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A Story of South Asian Art

Mrinalini Mukherjee and Her Circle

When **Benode Behari Mukherjee** entered Kala Bhavana, the art school of Visva-Bharati University in **Santiniketan**, in 1919, he was among its very first students. The school, set deep in rural Bengal, was unlike any other: built from natural materials, surrounded by sal trees, palm groves and mango orchards, it was a radical educational environment. Founded by the poet, painter, polymath and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, the institution was conceived in the aftermath of the First World War as a place where the world could meet on freer, more generous terms—a world apart from the colonial education system in art schools that had been established across India by the British.

Here, lessons often unfolded outdoors, with students seated under trees or by dusty roadsides. Benode was encouraged to look closely at the natural world—a theme that engrossed and preoccupied him throughout his life. Despite impaired eyesight, he painted with extraordinary sensitivity, capturing the lush surroundings and the Santhal tribes who lived nearby. His early scroll work, *Scenes from Santiniketan* (1920s), was strikingly original, though at first mocked by fellow students for its unconventional dimensions. Its long, continuous sequence of agrarian and university life, rendered in elegant, calligraphic brushwork reminiscent of East Asian traditions, embodied the spirit of Santiniketan's pedagogy.

Tagore hoped to create a place, as he once wrote, “**where the mind could have its fearless freedom to create its own dreams**”. At Kala Bhavana, distinctions between art and craft were dissolved, teacher–student hierarchies softened, and the Orientalising tendencies of mainstream education challenged. In this atmosphere of curiosity and experiment, convivial exchange thrived. Students mixed materials, techniques and aesthetics, forging creative friendships that would prove foundational to modern Indian art. The university's buildings still radiate this collaborative culture. Their walls and courtyards are alive with murals and sculptures made by generations of students and teachers. One of the most imaginative, *Life of Medieval Saints* (1946–47), was a joint effort by Benode—by then a teacher—his wife, **Leela Mukherjee**, and students, including **K.G. Subramanyan**. The mural depicts Bhakti saints in a teeming scene layered with references to Persian miniatures, Chola bronzes, Giotto frescoes and Cubism.

For **Mrinalini Mukherjee**, Benode and Leela's only daughter, childhood summers in Santiniketan must have seemed magical. Travelling from Dehradun, where her mother headed the Welham School's art department, she entered a world of creative ferment. By the late 1950s she was assisting her father, now fully blind yet still teaching art history, helping him with his collages and describing flowers to him as they walked together.

Mrinalini's own works, threaded throughout this exhibition, reflect this inheritance. They reveal a philosophy shaped by Santiniketan's reverence for nature and its expansive view of artistic practice. Whether in fibre, ceramics or bronze, her forms suggest a botanical abundance. As she observed in a 1994 lecture at Oxford's Museum of Modern Art: **"From both my parents, as from the ideological orientation of Santiniketan, I inherited a respect for craft—craft practice as a process, and for the craft object"**.

This ethos was reinforced when, in 1965, at age sixteen, she enrolled at the Faculty of Art at the Maharaja Sayajirao University in **Baroda**, Gujarat. Her teachers—including Subramanyan, one of Benode's most loyal former students, and **Gulammohammed Sheikh** and Jyoti Bhatt—were grappling with how India's diverse artistic traditions could serve a modern, postcolonial nation. Subramanyan, in particular, was concerned with the idea of India's 'hierarchical unity'. In essays later edited by Sheikh, he argued that the artist would be **"richer... if he despecialises himself and works in various dimensions, and liberates art from schools and museums and the usual academic stew-pots and pushes it into the landscape"**.

Field trips across Gujarat brought these ideals to life. Mrinalini and her peers—among them **Nilima Sheikh**, her lifelong friend—visited rural fairs, festivals and temple sites. She carried her camera and photographed with enthusiasm, focusing on temple reliefs and on groups of friends amid the swirl of crowds. These travels continued beyond Baroda: she journeyed across India and further afield, often with Nilima and Sheikh or her husband, the architect Ranjit Singh, who was also a key collaborator. From Ladakh to India's southern tip, from central forests to Cambodia's Angkor Wat and museums in Australia, Mrinalini built a vast visual archive.

Such experiences converged at Baroda's annual Fine Arts Fair, founded in 1961 by Subramanyan and Sankho Chaudhuri. The fair encouraged students to translate their encounters with what Subramanyan called India's **"living traditions"** into works of art made outside the studio and sold directly to the local community. The event was a communal endeavour: students and teachers decorated the school, erected stalls, and then welcomed the public. Mrinalini's contributions—her first fibre works woven from sunn, a local hemp, on makeshift looms—laid the foundations for the ambitious public commissions she later produced.

In the 1970s, after moving to **Delhi**, Mrinalini's practice gained boldness. Staying in the former flat of artist Nasreen Mohamedi, she drew inspiration and strength from a close-knit circle of artists and designers, including Krishen Khanna, Satish Gujral, Tyeb Mehta and Shona Ray. Over this decade, her fibre works became increasingly daring. They unleashed themselves from the wall, filling space with mythic resonance and gradually forming her distinctive visual language.

Her friendship with artist-writer **Jagdish Swaminathan** contributed to this transformation. The critic Geeta Kapur has recalled how Mrinalini listened to his **"brilliant rhetoric and drunken harangues"**. Swaminathan, then establishing the art centre Bharat Bhavan and its museum, Roopankar, invited her

onto its advisory board. Founded by the Indian government, the institution provided a home and support system for indigenous artistic practices long neglected in the state's modernising drive. As director, Swaminathan gained wider scope to pursue his interest in mysticism and the metaphysical. He noted the power of Mrinalini's sculpture, writing that in her work **"the illusion of the real wafts seductively and then congeals into hallucinatory presences"**.

Such monumental forms could take years to complete. In between, she experimented on paper. At Garhi studios, she first experimented with printmaking and etching, following a path once explored by her mother, Leela. While staying with Nilima and Gulammohammed in Himachal Pradesh, she adopted watercolour, producing atmospheric landscapes that seemed, perhaps unconsciously, to echo her father's way of working.

Direct observation remained a constant in Mrinalini's practice, and it is likely that the landscape studies she made earlier continued to inform her later explorations. When she could no longer source the natural fibres she favoured, she turned to ceramic. After attending a workshop organised by the Foundation of Indian Artists in 1995, she began creating bulbous, vegetal forms glazed in a visceral red, such as *Earthbloom* (1996), which seemed to grow organically from the floor. At times, she rolled clay onto fabric or beds of leaves, pressing their textures into the surface.

In the 2000s Mrinalini moved into bronze, producing works that were similarly arboreal and generative, though stripped of the Sanskrit titles she had once given her fibre pieces. She handled the medium with an audacious originality, recalling her mother Leela's own confident use of bronze. Carving directly into the wax used for casting, she improvised with orthodontist tools and fragments of plants to texture the surfaces. The resulting forms bore rumbles, bumps, knobs and scars—works that felt bodily, tree-like and bestial, at once raw and alive.

Mrinalini's maverick outlook allowed her to move with ease between materials, subjects, and sources, each endeavour giving rise to astounding results. The same spirit animates the group of artists gathered in this exhibition. Though they responded in different ways to India's shifting contexts and political currents, and drew upon a variety of visual lineages, they were bound by shared values: a belief in art as expansive and unbounded, and a deep respect for every form of creative expression. Their regard for one another, and for many others beyond this circle, was evident in the abundance of exchanges that took place, in conversation and correspondence, in exhibitions and collaborative projects. Together, these interactions contributed to and sustained the remarkable vibrancy of this moment in India's art history.

Cleo Roberts-Komireddi

Biographies

Mrinalini Mukherjee (b.1949 Bombay, India, d.2015 New Delhi, India), was one of India's foremost and innovative sculptors. Born to artist parents, she was encouraged to study at the Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University of Baroda where she focused on painting and mural making. Urged to explore quotidian materials, she turned to hemp and used an idiosyncratic macramé technique to create inventive wall-based fibre works. Her methods developed creating the commanding anthropomorphic sculptures for which she is best known. Towards the end of her career, Mukherjee chose to work in ceramic and bronze, producing equally forceful creations made in an unorthodox manner.

Benode Behari Mukherjee (b.1904 Behala, India, d.1980 Delhi, India), was an artist, educator and writer recognised for his contributions to the development of Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan. Following his studies here, Mukherjee became one of the institution's most illustrious faculty members who nurtured many of India's artistic visionaries. His paintings, drawings and murals skilfully integrated diverse artistic influences, often drawn from his travels in India and abroad. After a brief time as a curator at the Nepal Government Museum in Kathmandu and teaching in Mussoorie and Patna, Mukherjee returned to Kala Bhavana to teach art history. Having lost his eyesight, Mukherjee began working with collage and writing his award-winning autobiography *Chitrakar*.

Leela Mukherjee (b.1916 Hyderabad, Sindh, d.2002 Delhi, India), is recognised as one of India's earliest female sculptors. After completing a science degree, she joined Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan where she was trained in painting and sculpture. A visit to Nepal, with her husband, Benode Behari Mukherjee, introduced her to

wood sculpting techniques after which she began creating masterful carved sculptures, often showing entwined individuals. Mukherjee sustained her practice alongside her role heading up the art department at Welham Preparatory School in Dehradun. After two decades teaching, she moved to Delhi and explored painting and printmaking, frequently using these mediums to depict dancers she observed in styles invoking East and Southeast Asian aesthetics.

K.G. Subramanyan (b.1924 Kuthuparamba, India, d.2016 Vadodara) was one of India's most highly regarded modern artists, educators and writers. After completing an economics degree, he studied at Kala Bhavana where he was taught by Benode Behari Mukherjee. He went on to be at the centre of the Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University of Baroda where he inspired the next generation of India's leading artists with his focus on the country's living traditions and specialist crafts. His belief in integrating high and low art forms, which he wrote about and continued to share when later teaching at Kala Bhavana, informed his own practice. His large-scale murals and paintings alike were characterised by blending multiple mediums, techniques and stylistic sources.

Nilima Sheikh (b.1945 Delhi, India), one of India's leading artists, paints with various tempera mediums to create scenes based on lore and contemporaneity, often concerned with experiences of womanhood and the treatment of India's minorities. Initially completing a bachelor's degree in history at the University of Delhi, she undertook a master's at the Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University of Baroda in painting where she then taught briefly, early in her career. Drawing on historical art forms, including miniature and scroll painting, and

influenced by theatre and literature, her works are intensely atmospheric, at times incorporating text. Sheikh's own writing and research on Indian art have been significant as have her explorations of various media, covering children's books and theatre design.

Gulammohammed Sheikh (b.1937 Surendranagar, India) is an artist, poet, teacher, art historian and curator, who has played a major role in the development of contemporary art in India since the early 1960s. Beginning his career studying painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University of Baroda and completing a master's at the Royal College of Art, London, he went on to teach art history and painting at the University of Baroda for over three decades. Through his teaching, he encouraged engagement with a broad range of cultural traditions, drawing on practices such as Sienese frescoes and Indian miniature painting. Alongside painting, his work has spanned printmaking, digital media, sculpture and ceramics, and has been featured in global exhibitions.

Jagdish Swaminathan (b.1928 Shimla, India, d.1994 Delhi, India) was an artist, critic and author recognised for his appreciation and promotion of indigenous art practices. Trained initially as a journalist, Swaminathan attended Delhi Polytechnic and the Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw where he studied painting. Shaped by his membership of the Congress Socialist party and the Communist party, Swaminathan critically engaged with modernity in art and sought spiritual depth in his expression. Often looking to indigenous art forms for inspiration, he was committed to foregrounding this genre and became founding director of the art centre Bharat Bhavan and Roopankar Museum, both dedicated to such styles.

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