

art dose



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Print (Mak)ing

The graphic

“Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence in the place where it happens to be”, said Walter Benjamin.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of the multiple and the means for reproducibility has maintained a consistent appetite throughout history- with religion, entertainment, bureaucracy and politics generating occasions for further innovations. The stages in sustaining standardisation and equal values within communities functioned through methods of stamping, coin minting and casting mediums such as metal and terracotta. The need to disseminate information to a larger populace soon found thought and letter in ‘print’.

Undoubtedly, with wood being the most accessible medium, hand-carved woodblocks were used in the earliest form of printmaking. With designs carved in relief, its multiple quality was first made use of to stamp on fabric. The invention of paper in China and

its gradual application in the Islamic world and the West between the eighth and eleventh century AD, improvised woodblock printing techniques for the new medium. Following this, ‘graphic art’ found mass significance even before the ‘letter’ made any technical progress, until the German printer Johannes Gutenberg in the early fifteenth century set up the first movable type metal printing press. Even with the standardisation of alphabets and numerals, the creative hand of the artist was a prerequisite to continue illustrating his



The images are examples of the digital incorporated into the process of printmaking. Black and white digital photographs were printed on OHP sheets and heat-transferred onto zinc plate surfaces. Subsequently, work was done on the composition using traditional printmaking techniques.
Title: Untitled, Medium: Digital print, etching and aquatint on paper, Edition number: Proof print.

pictorial compositions. The figure of the ‘artist’ soon acquired an important status within this domain. Printmaking encountered later stages of experimentation in metal alone: intaglio (alternatively engraving or etching; a common incision technique that cuts into the surface of the plate) became a marker of finesse and skilled craftsmanship.

Making use of metal plates (zinc or copper) and chemicals, only a limited edition of prints -each considered a unique and original work of art- could be pulled from their surfaces before the etched image started to wear away. Use of copper plates was necessarily demanding high

technical skill in recording minute details and proved to be an expensive affair. Numerous printmaking techniques were developed using the metal plate. Lithography, a printing technique invented in the late 1700s was a cheaper substitute to the former, making use of a limestone matrix instead that of metal. The chemistry used for this technique allowed for a detailed rendering on stone and a generous circulation of colour print editions that attracted popular demand. Except, the invention of photography in the early nineteenth century gradually relegated the graphic methods of manual printmaking. Upholding an aim to attain a realism in every aspect, the eye overpowered the hand: photography could mechanically reproduce exactly what it captured. With the machine replacing the manual, the visual aspects and printmaking techniques were soon to become a 'convention' within the 'fine arts'.

PRINTMAKING IN INDIA

With trade relations advancing between the Mughal Empire and the West, printmaking and reproduction techniques were introduced to India in 1556 and the first printing presses set up in Goa. Christian missionaries subsequently travelled to the Mughal court, in the process presenting Akbar and Jehangir with Western religious prints.

Regional forms of printmaking like the Bat'tala from Bengal using woodblock methods were prevalent within the subcontinent. The advent of cheap colour lithography marginalised the more local forms of woodblock prints which were largely disowned in the presence of skilled printmakers, lithographers and draughtsmen.

Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) was an important artist at the crossroads of change, who made extensive use of the popular medium of lithography. With an intention to circulate his 'paintings' to the general public, he developed the methods of chromolithography (multi-colour prints) and oleography (print resembling an oil painting). Varma established the first Ravi Varma Fine Art Lithographic Press in Bombay in the year 1894. His prints acquired a popular audience and demand. Printmaking has played a major role in the political face of India, employing a distinctive aesthetics in its designs in order to instigate a sense of revolution within its consumers. During the tumultuous decades of the early twentieth century, it was made significant use of by artists to disseminate political messages. In the latter part of the twentieth century, "the idea of the 'fine print' as a modernist medium thereafter made its entry into studio practices in India. This is also the period when printmaking gained acceptance as an 'autonomous' high modernist medium, alongside painting and sculpture." (Jyothidas KV, MPhil Dissertation, pg. 9). Artistic hubs such as Baroda and Delhi encouraged the formation of printmakers collectives and groups to negotiate within this domain: evolving into studio spaces, exhibitions and participation in international print biennales and triennales. Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, the shift from the analogue system to that of the digital began to utilise anaesthetics that further invaded the 'art' in printmaking and the means of its reproduction.

SUSTENANCE OF PRINTMAKING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

On an occasion, a printmaker friend of mine narrated an instance of how a buyer once purchased an etching from this friend but only a few weeks later decided to claim the price, because the disconcerted buyer happened to come across the same image online (shared by the printmaker at some point in time). Seeing this, the buyer concluded that anybody could print these images from online sources and produce them for a sum of money. The bewildered printmaker decided to sit the buyer down and explain the methods involved in printmaking.

With the invasion of technology and the digital mediums in art, reducing 'conventional' art production to its minimum, what happens to the medium of printmaking, considering that the larger intent (the historical purpose of circulation of thought through visuals and writing) itself is being digitized? The setting up of printing presses, undoubtedly divided the printmaker's responsibilities between the manual and the mechanical: the artist still having to manually generate the images, while alphabets and numerals found engineered standardisation. Only with the emergence of photo processes, photography and now the digital has image-making found modes of production through the mechanical.

What becomes of printmaking in this situation and within 'contemporary art'? Is it now viewed only as an aesthetic form and a retention of the handmade within the space of technology? How have the technological alternatives to 'printing' affected the physical processes of 'printmaking'?

Jyothidas KV (PhD Scholar, Visual Studies, JNU) in his MPhil dissertation *Where Does the Printmaker Stand? A Study of the*

'Conventional' Print in Contemporary Times (2015), elucidates that "the fine print claimed a different stature from the commercial printing which was also undergoing changes due to the development in technologies. But most of the commercial techniques were not assimilated easily into 'fine print' production as the creation of the fine print was intended to bear the presence of artistic labour in the production (pg. 15).

The laborious manual process of printmaking following the computer, digital and the internet surge has demonstrated a complex relationship with the more novel mechanical interventions that comes in a relatively easy package of a few technical arrangements. Emulation through software has only eased articulation for the user, making the purpose of reproductions effortless hereafter. Where does printmaking –in its 'conventional' sense- then stand in this age of mass reproducibility, is contentious. As Paul Hamilton points out in his essay *Drawing with printmaking technology in a digital age* (published in TRACEY, May 2009), "The development of computer technology from the 1970s onwards and its integration into printmaking practice has given rise to the need for a re-examination of fine art printmaking as a form of mechanised drawing (pg. 1).

Paul Hamilton demonstrates the quandary that printmaking is encountering in the fast-growing digital era where "computers could be seen as a threat to the drawing, through their ability to allow the production of 'instant art', with little use of drawing skills" (pg. 3). The instantaneous, immediate and the convenience-driven market is becoming the preferred mode, overwriting the older orders of creative production.

Moreover, whose work of art does a digital output become? "Is it the computer that makes the drawing, the ink-jet printer or the artist



Title: Untitled, Medium: Digital print, etching, aquatint and chine-scolle on paper.
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operating the computer or could it be the software conditioning the artist?" (pg. 3) Additionally, the predicament that students will soon disengage with visual experiences and accepted norms of creative expertise within the capacity of technological advancements and pre-programmed sources of information, is effectively debated.

Professor Shukla Sawant (Visual Studies, School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, and a founding member of Indian Printmaker's Guild), was surprised to receive an entire sixteen-page catalogue for the Lalit Kala Akademi's first international Print Biennale (Rabindra Bhavan, New Delhi, 2018) all through a WhatsApp message.

In her forthcoming publication *The Multiple in a Paperless Future*, Professor Sawant clarifies, "Seeking to exhibit works made after 2015, the catalogue sought to exclude from the biennale's curatorial framework, processes such as photography, xerography, digital printing and monographs. While the catalogue publicising the 'event' of the Biennale itself was disseminated for reception on a mobile screen, accessible as a scrolling image even thousands of miles away, the assumption was that the multiple could only exist as an indexical image in relation to a physically produced surface." Subsequently, she enquires: "Firstly, what does it mean to propose a medium-specific biennale at this juncture of history? Secondly, what does the idea of a 'Fine Print' mean as visualised by the Biennale, at a time when the world is becoming increasingly paperless, yet saturated with images that are easily transmitted and open to constant reinterpretations?"

Professor Vijay Bagodi (HOD, Department of Printmaking, Fine Arts Faculty, Baroda and a founding member of Chhaap, a printmaking organization based in Baroda), himself at ease and satisfaction with conventional printmaking techniques expresses how digital art for him is still a relatively unexplored area, that could be examined in the future if the need arises. He observes:

"The whole process of making the print and the related experiences is vital as the process demands that the artist decides, assumes and pre-plans the final outcome. The two mediums that have impacted printmaking immensely are photography and the digital art. Many artists have started using unconventional methods and techniques with digital art and photography. This is making printmaking very challenging with many possible outcomes. "Students have started incorporating new technologies into printmaking. For some, the old techniques have become tedious and need to be replaced or modified. They use digital means to bring a new dimension into printmaking. Some students have also expanded the identity by printing on surfaces other than paper or by working on an extraordinarily large scale or on a minuscule format. These new methods are not a threat to printmaking; they simply extend the options and the capacity.

"Viewing the prints has also changed", he continues. "These developments have taken prints outside the established context. Now prints can be sold online using computer-generated editions. Such changes cannot be stopped and must not be curbed. These are responses to time. Historically, printmaking has incorporated many changes through the ages. Ultimately, printmaking techniques, whether they are conventional or modern are just tools that the artists use to express themselves. So, the tools have changed, but the output depends on what the artist wants to make and how successful he/she is in doing so."

While the historicity of approaches remains to enthrall, change is inevitable. Every change incorporated draws from former methods employed, reducing the historical process to the most fundamental element encompassed within its fabric.

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