

Current Impressions: Prints by Contemporary Indian Printmakers

The Frank Museum of Art at Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio announces the opening of “Current Impressions: Prints by Contemporary Indian Printmakers. The exhibition includes thirty-five prints by twenty-nine artists from India. The works were selected by noted printmaker and curator, Vijay Kumar of New York City. The Frank Museum of Art will be the only American venue for this exciting exhibition. Printmaking mediums to be exhibited include etchings, aquatints, serigraphs, woodcuts, engravings, and lithographs. The exhibition will continue from April 2 through June 6. There will be a reception on Thursday, April 17 from 5 to 7pm. The museum is located at 39 S. Vine Street in Westerville. Admission is free and open to the public.

Exhibiting artists include: Dattatraya Apte, Vijay Bagodi, Ananda Moy Banerji, Atin Basak, Uttam Kumar Basak, Yashpal Chandrakar, Anju Chaudhuri, Shail Choyal, Walter D’Souza, Rajan Fulari, Jayant Gajera, Hemavathy Guha, Sushanta Guha, Sumona Jana, Hanuman Kambli, Shekhar Kanade, Vijay Kumar, V. Nagdas, Kavita Nayar, Shahid Parvez, Avijit Roy, Rajib Roy, Salil Sahani, Ajit Seal, Kavita Shah, Bhawani Shanker Sharma, Shyam Sharma, K.R. Subbanna, and Sushma Yadav.

CURATOR’S STATEMENT

Growing up in the 1950’s in Lucknow, a city in northern India, the first printing I saw being done was “thappa” or wood-block printing on fabric. The wood blocks used for this printing were made from a beautiful, dark dense wood called sheesham, carved in intricate patterns of flowers, birds, animals or paisley most often, with a handle on the back for ease of use. Many patterns needed several different wood blocks, each carved to fill in a different color. In little stores I would watch a worker sitting cross-legged on the floor, in front of a padded bench (just inches off the ground) on which the printing took place. In quick succession he would move to the side the section of fabric he had just printed, dip the wood block in the ink with a sharp tapping sound (thuk!), line up the newly-inked wood block on the next section of fabric to be printed and swivel the block into place on the fabric, then another sharp tap (thuk!) as he hit the handle with his hand to press the ink into the fabric. Yard after yard of cotton or silk, for saris or other uses, rapidly moved by as I watched transfixed....

Many of the prints that I remember being for sale in the markets, or on the walls of friends’ houses, at that time were inexpensive, glossy, brightly-colored offset prints of Hindu gods and goddesses. These prints were the “direct descendents” of prints made a half century before. In the late 1800’s Raja Ravi Verma had popularized printmaking in India with the “chrome” or “oleo” lithographs his printshop produced (often copies of his paintings) of Hindu religious subjects drawn in a classical European style—today these prints are collectors’ items.

The first two wooden printing presses in India were imported in 1556 by Portuguese Jesuits in Goa for their missionary work. Two centuries later, during the British colonial period, engravers and etchers were among the European artists who began to come to India. Their engravings depicted the Indian landscape, monuments, and wildlife, and also Indian manners and customs. I remember seeing these very colonial and rather elegant, hand-colored engravings: of dark men in turbans, of battle scenes, of village scenes with bare-chested women, of caravans with beautiful elephants, horses and camels, of this Lord or that Viceroy, and of Maharajas and Nawabs of this or that state in British India.

The British government introduced lithography to India in the 1820’s, and by the 1850’s (as part of their program to introduce their own educational system in India to educate an elite class) were setting up art schools in major cities throughout India. By the 1870’s printmaking processes were being taught at these schools—although with a focus on commercial applications or reproducing “ethnic” crafts and art for the foreign market. The first school in India to really focus on printmaking as its own fine-art form was Santiniketan Kala Bhavan, founded in 1919 in Bengal. While many techniques were taught

(including the reductive woodcut technique brought back by artists who had been to China and Japan), the images and subjects of the prints made at Santiniketan were local. During this time prints were also being used to promote the movement for independence from Britain.

When India did gain independence in 1947, painting dominated the fine-art scene, as it still does today. More artists and teachers now travelled abroad to Europe or America and brought back what they had learned of printmaking or other techniques. Some artists, once they left, never returned to India to live, but still had great influence there. Krishna Reddy is one such artist. He began working at Atelier 17 in Paris in the 1950's, where he helped develop the "viscosity" etching technique for making multi-color prints from a single plate. He kept returning to India to teach at different art colleges and universities, and helped start printmaking workshops around the country.

Four years ago I got the chance to curate (with K. R. Subbanna) a show of prints by American and Indian printmakers that travelled to various cities in India. A seminar on printmaking took place the day after the show first opened in New Delhi. The large audience had the same interests and concerns as printmakers everywhere: how best to sell their work; questions about numbering editions; issues concerning the quality of the materials they were able to get; questions about which ink to use, which solvents are safest, etc. A major concern was the gallery owners' negative attitude toward selling prints--saying they couldn't make money doing so. This is now changing. With "out-sourcing" and the rapidly expanding Indian economy, the art market in India is booming. Many painters are selling out their shows for higher and higher prices; gallery owners are inviting established artists to painting "camps"--lavish all-paid trips to far-away destinations in exchange for a painting or two done during their stay. Since price seems to be related to the size of work, paintings keep getting bigger and bigger. The market, and price, for prints has also improved, and now making prints (e.g., turning drawings into silkscreens or large scanned images) has become an obvious solution for painters looking for ways to increase their output.

The prints in this show are not large, and the artists are all dedicated printmakers. From the beginning I asked them to submit prints made by traditional processes--not computer-generated or scanned digital prints--although of course artists in India are as adept as others (if not more so!!) in the use of computers. As computer technology keeps changing, so there are always also new techniques being developed in the "hands-on" printing processes as well.

Woodcuts, serigraphs, lithographs and etchings are all represented in this show. The imagery in a few prints can identify their country of origin, but this is not true of most. Some work is humorous, some narrative, some mostly concerned with issues of composition and color. Images by several artists involve galaxies and outer space, many include figures, but all are quite personal. I am especially pleased that several artists produced a new print series in response to the invitation to submit work for this exhibition

I was delighted when Professor Nicholas Hill asked me to curate this show. He has been truly supportive every step of the way, and I am very grateful to him for this opportunity. K. R. Subbanna, Rajan Fulari, and Dattatraya Apte from Garhi Studio in New Delhi all helped in putting this show together. I am especially grateful to Dattatraya Apte who was instrumental in contacting other printmakers in India, sending me images of their work, and collecting the prints once I had made my selections.

...I can still in my mind clearly hear the ...thuk!...thuk!...as I watched thappa printing so many years ago. Those sounds are rare these days...silkscreen has become the favored method for printing on fabric...and the beautiful thappas are now themselves sold as art objects or antiques...sounds of the past...remembered but heard no more.....

