

THE IMPRESSED IMAGE

Charudutta Ram Prabhudesai

Woodcut is among the most ancient sophisticated relief printing techniques used by man to make images. It is believed to have been used in Egypt and China for wooden stamps designed to make symbolic or decorative impressions in clay and wax. Later, when paper making developed, the technique of woodcut also got more refined and in China and Japan this technique was taken to its highest expression. The earliest use of wood-blocks is found with the development of paper on the Chinese mainland in the 2nd century A.D., which establishes the origin of this simple yet powerful method to much earlier than this period.

With the use of wood-plank by the artist, cutting and printing became more sophisticated and complex. However it is difficult to say whether it is its simple flat directness or its sophisticated subtlety that influenced the Western artist at very crucial junctures in the development of what is termed as 'tradition of Western Art'. Paper was known in Spain in the 11th century but it was not until it was produced in large quantities around the 14th century that woodcut began to unfold in the West. In Germany woodcut began to be used to make handbills for veneration, sold to pilgrims visiting holy places and to the populace on religious feast days. Woodcuts of Christ or the Virgin Mary were often pasted inside travelling chests or small altar pieces and frequently sewn into clothing for magic rites. But the woodcut practice began to decline around the mid-16th century. Until the late 19th century the woodcut was reproductive in a sense that newspaper editions today are.

There was a revival of this ancient technique: experimental artists like Gauguin, Lautrec and Van Gogh deliberately allowed the woodcut influence in the development of their own art, giving an individual print a distinct value for its own aesthetic merit. Many great artist like Albrecht Durer, Hans Holbein and Whistler and before them Titian, have used woodcut eloquently. In times edging the modern age, around WW2, Emil Nolde, Kirchner and many other artists found the stark, candid effect of the woodcut image very purposeful in their revolt against oppressive regimes like Hitler's Third Reich. Norwegian expressionist Edvard Munch greatly helped to renew interest in the woodcut as a serious contemporary art form.

An artist uses the wood more freely with a real sense of the material and usually cuts and prints his own blocks with a more complete knowledge and respect for the material. Yet fine prints as a self-expressive art form developed much later. The aesthetic freedom of the 20th century artist has enabled him to make new discoveries through experimentation and given him a richer utilization of the medium.

In India, printing of pictures from blocks began at the same time as the printing of books on paper - the history of woodcut printing goes back to the early 19th century Bengal - but large loose woodcut prints began to come around 1860. It is a brief period between 1830-1885, for when electricity came to Calcutta in 1885, woodcut declined as a printing tool to make way for the 'electrotype' copper plates for their longer run. Though prints are cheaper than paintings, they are exclusive art forms made in limited editions bearing the artist's signature.

Contemporary Art Prints originated in the efforts of 20th century Indian artists to develop and refine print-making into an independent medium of artistic expression. Today's famous Indian painters are also eminently creative print makers who are responsible for the gradual growing demand for prints in the current market. Some names like Amitabha Banerjee, Lalu Prasad Shaw, Laxma Gaud, Sanat Kar, and more recent artist-print-makers like Swapan Das, Anupam Sud, Shukla Sen Poddar and Anita Chakravarty are prominent print makers. Sanat Kar for instance pioneered wood intaglio, cardboard intaglio and sun mica engravings. Swapan Das leads the international coterie of print-makers in the multiplicity of colour gradations that can be introduced into a single linocut – up to 130 in his case!

The name of **Walter D'Souza**, the teacher and conductor of this workshop features among Indian artists who have made use of woodcuts for his artistic expression, more consistently than most proficient printers. He describes prints such as Durer's dry-points impacted and when he embarked on an art career, he explored all forms: sculpture, painting, drawing, etc. He gained exposure to print-making through his brother, an avid pop art fan who would bring home posters, books, and album covers. Seeing Warhol's soup cans and Monroes, D'Souza became interested in the possibilities of print-making, an interest that his brother encouraged. In fact, screen printing was quite popular during the 1960s and 70s. Beyond these early exposures to art, D'Souza is hesitant to name artistic influences, preferring to name his debt to his environs. Shortly after graduating, D'Souza was asked to set up a print studio at the Kanoria Centre for the Arts at Ahmedabad where he was occupied with this project from 1984-1995. He left Kanoria in 1995 since the work demanded "time to discharge administrative responsibilities." He states firmly that he was not and still is not a die-hard print maker. He does not work to the single purpose of producing an edition of prints, but is actively involved in all steps of the process.

Théodore Mariano Mesquita's elaborate lithographs, when he made them at the Art school in the mid-1980s, left no doubt regarding his aptitude for diligent image-making. The term 'aptitude' is used here to put the accent on Theodore's gift for visual comment. His world is quizzical - not puzzled but brazen, almost shamelessly indiscreet. His images are like scathing remarks on the cruelty towards candid impulses, often sexual impulses, but also others, which our vacillating morality tries hard to hide. He doesn't want to change the world but wants rather a kind of schizoid retribution for its ills. For instance, the woodcut print that he pulled at the workshop is an unexpectedly clean image of a cock. There are no puns, no slants or oblique nuances. It is a rooster – a common domestic bird of limited utility – whose allusion to the sun is hinted at by its proximity to the cockscomb; the head is in profile. It is not the mild sun at dawn but a blazing mid-day sun burning feverishly, surrounding the rooster's head in a god-like iconography. At the bottom, where its droppings might have been is a bomb about to go off! His inimitable Dürer-like signature adorns the bomb. What does he mean by this? Never mind that, because he is enjoying the technique of woodcut and it is palpable. The accents of the rays echo on the neck, straightening and shortening as they descend down the body. The plumes contrast starkly with the undisturbed background heightening the tension between a lethal bomb and the harmless domestic rooster. The title of this piece is a refrain from an old Goan Konkani 'Mando', "*kai borelo komblo rhojea main mhaka dilelo*". It loosely translates as, "Oh! that lovely cock that my mother had given me."

Abhijit Deb Nath: This young print-maker in his two-colour print makes a sort of assemblage of stuff, in orange and blue. It is a chair which seems to be assembled with wood-blocks made for textile printing. There is a recognizable tap at the bottom left, some boxes and 'stuff' really! Abhijit appears to be an emotional lad, perhaps a bit too hyper to fill up an entire chair-shape in orange and cobalt. For a woodcut it is unevenly printed: the top mid density of the orange falls down the left half making the chair appear wobbly. It may not be deliberately done – wish it were – for most of this image is unreadable “stuff”.

Jomy Johnson: The image in his print has two peacock-like birds and two young palms; a path strewn with accidental-seeming tool-marks. Such accidental tool-marking may happen when one tries to scoop too much wood with one stroke. Impatience as technique was not so developed when we used to print way back in 1983! The palms and the birds silhouette an uncertain mid-field over which there are two more gashes in the wood: one comet-like trailing, not into but out from the middle of the picture. An obscure grid of four tool-marks makes the other obscure 'accident'.

Karma Shirikogar: Her print titled 'Bird Flow' is not just a clever use of the medium but it shows refinement of technique and quite sophisticated sensibility for a young adult. She has cut an irregular, static polyhedron on the flat wood to create a pictorial movement within the stasis, with brilliant use of varied tool-marks. The result resembles a topographic map of some 'Xanadu' in Karma's mental vista; it is a labyrinth. Karma Shirikogar carries a Thai passport of Punjabi origin. She went to university in Australia. Karma lives in Shantiniketan, Birbhum. “Your independent thought and emotions are needed to experience art. Viewing art is a creative and personal experience. Therefore I only wish to share my process and inspirations with you. I experience painting and dance as intertwined ways of Being,” says Karma. The woodcut underscores it.

Mangesh Kapse: In his print the dog is hassled because he lives in a metro. This is a two-colour print of a basic play of lights and darks. Mangesh seems rather preoccupied with 'composition' as it is taught in art schools in Maharashtra. There is a story in the woodcut, but what almost attracts visually is the shadow of the angry dog baring its teeth. Obviously, the poor dog is troubled by something outside of the picture, giving it the appearance of an old white irate lady objecting to someone taking her picture.

Neha Grewal: Usually a black print on a buff offers better contrast, but Neha Grewal has used a lighter shade of Vandyke brown for her 'room'. It is a bird-eye view of a narrow, confined room with a chair and a modern-day chandelier. Two heavy forms on both sides meet the eye, guiding it through a narrow passage. The form on the right resembles a woman looking into the room while the form to left resembles a horse-hoof.

Partha Dutta: The work EMD G16 is a diesel locomotive built by General Motors in the USA and under license Australia and Spain. Partha's print is an array of what appear to be old hurricane lanterns marked with letters and numbers. The main one, in the centre shows human figures – workers working; a couple of chaps with helmets lifting some load onto the

head of the third. The technique employed is simple scoops, some vertical, others horizontal. The grey-black print does manage to create an oppressive feeling.

Raju Tota: The two-colour print, 'Souvenir', has a certain effect of accidental etching. There seem to be two dogs, (or one cut into two) and Jarasandha-like misplaced so as to prevent their joining ever! Clever trick, of Lord Krishna in the Mahabharata – advice given to the mighty Bhima to split the evil Jarasandha and toss the two halves of his split body so that he could not become whole again. The dogs, rather the head-ward half, appear to be distempered. There are arrows in orange at the paw of the dog and some personalized symbols and to the left there appear two forms. One may be a cricket bat and the other a door, but the whole appears like an old-time etching press. Hard shadows offset the image against the buff background.

Subrat Behra: His woodcut in an indeterminate shade of sap green is a veritable illustration from the Ramayana – the Mareecha episode. The tree rises like a claw rising out of a street in the American film 'Murder on Elm Street'. The fawn or the deer sort of glances at the claw-tree: the sky is spotted with arousing associations of a cheetal, a very common, very beautiful antelope often frequenting the Indian epics and fables of old. The deer is in a crowded undergrowth, the individual shrub-stems curling like pelicans.

Sujith Limmala: No doubt that the landscape in his print is desolate, what with Mexican cacti here and there amidst dunes, and there, planked in the middle, is the sudden rectangle figuring a crouching male. Above him are two hands, Christ-like stretching athwart and out off the frame. Their elbows are sort of clamped with two hands playing that silly thread game children play. There is a basic technique - scratches and hashes – the mid portion top of the rectangle is left paper white while the lower end has a flat lavender-brown. The strong black holds it all together.

Vaibhava Kitlekar: This Goan Artist has a Gauguinesque composition; some motifs like the lizard and leaves so noticeably Gauguinesque. The shade is a rich blue grey held together by a darker, almost black grey. A fruit bulb-like hangs there, functioning a womb wherein a female outline squirms with other seeds. A flash light enters the composition from below right, as if to throw light on the 'real' nature of things. The world of Vaibhava is complicated indeed: the grey underscoring the point.

These works were produced at the Woodcut Workshop for advanced art students from across India and was conducted by eminent artist and print-maker Walter D'Souza from the 22nd to 28th of February 2012 at the Foundation's studio facilities in Colvale, Goa.

A jury constituting of eminent national printmakers Walter D'souza, R.M. Palaniappan and Anupam Sud selected the above candidates from the 156 applications received.

Ten students from the final year under-graduate Bachelor's and post-graduate Master's Program had been selected from 26 fine art colleges and art institutions across India to participate in the 7-day workshop in woodcut technique. The student scholars selected were Abhijit Deb Nath, Jomy Johnson and Karma Sirikogar from Kala Bhavana, ViswaBharati

University, Santiniketan. Raju Tota from Government College of Art and Craft, Kolkata. Partha Dutta and Sujith Limmala from Sarojini Naidu School of Art and Communication, Hyderabad. Subrat Behera and Vaibhava Kitlekar from Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University Baroda, Neha Grewal from Faculty of Fine Arts, Jamia Millia Islamia University, Delhi and Mangesh Kapse from Sir J. J. School of Art Mumbai.

A art exhibition of the produced woodcut prints at the workshop was held on the 28th February at the Kala Academy, Art Gallery on the 28th and 29th February 2012. This workshop was documented, with critical appraisal of the process and works produced, in word, photo and video.

The author is a renowned artist, writer and dramatist from Goa, who lives and works in Auroville, Pondicherry.