

BANIPROSONNO: A JOURNEY OF ART AND JOY

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ABSTRACT

Pablo Picasso famously remarked, "When I was a kid, I drew like Michelangelo. It took me years to learn to draw like a kid." his quote highlights the natural creativity, freedom, and playfulness children bring to art—qualities that often fade as we grow older. The paper "Baniprosonno: A Journey of Art and Joy" explores the life and artistic journey of Baniprosonno, an artist who, even at 92, embodies this childlike spirit in his work. The paper is based on an interview I conducted with him on December 24, 2023. Through an analysis of Baniprosonno's art, the paper highlights how he maintains a sense of playfulness and spontaneity, drawing inspiration from everyday objects and experiences. It delves into how his childhood and life struggles have influenced his artistic expression, allowing him to retain a unique perspective that resonates with the innocence and creativity found in children's drawings. By showcasing Baniprosonno's work and his unwavering childlike nature, this study aims to celebrate the joy and authenticity that can be found in art when one embraces the playful essence of creativity. It encourages artists of all ages to find inspiration in the playfulness and creativity of children, reminding us that art is most powerful when it's filled with joy.

Keywords: Biography, Baniprosonno, Childlike Art, Modern Art, Modern Indian Artist.

Introduction

When we visit art galleries today, many visitors without an art background often think that some modern artworks look like something a child could have created. This reaction usually stems from seeing simple shapes, distorted figures, playful colours, and the combination of different materials. However, this childlike style is very intentional. Many famous artists find deep inspiration in the natural, honest, and spontaneous way children create. Artists like Andrea Bogdan, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Joan Miró, and Picasso saw great value in how children's drawings can simplify and express complex ideas (Ryan). Picasso himself admired children's art for its raw honesty and unfiltered freedom, and his work evolved to reflect these qualities.

This approach is not unique to Western art; it has also shaped modern Indian art. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Indian art was mostly focused on academic realism, heavily influenced by British colonial education. But the Bengal School, led by artists like Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose, shifted away from this Western style and focused instead on reviving traditional Indian art forms. This movement brought cultural pride, spirituality, and nationalist themes into Indian art. Later, in the 1950s, the Progressive Artists' Group, with artists like F.N. Souza, M.F. Husain, and S.H. Raza, broke further from tradition by exploring Western styles like Cubism, Expressionism, and Surrealism (Tomory). These artists balanced traditional Indian art and Western modernism, creating a unique blend of styles and encouraging simplicity and playfulness in art.

This blending of influences gave rise to simpler forms and childlike styles in Indian modern art as well. One artist, Baniprosonno, or "Bani," emerged in the 1960s with vibrant, childlike drawings, expressive lines, and a lively personality, leaving a lasting impact on both Indian and global art scenes (Chandel). He represents not only an artistic voice but also a bringer of joy and creativity, embodying the powerful and joyful spirit that childlike art can offer.

Early Life and Struggles

Bani was born on August 17, 1932, in Jabalpur. His life has been a colourful story of discovering himself, facing challenges, and staying dedicated to his dream of being an artist. He grew up in Bengal, surrounded by art and the beauty of village life, which deeply influenced him. His father's job in the military took the family to different places in India, helping Bani develop his artistic skills from a young age (Chandel).

Despite familial resistance, he pursued his passion for art, leaving home as a teenager. With a chuckle, he said, "I didn't even finish my matriculation" (Baniprosonno). His rebellious nature and refusal to be confined by academic

traditions led him to Delhi, where he secured employment at a ceramic factory. However, his involvement in a strike led to his expulsion from the plant. Homeless and without a place to stay, he resorted to living on the pavement. Bani found himself on the streets of Delhi, armed with nothing but a blanket and a small handbag containing art supplies, paper, and paint (Ghosal). He emphasised that he never cheated, stole, or took shortcuts. During tough times, he starved but relied on his artistic skills to create and sell birthday and greeting cards. To make ends meet, he went door to door, selling these handmade creations. In a challenging environment where the police would often crack down on the destitute, Bani's artistic endeavors seemed to garner unique recognition. Law enforcement, upon encountering him, would reportedly let him go, saying, 'nhi nhi chhor de isse, ye din me Photu banata hai,' which translates to "No, no, let him be, he makes drawings during the day" (Baniprosonno). This nomadic period eventually led to recognition; he started doing illustrations in books for 2–3 rupees.

The Unconventional Path

A few childhoods work that survive clearly show Bani as something of an infant prodigy but his journey in art was anything but ordinary. Despite getting into the prestigious Delhi Academy of Arts because of his talent, he rebelled against the traditional way of learning, refusing to follow strict academic rules, determined to hold onto his dreams (Baniprosonno segir frá á ensku). It wasn't an easy ride, with lots of challenges and uncertainties, but Bani never apologised for being true to himself.

Besides painting, he also tried pottery with basic training at a factory in Delhi. Later, he travelled to Kashmir for a pottery job, and the director there offered him a designer position. He mentioned that his only requirement was a place to stay, and they offered him accommodation in Srinagar, where he established his small studio. Bani spent a couple of years between Kashmir and Delhi, meeting encouraging artists and intellectuals in the process. He became part of a group of young artists and intellectuals, meeting regularly and discussing progressive and sometimes revolutionary ideas. This exposure made him aware of new cultural trends and visual concepts.

After spending some time in Delhi, Bani went to Shimla, and that trip changed his life. He met his future wife, Putul, at a Bengali community event. The connection between Bani and Putul is evident and heartwarming. When asked about how he got into art, Bani remains quiet, but Putul nudges in and says, 'bachpan se yahi ata tha bss,' meaning, 'he has been doing this since childhood' (Baniprosonno). Shortly after, in 1951, he had his first gallery show, marking a significant milestone in his career.

A World of Colour and Adventure

In 1979, Bani's artistic journey took an international turn when he received invitations from art galleries in Holland and Germany. This marked the beginning of his regular visits to countries in Europe and America, where he showcased his works in over a hundred one-man shows (Baniprosonno segir frá á ensku). He reminisces about a time when he visited Murnau and stayed at Kandinsky's house, also known as the Munter House. He affectionately describes the place as a "pilgrimage site" (Baniprosonno).

Baniprosonno's works have become increasingly collectible in the last decade and are in private and public collections around the world today. He is also a member of the International Association of Art, affiliated with UNESCO. His exhibitions spanned across various cities such as Kolkata, New Delhi, Mumbai, Kathmandu, Paris, London, Berlin, Amsterdam, Oslo, Stockholm, Barcelona, and Reykjavik, among others (Chandel). His art was featured in prestigious galleries and museums worldwide, such as The Commonwealth Institute in London, Kulturhuset in Stockholm, Sonja Henie Art Centre in Norway, Nordjy Hands Kunstmuseum in Denmark, Kulturamt Kiel in Germany, AOFA in Kolkata, La Passio Olesa in Barcelona, Stein Am Rhein in Switzerland, Kreuzlingen in Switzerland, Kolkata Academy, Menden in Germany, Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai, Gallery Listamenn in Iceland, and Reykjavik Art Gallery in Iceland (Baniprosonno segir frá á ensku).

Childlike Creativity

Picasso once said, 'It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.' Many modern artists appreciate how children view the world because it helps them develop a unique and honest style (Martelle). Baniprosonno embodies this perspective, as he expresses that "every child is an artist." However, he believes that

as we grow up, we often lose that childlike creativity. To remain an artist, he believes it's essential to keep the child inside alive, stating, "There's a funny man inside me, and I enjoy my life."

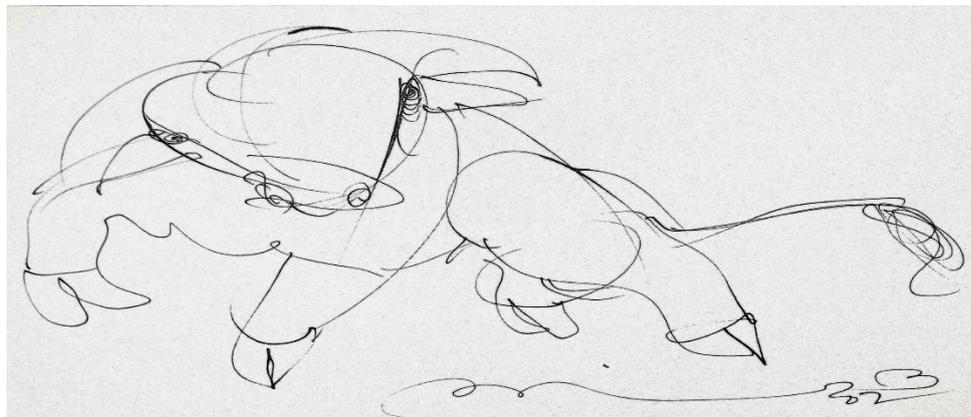


Figure 1: Sketch of a bull by Baniprosonno

Baniprosonno's art is free from strict techniques and societal pressures, embracing the natural and joyful expression found in children's art. Children's drawings reflect an understanding shaped by developmental psychology: they aren't bound by judgments like "right" or "wrong" or "good" versus "bad." Instead, children's art is a form of self-expression deeply connected to their emotional view of the world. They draw things not based on objective rules but on what matters most to them. (Krenz). He believes that to make something original, you need courage and shouldn't care about others' opinions. He explains, "It doesn't matter what others think. I comprehend it, visualize the arrangement and composition, and just do it. That's it. This courage is essential; without it, you can't work."

When presenting his recent paintings, such as 'Chasing the bull,' 'Roaster and the Women' (figure 2), 'Follow me' (figure 3), 'Boat and a Women,' 'Women and a Bull,' 'Women chasing the Cats out' (infused with humor showcasing his excellent drawing skills), 'Empathy,' and 'Let's Flee', he offers simple explanations, much like how a child explains a drawing, with straightforward titles and no elaborate meanings or detailed explanations. With a touch of humor, he jokingly remarked, "I've got a monstrous signature". His joyful painting style reflects the spontaneity of nature in all its forms. His art is truly captivating, appearing effortless yet powerful. It captures moments, feelings, and ideas through skilled brushwork. His paintings convey a sense of freedom and movement. With raw, earthy colors applied in bold strokes, he brings an energetic and dynamic quality to his work.



Figure 2: "Follow me"



Figure 3: "Roaster and the Women"

Baniprosonno's creative genius lies in his ability to transform simple images from everyday life into profound and significant works of art. His compositions often reflect an admiration for the sensuous beauty of women,

interwoven with elements of nature, birds, and animals. He shared, "I draw a lot of animals, from insects to fish, everything. The inspiration behind it goes back to my childhood spent in the villages of Bengal surrounded by animals like snakes, scorpions, frogs, etc. As a child, I would hear insects and rats making noise on the roof at night, which scared me. My grandmother would place a prayed copper coin under my pillow to assure me that those things won't harm me. This experience drew my attention towards animals, birds, and insects. Later, I discovered how folk arts incorporate these elements, and I drew inspiration from Indian folk art to create my own style."

The relationship between Baniprosonno's art and children's art lies in their shared spontaneity and emotional expression. Both emphasize authenticity over technique, allowing feelings and experiences to shape the artwork. Just like children create without constraints, Baniprosonno embraces that same childlike spirit in his art and personality.

Limitless Artist

Baniprosonno is a limitless artist. He makes paintings, sculptures, drawings, paper cutouts, and crafted objects with a playful freedom inspired by children's art. What makes him unique is that he doesn't confine himself to one medium; he explores and blends various forms of art with the spontaneity and creativity of a child. This mix brings to life a vivid, colourful world that resonates with people worldwide.

While showing his daily sketches, he expressed, "Drawing is the reality of the artist; it showcases the artist naked and reveals their true skills. Drawing is strength. These sketches don't come from mere thought, they come from the hands." For him, drawing requires hands-on mastery, a skill built through constant movement and practice.



Figure 4: Sculpture of a Monkey



Figure 5: Baniprassanno's Handprints on Sculpture

His sculptures are equally unique. He sculpts by feeling the shape through his hands, allowing his instincts to guide him. His handprints remain visible on the clay (figure 5), adding a raw, tactile quality to his work that invites viewers to feel the process behind each piece. His sculptures resemble prehistoric art, free from rigid rules and driven purely by flow. When creating his monkey sculpture (figure 4), he described how he immerses himself deeply into the essence of a monkey, forming an intense connection that shapes his work from within.

Baniprosonno's home near Saf Art Gallery on Sangti Seri Neri Road in Prantika, Shimla, is more than just a residence but a magnificent gallery showcasing his artworks. The space is adorned with large glass windows covered in paper cutouts of birds and animals, complemented by beautiful hand-drawn curtains (figure 6). The balcony is a vibrant display of flowers, thriving under the loving care of his wife, Putul, who has been a constant source of strength in maintaining the balance between life and creation (Chandel). Adding a personal touch to the gardening, Baniprosonno crafted a ceramic flower, placing it among the blooms nurtured by Putul. Each element in their home seems to be a reflection of the artist's creativity and connection with nature.



Figure 6: Hand-Drawn Curtains



Figure 7: Owl Sculpture from Oil Container Handle

In Baniprosonno's home, every corner tells a story, creating a unique and inspiring environment where art and life coexist harmoniously. Baniprosonno shares a charming anecdote about his first trip to London, where he explored the city using only one shoe. Recalling that memorable journey, he now repurposes the shoe as a holder for his brushes, turning a simple item into an artistic tool (figure 8). Another story unfolds as he narrates how he transformed the tin handle of the oil container into an owl (figure 7), highlighting his ability to see art in everyday objects. The narrative continues with the tale of collecting wood for his fireplace. Among the gathered pieces, he discovered a wood fragment resembling an owl. Rather than discarding it, Baniprosonno chose to hang it on the wall, seamlessly blending the elements of nature into his artistic haven. While displaying his own artwork, Bani also shares artworks created by Putul, emphasising that "Art is infectious." This suggests that the creative spirit and passion for art can inspire and spread among individuals, creating a shared artistic expression within a household.



Figure 8: Brush Holder from Shoes

Beyond visual art, Bani extends his creativity to storytelling. He writes fairy tales and nursery rhymes in Bengali, English, and Hindi, creating enchanting worlds for children of all ages. Several of his books have been published, adding a literary dimension to his artistic repertoire. Some of his well-known books include *Sun is Music*, *Death is a Lie Never Men Die*, *Cosmos: A Kinetic Sculpture*, *Crowl*, *Lal Phoolon Ki Khushboo Peeli*, and *Hraswa oo Dirgha oo* (Baniprosonno's Author Page). He also composes short stories and nonsense rhymes. One notable work is the book "Lala Phoolon Ki Khushboo Peeli," a collection of nonsense rhymes published in 1978. Bani once mentioned that this book describes him the best, showing what's inside him and the level of 'madness' he possesses. It's interesting to note that he completed this book in just 14 days. He kept a small notebook beside him to jot down his ideas. Even during bath time, he would ask Putul to write down his thoughts as he shouted them from the bathroom. This book is a unique insight into Bani's playful and creative side.

Bani's influence goes beyond just art galleries and books; he actively connects with the community through fun art workshops. In workshops like "I Draw - You Colour" and "I Draw - U Paint," he starts by drawing playful sketches of animals, plants, flowers, birds, and people with his felt-tip pen. Then, children bring these drawings to life by

adding colors. These workshops celebrate creativity and life, filled with lively music that inspires everyone and creates a joyful atmosphere where imagination can thrive. Bani also explores different art forms, surprising his fans with unique ceramic and clay sculptures. For kids, he creates a magical world of animals using paper cuttings and twigs, leading exciting workshops with names like "Phantastic Animals," "Marathon Drawing" (where they draw for 24 hours), "Wrap Rock," "Lamp and Insects," and "Creative Paper Cutting."

Conclusion

Baniprosonno's journey into the world of art began with a childhood dream, and his impact goes beyond strokes of the brush. His legacy is not only in his artwork but in the countless smiles and inspired souls touched by his creativity. His story exemplifies the profound connection between art and the childlike spirit that resides within us all. His ability to retain a sense of playfulness, spontaneity, and authenticity in his artistic expression serves as a reminder of the joy that can be found in creativity. By celebrating the simplicity and imagination inherent in children's art, Baniprosonno inspires both emerging and established artists to embrace their innate creativity without fear of judgment. His work not only bridges the gap between traditional and modern art but also emphasizes the significance of emotional expression and personal experiences in the creative process. Through his journey, Baniprosonno reminds us that creativity has the potential to uplift and inspire, enriching our lives and the lives of others in profound ways.

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