



Printmaking in India

Hello! Everyone welcome to today's episode. Today you will study about the growth and development of printmaking in India. Here we will focus on the journey of printmaking as an individual expression of an artist rather than a medium for reproduction. We will also discuss some of the important artists and their contribution in the field of printmaking. The subject expert is Ms. Sonam Chaprana who is active as a painter and printmaker.

Introduction

Printmaking is an art of using printing plate or stamp to create one or a series of multiple prints.

This art of printmaking is practiced in techniques like intaglio, relief, collography, planography, stencil etc. The process involves transferring of an inked image from one surface i.e. the plate or block to another which is usually on paper.

During the early days it was not regarded as an art, but only a medium of communication and commercialization.

It was during the 14th century, the printmaking techniques were widely utilized for mass production purposes like printing of the Bible with woodblock illustrations, cards, manifestos or posters, etc.

Growth of Printmaking in India



As we have discussed in the previous episode about Printmaking in India was initiated during the 16th century for the purpose of printing the books in Goa, where the two machines were brought by Portuguese missionaries in 1556. The First book in Tamil was printed in Kerala, 'Thambiran Vanakkam' it was translation of 'Doctrina Christam'.

In the reproduction of prints, a large number of contributions were made by European artists and printmakers like William and Thomas Daniell by introducing several series of etching and aquatint techniques to portray Indian views.

Involvement of Indian artisans with the western techniques has encouraged them to take the printing as a medium of reproduction, which resulted in the emergence of bold and linear quality prints of Battala Publications in Calcutta.

The first art school was opened in Madras under Alexender Hunter in 1850. The school of Industrial Art in Calcutta started on 16th August, 1854. Under the headship of David Garrick, who was teaching at Calcutta we find the first printmaker of India i.e. Annoda Prasad Bagchi who later on started his own studio as Calcutta art Studio along with four others. Besides the study of the antiques and puranic themes, Calcutta Art studio had executed portraits of eminent persons of the time.



Munshi Nawal Kishore founded the first Press of Lucknow called as Newal Kishore Press and Book depot 1858, one of the earliest printing and publishing establishments in Asia. Here the printing was done with stone blocks.

The notable areas of concentration of these presses were Calcutta, Dacca, Bombay, Puna, Delhi, Lucknow, Madras, Mysore and Punjab.

In 1880 colour lithographs and large theatre posters were printed in Litho press, whereas several Kalighat paintings were oleographed in Germany.

In 1883 Bampada Bandyopadhyay was the first to get his paintings oleographed from Germany.

Apart from the art schools print making was more practiced as illustrations for printed books, journals and magazines in the regional language and in English from the beginning of the 19th century.

Raja Ravi Varma set up a press in Ghatkopar, Mumbai. "The birth of Shakuntala" was the first print in 1894 from Raja Ravi Varma's press. Oleographs were used to reproduce oil paintings of popular myths, legends, gods, and goddesses. Multiple colours were the main feature of these oleographs.



Printmaking as an Autonomous art form and contribution of the artists

It was during the 19th Century in India, Printmaking graduated into an autonomous art form and accepted as a medium of total pursuit for creative expression in the 20th century. This was initiated by several artists who were working across the country and tried their caliber with printmaking techniques. This initiative was visible in the form of studios like Kala Bhavan and artists' groups like Vichitra Club, those were working and exploring the technique.

Vichitra Club

In 1915, the Tagore family established a club known as 'Vichitra Club' at Jarasanko, their ancestral home. This club was established to promote and encourage young artists to express their individual ideas. **At Vichitra Club the young and upcoming artists like Nandalal Bose, Asit Kumar Haldar, Mukul Dey were encouraged to experiment with every new creative mediums and art forms.**



Gaganendranth Tagore took special interest in lithography at Vichitra club. Later he set up his own press where he worked and published his album of prints 'Adbhutlok' of his punning pictures.

Kala Bhavan

Kala Bhavan was established in 1919 by Rabindranath Tagore. In 1921, under the guidance of Nandalal Bose, printmaking started as a serious art practice at Kala Bhavan as well as among a few artists in India. This was initiated by some artists like Rabindranath Tagore, Nandala Bose, Ramendranath Chakravarty, Manindra Bhusan Gupta, and Biswarup Bose, Mukul Chandra Dey, Binode Behari Mukherjee, Ramkinker Baij, Haren Das who has created and experimented with a number of etchings, linocut and woodcuts during this period.

Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a Bengali polymath, being a poet, dramatist, novelist, composer and visual artist. He is well recognized for his excellent work and his contribution in reshaping the Bengali literature and music during the late 19th century and early 20th century. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. Rabindranath's earliest visual work appeared in his



manuscripts of poems (eg. Purabi). His doodles, scribbles and recorded impressions were done on the page of his writings. Towards the end of his career, when he was at the age of 67, he started painting more consistently with subjects like animals, figures and portraits of women. His artistic style can be characterised by simple forms, bold and rhythmic lines which he has developed by making thousands of sketches around 1928. The subjects depicted often involved animals, figures and statuesque women.. As his interest developed further in visual art and his involvement with Vichitra club encouraged him to try his creativity in lithographs where he gave his sketches a form of lithograph prints.

Gaganendranath Tagore: (1867-1938)

Gaganendranath had briefly taken training during his early days, but he started practicing art seriously at the age of thirty nine. He was the elder brother of Abanindranath Tagore, who is also known for his contribution in Painting during this era of paintings in Bengal school. **Gaganendranath took special interest in western art and experimented with cubism like Picasso and Braque but his work cannot be categorized into Cubism rather can be looked as semi cubism.** He was a satirical cartoonist and



painter.(See Plate 28) **His great sense of humor and pun can be witnessed in his series of lithograph prints which he had published under the name *Adbutlok*.** His style of work was more towards the development of individual style during this Period. Later he has donated his press to Kala Bhavan

Nandalal Bose (1882-1966)

Nandalal Bose during his early days has made sketches and copied works of Raja Ravi Varma and Raphael's Paintings. Nandalal Bose took admission in the Calcutta School of Arts in 1905, and was a student of Abanindernath Tagore. He had assisted Lady Herringham making copies of Ajanta Paintings in 1910. He went to the Ancestral home of Tagore's, Jorasanko, where he has worked and widened his vision. **His vision was capable of absorbing the wide possibilities of printmaking despite being a skillful painter. .He had worked and experimented with different mediums of printmaking like etching, woodcuts, wood engravings, linocuts, dry point, lithographs as well as nontraditional mediums like cement blocks to take the prints. This experimentation was followed by rubbing and relief process. Nandalal Bose had worked on linoleum blocks to illustrate one of the books of Rabindranath Tagore called as *Sahaj Path*. .This**



book was a Bengali children's alphabet book which was printed in 1930-31 which can be considered as a turning point in the history of Indian creative prints. **The illustrations of the Sahaj Path by Nandalal can be compared with the paper cut art of the Santhal community surrounding Santiniketan. These images were flat, silhouette, bold, simple design, balanced with negative and positive forms.** During his visit to Japan and China in 1912, he has returned with some authentic and original Chinese rubbing and Japanese colour woodcut prints. **He has facilitated the artists of Kala Bhavan to see and directly witness the art of printmaking from the Far East.**

Mukul Chandra Dey (1895-1989)

Indian painter, engraver Mukul Chandra Dey (1895-1989) better known as Mukul Dey was an important personality **of his time. He was born in the Sridharkhola region of Bangladesh. A student of Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan School during the early years of the 20th century (c.1906-1912), He left his mark as a pioneer of dry-point etching in India.** He was one of the established artists and dedicated student of Shantiniketan during the Rabindranath Tagore's efforts to establish Kala Bhavan as



an inspiration to the young talent. **He was the first artist to travel abroad for learning printmaking. He travelled to America in 1916 to study printmaking and during the same year he travelled to Japan to learn and master the technique of etching which was less known in India during that period.** He returned to India in 1917, and thereafter he started practicing etching which he has learned during his foreign visits. In the year 1920, he went to London and during his stay he had been practicing etching and dry-point. After returning back to India, Dey went on to introduce the concept of dry-point etching in the world of Indian art. **He has done many portraits, depicting distinct ways of Santhal tribes, rivers, streams, the marketplaces and places around the West Bengal.** In 1928 he was offered the position of the principal of Government School of Art in Calcutta where he has given his best to promote and nurture the young students in the discipline of printmaking.

Ramendranath Chakravorty

Ramengranath Chakravorty was born in Tripura in 1902. His formal education has started after joining the Government School of Arts in 1919. **Leaving his conventional studies in between he left for Calcutta and joined Kala Bhavan which was newly founded in 1921.** On reaching Kala Bhavan, he was lucky to



work under Nandalal Bose as his mentor, who was considered one of the finest and greatest artist of all times. **Ramendranath enjoyed the fresh and conductive environment of Kalabhavan and as he had already received training under Asit Kumar Haldar he was ready to work with all his efforts in search of creativity and visual skill.** Along with other traditional art practises Kalabhavan also emphasized in nature study, which was often seen in the dedicated work of Nandalal Bose which continues to inspire many young artists. **Ramendranath's inclination towards the nature and surrounding environment helped him develop a visual vocabulary which resulted in detailed forms coming out of his own observations. His Innumerable prints consist of themes like people in the field, nearby villages, rivers, shadows under the tree, etc.** Two artists Madame Andre Karpeles in 1921-22 and Mexican painter Fryman in 1923 who have visited for demonstrating the technique of wood engraving and multi coloured woodcut technique respectively had encouraged the artists like Ramendranath to experiment with these mediums. And around the same time. **He had joined Government School of arts, Calcutta as the Head Assistant Teacher, 1929 under the principalship of Mukul Dey. During 1943-46, he was the officiating Principal there and in 1943 he introduced the department in the Art school. He became the**



principal in 1949. He has published his first portfolio of prints as Woodcuts, in 1931 and apart from this he kept on publishing his prints among the public like in a book format titled Call of the Himalayas, 1943.

Manindra Bhusan Gupta: (1898-1968)

He was a contemporary of Ramendranath and a keen admirer and practitioner of Printmaking art at Kala Bhavan. He had primary lessons of slate engraving which had learned during his study in the Jagannath College in Dacca. His works show his inclination towards traditional Bengal art and architecture. He was encouraged and gifted a tool kit of woodcut tools by Pearson after which Manindra started doing woodcut and wood engravings. During his exploration of wood as a medium of printmaking, he had done some woodcuts which were mainly for the purpose of sale as New Year's greeting cards. He left Santiniketan in the year 1925.

Biswarup Bose

He was another active and enthusiastic artist at Kala Bhavan who took special interest in printmaking along with Ramendranath and Manindra Bhusan Gupta. He went to Japan in 1935 when he was only 23 years old and stayed there to



learn the Japanese multi color woodcut technique. He used to speak Japanese fluently and learned printmaking techniques like Lithography, etchings, woodcut and linocut etc. He had taught all of these techniques in Kala Bhavan also and had printed many pictures in Japanese woodcut techniques during his career.

Binode Behari Mukherjee

He was the artist who had less vision since his childhood, but had a tremendous approach towards the beauty of nature. He is among those Indian artists who have contributed towards the development of art in India during its survival for Identity. **Apart from being a watercolorist he had taken up printmaking during working with his contemporary, Ram Kinkar Baij in Kalabhavan where many experiments were taken up to establish printmaking as fine art media in India. He has taken paper pulp prints and also worked in non-traditional media like cement blocks. Binode Behari Mukherjee's powerful compositions treated wood-cut in a modern way.** In his prints, is seen a respect for form and a feeling for abstract values which give these works a rugged power. **Especially notable are his landscapes in woodcut**



and linoleum (1936-45). They have a strong well-knit texture, powerful movement and an organic feel.

Ram Kinkar Baij (1910-1980)

Ram Kinkar Baij known to be the first modern sculpture of 20th century. He was born in village Bankura in 1910 and during the year 1925 he moved to Santiniketan where he studied under Nandalal Bose. **He is also known for his Printmaking because of its high for the high artistic quality of the etchings, dry-point and lithographs that he had done. He had done the works on Santhal community.**

Chittaprasad Bhattacharya

Chittaprasad Bhattacharya was born in 1915, Naihati. He was one of the passionate printmaking artists working during the struggling India. He dropped his surname Bhattacharya from his name as his own private protest against the caste system. **He was denied for admission in the Calcutta Govt. School of Art and Santiniketan's Kala Bhavan but still the**



images of his art were so expressive and powerful in their nature to convey the message. Some of his works that he had done for Communist propaganda remained unsigned and were more of poster quality . **He was recognized only after his Famine pictures which were burnt and banned in rage by the British government during 1943. These pictures and his compiled reports of famine were widely recognized as Chittaprasad's Hungry Bengal.**As a printmaker he had used woodcut and linocut as his medium of expression and to reach out the populace. **His images were all dedicated to showcase the misery and pain of the poor and middle class men, hungry and dying people of Bengal. He was active in socioeconomic concerns and had worked on these themes.**

Somnath Hore

Somnath Hore was born in 1921 in the village of Barama in Chittagong, now in Bangladesh. At a very early age, Somnath Hore started making posters for the Communist Party. He too was more influenced and concerned about the Humanism as ChittaPrasad. It was on the request of the party leader P C Joshi that Somnath Hore was admitted to the Government College of Art & Craft. **He had designed many posters for the Communist Party but gradually with time his images moved towards**



psychological aspects of suffering that he has experimented significantly with the printmaking process. He had done etching, intaglio and lithography and gave his technical experience in the final form of his Wound series, which was dramatized with a red spot with white on white prints which reflected the Political instability during the year 1971. For these prints he had made mould which were done in clay were then moulded in cement and pressing through which the Paper pulp was made. These prints were taken on these paper pulps which were prepared by the artist. Between 1954 and 1958, he was lecturer at Indian College of Art & Draughtsmanship in Calcutta. From 1958 to 1967, he held several posts such as incharge of the graphic section of the Delhi College of Arts visiting professor of the M S University, Baroda and Visva Bharati, Santiniketan and head of the graphic art department of Kala Bhavan, Visva Bharati.

Haren Das

Haren Das had practiced printmaking with great enthusiast. His subject matter is often landscapes and the woodcuts display a pattern of varied textures and motifs forming an overall pattern. His



prints portray his simple incidents of his life that he had experienced in the countryside. Haren Das was one of the significant products of this college. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he remained loyal to the training he received from the academy. **His training in printmaking came from his respected teacher, Ramendranath Chakraborty, and he remained devoted to his guidance throughout life. Haren Das devoted himself to the less popular medium (among the modern artists) called wood engraving. He experimented with the western technique of wood engraving with the Japanese multi-colored printing. He had combined the Stencil with oil based inks and did the whole process himself starting from layout to tracing, cutting and printing.**

Printmaking at other Places

Before 1950, other artists like Raufdar, Y.K Shukla, L.M Sen in Lucknow, Muralidhar Tali and Saifuddin Ahmad have started working with the medium of graphics at other centres in the country. Y. K. Shukla learnt etching in Italy and started part- time courses in the evenings at the J.J School of Art. Since the medium requires technical knowledge for the processes involved it was insular before 1950. **Also the availability of the**



material at the local market was one of the factors which made printmaking more complex to persuade.

Since the technique of printing evolved in Europe it requires continuous exploration and research in the working field. **Indian artists were eager to know the wide possibilities of this medium which lead printmaking as an medium of self expression, more aesthetically sound, independent, forceful and more self sufficient. The 1950s may be considered as very crucial and a period of change in the Indian art field where all the fields like painting and sculpture have developed more creatively.** At the same time graphic art was preparing to make a ground for its development. Later Sir J.J School of arts and Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda had initiated the practice of printmaking with great zest and zeal.

Printmaking moved towards its development and has been an important medium of self expression for various contemporary artists.