


ANALYSING PEDAGOGICAL CHANGES IN POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA THROUGH THE LENS OF K. G. SUBRAMANYAN'S PRACTICE

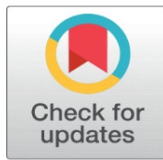
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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the situation of art education in post-independent India and how it evolved through different patterns and negotiations among modernity, inherited cultural spaces, and institutional authority. Existing research often limits pedagogy to the formal curriculum, ignoring the broader context of studio culture, material understanding, and real-life interactions that play a prominent role in building aesthetic understanding. This paper lays the foundation for rethinking pedagogy as institutional culture in motion, developed through experiments in teaching practices, shared learning spaces, public platforms, and implicit values that students absorbed through making. Through K. G. Subramanyan's writings, institutional initiatives, and selected works, as well as the distinct trajectories of students associated with Baroda, the paper suggests that Subramanyan's contribution is not limited in introducing a method instead it is reshaping the concerns under which artistic knowledge could be developed, circulated, and recognized.

Keywords: Art Education, Pedagogy, Institutional Culture and Modern Indian Art

1. INTRODUCTION

After independence in India, art education became a site of responsibility and at the same time a critical site where modernity, cultural inheritance, and institutional frameworks were supposed to be negotiated. It was not a project designed for a limited period of time, it developed organically and was shaped by different pedagogues, universities came out with their individual voices, nationalists developed a cultural thought, and debates around craft, tradition, and freedom in expression. There are several writings on this period focusing on the evolution of Indian art or institutional narratives that treat pedagogy mainly as curriculum. This paper does not confine pedagogy to curriculum alone whereas it examines pedagogy as it is constituted through practice and experiments over time. This shift allows postcolonial art education to be read as a field of mediation between different time frames.

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K. G. Subramanyan (1924–2016) a poet and educator, offers a specific perspective where his pedagogical methods have shaped Indian art and its aesthetics. Positioned across two foundational sites, Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan, where he trained from 1944 to 1948 and the Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University (MSU), Baroda, where he taught from the early 1950s through the late 1970s, his approach allows us to trace how pedagogic ideas travelled, evolved and acquired different meanings across institutions. His movement across these spaces helped him see how Santiniketan's craft-centred way of thinking reshaped within the formal system of a post-independent university format.

We see his contribution to pedagogy through art practice and writings both. Therefore by reading Subramanyan as an artist and as a pedagogue, this paper argues that his pedagogical practice functioned as a bridge between tradition and modernity, creative freedom and institutional constraint.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach grounded in art-historical and institutional analysis. The paper reads pedagogy as a dynamic set of relationships among teaching practices, material processes, studio culture, and institutional structures through combined approach of reading texts, understanding institutional context, and analyzing visual forms

First, the paper analyses selected writings and reflections by Subramanyan, especially his discussions of art, craft, education, and modernity. These are read alongside broader educational ideas associated with Rabindranath Tagore and the pedagogic ethos of Santiniketan. Second, the paper examines secondary scholarship on Santiniketan and the Faculty of Fine Arts at Baroda in order to situate Subramanyan's practice within larger institutional histories. Third, it uses visual analysis of selected works by Subramanyan to understand how his artistic practice itself embodied pedagogic values related to material experimentation, narrative plurality, and the reworking of traditional knowledge.

The study is not based on field interviews or archival excavation for this particular paper. Its findings are drawn from close reading of published sources and from interpretive analysis of artworks and institutional contexts. This methodology is appropriate to the paper's aim, which is not focusing on producing a comprehensive institutional history, but to examine how pedagogical change may be understood through a key practitioner whose career linked with two influential sites of post-independence Indian art education.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. SANTINIKETAN'S INFLUENCE: LEARNING IN A LOOSE CREATIVE COMMUNITY

Subramanyan's formative years at Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan helped in building an ethical and conceptual ground for pedagogy he later developed. Rabindranath Tagore's broader vision with craft, culture and education brought new avenues in Shantiniketan, it departed from the academic art school to a space for practice that connected with surroundings rather than being limited to academic structure and credentials. Pedagogy there, is imagined as a lived process, embedded in environment, community, and material engagement. Subramanyan later described the institution as a "loose creative community," stressing that one entered Santiniketan not to acquire professional credentials but to develop a value toward art as a way of thinking and living [Subramanyan \(2007\)](#). Encounters with teachers such as Nandalal Bose, Benode Behari Mukherjee, and Ramkinkar Baij often took place outside formal settings, reinforcing a mentor-based model in which learning emerged through dialogue usually beyond the classroom walls.

Although he was not overtly political, his deep understanding of craft traditions in India and across the world, along with his engagement with the Gandhian vision of nation-building, shaped his thinking. It enabled him to see craft as a structured practice rooted in processes and conventions and, in turn, to understand art as a form of language. Tagore's belief that education should nurture learning and curiosity, informed this approach, positioning pedagogues as a change maker [Tagore \(1961\)](#). Subramanyan repeatedly returned to this idea that art needs to be taught through experience, repeated practice, and self-critical engagement.

For Subramanyan a crucial influence during this period was Nandalal Bose's emphasis on practice as discipline. His analogy of the potter's wheel, where initial instability gradually resolves through continuous effort, offered a model of learning grounded in lived experience [Kumar \(1997\)](#). The analogy frames uncertainty and experimentation as the conditions through which creative experience and judgement develop in a practitioner. "*Shantiniketan grew with Rabindranath, Kala Bhavan grew with Nandalal Bose. Bose conceived his work with students at Kala Bhavan as a journey undertaken with a band of fellow travelers, generally led by him but also learning from one another as they went along.*" This statement from R. Siva Kumar clearly reflects how pedagogy at Shantiniketan had come together.

Figure 1

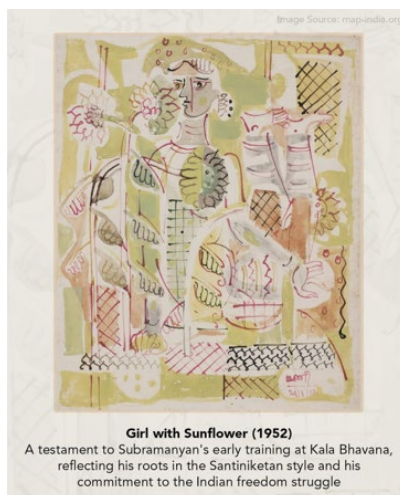


Figure 1 Subramanyan K.G. “*Girl with Sunflower*” (1952). Artwork cited in discussion of Santiniketan’s experiential pedagogy.

Source: Museum of Art & Photography (MAP), “Understanding K.G. Subramanyan through Six Pivotal Artworks,” <https://map-india.org/understanding-kg-subramanyan-through-six-pivotal-artworks/>, accessed April 14, 2026.

Subramanyan’s early work reflects this approach, his early painting “*Girl with Sunflower*” (1952) made soon after his time at Shantiniketan, leans toward observation, simple elements, and a sensitivity to local visual traditions, moving away from strict academic realism. The work draws on indigenous visual languages while being sensitive towards the material qualities of watercolor as a medium. More importantly, it reflects upon a way of making in the sphere of aesthetics in which form develops through sustained observation and material exploration while not becoming limited to strict academic frameworks.

3.2. FROM SANTINIKETAN TO BARODA: TRANSLATING PEDAGOGY ACROSS INSTITUTIONS

Subramanyan’s move to the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda, in 1951 marked a decisive shift in the institutional conditions under which the orientations discussed above would function. He joined as a junior colleague in the close-knit team of Markand Bhatt, Sankho Chaudhuri, and N. S. Bendre. The Faculty had been established under the Vice-Chancellorship of Hansa Mehta, who invited Markand Bhatt to found the programme, and this early formation gave Subramanyan considerable freedom to work, experiment, and shape his pedagogy within the institution. If Santiniketan shaped his sense of art education as environmental and process-driven, Baroda confronted him with the demands of a newly constituted university system, formal curricula, departmental structures, assessment, and institutional legitimacy. Santiniketan’s sensibilities had to be articulated within institutional frameworks, not outside them. Founded in 1950, the Baroda Faculty of Fine Arts was among the earliest attempts post-independence to establish a modern, university based art school in India. While it selectively engaged European models of art education, it was also invested in articulating a postcolonial cultural identity. Subramanyan entered this context as one of the first Santiniketan trained artists on the faculty, carrying with him an ethos shaped by informality, material engagement, and interdisciplinarity. At Baroda, however, such values had to be made operational within bureaucratic and disciplinary structures.

Subramanyan’s pedagogical significance at Baroda lies in how he redefined what could count as artistic knowledge within the university. Craft, folk traditions, and cross-media practices, including terracotta, mural, toy-making, illustration, and textile-related processes, were not positioned as peripheral skills but as integral to modern artistic inquiry (Subramanyan 2007). Through this move, he challenged the hierarchy that separated fine art from craft in academic discourse. Craft, in his framing, was neither quaint survival nor decorative supplement; it was a way of thinking through form, material intelligence, and cultural history. He Joins Weavers’ Service Centre of the All India Handloom Board as deputy director in Bombay from 1959 to 1961 and further consolidated this position by exposing him to textile and craft traditions whose techniques embody complex systems of knowledge. This experience fed back into his teaching at Baroda, where craft functioned as both pedagogical resource and conceptual framework. As Parul Dave Mukherji notes, “*K.G. Subramanyan revived the Santiniketan legacy of mural in Baroda and saw in them potential for public art; this was a meeting point between traditional artisanal practice, like Jaipuri sand casting and a modernist preoccupation with the grid and repeatable units*” (Mitter et al. (2022)).

This position becomes even clearer in Subramanyan’s own reflections on pedagogy. When he was asked what he thought about art pedagogy in India, he replied that it was “*not very innovative*” and pointed to Tagore and Gandhi as the two figures who had seriously thought about education. He described Tagore’s educational vision as modern in the deepest sense, especially in its insistence that education should prepare people not only for existing society, but for the society that is yet to be built. He also valued Gandhi’s idea of co-relative education, where people are educated alongside their trades so that they can later decide whether to stay or leave. From this answer, it becomes clear that Subramanyan sees pedagogy as a social and civilizational question, not only an academic one. He values educational models that join thinking, making, ethics, and community. It also suggests that post-independent India inherited radical pedagogic ideas but institutionalized them only weakly. Subramanyan says these ideas do not really enter the present system, and this gives an important opening to discuss the gap between pedagogic ideals and institutional practice in post-independence India. In this sense, education for Subramanyan is not a romantic return to tradition, but a question of informed freedom, imaginative possibility, and social transformation (Mitter et al. (2022)).

Subramanyan’s strategy was not to reject the institution, but to bend it by expanding what counted as legitimate work and building platforms where students could test art’s relation to everyday publics. The Fine Arts Fair treated circulation and use as pedagogical questions, and helped

students imagine artistic practice as socially embedded rather than confined inside the studio or gallery. Within the classroom, Subramanyan maintained a mentorship model consistent with his Santiniketan formation, prioritizing exploration over prescription. At Baroda, this approach gained institutional force through curriculum design, studio culture, and faculty decisions, including the incorporation of master craftsmen such as and not limited to Gyarsilal Varma. What is visible here is that the movement from Santiniketan to Baroda was not simply a shift from one institution to another, but a process of translating open-ended, interdisciplinary, and socially rooted pedagogic values into the structured framework of a modern university [Glukhova and Khachmafova \(2026\)](#).

3.3. VISUAL PEDAGOGY: ARTWORKS AS MODELS OF METHOD

Subramanyan's dual identity as practicing artist and teacher meant that his artworks often embodied the pedagogical values he argued for. Many pieces can be read as demonstrations of possibility, ways to blend tradition and modernity and to respond to social contexts through material practice without turning into stylistic templates. For that reason, studying Subramanyan's pedagogy is equally important as studying his own artistic practice

Figure 2



Figure 2 Subramanyan K.G. "The King of the Dark Chamber" (Terracotta Mural, 1963). Artwork cited in discussion of public art and material process.

Source: Asia Art Archive, "The King of the Dark Chamber (Partial)," <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/k-g-subramanyan-archive/object/the-king-of-the-dark-chamber-partial>, accessed April 14, 2026

A related strand appears in his terracotta and mural work, where the craft process becomes inseparable from public address. Above work shows how clay, relief modelling, and narrative staging can operate outside the easel tradition while still engaging questions of modern pictorial construction. Such works showcased to the students that modern practice could be materially grounded, collaborative, and architectural without losing conceptual complexity.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Subramanyan, K.G. "Woman in the Blue Room" (1981) Reverse Glass Painting. Artwork Cited in Discussion of Medium, Method, and Tradition as Working Vocabulary.

Source: Museum of Art & Photography, "Understanding K.G. Subramanyan through Six Pivotal Artworks," <https://map-india.org/understanding-k-g-subramanyan-through-six-pivotal-artworks/>, Accessed April 14, 2026.

The above work executed as a reverse glass painting, is another key example. Reverse glass painting, widely associated with bazaar and devotional imagery, had largely fallen outside the canon of modern art by the late twentieth century. Subramanyan's return to this technique is not nostalgic but methodological. The reverse process, where details must be painted before background, demands deliberate planning while producing a luminous, flattened surface. In this work, the domestic interior, populated by human and animal forms, resists fixed narrative and instead operates through symbolic suggestion. The visual language draws on popular painting, miniature traditions, and modernist interior space, making visible Subramanyan's insistence that tradition can function as a working vocabulary rather than a fixed inheritance.

Figure 4



Figure 4 Mukherjee, M. (1977). “*Ritu Raja*” [Hemp and Mild Steel]. Hemp and Mild Steel. Artwork Cited in Discussion of Later Artistic Trajectories Shaped by Material Intelligence.

Source: National Gallery of Modern Art, “Mrinalini Mukherjee – *Ritu Raja*,” <https://ngmaindia.gov.in/> (Collection Page), Accessed April 14, 2026.

These aspects and concerns reveal themselves also in the practice of artists whom he had mentored. Comparable orientations appear in the practices of artists such as Mrinalini Mukherjee, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Jyoti Bhatt, and Laxma Goud. Mukherjee’s work with knotted fibre, scaled to monumental form and later translated into bronze, retains a tactile sensibility that treats craft intelligence as an aesthetic device. Sheikh’s layered compositions integrate miniature painting, literature, and contemporary political contexts, extending an encouragement of narrative plurality and cultural diversity. Bhatt’s printmaking and photographic documentation emerge from sustained encounters with folk practices such as rangoli and village mural traditions, translated into academic work through fieldwork and visual research [MAP Academy \(2022d\)](#), [Kumar \(1997\)](#). The point is not adoption of “folk style,” but an orientation toward living visual cultures as sites of knowledge.

Taken together, these trajectories suggest that Subramanyan’s pedagogical legacy operates infrastructurally rather than stylistically. His influence persists as a way of thinking through materials, narratives, and cultural resources, an approach shaped at Santiniketan and made institutionally durable at Baroda.

4. CONCLUSION

Subramanyan’s significance lies in the way he brought an experiential, craft-inclusive, and environment-oriented pedagogy into the disciplinary structure of a modern university without letting it become doctrinal. At Baroda, craft practices, vernacular visual systems, and cross-media experimentation were not placed outside modern art, but became part of the methods through which modern artistic inquiry could be pursued within an institutional setting. Through curriculum design, public initiatives such as the Fine Arts Fair, sustained studio mentorship, and his own artistic practice, he kept these pedagogical possibilities active within the institution.

The visual analysis of his work and that of his students makes clear that this pedagogy did not function through imitation or stylistic uniformity. Instead, it shaped a shared mode of inquiry marked by material attentiveness, narrative plurality, and a refusal of rigid distinctions between art and craft. Post-independence art education in India is therefore best understood as an evolving field of mediation between inherited knowledge, modern institutional structures, and contemporary practice. Reading Subramanyan through this lens allows a broader rethinking of art pedagogy as dynamic institutional culture rather than as curriculum alone. It also opens further scope for comparing formal art schools with more open contemporary platforms such as KHOJ, FICA, and the Kochi Biennale, where interdisciplinary and socially engaged models of learning continue to be reworked outside or alongside the conventional academy.

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