

SUSHANT GUHA: A CONTEMPORARY MASTER OF INDIAN LITHOGRAPHY

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Abstract

Printmaking has established itself as a powerful medium within the Indian modern art world. Once considered merely a means of reproduction, it has now established itself as an independent and creative genre. Many Indian artists have made significant contributions to the development of this art form—one of them is Sushant Guha, who, in the form of "New Printmaking," presented a beautiful synthesis of innovation, sensitivity, and Indianess within this medium.

The present research paper examines the lithographic printmaking practice, life, work, and contributions of Sushant Guha, one of contemporary India's most versatile printmakers, to the field of printmaking. Sushant Guha is a leading name among contemporary Indian printmakers. He has given a new direction to lithographic printmaking by combining traditional techniques with a modern approach. His work is not only technically excellent but also possesses deep conceptual resonance. He frequently employs techniques such as linocut, etching, lithography, and woodcut. But the greatest attraction of his work is the novelty of ideas and the simple, yet powerful expression of form and color. After studying all aspects of his life, this paper demonstrates how he depicted various themes of life and society through lithographic printmaking technique and used them as a medium of social commentary. It also demonstrates how Sushant Guha has emerged as an important voice in modern printmaking, combining traditional techniques with social commentary. This paper explores Guha's formal training in traditional and photolithographic techniques and his role in developing lithography as a serious artistic medium in India.

Keywords: printmaking, modern art, new print making, Sushant Guha, lithography, photo lithography, woodcut, etching, linocut.

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Introduction

Printing has often coexisted with painting and sculpture in the Indian art landscape. In 1796, Alois Senefelder invented the lithography printing technique, which is essentially a reaction based on the chemical repulsion of water and oil. In contemporary Indian art, artists like Sushant Guha have made immense efforts to advance this technique. In Sushant Guha's hands, lithography has emerged not just as a technique but as a powerful medium of fundamental artistic expression and a link between art and society. Sushant Guha has dedicated his professional and artistic life to printing along with various other printing processes, but lithography holds a significant place in his practice. He received rigorous academic training and maintained an unwavering commitment to his chosen medium throughout his career. At a time when artists are increasingly abandoning lithography and working in other mediums, his dedication and conviction to lithography are clearly visible.

Biography, formal trainings and artistic formation

Sushant Guha was born in 1960 in Gaya, a town in the Purvanchal region of Bihar state. He began his artistic education at the school founded by Rabindranath Tagore in 1775. With his powerful drawing skills, he specialized in printmaking from

Kala Bhavan, Shantiniketan. After completing his studies, he moved to Delhi, where the busy and varied life there significantly transformed his work. Sushant Guha's constant pursuit of excellence led him to participate in a six-month research program in printmaking at Camberwell College of Arts and Crafts, London, in 1998, supported by a Charles Wells India Trust Award. During this program, he learned and mastered photolithography, photo etching, and pigment-based silkscreen techniques. Guha also received a National Research Grant and fellowship in printmaking. These institutional experiences provided him with technical expertise in lithography and an introduction to diverse contemporary printing practices.

Training in Lithography

Basic training: Sushant Guha's lithographic journey began at Kala Bhavan, Shantiniketan. He completed his Diploma in Fine Arts and Crafts in 1975, followed by a Postgraduate Diploma in Fine Arts with specialization in Graphic Art and Printmaking in 1982. At Shantiniketan, Guha found a unique educational environment that emphasized both traditional Indian aesthetics and modern artistic practices. This foundation gave Guha a deep understanding of printmaking as an art form rather than merely a technical knowledge.

Advanced Training at Garhi Studio: In 1991, Sushant Guha received a Lalit Kala Akademi research grant for advanced training in lithography at Garhi Studio, Delhi, one of India's premier printing institutes. The professional lithographic equipment available at Garhi Studio played a crucial role in refining Guha's technical mastery of traditional stone lithography. Working alongside senior illustrators such as Jagdish Swaminathan, Manjit Bawa, and Krishen Khanna, Guha was part of a vibrant artistic community that elevated printmaking to the status of equal painting and sculpture.

Photolithographic Training in London: In 1998, Guha underwent six months of advanced research and training in printmaking at Camberwell College of Arts and Crafts in London, supported by the Charles Wallace India Trust Award. This training introduced him to photolithography, photo-etching and water-based silkscreen techniques. Photolithography, a technique that uses photographic techniques to transfer images onto lithographic plates, enhanced his technical knowledge and inspired him to incorporate photographic elements into his work. This training in contemporary lithographic methods complemented his traditional training, making him proficient in both historical and modern lithographic processes.

Non-Toxic Printmaking Methods: In 2003, Guha received a Fulbright Fellowship for professional training in non-toxic printmaking at the Manhattan Graphic Center in New York. This training reflected a growing awareness of environmental and health concerns in printmaking studios. Traditional lithographic processes often involve toxic chemicals; Non-toxic alternatives allow artists to continue their practice while reducing environmental impact. This training demonstrated Guha's commitment to developing his practice in line with contemporary concerns without compromising artistic quality.

Sushant Guha's Lithographic Technique and Workshop Practice

Guha's prints are notable for their tonal depth, precise line work, and complex compositional layers—qualities that point to his continued engagement with stone lithography as a tactile, labor-intensive medium. Source and photographic documentation reveals that Guha worked directly on prepared lithographic stones or plates, using grease, tush, and careful scraping to achieve subtle grays and velvety blacks. He also integrates related intaglio/etching techniques and sometimes tonal areas such as aquatint, suggesting a hybrid approach to printmaking where lithography remains primary. His long-standing commitment to mastering tonal control and black-and-white contrast has been repeatedly highlighted in exhibition reviews.

Themes of Guha's Lithographic Works

Urbanization and Environmental Criticism: A central theme of Guha's lithographic work is a critique of rapid, uncontrolled urbanization and its environmental consequences. His lithographs effectively bridge the gap between rapid urban development and the decline of human values and environmental degradation. His work "Resettlement" (1986), an early lithograph, already reflected his concern with the human costs of urban development and displacement. This theme has continued throughout his career, becoming even more relevant and complex as India's cities grow at an unprecedented pace.

Violence, Misogyny, and Religious Extremism: Guha's current lithographic works have embraced darker and more explicitly political themes. His lithograph "Indigestion of Civilization" presents a collage of disturbing scenes reflecting the dark aspects of contemporary society. In interviews, Guha has stated that while his early works presented social satire as a means of criticism, his more recent works reflect direct protest against religious fanaticism and other atrocities.

Technology, Modernity, and Human Disconnection: His works, such as "Downloaded from Life" and "Time Traveler," address the impact of technology and virtual reality on human relationships and identity. "Time Traveler" presents a meditative figure with modern symbols, suggesting the need for balance between technological progress and social unrest. These works reflect Guha's engagement with contemporary global concerns regarding digital technology and its psychological and social effects. The title "Downloaded from Life" is particularly appropriate for his lithographic works—lithography itself is a form of "downloading" or transferring images from one surface to another, creating a metaphorical connection between medium and message.

Mysterious Images and Symbolic Density: Many of Guha's lithographs have enigmatic titles—"Piranha Lake," "Downloaded from Life," "Indigestion of Civilization"—that invite viewers to actively engage with the work's meaning rather than providing a simple narrative. The dense imagery in his lithographs creates visual puzzles that continually engage attention. This approach treats viewers as active participants in meaning-making rather than passive consumers of predetermined messages.

His Notable Lithographic Works

"Restoration" (1986): This lithograph, created relatively early in his career and measuring 11.5 x 15.5 inches, addresses themes of displacement and urban redevelopment, reflecting his long-standing concern with the human costs of modernization. The small size of this work is characteristic of lithographic prints.

"Indigestion of Civilization": In this impressive lithograph, Guha presents a disturbing view of contemporary social violence. The title itself is evocative—civilization is "swallowing" violence, misogyny, and extremism, but is unable to properly "digest" them, resulting in social malaise. The complex, layered imagery in this work fully utilizes lithography's potential for elaborate, multi-layered compositions.

"Time Traveler": This lithograph combines a meditative figure with symbols of modernity and technology, creating a visual dialogue between ancient wisdom and contemporary life. The lithographic medium allows for subtle tonal transitions that suggest the interconnection of various temporal and spiritual realms.

"Downloaded from Life": This work differs from the styles of Guha's earlier works, with lighter shades of cobalt and sap green replacing his usual dark blacks and browns. This work demonstrates Guha's experimental prowess in lithography. The title uses the language of digital technology to address human experience.

Contribution to Contemporary Indian lithographic Printmaking

Sushant Guha's technical mastery of lithography and his desire to advance knowledge through group activities, workshops, and mentorship have significantly influenced young printmakers. His artworks, created using traditional and contemporary lithographic techniques, offer a model of how artists can maintain technical excellence while remaining relevant to contemporary concerns. By specializing in stone lithography and training in institutional contexts (Shantiniketan, Camberwell, Manhattan Graphic Center), Guha has helped preserve and advance traditional lithographic skills. The simultaneous use of lithographic and intaglio techniques in Guha's lithographic prints is a living example of a hybrid approach that has become influential among young printmakers seeking both tonal nuance and textural variety. Through his work with the Indian Printmakers Guild and Multiple Encounters, Guha has helped build institutional support for lithography and printing in India. These groups have organized exhibitions, provided mutual support, and advocated for printmaking within the broader art world.

Sushant Guha is a founding member of Multiple Encounters, a group of printmakers formed in the early 2000s, committed to elevating printmaking as a serious artistic medium in India. Other founding members included Vijay Kumar, K.R. Subbanna, Anandamoy Banerjee, Dattatreya Apte, Kavita Nair, and Moti Jharotia. The group came into being when some members decided to break away from the erstwhile Indian Printmakers Guild. The group has worked tirelessly to establish printmaking, including lithography, as a legitimate artistic medium, deserving equal recognition as painting or sculpture. Through exhibitions, workshops, and educational initiatives, the group has raised social awareness about printmaking and provided support to young printmakers pursuing printmaking.

Guha's Role in the Indian Lithographic Tradition

Historical Context: Lithography arrived in India in the mid-19th century and was initially used primarily for commercial purposes—popular religious prints, advertising, and book illustrations. Lithography began to replace traditional woodblock printing in Kolkata in the 1880s, allowing for faster and more efficient production. Subsequently, in the 20th century, Indian artists began to re-adopt lithography as a medium of fine art. Leading institutions such as Kala Bhavan, Shantiniketan, Garhi Studio, Delhi, and Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, provided Indian artists with access to the field of printmaking by providing printing facilities, professional lithographic equipment, and training.

Contemporary Situation: In this historical context, Guha represents a generation of Indian printmakers who have achieved international technical standards while addressing distinctively Indian social concerns. His work demonstrates that lithography is not simply a borrowed Western technique, but a fully integrated part of contemporary Indian artistic practice. Unlike artists who learned printmaking but then abandoned it for painting or other arts, Guha remained dedicated to printmaking throughout his career. At a time when market pressures are pushing many artists toward more commercially viable forms of art, Guha's commitment has helped maintain lithography as a serious artistic medium in India.

Recognition and Influence

Guha's lithographic works have been exhibited in major exhibitions, including:

- "Ruptaar Panch Dashak: Five Decades of Printmaking" (2024), at the Visual Arts Gallery, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, curated by Alka Pande, where his lithographs and aquatints are known for "offering critical commentaries on society and its future and inviting viewers to reflect on pressing issues."

- "Divergent Practices" at Dhoomimal Gallery, showcasing works by the Multiple Encounters Collective, where curator Ina Puri noted that Guha's recent work "grapples with the same themes [violence and existential crisis], but is technically stronger than ever."
- "The Printed Picture: Four Centuries of Indian Printmaking" (2018), at the Punjab Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh, a historical survey that placed Guha within the broader context of Indian printmaking history.

Conclusion

Sushant Guha is a technically accomplished and thematically rich printmaker. He is one of the most important figures in the contemporary Indian printmaking landscape, particularly in the field of lithography. His lithographs reflect a confluence of technical mastery and immediate social engagement. His commitment to lithography spans decades. He has demonstrated the medium's continued relevance in contemporary art, disproving the notion that traditional printmaking techniques have become obsolete in the digital age. Through his sophisticated and innovative use of lithographic techniques, from traditional stone lithography to photolithography, Guha has created a collection of works that address important contemporary issues such as urbanization, environmental degradation, religious violence, and the erosion of human values in modern society.

While trained in the rich artistic tradition of Shantiniketan, he is influenced by global experience and experimentation. His prints reveal both Indian sensibilities and international sophistication. As a teacher, experimenter, and visionary, Sushant Guha has helped redefine lithography not just as a technique of reproduction, but as a powerful, autonomous art form capable of introspection, narrative, and poetic resonance. His contributions ensure the continued development of printmaking in India—rooted in tradition, yet boldly modern in spirit. Sushant Guha deserves to be recognized as a contemporary lithographic master in every sense; his art combines craftsmanship and contemplation, tradition and transformation.

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