life, where music and shared presence become sources of solace and renewal.













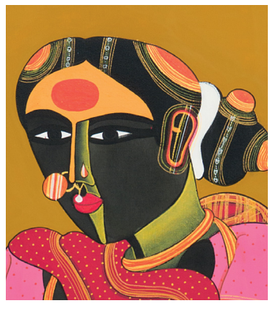


**UNTITLED**
36 x 24 in (91.4 x 61 cm)
Acrylic on canvas
2016
Signed & Dated: Lower Right

Vaikuntam turns to the beloved elephant-headed deity in this intimate canvas, rendering Ganesha with the same sculptural contouring he brings to his village figures. Seated in a relaxed pose, the god raises one rose-pink palm in the *Abhaya Mudra* of reassurance, while his trunk curls towards the other hand. A tall, intricately patterned gold crown sits atop the dark, olive-shadowed form, and voluminous yellow garments billow around his folded legs. At his feet, almost hidden, sits his *vahana*, the mouse. Set against a warm olive-ochre ground, the image evokes the intimacy of a household shrine, inviting a crossing of the threshold into the artist's inner sanctum. This encounter with divinity is not incidental to Vaikuntam's practice; it reverberates across his wider oeuvre, where the sacred continually inhabits the mundane.

**UNTITLED**
60 x 36 in (152.4 x 91.4 cm)
Acrylic on canvas
2026
Signed & Dated: Lower Right

A family portrait in Vaikuntam's idiom, this canvas places a man, a woman and a small child against a flat field of olive-ochre. The man, draped in a powder-blue upper cloth over a deep violet dhoti, raises his hands in a gesture between greeting and explanation, his gaze fixed on the woman beside him. She stands composed in a finely dotted red sari, one arm drawn protectively towards the child who presses close to her side. The restrained palette of blues and reds is enlivened by thin contour lines in yellow and pink that model each fold. The exchange between the figures unfolds through poised, almost ritualised gestures, lending an ordinary domestic encounter the bearing of a devotional performance. The familiar is thus elevated, as the human body assumes the composure and presence of the divine.













**UNTITLED**
48 x 72 in (122 x 183 cm)
Acrylic on canvas
2022
Signed & Dated: Lower Right

A sea of women fills this panoramic canvas, shoulder to shoulder in saris of saffron, crimson, violet, leaf-green and rose. Their faces, with Vaikuntam's characteristic dark complexion, kohl-lined eyes, vermilion bindis and gold ornaments, turn in different directions, as though gathered at a fair or awaiting a procession. Small green parrots perch on shoulders and in hands, a motif the artist often associates with love and longing. Densely layered, the composition is carried by repetition and colour rather than perspective, each sari stippled with fine dots and contoured in bright line. It is a joyous summation of the artist's devotion to the women of Telangana, whose grace and resilience he has celebrated for five decades. The recurring figures and motifs establish a visual rhythm in which individual identities gather into a collective presence, their differences held together by an underlying harmony.

**UNTITLED**
72 x 36 in (183 x 91.4 cm)
Acrylic on canvas
2008
Signed & Dated: Lower Right

A solitary figure stands frontally against a deep ochre ground, holding a tall staff topped with a pale banner emblazoned with the sacred discus and conch. The bold white-and-red *namam* marks repeated across his forehead, arms and chest identify him as a Vaishnava devotee, recalling the wandering mendicants and temple bearers who carried the insignia of Vishnu through Telangana villages at festival time. A vermilion cloth is slung over one shoulder and a white cord falls across his saffron-yellow dhoti. Rendered with Vaikuntam's characteristic economy, the image is iconic and hieratic, the figure's steady gaze lending him quiet authority. Devotion here is presented not as spectacle but as part of everyday rural life.









**UNTITLED**
36 x 24 in (91.4 x 61 cm)
Acrylic on canvas
2026
Signed & Dated: Lower Right

Music is a recurring motif in Vaikuntam's oeuvre, and here a turbaned flautist in a white, finely dotted kurta plays as a woman draws close beside him. Wrapped in a cobalt sari and a mustard blouse, she raises one hennaed palm, her eyes turned towards the musician as though caught mid-song. The pairing inevitably evokes Krishna and Radha, yet the figures remain distinctly of the Telangana countryside, with their stacked bangles, *tilak* and bold kohl. Thin lines of yellow and pink trace the drapery, lending the flat planes a gentle volume against the ochre ground. The result is a quietly lyrical composition about intimacy, attention and the enchantment of sound.

**UNTITLED**
36 x 48 in (91.4 x 122 cm)
Acrylic on canvas
2024
Signed & Dated: Lower Right

Two men and two women occupy the composition, arranged in a closely knit formation against a warm ochre ground. Dressed in vivid blue, yellow and green, their figures are defined by Vaikuntam's characteristic bold contours, flattened forms and saturated palette. Kohl-rimmed eyes, vermilion bindis, elaborate hairstyles, jewellery and patterned garments draw attention to the artist's engagement with the visual culture of rural Telangana. Their raised hands, poised fingers and turned profiles suggest an animated exchange, while overlapping arms and repeated gestures establish a rhythmic movement across the canvas. The intricate detailing of bangles, necklaces and textiles lends the composition a rich decorative quality, reinforcing the relationship between adornment and cultural identity in Vaikuntam's practice. Brought together within a shared pictorial space, the four figures convey a sense of community and collective presence, with gesture, colour and ornament animating their interaction.







**UNTITLED**
54 x 31 in (137.2 x 78.7 cm)
Acrylic on canvas
2008
Signed & Dated: Lower Right

A single woman fills the tall format of this canvas, her stance poised yet reserved, hands loosely clasped before her. She wears a saffron-orange sari stippled with tiny dots and a mustard blouse banded in gold, while stacked bangles in green, yellow and red climb her forearms. A small green parrot perches atop her head, one of Vaikuntam's recurring emblems of love and longing. Her profile, with kohl-lined eye, nose ring and vermilion bindi, carries the stylised grace the artist first admired in the female impersonators of the travelling theatre troupes of his village. Against the soft cream ground, she becomes an archetype of the Telangana woman: dignified, sensuous and self-possessed.





**UNTITLED**
60 x 144 in (152.4 x 365.8 cm)
Acrylic on canvas
Signed: Lower Right

The largest work in the exhibition unfolds like a painted frieze across twelve feet of canvas. A great herd of cattle fills the composition, their pale bodies outlined in delicate pinks, greens and ochres and adorned with red neck-bands, creating a shimmering, rhythmic pattern against the burnt-orange ground. Tucked among them on the right, a dark-skinned cowherd sits absorbed in playing his flute. The scene evokes Krishna as Gopala, the divine cowherd, yet it is equally rooted in the pastoral life Vaikuntam knew in rural Telangana. The repetition of forms recalls temple murals and Pichwai hangings, while the sheer scale gives the work an immersive, almost meditative presence.





*Another view*

**WOMAN WITH VEENA (ED: 2/9)**
49 x 21 x 18 in (124.5 x 53.3 x 45.7 cm)
Bronze
Signed: On the base

In this bronze work, Vaikuntam translates his painted world into three dimensions. A woman stands with her head tilted upwards, cradling a veena whose long neck rises past her face, as though she is tuning the instrument or lost in its melody. Her draped garment falls in heavy, stylised pleats, and the dark patina is enlivened by touches of colour: a yellow blouse, a painted face and bindi, and bands of bangles at the wrist. The sculpture retains the remarkable frontality and poised bearing of his painted figures; even in this new, tactile form, his fluid contours remain unmistakable. The sinuous flow of the figure, from the tilt of her head to the sweep of the instrument, seems to carry an internal rhythm, translating the language of music into the movement of form. The subject also connects the sculpture to the flute players and rapt listeners that recur throughout his paintings, extending his visual language into a new dimension without relinquishing its essential cadence.





**UNTITLED**
48 x 36 in (122 x 91.4 cm)
Acrylic on canvas
2022
Signed & Dated: Lower Right

Two figures meet in greeting, palms pressed together in *namaskara*, against a pale cream sky and an ochre ground. The figure on the left wears a russet dhoti and a striped shoulder cloth, while the companion is wrapped in a white, finely dotted upper garment over bright yellow. Both bear the vertical *namam* marks of Vaishnava devotion on their foreheads, a detail that anchors them in the temple culture of the Deccan. Their mirrored gestures and shared gaze create a composition of quiet dignity, ritual courtesy and companionship. Rendered with Vaikuntam's characteristic economy of line and flat, luminous colour, the encounter feels both specific and timeless, a small moment of village life raised to the level of icon.

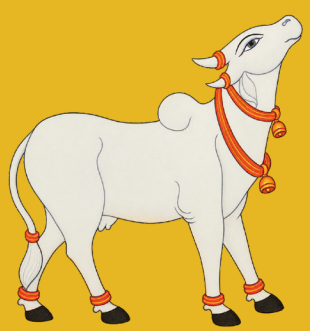




Thota Vaikuntam grew up in Boorugupalli, a village in the Karimnagar district of present-day Telangana. He completed a Diploma in Painting at the College of Fine Arts and Architecture, Hyderabad, in 1970, followed by studies in Painting and Printmaking at the Faculty of Fine Arts, M. S. University, Baroda, where he worked under K. G. Subramanyan. His first solo exhibition was held at Kalabhavan, Hyderabad, in 1973.

His instantly recognisable world of dark-skinned, kohl-eyed women and stately men is drawn from the people of rural Telangana. The artist traces his fascination with the female form to the male performers who impersonated women in the travelling theatre troupes of his childhood. Working in bold primary colours and crisp contour, he turns everyday village life, ritual and music into icons of grace.

Vaikuntam received the Bharat Bhavan Biennale Award, Bhopal (1988–89), the National Award for art direction for the Telugu film *Daasi*, and the Lalit Kala Akademi National Award for Painting (1993). He lives and works in Hyderabad.



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