

## Kanu Desai's Silhouette Paintings: Simplicity and Spirituality Evolved from Text

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### ABSTRACT

The paper explores the silhouette oeuvre of Kanu Desai in the larger socio-cultural and spiritual landscape of Gujarat and questions how his minimal visual language can be seen as the art, literature, and faith intersect. The study examines how Desai redefines the rigorous academic approach to silhouette by concentrating on such works as *Raudra Nrtya -Nataraja*, *Gauri nu Tap*, and *Flute*; the works that transform the technique of silhouette into the means to communicate the mythological significance, emotional complexity, and philosophical questioning. The question aims at including three main questions: how can such a seemingly austere medium help to express spiritual depth; how Desai is able to reconcile tradition with modernity; what is his own unique contribution to the contemporary Indian art. The discussion shows how Desai has created a sense of the cosmic power of Nataraja and the sensual closeness of Radha -Krishna iconography without losing the current aesthetic economy through strictly regulated contours and sharp contrasts, and a lyric dynamism. Combining the rural sense and the mythopoetic representations of creation, destruction, love, and transcendence, Desai takes silhouette painting to the next level of spiritual narration and thus attains a unique status in the 20th-century Indian art.

**Keywords:** *Kanu Desai, Silhouette Painting, Indian Mythology, Spiritual Aesthetics, Gujarati Art Tradition.*



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Image 1: Kanu Desai, “Raudra nr̥tya - Nataraja”, silhouette painting, Poster colour on Paper

Gujarat, which lies in the western part of the Indian subcontinent, has had a series of socio-cultural changes which have occurred through the course of millennia. These changes may be traced back to the successive invasions of the region and invasion of other cultures, who came with their culture template. However, Gujarat has been in a position to maintain a unique tradition that shows inherent resistance to foreign impacts.

Art and literature have always been very important sources of expressing human creativity and independence in the field of humanities. They have changed in shape over time, but it is their interdependence that is as constant as ever. Both, writers and visual artists, share their imaginative work both in terms of a textual account and visual-aesthetic presentation, respectively. Their intersection perhaps has never been more dramatic than in the cross-fertilisation of these two realms: the painters regularly find thematic basis in the literary work in the compositions, the writers in the narrative basis in the visual illustrations.

This mutual interaction can be observed most clearly when the work of a visual artist reflects the motifs of the text that is alluded to by a writer and gives the literary scenery a new life on painted canvas. On the other hand, the authors can find their inspiration in the visual arts, comparing the frescos of Ajanta in the distant past, the Chapel of Kailash Temple of Ellora, or the religious paintings of Raja Ravi Varma. The resulting product of these kinds of discussions is a new creation which often resonates with mythopoetic accounts of the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and other puranas.

In order to explain this meeting point of art, literature and faith, I turn on silhouette painting which was the medium of representation that best exemplifies the cultural tapestry that has been created around Gujarat. Kanu Desai had his early education in Proprietary High School in Ahmedabad and later he proceeded to Gujarat Vidyapith, a school started by Mahatma Gandhi. Desai made a great contribution to the cultural landscape of the region through careful research and creative practice over time.

Desai was born in the small village of Diva, and Bharuch in Gujarat state. This rural environment was a sharp contrast to the artistic centres of metropolis. Having been raised in a low-resource environment and receiving little formal training in the arts, Desai took an unorthodox route through which the majority of contemporary artists take. But his urge to visual expression was not diminished and he had to perfect his work in relative seclusion.

Desai came to develop during early years of his life with the perseverance being fervent and chances to perfect his own technical skills were limited. His mother, Hiraben was very critical in the development of his temper. The clarity, order, and reflective creativity of her practicing piety had shown her son how to find aesthetic pleasure in ordinary mediums, in paper blossoms, toys made out of waste materials, and everyday things transformed by imagination. Her order, neatness, and patience had later formed the basis of artistic commitment of Desai.

Desai created a magnificent work through sheer determination and tutelage of great instructors. His association with Sir Ravishankar Raval, who was one of the most significant names in the artistic canon of Gujarat, came in handy in developing his aesthetics. Desai owes much of his development to the mentorship of Raval, which not only helped him to bring out his natural talent, but also pushed him into further education.

Desai made the most of his artistic base and spent two life changing years under the guidance of Nandalal Bose, one of the most revered modernists in India. It was at this time that Kanubhai honed his style and discovered his own unique voice in silhouette painting a form of art that would become his own trademark.

The works by Desai have a relaxed and simultaneously energetic atmosphere. They have their essence of the religious subject matter but intertwine the sense of passion and motion. The fusion of simplicity and profundity is the characteristic feature of his artistic diction. The corpus explores the serene beauty of country living, at the same time touching on some of the darkest emotional and spiritual themes. He has a deep understanding of Indian spirituality, which is revealed in his style, as he is a man of the Indian cultural environment, but at the same time, he follows a modern artistic paradigm.

It might seem that the silhouette work of Kanu Desai is misleadingly basic at first glance. It is executed through the application of the contrasting light and dark, where the subjects are customarily depicted in profile. Even though the visual language as a whole is minimalistic, the artist cannot help but demonstrate amazing accuracy and dexterity; the lack of gradations in color or shading makes the need to be clear and precise in the construction of the lines and their clarity even more clear. As a result, the ease of the method, in its turn, creates a perception of some increased complexity: the artist is required to tell his story, express his emotion, and bring some dynamism to the composition simply using the outline of the black figure, thus making the silhouette a strictly disciplined figure in the rhetoric of visuality.

The silhouettes of Kanubhai stand out by breaking the expectations of the genre. The lines of his work are flowing, even lyrical, and not as mechanical as in the case of traditional silhouettes. This fluidity of motion combined with continuous compositional curves gives the figures a sense of movement and feeling. The artist and his mastery can be traced in how he employs the extreme contrast to give life and dynamics to the otherwise motionless figure, as a result creating an oeuvre full of motion, despite the simplicity of the motions, and full of expressive possibilities.

Although the works of Kanubhai have often been categorized in the category of silhouette painting, it is the ability to incorporate spiritual and emotional quality that makes his work stand out. At a time when most modern Indian artists have rejected the conservative religious iconography, Kanubhai has always resorted to the richness of Indian mythological and religious tradition. His representation of the Raudra nrtya -Nataraka, the dance of Lord Shiva, on a background of raging red that indicates destruction, is the exemplarity case. By making the deity vibrant in posture to the expansive gesture of Tandava, as a destructive and productive gesture, the curve of the silhouette as the medium through which the cosmic powers engage in a metaphysical conversation is placed.

The version of Nataraja by Desai is a clear confirmation of how this artist balances the conservative themes of spirituality and the social and aesthetic trends of modern silhouette painting. Desai also simplifies the picture, unlike many representations where the scenery is pre-empted by the grandeur of the cosmic dance. The stylised shape expresses at once the martial energy of Shiva, his contemplative repose, and therefore incorporates the martial, rhythmic vigour of the dance with a rhythmic, mindful resonance, which establishes its divine character.

Altogether, Desai skilfully focuses on the spiritual dynamism of Nataraja with a strict economy of line. Though stripped down to minimum needed elements the silhouette summarizes the duality of destruction and creation that the Hindu mythology of Shiva held. Limiting his visual vocabulary to short, powerful lines, he creates the effect of a resonant expression of the conflict between destruction and creation, thus demonstrating how silhouette may be an effective means of conveying a complicated symbolic story.

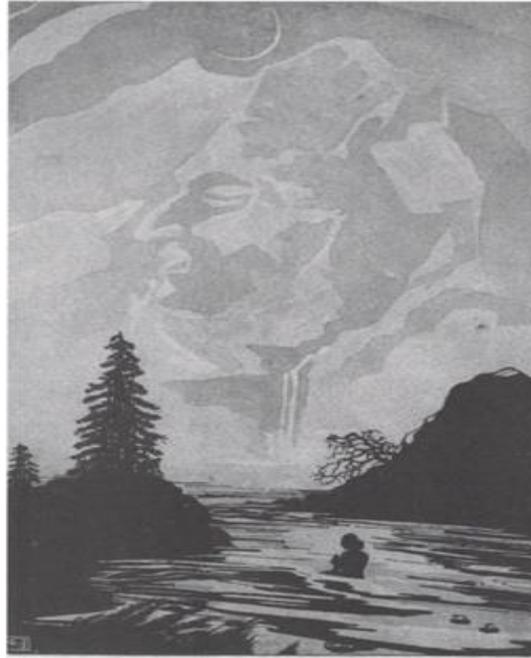


Image 2: Kanu Desai, “Gauri nu Tap”, silhouette painting, Poster colour on Paper

The other important aspect of the oeuvre of Kanubhai is the skillful ability to make silent and reflective interludes. One of the most striking examples is his canvas Gauri nu Tap when Gauri is shown in penance by a river. The towering deodar trees and snow-capped mountains set the composition in contextualization with the silhouette of Gauri in the calmness of meditation, and the slight hint of her desire of Shiva adds the intonation of deep spirituality to the picture. The low budget application of silhouette technique makes the tableau look more mystic and the focus of the viewer is made on the emotional depth of the tableau.

The skill of Kanu Desai in making spiritual depth out of the silhouette painting makes him stand out in the current lot of artists. At a time when most practitioners lean towards the ordinary or the ordinary, the continued use of mythological and spiritual motifs by Desai gives a unique viewpoint. His works are not the iconographic depiction of religious personalities or myths, but introduce more profound metaphysical questions about creation, destruction, desire and transcendence. Therefore, Desai becomes a spiritual storyteller who uses the language of silhouette to present eternal truths concerning the human condition and the divinity.

His writings are preoccupied with the spiritual solemnity of the historical epic, but another feature of the art practiced by Kanubhai is also a high degree of love of the simplicity and

beauty of the rural life. He avoids the pomp of city scenes, the luxuries of court life. Instead, Kanubhai is a film which is inspired by the silence of the rural beauty. His silhouette paintings usually assume a peaceful rural setting, with a calm village pond, interspersed with the lotus that is in flower, with birds singing and deer wandering serenely over the view. These are works that are so serene and reverential to nature.

The description of life in rural India by Kanubhai goes far beyond the visuality of the picture; it is the artistic sensibility of this artist. He gives the importance to the minor aspects of nature- the delicate tree, calming bird songs and harmonious relationships between man and the animals. His bodies do not portray the power of nature, but the humble beauty of its softer scenes. Therefore, the art of Desai welcomes the viewers to recapture the calm sounds of nature, thus providing a visible opposition to the hectic pace of the modern urban life.



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Image 3: Kanu Desai, “Flute”, silhouette painting, Poster colour on Paper

In Flute, one such moment is when Radha and Krishna are in an intimate situation and Desai depicts them as silhouettes amidst a soft and flesh-coloured background. The elegance of the figure of Radha with Krishna and his flute in her hands speaks of their gentle closeness, and the posture of Krishna speaks of fantasies and adoration. The mere and strong lines of the silhouettes convey not only physical intimacy of the figures but also the emotional separation among them. The piece is lyrical in nature and brings back the emotion of love and separation, which feature in most of the works by Desai.

The silhouette paintings produced by Kanu Desai is a great combination of simplicity and depth. The skill is shown by the fact that he caught the spiritual and emotional essence of Indian mythology through a medium that seems to be simple. Desai does not have to rely on rich details and visual elaboration to convey his messages. He reduces complicated feelings and deep spiritual thoughts to the crude creation of black and white figures. His work is a refreshing interpretation of the Indian art, which honors the traditional spiritual subject but takes a modern approach to the artistic process.

Along with his spiritual and natural subjects, Desai also paints about more profound inquiries about human existence- creation, destruction, love, longing and the pursuit of transcendence. His figures are not mere pictures, they are thoughts about the mysteries of life and the gods. In his work, Kanu Desai has established his own niche within the contemporary Indian art, which provides the voice of modernity and at the same time is in touch with the heritage of spiritual writings in India.

The contribution that the silhouette paintings of Kanubhai have made in the Indian art is unique and significant. It is through this ability in the silhouette technique that has produced works that are aesthetically significant in that they are spiritually significant. The simplicity of the medium helps Desai to demonstrate his artistic prowess and vision, as he is able to convey his more complex emotions and themes using it. His art attracts people as it makes them enjoy the beauty of Indian spirituality and rural life and at the same time examine the philosophical issues that his painting raises.

With the development of the artistic path of Kanu Desai, his figures remain the strong and enduring one in Indian art.

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