



Reinventing Tradition: The Narrative And Allegorical Art Of K.G. Subramanyan

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Abstract: K.G. Subramanyan (1924–2016), one of India's most influential modern artists, played a pivotal role in shaping contemporary Indian art through his eclectic approach, blending traditional Indian techniques and themes with modernist ideas. A painter, muralist, printmaker, sculptor, and educator, Subramanyan's work reflects his deep engagement with Indian culture, history, mythology, and politics. This research article explores the evolution of his art, his approach to storytelling, and his contribution to postcolonial art discourse.

Index Terms – K.G. Subramanyan; Narrative Art; Allegory in Indian Art; Cultural Synthesis; Postcolonial Modernism; Indian Visual Traditions

Introduction

K.G. Subramanyan's art transcends stylistic boundaries. His art blends folk, classical, and modern sensibilities to create a unique visual vocabulary. His engagement with Indian cultural traditions—especially Kalighat painting, Madhubani art, and Pattachitra—reflects his belief that modern Indian art should not alienate itself from its indigenous roots but should instead engage in a dialogue with them. A student of the legendary artist Nandalal Bose and a professor at Baroda's Faculty of Fine Arts, Subramanyan arose to key figure in shaping postcolonial Indian modernism.

Study and Interpretations:

Subramanyan was born in Kuthuparamba, Kerala. His early years were marked by the socio-political climate of colonial India. His participation in the Quit India Movement in 1942 led to his imprisonment and a lifelong engagement with issues of politics and identity. His formal art education began at Kala Bhavana in Santiniketan, where he was mentored by Nandalal Bose and influenced by Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of synthesizing global and local traditions.

Santiniketan played a crucial role in shaping Subramanyan's belief in art as a synthesis of varied influences. The institution's emphasis on the integration of fine arts, craft traditions, and folk practices resonated with his approach, which rejected rigid hierarchies between "high" and "low" art. This influence would later shape his pedagogy and artistic practice, as he sought to bring everyday Indian visual culture into the realm of modern art.

Storytelling forms the backbone of Subramanyan's art, which is rich in allegory and visual narrative. He drew from a wide range of sources, including Indian mythology, folklore, and classical literature, to explore contemporary issues of politics, gender, and social change. His paintings often feature crowded, dynamic scenes filled with humans, animals, and mythological figures, juxtaposing the sacred and the mundane.

One of the hallmarks of Subramanyan's work is his reinterpretation of classical Indian stories, especially from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, where he infuses modern social commentary. For example, his series on the *Ramayana* often critiques power dynamics and reflects on the role of violence and authority in both ancient and contemporary contexts. His depictions are not straightforward retellings but subversive adaptations that interrogate cultural assumptions.

Narrative in Subramanyan's Work - Intertwining Myth, Folklore, and Contemporary Stories

K.G. Subramanyan was a master storyteller. His art includes elements from Indian mythology, folklore, and everyday life to create visual narratives that transcend time and context. For Subramanyan, the purpose of art was not just to create aesthetically pleasing works but to tell stories that resonated with cultural, political, and social significance. He often drew upon classical Indian stories like the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and regional folklore, reinterpreting them in ways that were both contemporary and timeless. For instance, his reimagining of the *Ramayana*—especially episodes involving Rama's exile and the battle with Ravana—takes on new meanings when viewed through the lens of modern political struggle. These epic tales were familiar to his audience, but he manipulated their narratives to critique contemporary power structures. The figures in his works are often depicted in moments of tension or action, presenting not just stories of the past but reflecting ongoing social issues like inequality, corruption, and injustice. In his painting series on *The Ramayana*, Subramanyan's treatment of myth is never literal. His visual storytelling avoids fixed interpretations; instead, he uses mythological characters to explore the power dynamics of rulers and subjects, oppressors and the oppressed. The settings of these works are intentionally ambiguous, blending mythological with modern imagery, thereby placing traditional stories in the context of contemporary India's social and political life.

What distinguishes Subramanyan's approach to narrative is his ability to layer stories within stories. His works are often crowded with activity—multiple characters, animals, and symbols interacting in a confined space. Each of these elements carries its own narrative weight, contributing to a larger, often fragmented story. This dense, layered style draws the viewer into a complex, multi-dimensional world where the past and present, myth and reality, coexist. In works like *The Zoo* (2000), Subramanyan presents a visual space teeming with humans and animals, which on the surface appear as a playful or whimsical tableau. However, closer scrutiny reveals multiple layers of commentary on social hierarchies and human behaviour. The humans and animals share a symbolic relationship, where the animals often serve as stand-ins for political or social commentary, perhaps critiquing human greed, corruption, or the absurdity of societal norms.

One of Subramanyan's key contributions to Indian art lies in his analytical examination and use of traditional narratives. While he draws extensively from Indian epics, folklore, and even colonial history, he rarely adopts these narratives uncritically. Instead, he deconstructs and reassembles them to challenge the authority of tradition itself. In his reinterpretation of episodes from the *Mahabharata*, for instance, Subramanyan focuses on the morally ambiguous aspects of characters such as Karna and Duryodhana, figures traditionally cast as villains. In doing so, he questions the binaries of good and evil, highlighting the complex interplay of fate, power, and morality in human actions. This approach is emblematic of his broader philosophical stance—one that rejects absolute truths and encourages viewers to engage with the multiplicity of meanings that art can offer.

The Use of Allegory for Social and Political Commentary

Allegory plays a central role in Subramanyan's work, often serving as a vehicle for social and political critique. His art, rich in symbolism, allows him to comment on the state of Indian society in a way that is indirect but no less powerful. Subramanyan's use of animals, for example, often imbues his work with allegorical meaning. Animals—frequently depicted alongside human figures—function as metaphors for human traits, vices, and political scenarios. In many of his works, animals are imbued with human characteristics, participating in scenes of domestic life, governance, or conflict. These anthropomorphized figures can be seen as representations of specific social classes or political figures. For example, a lion might symbolize authority and power, while smaller, more subdued animals could represent the oppressed or marginalized.

His works often reveal an ironic distance from the reality they depict, using humour and playfulness to criticize social hierarchies or political situations. Subramanyan's allegorical approach provides layers of meaning, so while a piece might appear whimsical or fantastical on the surface, it contains deeper critiques of real-world issues like corruption, injustice, or authoritarianism.

Folk Traditions as Allegorical Vehicles

Subramanyan's engagement with Indian folk traditions, particularly his incorporation of Kalighat painting and the scroll-based art of Pattachitra, allowed him to work with a visual language already steeped in allegory. Folk art in India traditionally contains layers of moral, religious, and social allegory, often designed to convey lessons or parables to the masses. By adapting these forms into his modernist style, Subramanyan was able to communicate complex ideas in an accessible yet profound manner.

His use of Kalighat-style figures, for example, brings a sense of immediacy and earthiness to his work. The exaggerated, sometimes grotesque, forms of his figures draw attention to the vices or follies they represent. This folk-inspired aesthetic enhances the allegorical dimension of his art, making his critiques of contemporary society all the more resonant. For Subramanyan, folk traditions were not merely decorative or nostalgic; they were potent tools for communicating allegorical meanings that spoke to the human condition and the political realities of his time.

Allegory in Murals and Public Art

His work in murals, especially those he created in public spaces, frequently employs allegory as a means of engaging with local communities. His murals are often filled with vibrant, narrative-rich compositions that blend mythological figures with contemporary scenes. The public nature of these works required him to create art that was immediately accessible to a wide audience, yet still capable of conveying deeper meanings.

His mural at MS University in Baroda, for instance, features a panoply of mythological and everyday figures interacting in a shared space. The allegorical resonance of these works is enhanced by their context—public murals in educational institutions or community spaces take on an additional layer of meaning as they engage directly with the public. Through these murals, Subramanyan invites viewers to reflect on their own place in the narrative and to consider the broader social and political allegories embedded in the work.

In his art, narrative and allegory are inextricably linked. His layered narratives often rely on allegory to deliver their message, while his allegorical figures are deeply embedded within larger stories. This dynamic relationship allows his work to operate on multiple levels—engaging with viewers on both an aesthetic and intellectual plane.

Through his innovative synthesis, Subramanyan created a body of work that is rich in both visual appeal and intellectual depth. His ability to blend the traditional with the modern, and the personal with the political, marks him as one of India's most significant artists. His narratives draw from the rich well of Indian myth and history, yet they are always open-ended, inviting viewers to find their own meanings in the stories he tells.

K.G. Subramanyan's mastery of narrative and allegory positions him as a critical figure in the development of modern Indian art. His work challenges conventional interpretations of Indian cultural narratives, offering instead a more nuanced, subversive, and allegorical approach. By synthesizing folk, classical, and modern elements, he created a visual language that not only reflects the complexity of postcolonial Indian society but also engages with universal themes of power, morality, and identity. Subramanyan's art stands as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling and symbolism in art, making his contribution invaluable to the history of contemporary Indian art.

Conclusion

K.G. Subramanyan's body of work offers a rich exploration of narrative, symbolism, and cultural synthesis. His practice demonstrates a deep respect for India's diverse visual traditions, while also engaging critically with the challenges of modernity. His art remains a testament to the power of storytelling, the complexity of cultural identity, and the role of the artist in reflecting and shaping society.

By embracing both indigenous and modernist influences, Subramanyan created a visual language that resonates with the complexities of postcolonial India, making him one of the most significant figures in Indian art history.

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