

The Authors' Brush-Strokes: A Study on the Aesthetics of Art in the Illustrations of Satyajit Ray and Kurt Vonnegut

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Abstract:

Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) and Kurt Vonnegut (1923-2007), both products of different histories and cultural mores, however, share an artistic flair: sketching, painting, and writing pictorial narratives. What is remarkable is the way their photographs illuminate and expand their writings. My research report proposes to study the sketches- the illustrations and artwork of Satyajit Ray and Kurt Vonnegut both individually and through a process of comparison and contrast, enlarging upon their respective philosophy of art manifest in forms that bestow distinct emotion and soul upon each painting alike. This report proposes not only to observe but also to analyze the brush strokes of authors.

Keywords: Bengal School of Art, Cubism, Abstract expressionism, Illustration

"It is often said that we live in an increasingly visual, image-based culture. The digital age has brought a growing expectation of pictorial instruction, signs, and symbols. Images are moving, or static now seems to accompany most forms of information and entertainment. The art of illustration is traditionally defined as one of elucidating or decorating textual information and augmenting it with visual representation. But in many contexts, the image has begun to replace the word" (Salisbury and Styles, 7), states Martin Salisbury and Morag Styles in the introduction to their book, *Children's Picture book: The Art of Visual Story Telling*. "Ut Pictura Poesis," says Horace in his work *Ars Poetica*, which means, 'AS is painting, so is poetry.' This stream of thought was carried forward by Simonides of Keos, who says, "Poetry is a speaking picture, painting a silent poetry." Through various stages, the art of painting has gradually merged with the arts of fiction, and literary works have been given a pictorial representation – illustrations or illuminated verses.

Soon the persona of the author became one with that of the artist, and the artist-author started complimenting his texts with illustrations which soon became the tool by which the readers were to interpret the texts. Henri Bergson says that an image revolves around bridging the explanatory gap between the conscious and physical phenomenon. In particular, it

illuminates the enigmatic relation between mental and external (accessible to others) representations: the graphics compliment and hones the pictorial narratives.

Leo Spitzer, another stylistic critic, has made it possible for us to view a writer's language as a syndrome of lexical and syntactical choices, psychic processes, and drive sociological usages and attitudes, metaphysical assumptions, and positions. Such a response stipulates the language qua language is taken as an evolved totality within which visions of human reality may be structured, so far as it is possible to do so.

Satyajit Ray started his career as a graphic illustrator for book covers, illustrations for children's books, film posters, etc. Satyajit Ray was a veteran artist, and post-death, he left behind an astounding legacy encompassing quantity, variety, and quality. Not only did he illustrate short stories that he penned but also those that were written by others. He created four new types of English calligraphic fonts, designed book covers, and eventually brought a new era in terms of book jacket design in India. He came up with booklets, hoardings, and posters, usually for the films he directed himself. When requested by his friends and relatives, he also designed wedding cards. Ray, in his youth, had been trained in painting and graphic art at the Viswa Bharati University, Santiniketan, for almost two years and a half and had been taught by veteran painters like Nandalal Bose and Binod Behari Mukherjee. They were adept enough to infuse the art of the Bengal School into Ray's intrinsic creativity.

Kurt Vonnegut's life, on the other hand, has been checkered by various subjects; some were of his choice, the others the will of his elders. However, every path of his led him to the magazine or the news editorial of his institution. He admits that it just turned out that he could write better than many other people and that each person can do something quickly and can't imagine why everybody else has so much trouble doing it. Most people were relatively unaware of his career as an artist when he gained fame as a writer with his sixth novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, published in 1969, seventeen years after his first novel. The picture of the locket on Montana Wildhack's breast, which contained the script of the serenity prayer in *Slaughterhouse-five*, was the first of his artwork to have appeared in his books. Vonnegut subsequently started including his doodles and sketches in his novels, beginning with *Breakfast of Champions*. Even before he started including his doodles as a part of his writings, he used to include his works on the cover pages of his novels, accompanied by his signature, which more often than not resembled his self-portrait. Vonnegut was influenced by Paul Klee and Jackson Pollock's styles of art: cubism, surrealism and abstracts.

In Bengal, a new school of art developed centering on Abanindranath Tagore, who rejected Raja Ravi Verma's art, considering it too imitative of the Western style. They felt this style was insufficient for depicting the national legends and ancient myths. They were, therefore, sure that a new class needed to be practiced to capture the majorly spiritual essence

of the Oriental. They parted ways from the traditional oil paintings and the techniques of the realist school. They turned to Indian medieval Indian paintings – miniature and mural paintings that could be seen in the caves of Ajanta. These artists also took inspiration from the Japanese artists who visited India at that time when the Asian Art Movement was budding. Chinese calligraphy, Japanese coloring, and Persian finish were borrowed to develop further the brewing movement known as the Bengal school of art. They thus posed as the Avant Garde – equivalent to the direction of the same name in the West. The paintings of the Bengal school were simple and standard, accompanied by an attractive color scheme. Refined figures were shown with much elegance, and the images skilfully contrasted shades of light and dark without any visible hardness. This movement led to a successful merging of Oriental and Occidental techniques.

On the other hand, Kurt Vonnegut mainly followed the art style known as Abstract Expressionism. This movement became popular in the United States of America in the 1940s and centered around New York. The term was popularised by Jackson Pollock and practiced widely by Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko, which were all pretty different in style but linked by a shared outlook. These artists wanted to break free from traditional aesthetics, social norms, and values. They abandoned Naturalism which had been dominating the art of the twentieth century. The painters believed in spontaneous freedom in the expression of their thoughts. Action painting is a technique that calls for the artist to use random actions in his paintings. They used to splash, dribble and pour paint all over their canvas, often laid flat on the floor. However, action painting was not used too often by Vonnegut, who often resorted to the Cubist style of painting as well, a school of painting that was initiated and carried forward by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque from around the year 1907. This school of painting, too, like the Abstract Expressionists, aimed at a radical break from the realistic style of the depiction of the subjects of painting, especially nature which had been ruling supreme in the art world since the days of the Renaissance. The Cubist artists focussed on depicting the permanent or base structure of the objects from multiple angles rather than showing them from a particular point in the time-space coordinate and a single point of view so that the different aspects of the single object can be perceived at the same time.

Both Satyajit Ray and Kurt Vonnegut had art running through their veins. Satyajit Ray's father, Sukumar Ray was the famous illustrator of his yet more famous book of poems, *AbolTabol*, and his grandfather Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury was not only an eminent illustrator but also revolutionized the art of block printing in Indian illustrative techniques. To help his father run the family printing press, Sukumar Ray spent a few years in the Department of Printing, University of Manchester. No wonder Satyajit Ray was exposed to art and took to practicing it at such a tender age.

" I have had a bent for art since my childhood. I could do portraits when I was a boy of 13 or 14. I could also make clay images. I feel I inherited this flair from my father

and grandfather. Upendrakishore was a perfect illustrator. Father, too did illustrations. But he died early. Upendrakishore, too passed away at a relatively early age of 52. However, learning from Mastermoshai (Nandalal Bose) and Binod-da (BinodBehari Mukhopadhyay) helped me change the style of my art. Ramkinkar made me familiar with the modern trends of sculpture.' This is what Ray said about his world of art in an interview sometime before he passed away. This formed part of the brochure at an exhibition aptly titled Art of Satyajit Ray. organized by Ray Society at the North Gallery of the Academy of Fine Arts 19th through 25th January 2008, one could step into this little-known world of this internationally renowned filmmaker called Satyajit Ray." (Satyajit Ray Society)

Kurt Vonnegut's family, too, was that of artists. When he was invited to a show where writers like Norman Mailer and Tennessee Williams' artworks were exhibited, he said, "I've drawn all my life, on the edges of manuscripts and things like that. But I started thinking, 'This is the amateur approach...so I decided to take myself seriously as an artist... My father was an artist, my grandfather was an artist, and I have three children who are accomplished artists.'"(Vonnegut, *Drawings*,14) Despite being a writer, and a famous one, Vonnegut was always interested in being an artist. He says, "Writing is labor, and the writer's reward arrives when he or she hands it to the editor and says, 'it's yours.'" The painter, on the other hand, says Vonnegut, "gets his rocks off while doing the painting. The act itself is agreeable." (Vonnegut, *Drawings*, 19)

As a graphics designer, Satyajit Ray would first try to conceive an idea that he would want to give shape to in the form of an illustration. After doing so, he would explore the inner meaning and possibilities of the idea, then finally merge the conception of the mind and his artistic hand on paper. Ray has been known for applying the technique used in films where a penetrating and nuanced vision would be required to prove it inside out and finally sketch it. Ray revolutionized the film industry and commercial art in Bengal. Eventually, this prolific artist came up with his style, which we have gradually come to admire and love intensely. Ray always tried to create something from absolute scratches, which according to Aristotle, is the principle behind the creation of the universe. He mastered the style of using brush strokes of various thicknesses in a single composition. Sometimes, he used rough brush strokes to portray restlessness and overflow of energy, whereas some strokes flowed like trickling water on a glass pane.

The Society for the Preservation of Satyajit Ray Films, better known as Satyajit Ray Society or just Ray Society, established in 1994, is dedicated to restoring and preserving the invaluable legacies the versatile genius left behind when he passed away in April 1992. In his profound works, one notices both traditional sophistication and experimentations with varied art styles which incorporated several other local and foreign art traditions. However, he never compromised on aesthetic appeal and authenticity. One of the best examples of his application

of the East Asian style or the Oriental School of art was the book cover design of his novel *Tintoretto Jishu* (1983) which his mentor, Binod Behari Mukherjee, heavily influenced.

In the pre-digital era, illustrators following the traditional modes of art would have to adhere to the realist mode of creative representation. This was because of the lack of good cameras and techniques of photography, where the illustrators were meant to create something which could aptly represent the natural world and the actual visual version of the things or objects they were trying to portray. However, during the era when Ray was working as a designer of graphics, techniques of photography in commercial spheres had already started taking a turn towards what it is today, and the use of digital effects had already started coming under the spotlight. This gave Ray ample opportunity to experiment with the natural forms of creative illustrations which could aptly represent the narratives. At the same time, this also allowed Ray to execute his artistic license to portray reality as he imagined it.

Ray popularised two categories of Bengali typeface – the architectural form, which was the reproductive mode, and the calligraphic format, which was the non-reproductive mode. Such versatile artistic manifestation reflected upon Ray's profound understanding of the organic and mechanics to create a perfect amalgamation. As mentioned earlier, Ray had received professional training in brushwork, which he used to develop newer Bangla calligraphic fonts. In the 1960s, when Ray worked at Signet Press, he had to illustrate Bengali poems and book covers. It was then that he realized that the metallic-type face was falling short in conveying the authentic flavor of the Bengali language. He, therefore, thought of incorporating calligraphy as part and parcel of his illustrations.

His exuberant use of contrasting colors and the play of shadow and light in the illustration of *Fedula*, his series of detective novels, is praiseworthy. In *Gorosthane Sabdhan*, *Sonar Kella*, and *Koilashe Kelengkari*, Ray created book covers that incorporated the merging of colors of contrasting hues to form an appealing combination of silhouettes and outline drawings, very similar to photographs and their negatives. The shapes bring in an aura of mystery- an ambiance that would hone the element of adventure and excitement. In the 1970s, psychedelic art was gaining steady momentum in the globally recognized advertising culture. Ray was no exception, and he incorporated the psychedelic to probe into the mind of his characters to give the readers a clear view of the foggy and inebriated thinking of the fictional protagonists. They were rampant in the series of science fiction—*Professor Shonku*. A similar technique was used when he designed the book jacket for another *Feluda* novel- *Gangtoke Gondogol*.

Ray's versatile expertise as an artist is best portrayed when he sets aside the use of psychedelic and brings in the use of the Naturalist mode of illustration in artwork such as *Professor Shonku's Kandokarkhana* and *Shabash Professor Shonku*. However, Ray carefully

avoids strict adherence to the conventional naturalist school of art. While reading one of Professor Shonku's novels, the reader would feel as if they could see right through professor Shonku's mind because of the effect of transparency that Ray used to portray the character in his illustration. Such graphic representations bring to life the dynamism and enthusiasm of Professor Shonku's adventure.

When the *Pather Panchali Sketchbook* was published in 2016, Sandip Ray commented on his father's artwork:

"He (Satyajit Ray) did some sketches in a drawing book after he had come back from London in 1950 and illustrated a succession of pictures (in pen, brush, and ink) for the sequence of scenes as they would put up in the films." (Ray, Sandip. *Interview*)

Ray allowed himself to be amply influenced by art cultures around the world. He brought the Dadaist effect to the posters for *Pratidwandi* and *Mahapurush*, where he used the surrealist photo montage technique. The impact of the minimalist pop art movement can be seen in the artwork of *Mahanagar* and *Seemabaddha*. It promotes the effect of totality with the scanty use of expressive lines and a sudden splash of color accentuating the painting in a way that resonates with the tradition of Andy Warhol. The poster that Ray designed for his movie 'Ghare Baire' represents his maturing in the field of digital. He uses the chiaroscuro technique, which uses the contrast between light and dark to execute the depth and volume of the whole composition.

In his book *The Breakfast of Champions*, Kurt Vonnegut created a particular form of profile drawing, which was his signature hidden behind the complexities of his simple lines. These drawings, despite seeming overtly naïve, which appeared in this novel for the first time, came as a pleasant surprise to his readers because these drawings elevated his genuine sense of humor furthermore, which were earlier prevalent only in his writings. These drawings often emphasize portraying the eccentric difference between what words intend to signify and what they end up meaning. Some other drawings are used to elevate the essence of the novels and seldom, often, to deliver the punch lines of Vonnegut's famous tongue-in-cheek humor. Using these drawings as a tool, Vonnegut tries to demystify and deconstruct American society and culture, bringing to the fore their often seemingly adolescent nature and perspective, which are sometimes laden with guile. In a novel that revolves around an art fair, the childlike simplicity of his lines adds an undercurrent of professional irony. The most well-known of Vonnegut's drawings are those he made out of most direct lines, filled with felt-tip pens. More often than not, these drawings were human profiles that he would use to represent the diverse inner nature of human beings. This form of drawing was initiated from his doodles, which he often made in the margins of his manuscripts, or crumbled balls of rejected paper which he eventually started to push in fair with the intention of printing them as a part of his novels. He came to call them his 'felt-tip calligraphy.' In his series of drawings, better known as "Letters," he uses his expert hand to merge different font styles on the same piece of paper, letting the

lines of each font cut and dissect those of the others and yet not lose out on their legibility. Often he used different colors or thicknesses of felt-tip pens for each font so that one could easily distinguish each font, see each as an individual letter, and then see the whole of it as one of his extraordinary creative masterpieces. Another prominent feature in some of the doodles is that he never picks up his pen from the paper. The entire doodle, with its complex curls, comes together to create such a drawing where he weaves in emotions and incidents with one single stroke of his pen. Another series of his painting depicts a series of self-portraits done explicitly using cubist techniques. Peter Reed describes a moment when he saw the veteran writer mark the white canvas with his drawings:

When I watched Vonnegut Draw, he began with a vertical line and then a horizontal one. It was almost as if he was about to draw a graph. That approach is not apparent in those drawings one might call 'Cubist,' where vertical and horizontal lines bisect the image. (He once told me he was intrigued by what the Cubists didn't 'breaking up the chaotic into geometric forms, pleasing shapes.')." (Vonnegut, *Drawings*, 15-16)

He made extensive use of white spaces on his canvas or paper. What is notable is that there are many of his paintings that seem to have been traced out from one single drawing and were colored in different patterns using felt tip pens. Often other profiles of a single portrait were merged into a single painting where each portion enclosed by lines was tinted in different colors. This could signify the different shades that could be highlighted in a human being – not in visible external tones but in the colors that emanate from within. The doodle was also often made back to back, which is why they were visible through each other. Apart from his self-portraits, Vonnegut also drew faces apart from his own. Faces were, in fact, commonplace in his art. Peter Reed notes, "...he remarked that one can recognize someone at a distance when the face appears as little as more than the three dots of eyes and mouth." (Vonnegut, *Drawings*, 14) Vonnegut notes, "The human face is the most interesting of all forms. So I've made abstracts of all these faces. Because that's how we go through life, scanning faces." (Vonnegut, *Drawings*, 14)

A doodle-like illustration accompanies his short story "The Hall of Mirrors, where a face is shown, half a natural coloring, the other half is a reflection in a mirror. However, while looking at the photograph, one will not be able to determine which one is the real and which is the reflection. Despite a thin line differentiation between illusion and reality, the portraits easily merge into one, giving an impression of a whole.

Therefore, we can get a glimpse of the expert hand of these two prominent writers who wrecked the world of painting so much that now we cannot speak of any of them without simultaneously drawing upon their writings and drawings.

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