

# A Cultural Exchange

This Woodstock artist keeps ties to her native India through her paintings.



PHOTOGRAPHY: BLAINE SIMS

Malika Garrett casually slips off her shoes and sits gracefully on the floor. Leaning forward, the raven-haired young woman talks enthusiastically about her journey as an artist. Her large dark eyes widen as she recalls her story.

"I'll never forget the 19th of August, 1985—my first touch of seeing Southern hospitality," she says. "A gentleman who worked at Wesleyan College in Macon came all the way to the Atlanta airport to pick us up. He didn't have to do that, but he did."

This kind gesture welcomed Malika and her father, who traveled with her. Malika came from Calcutta, India, to Macon, Georgia, to attend Wesleyan—sight unseen—on a full scholarship. Going from a city of 14 million people to a town of about 100,000 gave Malika pause, but that attitude changed over time.



**above and left:** Malika uses a palette knife instead of a paintbrush to execute her work. "Because these colors are very bold, I wanted a way to express it too, and my knife does that," she says.

## Charming Start

"I was taken with the Southern charm," she says in a soft, lilting voice. "Everyone was very, very, very nice. They took me in, and that's where it all started."

Her college roommate played a key role in helping her to establish roots here. "She's as Southern as Southern can get," Malika says with

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a laugh. "After four years together, her home became my home."

Malika originally intended to pursue a career in graphic design. As far back as she can remember, she wanted to be an artist or a designer. After graduating, she took a job with the same company that owns *The New York Times*. "I thought I was going to be in advertising, drawing ads," Malika says, shrugging her shoulders. "I ended up selling [ad] space because I was a natural at it."

One job led to another as her career in sales took off. (She now works for Kodak.) She also met and married a Georgia boy, Russell Garrett. They lived for a time in Singapore, traveled the world, and eventually returned to Georgia. Today, they live comfortably in a traditional neighborhood in Woodstock with their children Miles, 7, and Aalia, 2.

Along the way, Malika continued



painting. And a few years ago, she began selling her work through the Internet. She's sold paintings to buyers in China, India, London, Singapore, and throughout the U.S. Malika paints as a creative outlet, but it also keeps her connected to India.

### Art From the Heart

Malika's works hang throughout her home. A two-story foyer and a cathe-

**above:** Although Malika chose to stay in Georgia after college, India inspires her artwork.

dral ceiling in the great room make it easy to display her large-scale canvases. The petite artist looks even smaller next to her paintings. Still, her spunk and personality match the vibrant colors and bold strokes. "My paintings give me more space to

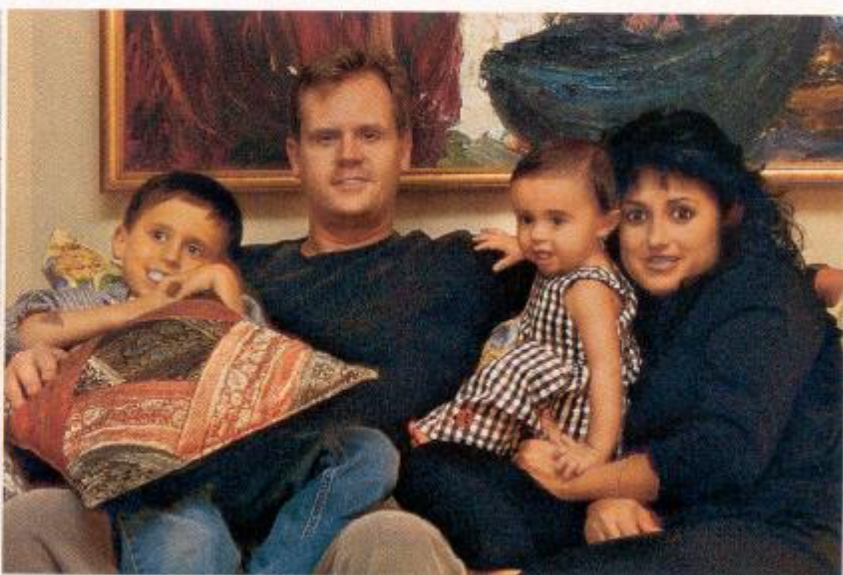
## East Meets South

After marrying a Southerner, Malika discovered that more similarities exist between their respective cultures than she first thought.

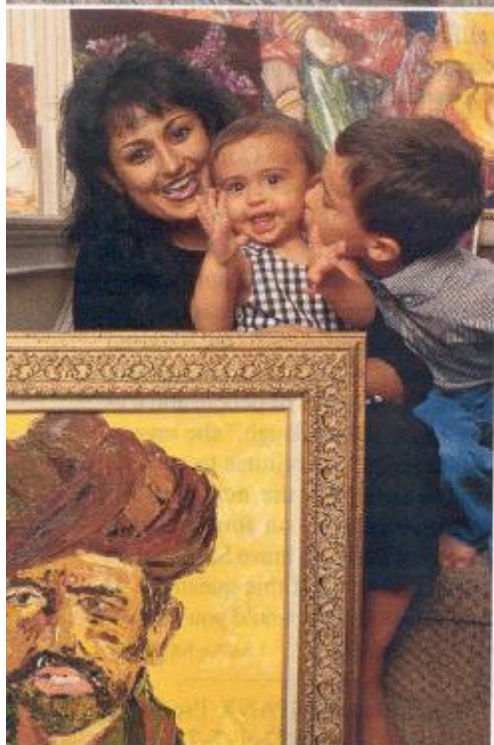
Malika tells the story of the first time her husband's mother served her fried okra. "It's one of my favorite vegetables in India," she says. "My mother-in-law said, 'This is as Southern as it gets, Malika.' I'm like, 'You won't believe it, but we eat the same thing in India.' We love fried okra. The same is true for collard greens."

Family traditions reign in both cultures too. "Like my native city, the South is very much about family gatherings and getting together," she says. "It's funny, when I go back, my parents say, 'You're so American now.' Maybe. But I know the core values are absolutely the same."





**above:** Malika and her Georgia-born husband, Russell, teach their children, Miles (left) and Aalia (right) to appreciate both cultures.



With two active children who keep her busy during the day, Malika paints late at night after the kids go to bed. "I guess that's my peacetime," she says.

express myself with colors," she says. "I feel restricted in small paintings."

Looking through her portfolio, you see that most of Malika's work focuses on portraits—but not in the traditional sense. Bright colors, layer upon layer of oil paints, and softened features blur the line between realism and abstraction. Just like Malika, her style can't be pigeonholed.

The inspiration comes from photographs she takes of people in India. "I'm not into doing portraits," she says. "I want to capture the essence of those living in Calcutta."

Ironically, she says, the city of her birth is dark and dingy. Malika explains, "It's one of the dirtiest places in the world, but the people are incredible. It's that inner feeling I try to express. There's so much hospitality and so much love in the people. I think that Southern people are the closest to those who I come from."

Malika goes back to India every couple of years. When she first came to Georgia, the Indian population here was much smaller, she says, making it even more crucial to feel culturally connected to her roots. Now it has grown significantly,

particularly in the Atlanta area. "The thread to my native culture isn't as skimpy as it used to be because there's a bigger community now," she says. "It's huge, and it's growing. But I have to go back because my subjects and my family are there."

### The Canvas of Life

As Malika pours a cup of coffee, she sums up her dreams for the future.

She hopes to eventually leave her business career and paint full time. But for now, with two young children and a demanding job, she paints mainly in the wee hours of the night. Although she plans a show in New York some day, she continues to sell mostly by word of mouth and through Web sites ([www.mayonarts.com](http://www.mayonarts.com) and [www.myexhibition.com](http://www.myexhibition.com)).

Malika looks out the large window at her very Southern neighborhood and smiles widely. "Georgia is my home now," she says, "but I still hang on to my other home. The soul of my work is in India. It's about the people; it's about the colors. I want to keep that connection always."

SARA ASKEW JONES

**"My paintings give me more space to express myself with colors."**

Malika Garrett, artist