

The Role Of Technique In Contemporary Printmaking

Uttam Kumar Basak
Assistant Professor

Department of Graphic Art (Printmaking)
Kala-Bhavana, Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan-731235, India

Abstract : The terms 'art' and 'technique' are inextricably intertwined in the world of art. The artist, according to his mental attitude uses these two terms for their utility in the field of art. For purposes of working, if one wishes to stress the artistic aspect—the technical aspect may lie untapped; on the other hand, a work of art created through technical skill may have its artistic qualities unapparent. In some cases, both qualities having equal importance have spread as works of art. It is however, near impossible, to give complete form to a work of art without the role of technique. In Printmaking technique is to parallel support the image not vice-versa. Greater thought must be given to the image and advantages of the Printmaking medium.

This applies in every field of visual art especially in Printmaking as various chemicals, mechanical and technical methods are involved in the practice of contemporary Printmaking. To discuss in detail the active role of technique in art from the perspective of a printmaker. It is to be observed that how printmakers express their personal thoughts by selecting an appropriate medium which help them to climb the steps to aesthetic success. The printmaker's views, his ideas, the development of his art are expressed through various methods, their forms and techniques. Printmaker's way of expression is purely personal. I have derived these views from my experience as a student of the Printmaking section of the Fine Arts Department of the university. In this article, I propose to discuss in detail the active role of technique in art from the perspective of a printmaker.

Index Terms - Printmaking, Chemicals of Printmaking, Printmaking Techniques, Printmaking Methods.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relation between the printmaker and the method and technique he uses is to be discussed with the development of modern printmaking in the West- its development and reach. The reason for this is that modern printmaking first started in Europe. Between the 15th century and the 3rd decade of the 20th century, we find some artists who have implemented printmaking method and techniques in their art. Among these the names of Albrecht Dürer, Rembrandt, Goya, Damien, Paul Gaugin and Picasso can be mentioned. Through Goya's aquatint, Damien's lithographs, Paul Gaugin's woodcuts, and Picasso's etching new possibilities opened up in the world of graphic arts. In the second decade of the 20th century, the German Expressionists with their works added to the richness of this art. Later, during the end of the 4th decade of the 20th century, Hayter's workshop in Paris and some graphic artists from USA who introduced modern techniques to printmaking added a new dimension to the form of art. Gradually these practices spread around the world. When the Indian Government opened up channels for cultural exchange with foreign countries, printmaking too entered India.

Although printmaking and its modern innovations started in the West, in India experiments with techniques were no less important. There were many contemporary artists in India who were deeply involved in this art form and who by their experiments enriched printmaking and gave it a new direction. Unlike the artists from the West who only experimented with form and technique, Indian artists used techniques to express traditional content and subject matter. In the history of printmaking, Indian printmaking has an independent and a high position. In this field, these artists contributed, are unforgettable.

We are aware that creative printmaking started taking place in India during pre-Independence or during the second decade of the last century. If we go through the history of printmaking of India we find earliest

example of printmaking in India took place in the ancestral home of the Tagores in Jorasanko. The Vichitra Studio was established in 1915 to channelize the talent that lay in the Tagore family. It was Mukul Dey (1895-1989), with encouragement from the Tagore family, who started printmaking at this studio and it was through his efforts that creative printmaking began in India.

In 1921, when Kala-Bhavana in Santiniketan was established as an art institute in Visva-Bharati, Printmaking was one of the subjects taught. Nandalal Bose was one of the first artists to use printmaking as a medium of creativity rather than for making multiple copies. In India Santiniketan became a place for nourishing creative Printmaking.

On the whole, during the first phase of creative printmaking in Kala-Bhavana, the three artists who laid the foundation for the department of Graphic Arts were Ramendranath Chakravarty, Manindra Bhushan Gupta and Biswarup Bose. Through their attempts at experimentation in printmaking they were able to create a congenial atmosphere.

A little later, we come across three other artists in Santiniketan who introduced a fresh approach to printmaking. They were Nandalal Bose, Binode Bihari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar Baiz. We find a quality of graphic works of Benode Bihari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar. We have observed that in the history of creative printmaking, right from the first phase upto the middle of the 20th century, Nandalal, Benode Bihari and Ramkinkar were familiar with various possibilities of the printmaking medium—its characteristics and technique. On the other hand, the artists of the Government Art institutions used printmaking chiefly for its reproductive quality—most of them unaware of the possibilities of this new medium.

The Printmaking of Kala Bhavana come in lime light when in 1969, Somenath Hore joined Kala-Bhavana as the head of the Department of Graphic Arts. This ensured a new vigor in the department. Printmaking was introduced in Graduation level.

The department of Graphic Arts progressed and became an important part of Kala-Bhavana. The 70s and 80s saw a great era in printmaking in Kala-Bhavana under the leadership and influence of Somnath Hore and Sanat Kar—a number of talented printmakers emerged from among the students. This new generation of printmakers would take this genre to different art institutions across India.

So far we have seen how creative printmaking made its beginning in different parts of India. Although printmaking made a small beginning, it gradually spread out all over the country in a big way. Along with the spread of the printmaking genre, we observe the progress made in technical skill, in style and in artistic perception. Works by contemporary Indian artists help us to trace this development. Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan played a vital role in the development of Printmaking and it will be more relative to discuss the Prints of great Printmakers like Somnath Hore and Sanat Kar in context of role of Printmaking technique applied to their work process.

2. EXPRESSIONS OF TWO CONTEMPORARY PRINTMAKERS OF SANTINIKETAN, INDIA: THEIR USE OF MEDIUM, TECHNIQUE AND STYLE

The kind of creative printmaking that we saw in the first half of the 20th century has today been transformed into a different world. The progress made in printmaking in the last 30 years is unbelievable. From the beginning of the 20th century Indian artists have been communicating with the outside world and there have been cultural exchanges with artists of other countries and they have been introduced to various methods of printmaking, newer techniques and styles. Many artists took up this new learning and practiced it in their art. A number of artists started using these new ideas without having any experience, which led to problems and in trying to solve these problems some new ideas emerged which were not artificial—yet out-of-the-ordinary. These ideas were an addition to the history of printmaking.

In printmaking, each method has its own characteristics and language. The artist, according to his need will select a medium and style. Somnath Hore and Sanat Kar, the two great contemporary printmakers and their relations with their mediums. We shall see how these artists could express their viewpoint using specific medium, technique and style.

We start with Somenath Hore. In traditional Indian art the chief aim was to express the inherent truth of an object. The artist conceptualized it. This art was totally objective and symbolic. Somenath Hore saw art in a similar manner.

By completely reflecting the artist's thoughts and subject-matter against the backdrop of art—printmaking plays an important role. Although in his early career he was not connected directly to printmaking, he did feel the need for expressing this reflection. He quickly felt a connection between his life, his mental make-up and his emotions with the different printmaking methods. His thoughts and ideas found articulation through the various techniques of printmaking.

While working on these mediums he was aware of the characteristics of material used in each medium. While working not only did he keep these characteristics in mind, he was able to communicate an aesthetic appeal through his prints. As he matured as an artist, he gradually moved away from these techniques.

In the first stage of his work, Somenath Hore used this medium to put across his views. Although technique and style did not play an important role, he was successful in expressing his ideas. In the practice of creative printmaking a contact needs to be established between artist and his form. The total progress depends on this. In the case of Somenath Hore, this contact can be perceived from the first stage of his career. To assess the achievement of Somenath Hore in the medium and form in creative printmaking, one has to turn to the history of creative printmaking in India.

But Somenath Hore's predecessors worked as printmakers but were not fully aware of the distinctive features of printmaking and therefore the spread of this medium remained sluggish. The medium, besides, had a limited circle.

Somenath Hore's exceptional works make him stand apart from his predecessors and contemporaries. It can be said that no artist other than him had the skill to work in so many techniques. Apart from his skill in using different mediums and techniques, he also experimented with techniques making use of the far-reaching effects of this art form. Somenath Hore's entry into the world of printmaking is a turning point in the history of this medium.

Somenath Hore became conscious of the various techniques of printmaking and found ways to use these effectively. He was enthusiastic about tonal effects and he used wood-engraving and multi-coloured blocks in linocut to work on this. He was able to bring about a gradation in tones. Using a number of coloured blocks he created some beautiful prints through experimentation.

We notice in Hore's works a depiction in art where art and his life converged. Here art does not remain a technically perfect realistic work. The artist's opinion, his skill in using technique and his attitude to life all combine intrinsically to create art.

When Somenath Hore traced a line, the line was not only a line—it did not act as an outline of an object, neither did it demarcate any limit. The line tried to bring about the essence of an object or a sentiment. The line takes an active role in expressing the character of an object and the emotion it evokes. The artist in manifesting his object, uses according to his needs, uses different variations of lines. His aim is not to depict a two-dimensional drawing of an object within a framework. He uses a network of lines with special characteristics to depict the formation of an object with a suggestiveness to express it. The lines are sometimes firm, sometimes rhythmic. These lines have been created keeping in mind the thought behind the object. In depicting the many forms of these lines, he was specially helped by the medium of intaglio. With the amount of acid used and the pressure of one's hand, a variety of lines can be created according to the dimensions needed. On the one hand, the artist's social awareness or the throbbing of an object with its suggestiveness and on the other hand, the medium—the full potential of form—a complete fusion of both has occurred. Technology and the artist's emotions go together giving each other appropriate importance we may now discuss the importance of intaglio and style in the works of *Somenath Hore*.



Engraving by Somnath Hore, 1983



Engraving by Somnath Hore, 1983

A number of factors have to be studied—how much acid is to be used on lines of a metal plate with an application of high ground. Also, how long the acid should be allowed to remain to give the exact suggestiveness ensured by the artist. The acid is measured according to the character of the lines. If the lines are to be firm and bold, acid has to be used accordingly; if the lines are to be soft and velvet-like, the acid has to be decreased. Sometimes a number of lines are placed together to give a dark texture. Somnath Hore had acquired a thorough knowledge and experience of the intaglio medium and was able to manoeuvre its technical aspects to suit his purpose. This is clear from his etching in black and white, entitled, *The Children* (1958).

When the artist works in the medium of engraving, everything changes. Whereas in etching the process is not direct, in engraving the process is more direct. This means the artist's immediate reaction can be transferred onto the plate straight away. The character of the lines depends on the artist's drawing and the engraving. The lines could be rough, bold, firm or rhythmic. In his engraved prints, Somenath Hore has brought about an integrated connection between his lines and his subject-matter. In Somenath Hore's life, the Bengal Famine of 1943 is seen to have made a deep impact—numberless homeless, emaciated humans with shrunken faces and skeletal bodies; their lack of food keeping them on the verge of death. Somenath Hore articulated the storm of his emotions in lines that showed strength and boldness. Cadaverous bodies with bony ribcages were all expressed through lines that brought out the stark reality of human indignity. The artist's thoughts seemed to flow through the engraved lines of the plate with sheer boldness. He was a structure-perfect artist and this bold structure was created with bold lines.

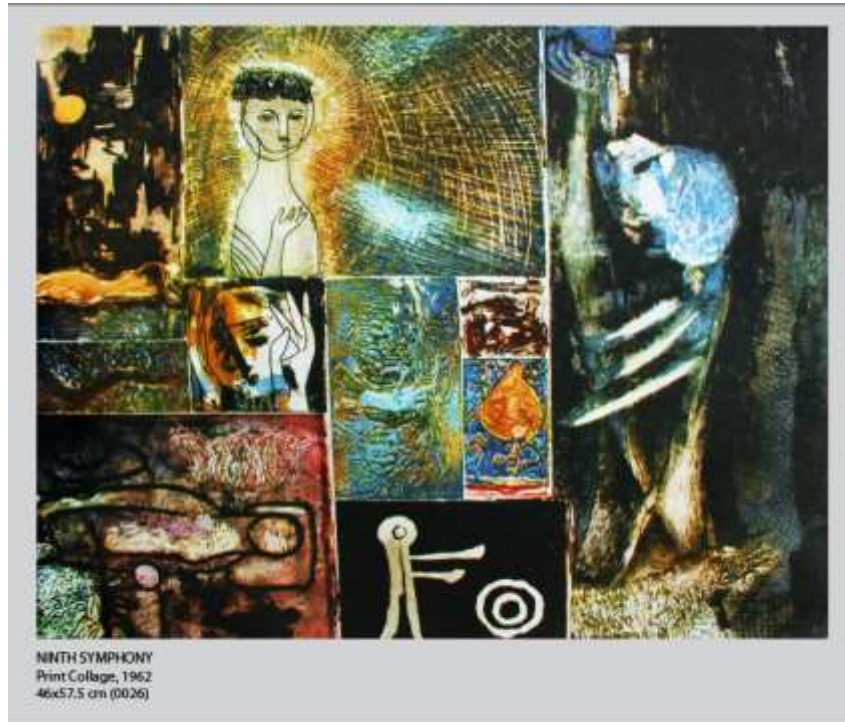
During the second phase of his career (1959-64), Somenath Hore started working with colour intaglio. In 1958, printmaker Krishna Reddy held an exhibition of his colour intaglio prints. Hore found the use of colour, the texture and form in these prints very attractive. He was very curious about these effects but Krishna Reddy could not help with either satisfying his curiosity, nor could he answer his queries. Somnath Hore, on his own, worked out the technique and soon mastered it. By 1959, he was able to start colour printing. He had been able to create layers on the metal plate by applying different amounts of acid. In the same way, he mixed various amounts of oil with colour and used this with different kinds of rollers, some with more oil, and some with less. As a result, from the same plate, different layers are created with different colours and when pressure is applied one gets a complete colour print from one plate.

Later (1964), he was able to make the intaglio process his own and his thoughts seemed to merge into the process. At this stage, his subject was the 1943 Bengal Famine. The tragic reality of this catastrophe was reflected in his prints—through the deep gashes created by acid on the plate. He knew exactly how to use the acid on the plate—at times he used strong acid to cause deep wounds on the plate—to give a rough, uneven texture. He was able to handle this process according to his perception. He used these effects in his next series- Wounds.

We have been discussing his works in intaglio—we now turn to lithography which was also one of his favorite mediums. His contribution in this field is no mean achievement. While in Delhi and later, in Kala-Bhavana, Santiniketan, he worked in this medium. Here, too, he used the particular characteristics of the medium to express himself—creating flawless prints. With the help of the grain in stone, he used his crayon in an unprecedented manner. He also mixed the ink with water in such a way as to create different tones—some translucent others opaque.



Lithograph by Somnath Hore , 1982



Viscosity Print by Somnath Hore, 1962

In 1970, Somenath Hore entered a new phase in his career- this was outside the conventional printmaking technique. Although in form, he would take help from the intaglio process. He was profoundly affected by the destructive war of Vietnam. The tortured bodies of victims who were hurt by bullets or bombs took shape in his art. On a cement plate, he created various layers of embossed forms and then covered the whole thing with paper pulp. Taking a spoon or a spatula, he rubbed the pulp at each fold creating an image. After removing the paper layer, one can see an embossed image on it. In this way he created various images— blood oozing out of wounds—but white, cold, helpless and sadness without hope.

In these works, besides using the intaglio process, there is a sculptural quality. Apart from viewing the picture, the viewer is able to experience a tactile feel and is overwhelmed by this sculptural effect. One can easily conclude that Somnath Hore's thought processes were expressed best by the printmaking medium. He owes a lot to this medium. In later years, he further contributed to this medium in a remarkable way. This shall be discussed later.

Among his contemporaries, the next printmaker whose contribution to the printmaking medium is significant in term of role of Technique in Contemporary Printmaking is Sanat Kar. He was able to bring about changes and new ways of printmaking in the intaglio process which helped it evolve as a technique.

Sanat Kar was born in Kolkata. He studied at the Government School of Art. As a student he was drawn to the printmaking medium and successfully worked in wood-engraving and dry point. While in college he acquired skill in method and technique, though in a limited way, from his teacher Haren Das. But his inner urge made him work hard, researching and experimenting with different printmaking techniques. He became an accomplished printmaker very soon.

He was able to add another process to Indian intaglio. This special medium with its technique and form brought about an enhanced creativity and aesthetic delight.

The print of 70s, of Sanat Kar shows the experimenting in wood-engraving. He successfully exploited the material needed for wood-engraving and was able to establish himself as a creative printmaker. But he did not stop here. Instead of continuing to work on conventional wood, he experimented with plywood, sunmica and other substitutes for wood. He was able to synthesize woodcut and wood-engraving.

Very soon, he was working on wood and wood substitutes and experimenting with these. This led him to a new process which was wood-intaglio. He was able to create lines and textures on plywood with the help of a machine- in some places the plywood was made smooth with polish. He could work creatively on plywood directly and yet the expense of metal plates could be avoided



Wood intaglio by Sanat Kar, 1984



Wood intaglio by Sanat Kar, 1978

The process of wood-intaglio is different from that of metal-engraving. The wood-intaglio is worked with brine on a layer while metal-intaglio uses acid.

Before he started to work on this new medium, he had done colour intaglio on metal plates. Even in this process, he did not remain in the conventional mode. Instead of using ground on the metal plate, he used printing-ink or crayon or graphite pencil and then added the acid onto these lines. Since he used a lot of

texture in his works, he was always experimenting with newer material to create textures. Hence he dispensed with the need for ground and going beyond its limits, he was free to experiment in creating new plates. However, even in his experiments he kept the graphical quality of etching in mind. While using acid on plate, he was conscious at every level that the special quality of etching be expressed.

Apart from this two great printmakers many more such innovative Printmakers from the rest of India were making an significance contribution in exploration of role of technique in their prints . They are Kanwal Krishna, Laluprasad Shaw, Amitabha Banerjee, Jagmohan Chopra and many more. The Printmaking technique was not merely an instrument to work but a great way of express the ideas of Printmakers as per his or her need of artistic expression.

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