Spring 5-1-2008

Monkeys and Camels and Hippos...Oh My! An Illustrators journey through South Asia

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Reflective Essay

A lotus smiles as she blossoms open, reaching her petals across the reflective pond water. Surrounding her are six small flowers, giggling as they share in her hope for a life filled with happiness and joy. Straight bamboo stalks shoot out of the water, clustered together like groups of children. Pairs of parrots, fish and snakes stand by, singing about love and fertility while the sun and moon watch protectively over this beautiful scene.

The image described above is based on a kohbar, (See Figure A) a traditional Mithila image and an auspicious symbol tied with Indian marriages. (Szanton Dalit 2007:1) Mithila is located in Northern India within the state of Bihar; once a prosperous area, it is now one of the poorest states in India. (Szanton/Bakshi 2007: 3) Here women have been painting auspicious symbols on the walls of their courtyards since the 14th century, although they were not publicly displayed until 1949 when an earthquake brought down walls which kept such works hidden in the homes of the Mithila upper class. (Szanton Dalit 2007:1)

After this disaster, a local colonial officer William G. Archer published photographs of the wall paintings, creating both national and international interest about the process, history, and symbols behind Mithila painting. (Szanton/Bakshi 2007: 11) (See Figures B and C) Historically the purpose of these works was as an accompaniment

to religious rituals and as a source of protection for the family's well-being. But just as the Indian state has evolved drastically over the years, so has the Mithila tradition of painting. These works are now produced on paper and sold commercially in large galleries across the world as well as within the small craft museums I visited while traveling in India.

Mithila painting has been an enormous source of inspiration for my capstone project *Monkeys, and Camels and Hippos…Oh My!*, a graphic novel based on my studies in India during the winter break of my junior year. I journeyed through the cities of Delhi, Agra, and Jaipur, and visited several small villages along the way. The group with whom I traveled included five female students, my illustration professor John Thompson, and our guide Bhoju. We stayed in India for fifteen days to collect reference, make sketches, and take notes which we would use in the upcoming semester to produce artwork based on our experiences in India.

During our stay, we encountered crowds of people filling dusty streets, pigs with slimy noses sniffing the sand, store windows bursting with patterns, and withered trees bent over fields of mustard. We watched artists create sculptures, miniature paintings, carpet weavings, woodblock prints, and wall hangings. Inspiration was everywhere, but I was especially fascinated by work within the folk tradition. Ironically I was not drawn to the Mithila paintings we

came across while abroad. Perhaps these complex pieces were simply too overwhelming among the elaborately patterned buildings and busy Indian streets bustling with exotic animals.

While in India I kept a journal with notes and sketches depicting the animals, people, and architecture we came across during our journey. (See figure D). Through these sketches, I began preparing patterns, environments, and characters which I would later use in my graphic novel. This is especially apparent in my depiction of several hanging fish puppets I passed in an outdoor craft museum; these puppets became the structure from which I based my own fish characters, as seen in Figure E. I also bought woodcut stamps, paintings, and Indian comic books to inspire my work in the months after returning to Syracuse.

During my time spent in India, I gathered an incredible amount of material on which to base my capstone project. This excess of information was extremely valuable, but at the same time I also felt overwhelmed by options. I had hundreds of photo references, sketches of patterns, animals, and plants we encountered, as well as notes on Hindi words, and bits of stories Bhoju shared with me during our time together. The project possibilities were endless, but it was now the spring semester of my junior year and I had to make a decision and get started on my capstone project. Ultimately, I chose

to develop my own story based on our class trip because this would allow me to incorporate my personal experiences into the work.

When our class returned to Syracuse, we continued to meet once a week in order to develop projects that would be displayed in the Panasci lounge at the end of the semester. John suggested I begin producing artwork as soon as I finished creating a lose outline of the story. While I would not have enough information about the narrative to create final pieces for my capstone, I hoped I could find a way to incorporate these works into the story at a later date. Therefore I tried to envision art that had the potential to work together in a series. It may seem backward to complete pieces in a story which has yet to be written, but John felt that creating artwork would aid in my development of the story, as well as help me make format decisions for my tale. He also believed it was more important to begin experimenting with style, color, and composition while the trip was fresh in my mind.

In order to create these first pieces, I began researching contemporary Indian artists, especially those artists of whom our class came across while abroad. I not only used these artists for inspiration, but I also analyzed their characters and compositions in order to better understand how to design my own project. Through this research, I discovered Anwar Hussain's colorful landscapes. (See Figures F and G) While I have always used intense colors in my

illustration work, Hussain's use of bright yellows, rich oranges, vibrant greens and deep blues inspired me to make a trip to the art store in search of new hues based on the potent Indian dyes I had seen while abroad.

Another influential artist I discovered was Jamini Roy. (See Figure H) His use of simplified shapes, flat colors, and well-planned compositions made his work ideal to study. Roy has a simple, graphic style that I could mimic as well as elaborate and personalize. Before discovering Mithila paintings, I based my figures most heavily on his work, as demonstrated by my "Elephant Door" piece, seen in Figure I.

At the end of my junior year I had completed four pieces, compiled a list of important events on our trip, made notes on our itinerary, organized my photographs, created a basic outline of the story, and sketched a first-draft dummy book. The pieces I had finished were well-executed, but due to their diverse dimensions, color palette, approach, and style, I could not use them in their original state within my graphic novel. In order to include these works, I had to make changes by using a combination of painted touch-ups and computer work. (See Figure J). When I realized I had created this formatting problem, I knew I had to make several layout decisions immediately.

I met with my professors to discuss my project and together we searched through their libraries of art books for format solutions. My professors recommended I use a graphic novel approach to tell my story, in order to eliminate the writing required to produce a children's book. This would also allow me to depict my experiences in a more personal way, while giving the viewer the freedom to interpret my pieces as well.

However, among graphic novels there are variations in storytelling, style, and approach. Therefore I created an experimental piece, in order to test a format closely linked to the layout of traditional comic books. (See Figure K) Although I did not use this piece in my final capstone project, it was personally one of the most important works I created in this series. Through this piece I determined the book proportions, established an account with an online printer, and made the decision to produce the rest of the series in acrylic paint. I had wondered if the computer would be a faster medium in which to create these complex and highly patterned works, but I did not like the quality of the work I was then producing on the computer, so I stayed with a traditional medium.

I now had several experimental pieces completed and a format in which I could produce work. It would seem the execution of my capstone would be relatively easy from this point on. However things only seemed to get more difficult in the upcoming months. Although

I had created a few pieces in the spring semester of my junior year, I still felt confused stylistically. My artwork changed drastically after traveling in India and while I was happy with the new developments, I was still unsure how to use this style as an illustration form.

I took this time to think back to my personal reasons for developing this project. I had wanted to depict the story of my travels in India, so that my friends, family, and peers could appreciate the beautiful things I saw while abroad. Now I began to doubt the complexity of the story I had developed and I wondered if my graphic novel approach was a mistake. In my illustration classes, my artwork was beginning to change direction, as I became more interested in designing products and packaging. I wondered: should I stop this graphic novel and start with a new approach?

Fortunately, I was taking a class in Modern South Asian Cultures with Susan Wadley during the fall semester of my senior year and she recommended I research Mithila paintings. I had remembered seeing several of them while in India but they did not have a great impact on me or my artwork. However I was at a stand-still in my capstone productivity, so I was willing to take any suggestions and the Lowe gallery happened to have an exhibit of Mithila works open to the public. I attended a showing with anthropological commentary by Dean Wadley.

After the exhibition, I ran upstairs to my studio to begin sketching. For some reason, the display of Mithila works now had an incredible impact on me. I am still unsure why it took me so long to appreciate this art form; perhaps I simply had to internalize the Indian culture and grow accustomed to their stylization and storytelling in order to understand and value this distinct art. Possibly my taste in art had changed with my own artistic transformations. Whatever the reason, I was now intrigued by the Mithila use of line, composition, patterning, characters, storytelling, and vivid colors.

I began researching Mithila painting, learning the process of creating works as well as discovering their techniques and sources of inspiration. Creating a Mithila painting is simple in theory, yet complex in execution. There are no sketches prior to the production of the final work. However, to assume that the artist therefore needs not plan prior to painting is grossly incorrect. Instead the artist must have an incredible ability to visualize the image before even touching their brush to the paper.

In general, the border of a Mithila painting is completed first, often containing decorative motifs which reflect the subject of the painting. Next, the artist depicts the most important subject, placing them in the middle of the page and moving out from the central figures with less important characters, designs, and extra

information. Outlines of the subjects are drawn first, filling in colors and patterns after the entire composition has been laid out. The eyes are painted last, in order to give the final spark of life to each piece. (Szanton/Bakshi 2007: 4)

Although I certainly had to create detailed sketches before painting my artwork, it was liberating for me to study how the women of Mithila approach their pieces. The first piece I created after the Mithila exhibition was my "Indian God," seen on page 8. The border is based on one of my favorite Mithila works and I placed my main character within this defined area just as the women from the villages organized their pieces. I then filled any extra space with designs that added to the story; in this case I painted bubbles floating in the sky. Previous to this approach, I had spent hours researching compositions, characters, and patterns before developing a tight sketch. But the Mithila works reminded me that what is inside my head is more unique than anything I can find online or in my camera.

I believe stylization comes from observing reality first, then internalizing and personalizing it in a way in which the artist still conveys the meaning of the object. In this way, stylization creates characters and environments of which could never be observed in nature, but are instead created out of the personality of the artist and the world they create with their paint. Mithila paintings

reestablished this artistic concept into the pieces I produced for

Monkeys and Camels and Hippos…Oh My! I had seen the realities of

India and documented them through sketches and photographs, now I

needed to find a way to create my own world from these

observations.   After researching Mithila paintings I now felt

confident that I could develop an elaborate and detailed world in

which my characters could explore.

   However, I was still relying heavily on the Mithila works to guide

my pieces both compositionally and stylistically.   I began to wonder

if my work was overly influenced by Mithila painting and I feared that

I was simply recreating Indian artwork through an American

viewpoint. Instead I wanted to move away from this influence and

create my own characters, environments, and animals from my own

personality and imagination. Therefore I met with my capstone

advisor to confront my apprehension. John suggested I simply

continue to paint and that my style would develop as I produced

more work. Sure enough, with each piece I completed, the more the

landscapes and characters became my own.

   At the conclusion of my capstone project, I am proud to say I

successfully produced over twenty final pieces. I also organized

these works, along with six tight sketches, into a collection that is

now posted on the Lulu Publishing website. From this site, I can

order as many copies of my book as I need and I am able to update

the book when I finish painting the last pieces. I included the final sketches in my current Lulu book in place of any incomplete paintings, to enable the reader to follow the story.

Originally I had intended on creating a detailed and linear story through my graphic novel. I had hoped to define the events and characters with the specificity of a comic book. But as I developed these works over the past year and a half, I began to realize the beauty of allowing the audience to make their own decisions. Often in the field of illustration, artists are confined to the limits of the article, product, or story. This can be restrictive and frustrating. Therefore, I decided to approach these pieces with a painterly attitude, opening my characters and their world to the viewer and allowing them to interpret the works individually.

Reflecting back on this process, I am amazed at how much I have grown as an artist. Previous to this series, I rarely depicted people. Instead I would use animal characters as a medium to express my thoughts and ideas. In *Monkeys and Camels and Hippos...Oh My!*, the main characters of the book are John Thompson and my class, consisting of six students in various fields of art. My capstone project is built largely on the character and personality of this eclectic group and I wanted my story to reflect these qualities. The girls with whom I traveled had an enormously positive impact on my journey and I tried to capture their individual traits in order to create characters

that were likable and to which the viewer could relate. This was quite a challenge because my capstone project contains no words; therefore everything had to be revealed through their actions and emotions.

However, through the portrayal of my seven main characters in over twenty pieces, I became more adapt at depicting human emotion as well as creating simple gestures that the viewer could understand. It is apparent when reading the story how much my work has changed from the variances in character style throughout the book. The development of this project made me a more confident artist and created a style which I now use for my illustration assignments as well.

One of the best effects of this project has been people's reactions toward my work. When I first created pieces after traveling in India, I wondered what my fellow students and professors would say about my drastic change in style. I was amazed that every person reacted more positively toward these works than toward my original illustration approach. The bright colors, playful characters, and intricate patterning are still well received by both professionals and untrained viewers.

The creation of *Monkeys and Camels and Hippos...Oh My!* has not only given me the confidence, skills, and experience to develop my own narrative, but also to design and publish my own book. My

work has always been fun and playful and I want to keep my paintings light-hearted as I continue to create, but I also hope that in the future I can produce stories which reflect more deeply on the world in which I live. I would like to comment on the problems, experiences, tragedies, as well as the wonders of my community, and of the places I visit throughout my lifetime.

This desire to communicate to viewers with my cultural work comes from the various questions I was asked when I arrived home from India. The details most people wanted to know was how crowded the cities were, how terrible the poverty I saw, and if India really was "dirty and smelly." I had never realized Americans were so terribly biased toward India, and it surprised me. The first word that comes to mind when I picture India is color. Color was everywhere, in the patterns on clothing, bouncing off the tiles of mystical temples, and painted on the trucks in the streets. These are the images I picture when thinking of India, and my series reflects my fondness for this beautiful and unique country.

In seeing other people's ignorance, I realized the importance of traveling and meeting people from various countries and background. There poverty in India, but there is also incredible sites, friendly people, and endless experiences to be had. I looked past the problems to see the beauty of the people, religion, food and culture of this country. This is why I depicted the scenery that we passed,

the people we met, the stories we were told, as well as the tales we invented ourselves throughout our incredible trip.

Mithila artists use a traditional craft in order to address contemporary issues, which not only gives these people a voice but it also develops their art by creating new and unique iconography. Yet it is important to note that while Mithila paintings are now often modern in subject, they are also intrinsically linked with past traditions. The changes these artists have made over the years to their style have occurred without compromising the integrity of this tradition. It is this juxtaposition of the past and the present which make Mithila works intriguing, and this kind of innovation that has kept these works fresh for over 700 years.

I too hope to develop my work just as the artists within the Mithila tradition continue to change and grow. It is so important for an artist to always be searching for inspiration and constantly evaluating their past work, while pushing themselves in new directions. *Monkeys and Camels and Hippos...Oh My!* is just the beginning of many things to come. I hope to continue to travel, as well as research new cultures in order to develop not only as an artist, but as a person.

In closing I would like to say thank you to all the people who helped make this project a reality. First, I would like to thank my parents who supported me throughout this entire process and who

encouraged me to make the trip to India, telling me that it was the chance of a lifetime. I would also like to acknowledge John Thompson's work and guidance throughout this entire project. He helped me through any problems that occurred and encouraged me to just keep painting. I appreciate the independence John gave me throughout this project; although he made sure to check in on my progress, he also allowed me to make many decisions on my own.

Susan Wadley was an incredible source of information throughout my capstone research. Her class allowed me to better understand India and the people who live within this diverse country. She also shared her books, tapes, and knowledge and directed me to the right people so that I could get the resources I needed. Without her support, I may have never rediscovered Mithila paintings and I cannot imagine the outcome of this project with this influence.

I would also like to thank Steve Wright who was always ready to meet with me when I had questions about capstone requirements. He recommended I apply for the Crown Scholar award, which I received after returning from India. This funding aided in paying for my expensive, but worthwhile trip to India with John Thompson.

I want to thank Steve Ellis and Roger DeMuth who reviewed my work, gave me suggestions, and who always support my artistic decisions. Finally, I'd like to acknowledge all the girls who traveled with me on our incredible journey. Our bus trip sing-a-longs, and

ballroom dance classes at the Taj Mahal inspired these works and made me realize the importance of taking chances and seeing the world. There is no better way to explore the wonders of this planet than with a group of great friends...Africa anyone?