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● Vaishali Vijaykumar

Two aspects about Nanditha Krishna's life hit you simultaneously when you step into the white majestic building on the CP Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation campus — 18 dogs in one house, and her vivacious personality which defies her age. Dressed in an olive green cotton sari, Nanditha, director of CP Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation, opens up her verdant home, which is a mini art gallery.

A well-known historian, environmentalist, research scholar, and author, Nanditha's home reveals her alter ego as an artist.

"During my childhood, when we went on vacations, I always carried a sketchbook instead of cameras. Nature somehow finds a place in all my creative works. The laid back atmosphere of Ooty would especially bring out the best of my artwork. I sketch mountains, sceneries, and people. I like to keep my sketch works in private. They are close to my heart and I do it only for relaxation. It is an in-between passion for me to unwind from my writing and reading schedules," says Nanditha, who is currently sketching a three-faced Lord Shiva seen under the shade of a peepal tree, and the second one on Koravai Durga. Both are inspired from her book, *Sacred Plants*.

Nanditha learned to master linework and figurework from her teacher KH Ara in 1974. She practiced under his tutelage for four years. "A good line should bend, move and



Nanditha Krishna ● Debadatta Mallick

THE PRIVATE ARTIST

dance, he would say," says Nanditha.

Nanditha's home echoes her personality — rooted in traditionalism but worldly and fresh. Fittingly, a section of the dining area is dedicated to Ganesha idols of all sizes and

metals; and photographs from her visit to Cambodia in 1990 adorn one of the cream-hued walls.

Nanditha's prized possession is MF Husain's painting of an elephant carrying Ganesha. "I handle my collection with care, right from dusting them to safeguarding. My collection of stone sculptures is also close to my heart," says Nanditha, who is yet to partake the art goodness at Kochi Biennale.

In her rare collection are Cherial paintings — a form of folk art — which clearly indicate her eclectic choices. "Ever since I started earning, I invested all my money on art books and paintings. There are over a hundred paintings at home. I've given some to the Kanchipuram museum due to lack of space. I don't go for auctions. My paintings are picked up at the spur of the moment," says the art collector, who loves spending time at the National Museum in Delhi.

Nanditha and her team have been working with the primitive tribe of Nilgiris for the last 20 years. Together, they saved the tribe's Kurumba art from becoming extinct. In this form of art, she explains, paintings are done using natural dye on natural paper. The sale of paintings is the only income for this tribal community.

Nanditha's penchant for sketching and paintings spills into every room of the house, much like her mirthful demeanour which lurks long after you have met her.

(Alter Ego is a series on the lesser-known facet of Chennai's influencers)

“ I am proud to come from a family of three-generation women writers. My grandmother used to write books in Tamil. My mother was again one of the great writers of those times. I often become so absorbed with work that other things seem too trivial. —Nanditha