

Making Stones Speak

Pramodbabu's Painted Sculptures

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(Author & Filmmaker)

Speaking about his art, the world's greatest sculptor Michelangelo said: "When I look at a stone, I see faces and shapes in it struggling to come out as if from a prison. So I pick up my hammer and chisel away the unwanted part to reveal what the stone has hidden inside it for so long!"

If stones could speak, the great artworks and sculptures of human civilization we call world heritage art today would no doubt tell us the real story of forgotten Empires and the tragic lives of scores of artists and creators who died nameless and unknown despite their monumental works.

An artisan may have the craft and skill to depict reality with great fidelity and accuracy. But only a true artist can probe beneath the superficial to reveal the soul of his subject to attain the sublime. This spirituality gives his art a universal and eternal quality which is timeless.

Prof. Pramod Ramteke, known to his students and friends as "Pramodbabu", has had a distinguished career as an art teacher and artist. A native of Nagpur, he has taught at his home university and at Mumbai's renowned J.J.School of Art, his alma mater. As a senior artist, he has held regular exhibitions at Mumbai's Jehangir and prestigious galleries all over India. His work has featured prominently in national exhibitions and been recognized with the AIFACS award.

In his lifetime devoted to art over a half century, Pramodbabu has worked in various art genres and media from sketches, portraits, figurative and abstracts in pencil, ink, charcoal, acrylic, oil, water colour and even graphics. As a portraitist

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his mastery was recognized by a sitting with President Narayanan at Rashtrapati Bhavan where he created his masterpiece portrait which now hangs on the hallowed walls of the London School of Economics in London.

A tireless innovator, Pramodbabu's insatiable curiosity and interest led him to develop new art forms as his creative vision ripened with maturity. His interest in stone art began when he picked up a stone with unique features which he observed with his keen eyes for weeks. Seeing its resemblance to one of his friend's features, he painted his portrait over it with stunning realism. The fascination he saw on his friend's amazed face made him realize he had created a new art form with a lot of potential.

Delving into extensive research, he found a whole genre of graveyard art on grave stones on which names and epitaphs of the dead were engraved. Instead of this "dead art" as he called it, on a flat 2-D gravestone, Pramodbabu found the rounded, 3-D aspect of his stone art more creative and challenging.

He roamed the remote area of Butibori and Hingna to find rocks with the right look and texture. After a good wash, by trial and error he found the right kind of rounded brushes and acrylic colours to paint directly on the cracked rocky surface. The work was tedious but the octogenarian toiled patiently until he mastered it. To ensure the details and colours of his painting did not mix and merge he found the right paint fixer and he felt encouraged.

He bravely took on the challenging task of doing a portrait of no less than the great artist Rabindranath Tagore. It was highly appreciated by all art connoisseurs. Inspired by the positive response, Pramodbabu began work on the idea of a unique "Stone Portraits" exhibition in 2015 as he celebrated his platinum jubilee with renewed gusto.

His new exhibition in a new art form included 20 realistic portraits of prominent leaders like former president Shalinitai Patil, former Maharashtra CM Devendra Fadnavis, union minister Nitin Gadkari, Atal Bahadur Singh, Girish Gandhi, Maruti Chittampalli, Yashwant Manohar, Poet Grace,

Jogendra Kavade and Jyotsna Darda. Her husband Vijay, a Rajya Sabha MP and Chairman of the Lokmat Media group, appreciated Pramodbabu's work and said it was worthy of an Honorary Doctorate in Art for its creativity.

The unqualified success of his "Stone Portraits" show in 2015 not only validated Pramodbabu's belief in his new art form but made his work commercially attractive to a variety of top art galleries. He scaled new heights of popular success with next series on India's most renowned personalities from different fields, including Bollywood celebrities. So enthused was the latest superstar Tiger Shroff that he eagerly carried off his 80 pound stone portrait like a trophy. But the biggest accolade was the one he received from Big B himself for his expressive stone portrait on his 76 th anniversary.

Pramodbabu's portrait of Big B cast him in abstract form as a Shaman veiled in his own dark mystery. It is an image as primordial as the earliest art of Neanderthal man as a cave dweller in the stone age in 70,000 B.C depicting the bestiality of his hunt for food as his only means of survival. The handprint of the artist appears as his confession in the very blood of his victim!

Night may have borne Apropos and the tribe of Dreams. It is equally a blessing and curse for visionaries who bear the burden of turning their dreams into reality like a crucifix. Rocks are the phallic form of creation born from molten lava in Mother Earth's bowels. The rocky moon is her daughter whose menstrual story we see etched in the sky as her waxing and waning from fullness to crescent.

In the context of what's going on today in India in the name of art can we say we have come out of the caves of our primitive existence? By depicting such profound mysteries in his new art of "Painted Sculptures", Pramodbabu has truly given new life to inert stones and made them speak through the vivid and expressive language of his stone art.
