

Prints As Global Ambassadors of Cultural Aesthetics

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Abstract

The will to subsist against all odds is the basic catalyst of human existence. At times the struggle is for space and at other times the dignified sustenance of a race. Communication, as a form of mark-making, whether physical or psychological, therefore remains the prime impetus in garnering change. From the earliest origin of prints in the form of Prehistoric Hand Stencils on cave walls to Digital-Prints maneuvered by pixels, Printmaking has navigated a long journey of human history and communication has been its prime objectivity. This objective fulfills the natural human instinct of mark-making that stems from the fact that as a species humans are social beings with an urge to commune through collective discourse. From the stenciled Prehistoric Hand Stencils to machine maneuvered Digital-Prints – the idea is to propagate forms and ideas that expand the human vision and understanding of its existence in relation to time and space.

Keywords: Digital-Prints, Prehistoric Hand Stencils on cave walls, Cultural aesthetics, Global ambassadors of cultural aesthetics

1. Introduction

“Intelligence is based on how efficient a species became at doing the things they need to survive.” by Charles Darwin

Prints have always been a medium of Mass-propagation of ideas, due to the character of its multiplicity, which allows manifold editions of same set of images and text, thereby creating a more democratic space of discourse, as opposed to the exclusivity of handwritten or painted manuscripts. Throughout history Prints have played a crucial role in raising mass conscience by facilitating the sharing of ideas in multiples to masses. This propagation allowed the routing of rare information and knowledge base among the people which eventually led to the collective evolution of humanity by paving the way for progression of revolutionary ideas and inventions. As knowledge sharing prospered beyond geographical boundaries and nationalities, each exchange or interchange collaborated towards strengthening of ideas, that may have developed locally but became a global heritage eventually, nurturing lives beyond stringent man-made boundaries. To elaborate further on this process and the role played by prints in facilitating this advancement, I would hereby like to state some facts accompanied by chronological progression that illustrates how Prints became global ambassadors of cultural aesthetics.

Hand Stencils are considered to be the earliest forms of printed impressions found inside Prehistoric caves across the world. Though geographically far apart images seen in Fig.1 and Fig.2 are both Prehistoric Hand Stencil impressions from Argentina (South America) and Chhattisgarh (M.P., India). The stencils were made by holding the hand against the rough surface of the cave wall and spraying natural pigment color on it, thereby imprinting the hand mark on the cave wall. Whatever were the reasons behind these mark makings, whether ritualistic or other, the fact remains that they are the earliest symbols of human mark-making and printed human communication.

The next set of images are of Stamp Seals made of fired clay, sourced from two of the most ancient civilizations of the world. The Cylindrical Stamp Seal seen in Fig.3 is from Mesopotamian Civilization wherein symbolic impressions were rolled out on clay. The round Terracotta Stamp Seal seen in Fig.4. is from Indus Valley Stamp Civilization (1st millennium BC.) which was used to stamp motif impressions, a method quite similar to the indigenous tradition of Wood-Block printing on fabric, still in practice. Cotton textiles from India embellished with Wood-Block impressions have been found have been found wrapped on ancient Egyptian Mummies and Indus Valley seals found in



Figure 1: Hand Stencils (7300 BC), Cueva de las Manos or Cave of Hands, Argentina, South America.



Figure 2: Hand Stencils (10,000-year-old) Sonari, Hathajodi, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, India.



Figure 3: Mesopotamian Cylindrical Seal with rolled out impression.



Figure 4: Indus Valley Terracotta Stamp Seal (1st millennium BC.).

Mesopotamia, which establishes the link of trade relations between these powerful ancient civilizations. The method of printing motifs from carved Woodblock by stamping it onto fabric or paper is demonstrated in Fig. 5.



Figure 5: Printing motifs from carved Woodblock following the method of stamping.



Figure 6: Tibetan Woodblock carved with religious Buddhist motifs and text.

The method of printing impressions from woodblocks were not just used for creating multiples of images but also that of text and at times both together. Fig. 6. is a Tibetan Woodblock carved with religious Buddhist motifs and text while Fig. 7 and 8 are impressions taken from this block on paper and cloth respectively. Buddhism being one of the early religions believing in the democracy of knowledge sharing, paved the way for transferring scriptures into printed manuscripts known as '*Pecha*' Fig. 10. printed from a single Woodblock Fig. 9, also known as Block-book, with text and images carved on it. Impression was taken by applying ink onto the Woodblock, then placing paper on it followed by gently rubbing the paper on the backside to allow ink to be transferred from the matrix



Figure 7: Impression taken from the carved Tibetan Woodblock with text and images.



Figure 8: Impression of the carved Tibetan Woodblock taken on fabric.

(woodblock) onto the paper surface. The '*Diamond Sutra*' (Fig.11) is the earliest surviving printed book dated 11th May 868 AD. a scroll printed during the Tang dynasty rule, from single piece woodblocks or Block books. An example of Block-book may be seen in Fig. 12 which is a single piece Japanese Wood-block carved with text and images. The same method of woodblock carving is seen in Japanese tradition of Ukiyo-e printing with text and images printed from a single block.

Before the discovery of paper impressions were printed on fabric, very few of which survive. However discovery of paper around 1st. century BC followed by the discovery of ceramic movable types in China, revolutionized the method of printing and knowledge propagation around the world. Knowledge about these skill-sets travelled across the borders along with caravans passing through the silk Route, eventually inspiring the building of metal types and the first Printing Press in Germany by Johannes Gutenberg who printed the Bible in 1454 AD. using movable types. Discovery of the Gutenberg Press revolutionized the art of publishing from 15th century onwards, facilitating a wealth of knowledge transmission across nations and overseas. The year 1556 AD. was a harbinger of change and an eventful



Figure 9: Carved woodblock matrix of a 'Pecha' Tibetan Buddhist manuscript.



Figure 10: Printed impression of Tibetan Buddhist manuscript taken from carved woodblock 'Pecha'.



Figure 11: 'Diamond Sutra' - earliest surviving printed book dated 11th May 868 AD.



Figure 12: Carved Japanese Block-book.

year in Indian history, as it saw accession of Akbar on the Mughal throne and arrival of the first Printing press in Goa from Portugal with the objective of propagating Christianity among the natives. In 1578 AD the first book in vernacular language *Tampiran Vanakam* (translation of St Xavier's Doutrina Christa) was printed in India.



Figure 13: Portrait of Johannes Gutenberg, Wood Engraving Print.

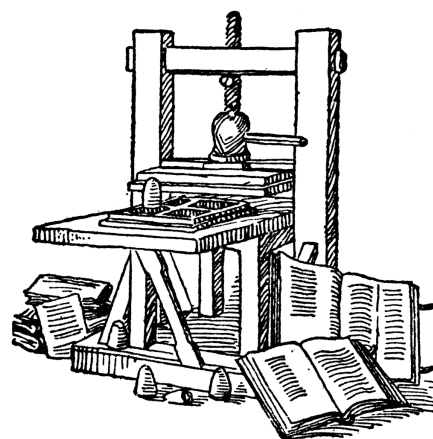


Figure 14: Gutenberg Printing Press.

Akbar's reign is considered to be a *renaissance* of cultural confluence in the subcontinent. It saw European engravings reaching the Mughal court, carried by Jesuit missionaries, which greatly influenced the Mughal atelier of indigenous artists and paved the way towards a unique fusion of Eastern and Western aesthetics under Mughal patronage. Burgeoning trade under successive Mughal emperors ushered the arrival of European traders and with them the import of crucial technological advancement in every field, including printing technologies.



Figure 15: Tampiran Vanakam - first vernacular language book printed in India (1578 AD).

By mid 18th century the British East India Company had established a strong presence on Indian soil which demanded an urgency for documentation of the richness of the new Colonies and a propagation of the same in European market to court further financial investment to increase trade from the Indies.

This resulted in establishing of several Printing Presses and Publication Houses across different Presidencies in India. There was a growing demand for printed albums illustrations depicting local flora, fauna, natives and lifestyles. Skilled indigenous artisans were trained in the process of draughtsmanship and printing to meet this demand. Artists like Thomas and William Daniell travelled across the country to document picturesque Colonial territories published as print albums like 'Twelve Views of Calcutta.' (Album of etchings) Fig. 16. The albums have become priceless pieces of documentation today.



Figure 16: 'Twelve Views of Calcutta' - Album of etchings by Thomas and William Daniell (1788).



Figure 17: . Places of Entertainment in the Eastern capital Woodcut Print by Katsushika Hokusai, (1802) Edo, Japan. Victoria & Albert Museum

2. Conclusion: Cultural hybridity and exchanges of Aesthetic influences

The paper traces how mark-making, imprinting or printmaking remained intrinsically entangled, as tools of communication and development, in the history of human evolution. From the Hand Stencils of Prehistoric caves to Terracotta Seals of Ancient Civilizations, to Woodblocks for printing on fabric followed by Block-books having both texts and images and later the Printing Press which revolutionized the very idea of knowledge initiation through its output in terms of speed and quality. As the means of communication advanced so did the modes of transference. The Silk Road for example was not just the path for merchandising but also for erudition in terms of skill-sets, spirituality and scholastic elaboration. The knowledge transference of Buddhism along with the skill of Printing on fabric and paper (after its discovery in China) was facilitated through the winding paths of the Silk Road, connecting cultures with the urgency to thrive and prosper aided by novel innovations. With the opening of trade routes over land and sea, more and more exchange of merchandise became plausible.

Prints, due to their small format size and availability of editions, reached the farthest of spaces among the most unassuming faction of people, thereby acting as true ambassadors of cultural exchanges. A case to the point is the coming of European Prints to the Mughal court and the collection of Indian miniature drawings and paintings

among European artists like Rembrandt van Rijn. Fig. 20 illustrates this counter influence of aesthetics between the two nations. The image on the left is a drawing by Rembrandt after the Mughal miniature painting. It clearly shows Rembrandt's fascination with the refined aesthetics of the Mughal School of Art, which in itself was a confluence of 'gharanas' or traditions of Persian and Indian schools of art. The European prints added an extra dimension to the richness of these traditions, thereby creating a collective visual language that had traversed many boundaries while depicting indigenous lives and events.

The print above titled 'Places of Entertainment in the Eastern capital' (Fig. 21) is Woodcut Print by Katsushika Hokusai, which depicts the excitement among Japanese people on seeing the Dutch Merchants in the city of Nagasaki. It beautifully captures the wonder and curiosity of knowing something new and alien, and the hunger for experiencing it.

A collaboration also happened in shaping the vernacular typographic fonts of India as they were cast into metal types by Europeans in collaboration with indigenous metalsmiths. In fact some of the first metal types were first fashioned and printed abroad and much later printed in India, after training and collaborating with local craftsmen. The objective may have been the expansion of Christian faith among the natives, but what it eventually achieved was the democratization of knowledge and the right to dignified living for people from all sects of the society. The medium of Print thereby remains the true ambassador in heralding democracy among the people of this world.

Authorship contribution

Moutushi Chakraborty: Conducted the visual and contextual analysis, conceptualized the structure of the paper; prepared the full draft; reviewed art-historical sources; and ensured adherence to academic and formatting guidelines.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declares that there are no conflicts of interest writing this review paper.

Similarity Index

I hereby confirm that there is less than 10% Plagiarism was achieved in this case study.

Data availability statement

All information used in the study is derived from publicly available art-historical literature and direct observations.

Declaration

The author declares that this paper is an original work and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. All external sources have been properly cited.

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