

Original Article

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

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ABSTRACT

Post-independence Indian art education developed through uneven negotiations among modernity, inherited cultural frameworks, and institutional authority. Scholarship on the period often treats pedagogy as curriculum alone, rather than as lived studio culture, material conditions, and the everyday micro-politics that shape artistic formation. This paper proposes a framework for reading pedagogy as institutional culture in motion, produced through teaching practices, shared spaces, material access, public platforms, and tacit values that students absorb through making. Using K. G. Subramanyan's trajectory across Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan (1944–1948) and the Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda (early 1950s to late 1970s), the paper argues that his pedagogical practice mediated between tradition and modernity, craft and fine art hierarchies, and studio freedom and university regulation. Through his writings, institutional initiatives, and selected works, as well as the distinct trajectories of students associated with Baroda, the paper suggests that Subramanyan's contribution lay less in prescribing a method than in reshaping the conditions under which artistic knowledge could be produced, circulated, and legitimised.

Keywords: Art Education, Pedagogy, Post-Independence India, Santiniketan, Baroda, K. G. Subramanyan, Craft and Modernism

INTRODUCTION

In the decades after India's independence in 1947, art education became a critical site where modernity, cultural inheritance, and institutional authority were negotiated. Post-independence art education did not emerge as a single, unified pedagogical project. It developed unevenly, shaped by newly constituted university systems, the afterlife of nationalist cultural thought, and debates around the status of craft, tradition, and artistic autonomy. Yet much scholarship continues to approach this period either through stylistic histories of modern Indian art or through institutional narratives that treat pedagogy primarily as curriculum, rather than as lived practice.

Methodologically, this paper treats "pedagogy" as more than curriculum. It includes the micro-politics of studios (how space is shared, what materials are available, what kinds of work are praised or marginalised), the public-facing platforms that institutions build, and the tacit values students absorb through everyday practice. This shift, from pedagogy-as-syllabus to pedagogy-as-lived institutional culture, allows us to see postcolonial art education as a field of mediation rather than a finished model.

This paper proposes an alternative framework: to read post-independence art education as institutional culture in motion, produced through teaching practices, studio environments, material choices, and everyday negotiations within art schools. In this

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framing, pedagogy is not a fixed doctrine but a dynamic process shaped by artists who teach, institutions that regulate, and students who translate pedagogic values into practice.

K. G. Subramanyan (1924–2016) offers a productive lens for such a study. Positioned across two foundational sites of Indian art education, 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 trajectory allows us to trace how pedagogic ideas travelled, transformed, and acquired different meanings across institutional contexts. His movement between these spaces was not merely biographical; it was pedagogical, revealing how an environmental and craft-oriented ethos associated with Santiniketan was reworked within the formal structures of a post-independence university.

By reading Subramanyan simultaneously as artist, teacher, and institutional actor, this paper argues that his pedagogical practice functioned as a mediating force between tradition and modernity, craft and fine art, and studio freedom and institutional constraint. Drawing on his writings, selected works, institutional initiatives, and the practices of his students, the paper suggests that Subramanyan's contribution to art education lay less in prescribing a style or method than in reshaping the conditions under which artistic knowledge could be produced, circulated, and legitimised.

SANTINIKETAN'S INFLUENCE: LEARNING IN A LOOSE CREATIVE COMMUNITY

Subramanyan's formative years at Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan, provided the ethical and conceptual groundwork for his later pedagogy. Shaped by Rabindranath Tagore's educational vision, Santiniketan departed sharply from academic art schools organised around hierarchical instruction, professional credentialing, and stylistic correctness. Art education here was imagined as a lived process, embedded in environment, community, and material engagement rather than confined to classroom training.

The pedagogical culture of Santiniketan was defined by informality and interdisciplinarity. Learning unfolded through shared spaces, collective work, and sustained observation rather than through rigid curricular frameworks. Subramanyan later described the institution as a "loose creative community," emphasising that one entered Santiniketan not to acquire professional credentials but to develop an orientation 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 occurred outside formal instructional settings, reinforcing a mentor-based model in which learning emerged through proximity, dialogue, and example rather than prescription.

This environment cultivated an understanding of art as sensibility rather than skill alone. Pedagogy did not aim to impose stylistic coherence or standardised outcomes; instead, it sought to create conditions under which individual artistic languages could emerge. Tagore's belief that education should nurture growth rather than enforce conformity informed this approach, positioning the teacher as a facilitator of conditions rather than an authority who dictated method [Tagore \(1961\)](#). Subramanyan repeatedly returned to this idea in later writing: art cannot be taught through rule-based instruction; it develops through experience, repeated practice, and self-critical engagement with materials.

A crucial influence during this period was Nandalal Bose's emphasis on practice as discipline. Bose's analogy of the potter's wheel, where initial instability gradually resolves through sustained effort, offered a model of learning grounded in embodied experience rather than technical mastery alone [Siva Kumar \(1997\)](#). The analogy frames uncertainty and experimentation not as failure but as the conditions through which form stabilises and judgement develops.

Subramanyan's early work reflects this pedagogical grounding. *Untitled (Girl with Sunflower)* (1952), produced shortly after his Santiniketan years, demonstrates an engagement with observational drawing, narrative simplification, and vernacular inflections rather than academic realism. The work draws on indigenous visual languages while remaining attentive to the material qualities of watercolor. More importantly, it signals an approach to making in which form emerges through sustained looking and material exploration, not adherence to prescribed norms. Santiniketan thus shaped Subramanyan's understanding of pedagogy as an ecological process, formed through environment, shared artistic life, and material practice.

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 these pedagogic orientations would operate. If Santiniketan had shaped his sense of art education as environmental and process-driven, Baroda confronted him with the demands of a newly constituted university system, including formal curricula, departmental structures, assessment, and institutional legitimacy. The transition from Santiniketan to Baroda therefore required translation rather than transfer. 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 post-independence attempts to establish a modern, university-based art school in India [MAP Academy \(2022b\)](#). 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, Subramanyan 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, labour, material intelligence, and cultural history.

His tenure at the All India Handloom Board (1959–1961) consolidated this position by exposing him to diverse textile and craft traditions whose techniques embody complex systems of knowledge [MAP Academy \(2022c\)](#). This experience fed back into his teaching at Baroda, where craft functioned as both pedagogical resource and conceptual framework.

Baroda also made visible a tension that Santiniketan could hold more loosely: the university's need to stabilise "standards" versus the artist-teacher's need to keep inquiry open-ended. 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, for instance, treated circulation and use as pedagogic questions, and helped students imagine artistic practice as socially embedded rather than sealed inside the studio or gallery [MAP Academy \(2022b\)](#), [Kalra \(2022\)](#).

Subramanyan's interventions at Baroda extended beyond the studio into institutional and public space. Initiatives such as the Fine Arts Fair reimaged the art school as socially embedded, where artistic production could circulate beyond elite exhibition contexts. Such initiatives were not add-ons to pedagogy; they trained students to consider audience, circulation, and use-value, the social life of objects, thereby widening what art education could be within a university.

Within the classroom, Subramanyan maintained a mentorship model consistent with his Santiniketan formation, privileging exploration over prescription. As alumni recollections suggest, techniques could be demonstrated, but responsibility for meaning-making ultimately rested with the student [Kalra \(2022\)](#). At Baroda, however, this approach gained institutional force through curriculum design, studio culture, and faculty decisions, including the incorporation of master craftsmen such as Gyarsilal Varma.

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.

A related strand appears in his terracotta and mural work, where craft process becomes inseparable from public address. *The King of the Dark Chamber* (terracotta mural, 1963) demonstrates how clay, relief modelling, and narrative staging can operate outside the easel tradition while still engaging questions of modern pictorial construction. Such works modelled for students that "modern" practice could be materially grounded, collaborative, and architectural, without losing conceptual complexity.

The paper's argument becomes clearer when Subramanyan's work is read alongside the distinct trajectories of students and colleagues associated with Baroda. Influence travels not as a single aesthetic, but as permission: to treat inherited visual systems as resources, and to let material process generate thought.

Woman in the Blue Room (1981), executed as a reverse glass painting, is a key example. Reverse glass painting, widely associated with nineteenth-century 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 therefore not antiquarian 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 simultaneously 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.

Across later generations, 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 sculptural method. Sheikh's layered compositions integrate miniature painting, literature, and contemporary political contexts, extending an encouragement of narrative plurality and cultural heterogeneity. 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 \(2022d\)](#), [Siva Kumar \(1997\)](#). The point is not adoption of "folk style," but an orientation toward lived 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.

CONTEMPORARY SHARED CONCERNS IN ART PEDAGOGY

Contemporary pedagogy in India continues to foreground collaboration and the ethics of knowledge-making. Artist-educators have argued for learning structures that make uncertainty productive through group critique, shared making, and non-hierarchical studio environments. Read alongside Subramanyan, such positions clarify that the question is not only what is taught, but how institutions distribute agency: who gets to decide what counts as “research,” what kinds of making are valued, and how students learn to locate themselves in relation to community, labour, and history.

Recent public lectures and seminars by artist-educators, including those hosted by the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art & Education (FIAE), Goa, provide a contemporary lens through which Subramanyan's pedagogy can be revisited. Rather than positioning him as an isolated historical figure, these discussions place his practice within a longer continuum of reflective art education in India, shaped by negotiation between institutional structures, material practice, and cultural responsibility.

Across these conversations, a recurring concern is that art education must be contextual and lived rather than reduced to a fixed academic system. R. Siva Kumar's articulation of contextual modernism is relevant here. His insistence that Indian modernism, and by extension Indian art pedagogy, must be understood through location, social context, and historical specificity resonates with Subramanyan's emphasis on learning through local materials and vernacular forms [Siva Kumar \(1997\)](#). Process-based learning emerges as another shared thread. Contemporary arguments for uncertainty, collaboration, and non-hierarchical learning structures echo Subramanyan's insistence that art cannot be “taught” through rigid instruction. Finally, ongoing attention to documentation and ethical engagement with folk traditions restates a concern central to Subramanyan's pedagogy: learning from lived cultural practices without reducing them to stylistic appropriation or extractive “resource.”

These resonances suggest that Subramanyan's practice remains relevant not as a prescriptive model but as a historically grounded strategy for negotiating pedagogy within institutions, especially in contexts where modern art education must continually mediate between regulation and studio freedom, inherited knowledge, and contemporary practice.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined pedagogical change in post-independence Indian art education through the practice of K. G. Subramanyan, arguing that pedagogy during this period operated less as a formalised curricular model and more as a process of institutional mediation. By analysing his formation at Santiniketan, his long tenure at Baroda, his own artistic production, and the subsequent practices of his students, the study demonstrates that pedagogic influence cannot be adequately understood through stylistic lineage or syllabus design alone. Instead, it must be approached as a set of conditions, material, institutional, and discursive, within which artistic knowledge is produced and circulated.

Subramanyan's significance lies in translating an experiential, craft-inclusive, environment-oriented pedagogy into the bureaucratic and disciplinary framework of a modern university without turning it into doctrine. At Baroda, craft practices, vernacular visual systems, and cross-media experimentation were not positioned as alternatives to modern art; they became methods through which modern artistic inquiry could be pursued within an institutional setting. Through curriculum design, public initiatives such as the Fine Arts Fair, and sustained studio mentorship, pedagogy became an infrastructural practice rather than an individual teaching style.

Visual analysis of Subramanyan's work and that of his students clarifies how this pedagogy functioned. The absence of stylistic uniformity underscores that Subramanyan's influence did not operate through imitation. Rather, it shaped a shared mode of inquiry, marked by material attentiveness, narrative plurality, and refusal of rigid distinctions between art and craft. This infrastructural quality helps explain the durability of his pedagogical impact, which persisted through successive generations and institutional cultures.

Ultimately, the paper suggests that post-independence art education in India is best understood as an evolving field of mediation, between tradition and modernity, institutional regulation and creative autonomy, and inherited knowledge and contemporary practice. Reading Subramanyan through this lens enables a broader rethinking of art pedagogy as dynamic institutional culture, opening further research into how such cultures are formed, sustained, and contested within art schools in India and beyond.

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