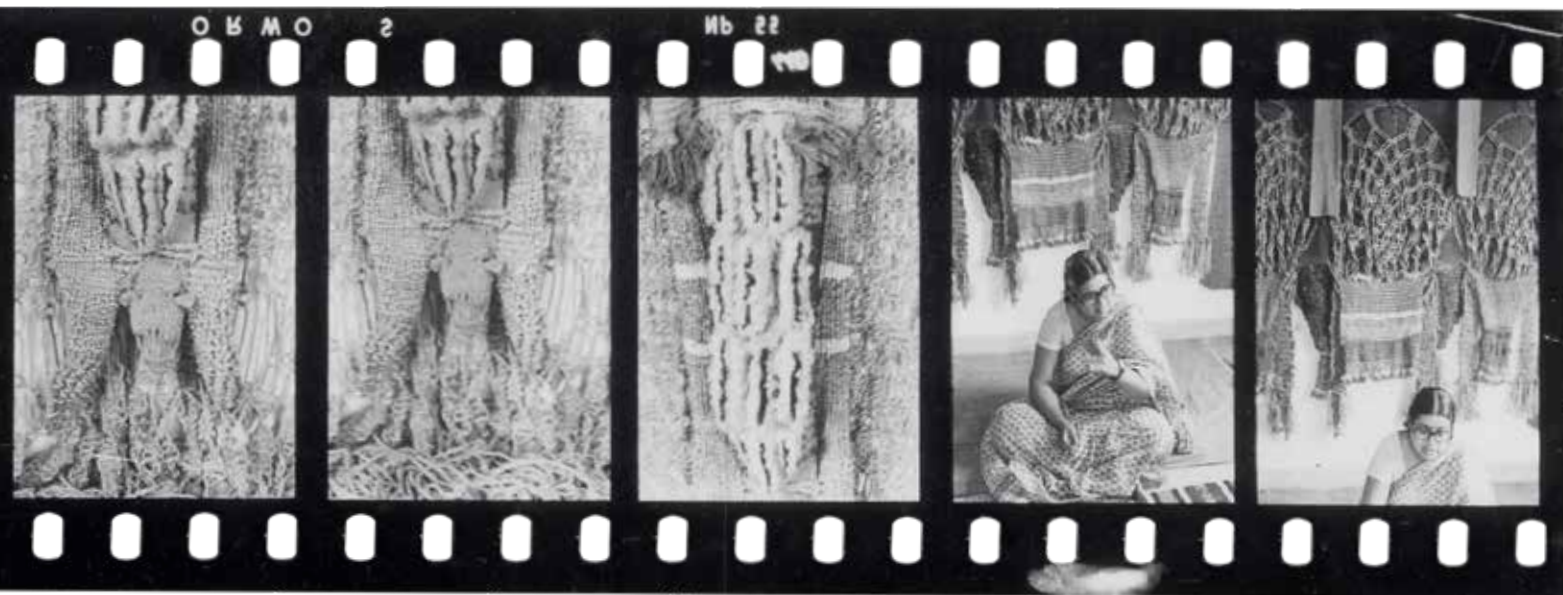




Unbroken





cord

With her otherworldly textile art, Mrinalini Mukherjee united modernism and South Asian folk traditions. Kamayani Sharma explores the strands of Mukherjee's career ahead of an RA show on the artist and her circle





When Mrinalini Mukherjee held her first major exhibition in the UK in 1994, a critic likened her monumental biomorphic totems to the villainous plants that prey on humans in John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). Made with natural fibres knotted, plaited, folded and tucked into forms that resemble overgrown vegetal organisms, there is indeed an eeriness about the late Indian sculptor's works.

Today, Mukherjee, who died in 2015, is revered as among the great textile maestras of her generation, and a towering figure in the development of South Asian modern art. For more than 25 years, beginning in the 1960s, she worked with fibre – jute, cotton, sisal, shani and her favoured hemp – sourced from the Indian subcontinent and hand-dyed. Occasionally expanding her oeuvre into abstract watercolours and etched landscapes, from the mid-1990s she turned first to ceramic and then bronze, continuing to take inspiration from botanical materials and metaphors. Those who knew her described Mukherjee – nicknamed Dilu – as witty, doughty and spirited. Through her deep-rooted professional and personal relationships, her practice links together a multigenerational network of artists who rose to prominence in post-Independence India. The Royal





‘Nestled among red soil gullies, rice fields and jungle, the art school at Santiniketan became a pan-Asian crucible for experimentation’

A nature lover, Benode Behari painted the plant life of both the Santiniketan campus and the north Indian mountains, even as he slowly lost his vision. Walking with him in the campus, Mrinalini would describe flowers for him to identify, and capture them in photographs while dreaming of becoming a botanist herself. Landscapes have brought father and daughter together on paper, too: the slanting trees of Benode Behari’s Chinese ink work *Mussorie* (1954; left) are akin to those swaying in Mrinalini’s monochrome etchings, such as *View* (opposite page; 1983), and the undulating landscape rhymes with the folds characteristic of her fabric, clay and bronze works.

From Leela’s sculpture, Mrinalini inherited what she called a ‘naïve animism... that breathes a transgressive life into her modernist forms’. Her mother’s influence can be seen in sculptures made from rope, glazed clay and bronze, so steeped in ancestral tradition and the language of natural forms that they appear as if sentient.

Santiniketan seeded in Mukherjee a closeness to nature and a responsiveness to the local, in terms of both materials and process. In 1965, when she was ready for higher education, the art school in Santiniketan was going through a lull in terms of quality and influence; its focus on craft was waning, and Mukherjee herself described it as in ‘decline’. But its spirit had incarnated in another campus, that of the Faculty of Fine Arts at MSU, Baroda. Located on the banks of a river that runs through the heart of an erstwhile princely state, the school was poised to educate India’s new, postcolonial generations of artists. Many of its teachers had trained at Santiniketan and carried its sensibilities, namely a grounding in the immediate environment and an investment in vernacular craft and folk art. Taking a cue from her teacher there, K.G. Subramanyan, who espoused the idea of modern Indian art as a ‘living tradition’ in dialogue with historical practices, Mukherjee would adopt what she described as ‘an integrated approach to art and craft... working with the linguistics developed by the practice of craft’. Her choice of medium – sunn and sisal hemp used to make woven beds – was also borne of a desire to opt for easily available, regional materials.

Mukherjee’s interest in craft found ‘conductive soil’ in Baroda, and in 1969 she produced her first fibre work, a hemp hanging for a fine art fair at the university, an annual fundraising event. Among the knotting techniques she deployed was macramé, an ancient Arabic weaving method which she learned from a *Reader’s Digest* magazine. The knot became the alphabet for Mukherjee’s sculptural language, its capacity to multiply through entwinement enabling her to improvise extravagant structures.

Photographs from her travels around India reveal her interest in temples and religious symbols. She often travelled by motorcycle with her architect husband »

Previous spread:
photographic
negatives of Mrinalini
Mukherjee and her
work (c. 1970)

Opposite page, above:
View, 1983, by
Mrinalini Mukherjee

Opposite page,
below: the young
Mrinalini with her
father Benode
Behari Mukherjee in
Dehradun, 1950s

This page, above:
Mussorie, 1952,
by Benode Behari
Mukherjee

Academy’s exhibition ‘A Story of South Asian Art: Mrinalini Mukherjee and Her Circle’ hosts her intriguing creations, and situates them among the work of her peers.

Mukherjee was born in 1949, two years after India’s independence from British colonial rule, to two educators belonging to an indigenous modern art movement – sculptor Leela Mukherjee and painter Benode Behari Mukherjee. Mrinalini’s lifelong interest in the botanic germinated in the landscapes of her 1950s childhood. Her mother Leela, who practised wood carving, taught at an elite boarding school in Dehradun, a city in a western Himalayan valley. Her father Benode Behari taught in West Bengal, at Kala Bhavana Institute of Fine Arts in the town of Santiniketan, where she spent her summers – a historically significant art school established by the Nobel Laureate poet, philosopher and artist Rabindranath Tagore at the turn of the 20th century.

Nestled among red soil gullies, rice fields and jungle, the art school at Santiniketan became a pan-Asian crucible for nationalist and modernist experimentation: a place where artists incorporated local, indigenous and environmental traditions and ideas into their practices, vexing the Euro-American cultural framework that dominated the story of modern art.



TATE, PRESENTED BY AMRITA JHAVERI 2013. PHOTO: © TATE. COURTESY OF MRINALINI MUKHERJEE FOUNDATION

» Ranjit Singh, whom she met in Delhi after moving there in 1972. When her practice shifted from hangings to standing sculpture, Mukherjee was drawn to the ornamental nature of temple art, reflected in works like *Ritu Raja* (1977; below). Here, the woven umber ensemble of flaps, sags, tassels and poufs also references the costumes of Indian performance, like the neckpieces worn by classical Kathakali dancers, and the skirts worn during the trance-like folk ritual Theyyam. *Ritu Raja* anticipates the pantheon of fibre deities she made in the 1980s, which she described as 'grotesque but benign queens of the jungle, reptilian guardians or opulent deities of an enchanted arbour'.

In the following decade, Mukherjee's sculptures took on a sexual, anatomical aspect. A late hemp work, the black and red *Adi-Pushp II* (1998-99; page 13), appears like a primordial, vulval flower, blossoming around a lingam – a symbol of fertility used in the worship of the Hindu god Shiva. The work's title (*First Flower* in English) nods to the influence of the aboriginal: the 'adi' in *Adi-Pushp* is the same as the *adi* in *adivasi*, meaning first dweller, the word for indigenous in India.

By the 1990s Mukherjee had travelled and exhibited worldwide, while being based in Delhi for more than 25 years, setting up studios in various locations across the city. With its access to both government support and international exposure, India's capital attracted artists

Opposite page:
Jaubha, 2000,
by Mukherjee

This page, right:
Mukherjee on her travels
in India, c. 1969

This page, below right:
Ritu Raja, 1977,
by Mukherjee



'The knot became the alphabet in Mukherjee's sculptural language, enabling her to improvise extravagant structures'

from respected institutions like Baroda and Santiniketan. Mukherjee's studios were places where her artist friends would come together – and sometimes assist her in her experiments with installation. While her process for making works such as *Adi-Pushp* was intuitive, the often complex task of installing her textile creations exemplifies her rigorous exploration of the architecture of fibre.

Having turned her hand to ceramics at a Delhi workshop in the 1990s, next came Mukherjee's 'bronze age'. When her woodcarver mother became too frail to wield hammer and chisel, she started making small wax models with a view to casting them in bronze. On Leela's death in 2002, 13 years before her own, Mukherjee took up her mother's final medium as a way 'to do something which was immediate'. Debris and deadwood became the subjects of her metal transmogrifications. Her artist friend and Baroda classmate Nilima Sheikh recalled Mukherjee phoning her one morning, to tell her that she was coming over to pick up a palm frond that she had seen the previous day. Not only found objects, but found methods informed her approach to bronze. She used dental instruments from a neighbourhood laboratory, 'scraping and burnishing, anointing and embellishing' the bronze after casting. Echoing her textile »





Left:
Mukherjee and works in
progress at her garage
studio in New Delhi, c. 1985

» creations, her works in bronze and ceramic are steeped in the language of natural forms and South Asian folk traditions, to which she gives a distinctively modern, abstract twist.

In a way, Mukherjee's childhood ambition of becoming a botanist came true. She became a botanist of supernature, a weaver of wondrous biomorphic figures and artefacts. Among India's most original post-Independence sculptors, she entwined modernist geometry and lineages of South Asian sculpture, and devised a language of knots and folds that could be scaled up to baroque proportions and adapted across mediums. The Latin word for 'knot' is 'nodus', the root for 'node'. Mukherjee, daughter of Santiniketan, student of Baroda, denizen of Delhi, not only represented

an important strand, but threaded together multiple communities of late 20th-century Indian art.

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● **A Story of South Asian Art: Mrinalini Mukherjee and Her Circle** *The Jillian and Arthur M. Sackler Wing of Galleries, 31 Oct to 24 Feb 2026. Exhibition organised by the Royal Academy of Arts, in partnership with The Hepworth Wakefield, which in 2026 presents a major retrospective of Mrinalini Mukherjee. Supported by the Mehra Family, Seher & Taimur Hassan*

● **Friends Previews** 29 Oct, 10am to 9pm; 30 Oct, 10am to 6pm. For related events see page 82