

The Polymath

Art Of
K.G. Subramanyan

DISCOVER MAP



Let's talk about one of India's pioneer modern artists - K.G. Subramanyan.

Friends called him 'Mani da' and in the art circles of today, he is also known as KGS!

Do you have a nickname that friends have given you? If yes, why did they chose it? Do you know?





Subramanyan's art cannot be put into a single category of style, technique or influence. He was a painter, a muralist, an illustrator, a writer and so much more!

He was curious about so many things in the world, and wanted to play around with as much of it as he could.

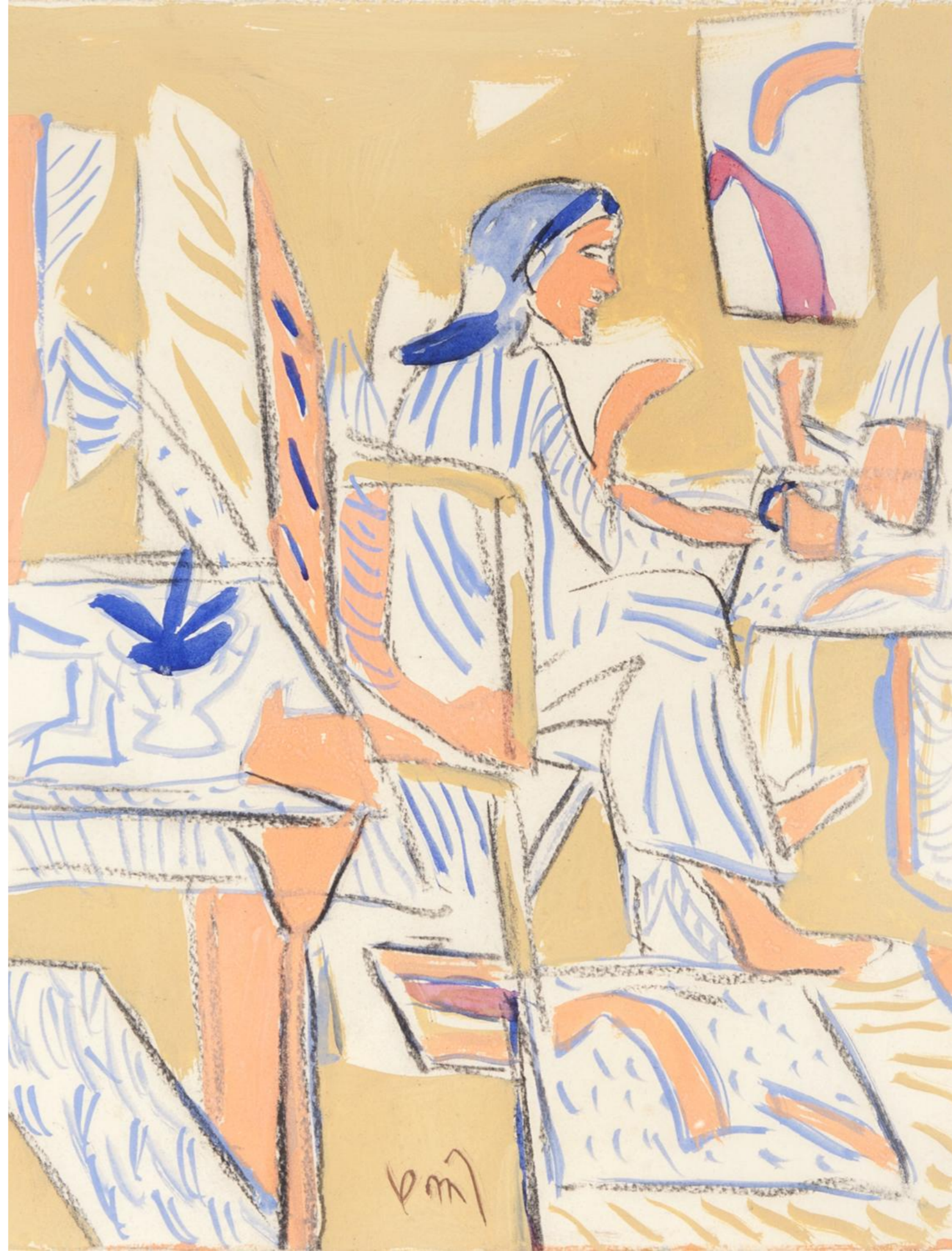
How many art objects can you spot in this image? How many different materials & making techniques?

Subramanyan worked at the time of the Indian freedom movement.

This extraordinary environment influenced his art too, and he wanted to develop a new identity for Indian art that was **local as well as global** (or as we might say today, glocal!).

THINK.

What does it mean to be **glocal** in today's world? Can you think of examples from your own life where you can spot this phenomenon?



REFLECT.

What do you think is going on in this work? How many colours do you spot in its composition? Why do you think that is?



Here's the start of a quote by Subramanyan. Read it carefully.

...when I was a young boy, there was such a **panorama** (or connected scene of art) where I grew up. There was art in the home, on the street, in the workshops and studios, in the precincts of temples and mosques, in public festivals and fairs, and this involved a lot of people.



REFLECT.

Why do you think the word panorama was bold? Can you see any connection between that word, and the rest of the quote here?

Does this text that he wrote tell you anything about Subramanyan's influences and his approach to art making? What does it make you think – about the role of art in our lives?

VOCABULARY ALERT!

A panorama is an unbroken view of the whole region surrounding an observer. In other words, a complete view in every direction.



Looking back from here I can recall that my mother herself commanded many skills. She was adept at weaving mats, making baskets, and toys from coconut fronds, laying and burnishing lime-plaster floors; my aunt was an accomplished decorator of the floor and the wall with ritual drawings. Not far from our home, there was a carpenter who was also a wood-carver, a brass-founder who was also an image maker, and within quarter of a mile there was a temple that carried many painted wood carvings of great finesse and liveliness.



In his practice, Subramanyan was very much influenced by the **Kalighat paintings** of West Bengal and the work of the famous artist **Jamini Roy**.

LOOK CLOSELY.

This is a Jamini Roy painting – are there any unique elements that stand out to you?

Can you think of a food item that resembles the shape of the cats' eyes?

Learn more about Jamini Roy in another Discover MAP pack [here](#).

ART SPEAK!

Kalighat paintings refer to an art style from Kalighat (in West Bengal) that is characterised by **quick brushstrokes, black outlines** and **bright colours**.

This style was born along the Kalighat Temple in Kolkata, where artists made quick religious drawings as temple souvenirs in the 19th century.

This style was in danger of dying out. But today, Kalam Patua, a descendent of the original artists, is bringing it back. This is a work by him. What references to the modern world do you spot here?

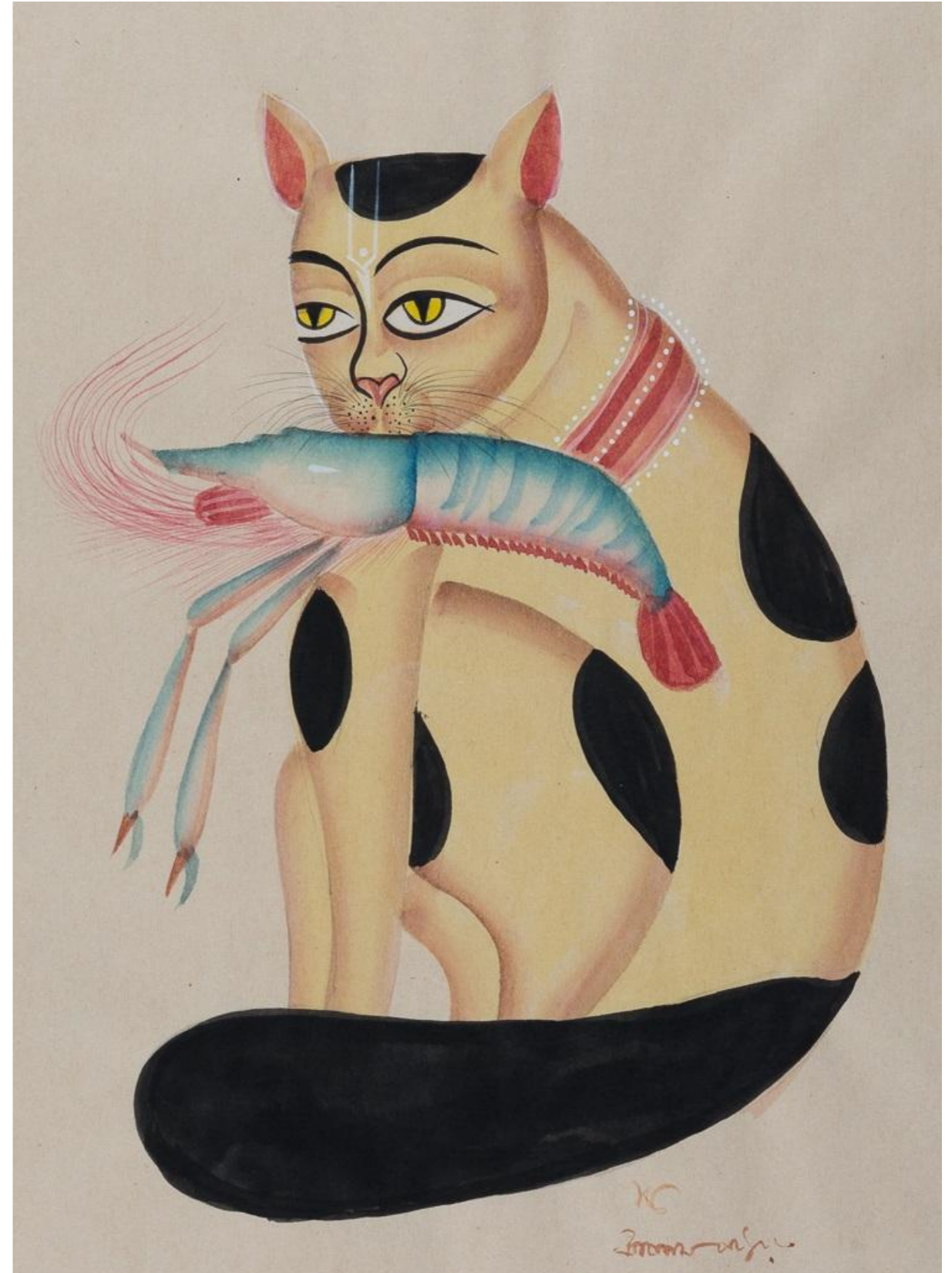


The cat and lobster duo was a popular theme among the Kalighat artists. The cat symbolised greedy priests (notice the caste mark on its forehead) who preyed on innocent victims, symbolised by the lobster!

EXTEND.

What kind of human characteristics do we usually associate with a cat? Why was this animal chosen to symbolise a cunning personality?

Make a list of animals and the characteristics we associate with them. Learn what this process is called in another Discover MAP pack [here](#).





Now let's look at this work by Subramanyan.

LOOK CLOSELY.

How many characteristics of the Kalighat style can you spot in this work? Are there any differences?

IMAGINE.

In this work, the lobster has changed to a fish! Can you think of a new story that the cat-fish duo is trying to tell us?

What is the role of the human in this story?

Make a meme about this artwork!

Another major influence in Subramanyan's work was that of Cubism.

ART SPEAK!

Cubism was a **European art movement** that brought different views of the subject together in the same image, resulting in works that appear fragmented and distorted.

Here is a cubist work by **Pablo Picasso** – one of the founders of Cubism. Takes a while getting used to, doesn't it? Do you see any familiar items in this painting?

Image: The Cleveland Museum Of Art





And here is Subramanyan's work inspired by the cubist movement.

LOOK CLOSELY.

How many viewpoints can you find in this work?

Do you see parts of a face that are painted both in front and side profile? Which are those?

How do you think this work is made? And what surface do you think it is made on?*

If these people could talk, what do you think they would be discussing?

*This is a print on paper made through woodcut - a technique where a wooden surface is carved, ink is applied on the grooves and pressed to form the imprint. Isn't that cool?



Here is another of his works that plays with perspective and space.

Can you figure out where the floor ends and the walls begin? What makes you think that?

Can you figure out why this work looks 3D even though it is not?

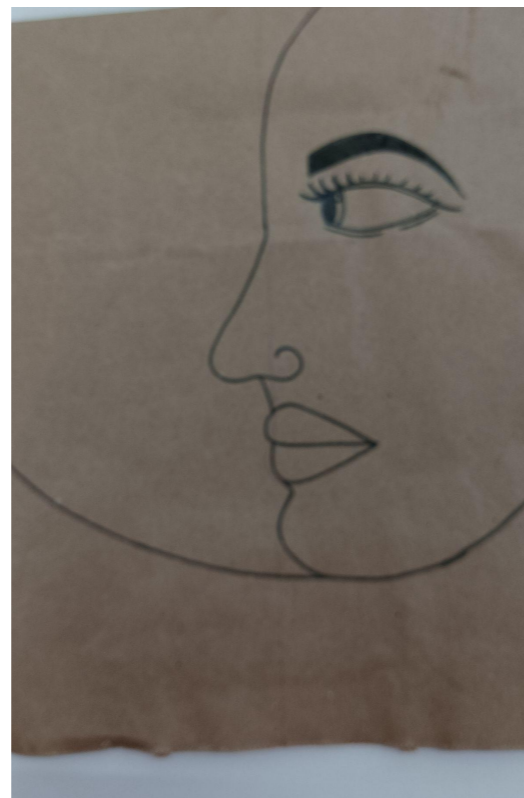
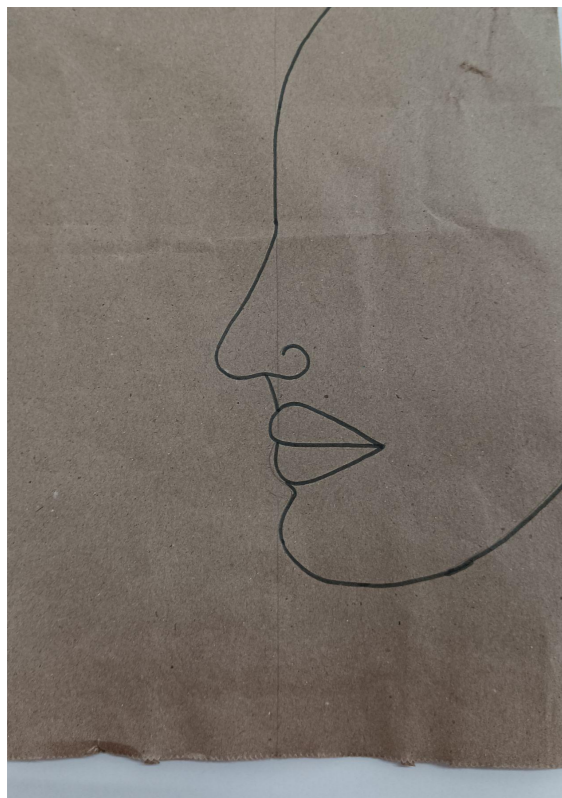
Is our point of view for the table, the same as the view for rest of the elements? Where do you think you would have to stand in the room to get this view?

CREATE.



How about making a cubist mask now? You need only three things for this project - a **brown paper bag**, some **colours** and a pair of **scissors**

To draw the face, make a plus sign on the paper bag. On the right side, make a forehead and nose in left profile and continue to the mouth, chin and up the side. End with the neckline also in profile. Add the eye and eyebrow in profile as the rest of the face as well.



On the other side of your plus sign, outline the face in frontal view. Draw a front view eye and join the lip-line. Colour with your chosen materials, and cut holes for the eyes. Your cubist mask is ready!

Pro tip: Use your colours to create more angular blocks to make it more cubist like! See our final mask in the next page for ideas!



Here's our friend wearing the mask! Can you get yours to do the same? Don't forget to send us a picture of your mask at education@map-india.org.



In addition to art movements Subramanyan was also very interested in mythology and history which influenced his art as well.

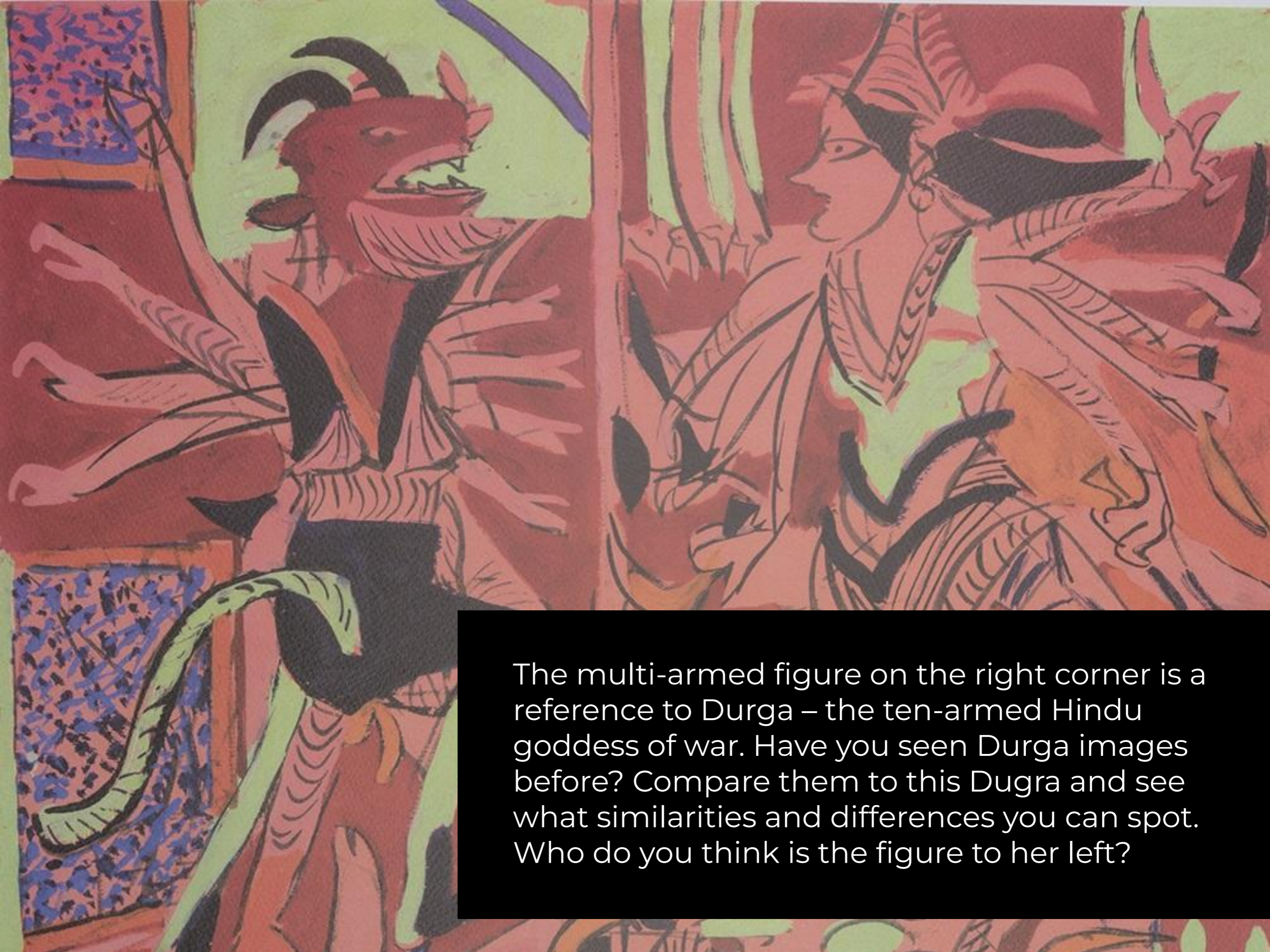
LOOK CLOSELY.

Can you spot a reference to any stories from Indian myths in this artwork?

What can you guess about the space where this scene is unfolding?

What is the point of view for you, as the viewer? Do you see the cubist influence in this work?

The multi-armed figure on the right corner is a reference to Durga - the ten-armed Hindu goddess of war. Have you seen Durga images before? Compare them to this Dugra and spot the similarities and differences.



The multi-armed figure on the right corner is a reference to Durga – the ten-armed Hindu goddess of war. Have you seen Durga images before? Compare them to this Durga and see what similarities and differences you can spot. Who do you think is the figure to her left?

Subramanyan also experimented with many other styles and techniques in his work.

Here is an interesting work by him which looks very different from the ones you have seen so far.

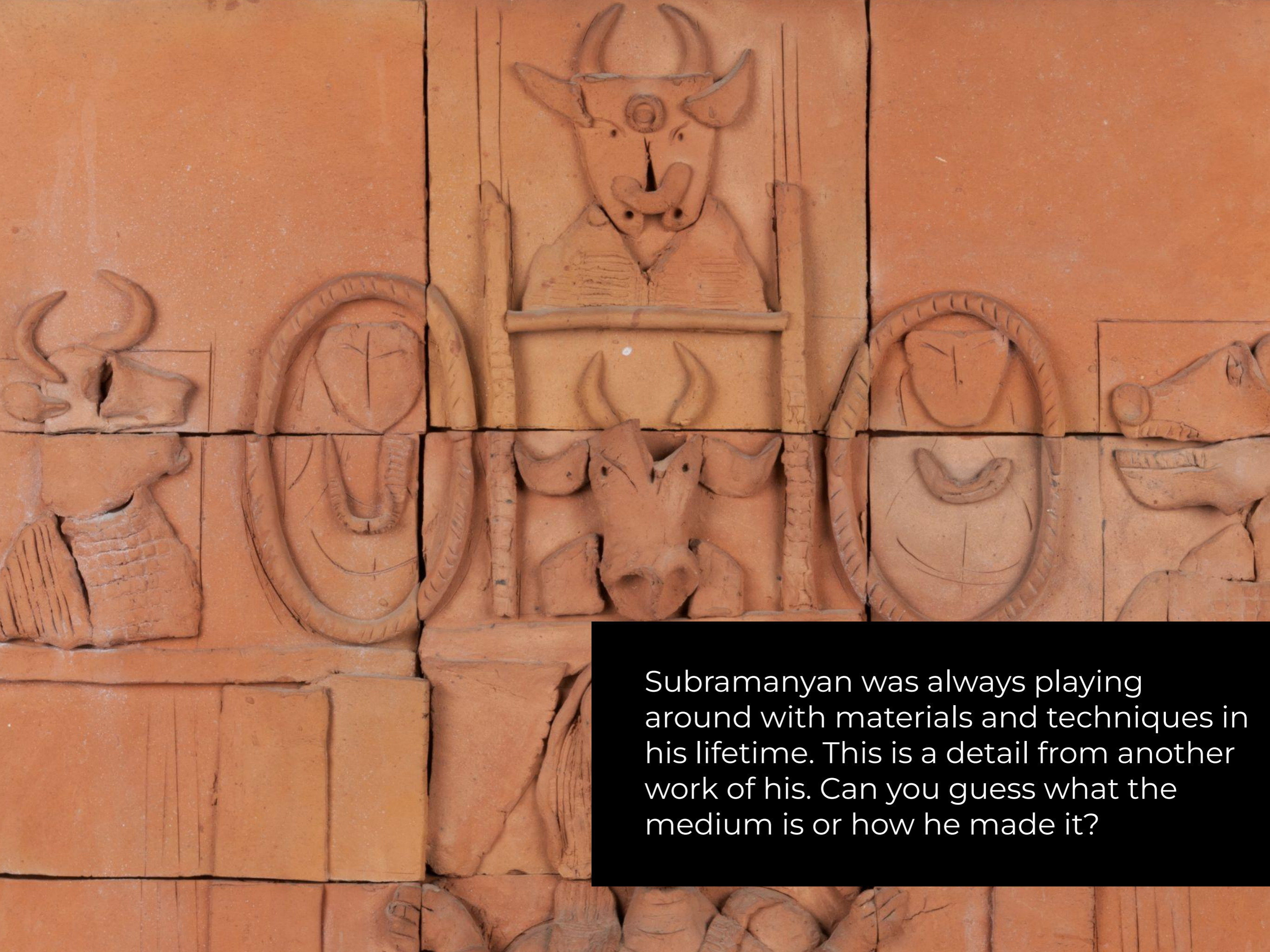
LOOK CLOSELY.

Do you recognise what it is? How did you know? Can you guess what materials were used to make this work?

Replicate the wings of this insect on paper. How will you move your hand to get the effect of translucent wings?



Why do you think only one colour was used in this work?



Subramanyan was always playing around with materials and techniques in his lifetime. This is a detail from another work of his. Can you guess what the medium is or how he made it?



This is actually a terracotta* panel which kind of works like play-doh! So it's a sculpture made with bare hands.

In the 1970s, Subramanyan was inspired by traditional methods of working with clay and made works like this one, completely by hand.

LOOK CLOSELY.

Do you see any repeating designs and characters?
Can you spot how this work is made up of smaller panels assembled together?

If you could give this work a title, what would you call it?

* Terracotta is a type of fired clay of a brownish-red colour and unglazed, used as an ornamental material and in modelling.



THINK.

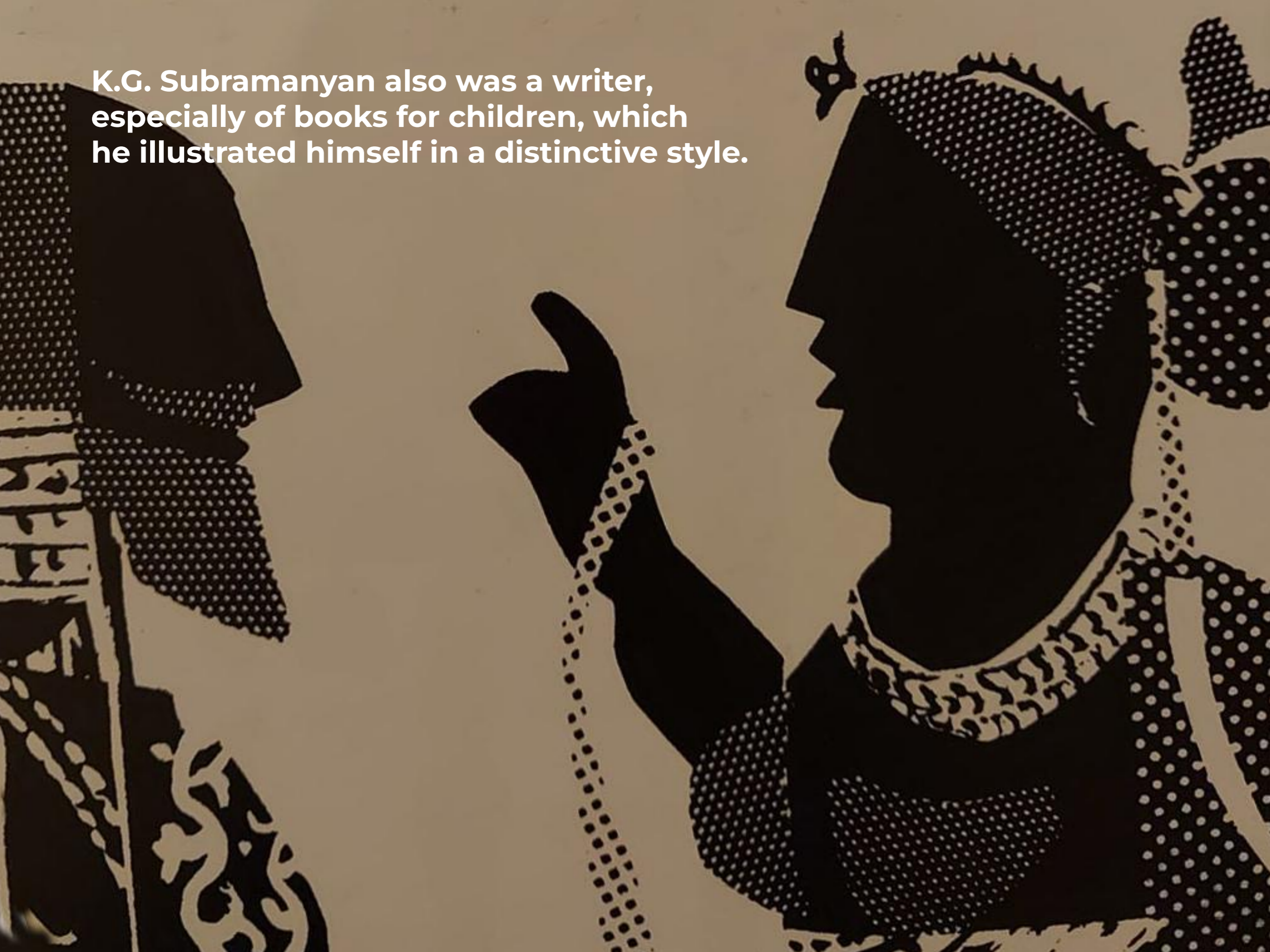
Why did he make them as separate panels?
Could it have anything to do with what you see in each panel?

IMAGINE.

Imagine a story about what you see here. Now think about what happens if some of the panels move and change positions! Can you think of new stories that can create?

Head to our **DIY Extra** to learn how to play with clay using only your hands!

**K.G. Subramanyan also was a writer,
especially of books for children, which
he illustrated himself in a distinctive style.**





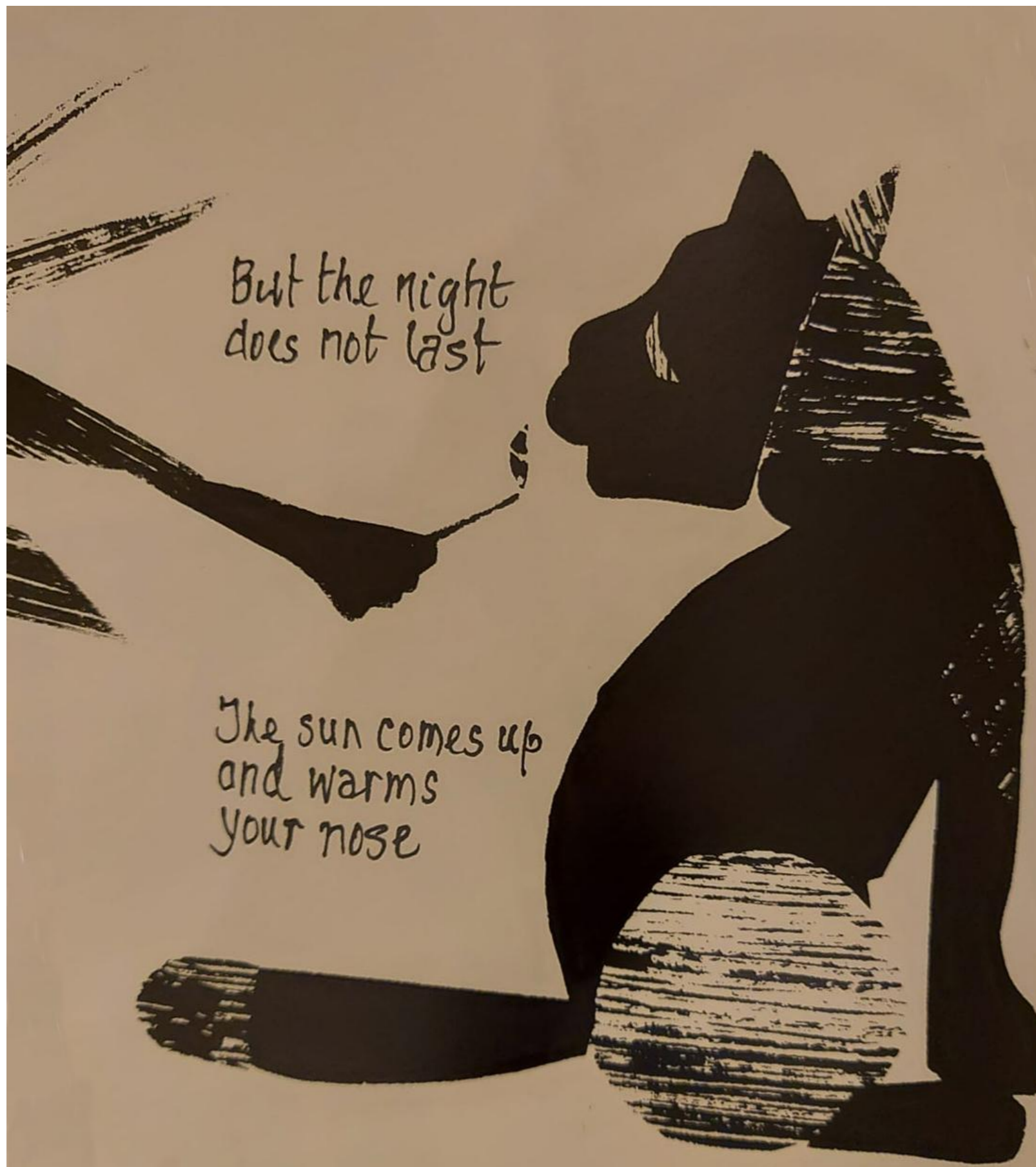
LOOK CLOSELY.

Here is another example of a page from one of his books.

What do you think it is about? Do the characters give you a hint?

How many of them can you recognise? Look closely at what each character is holding or wearing!

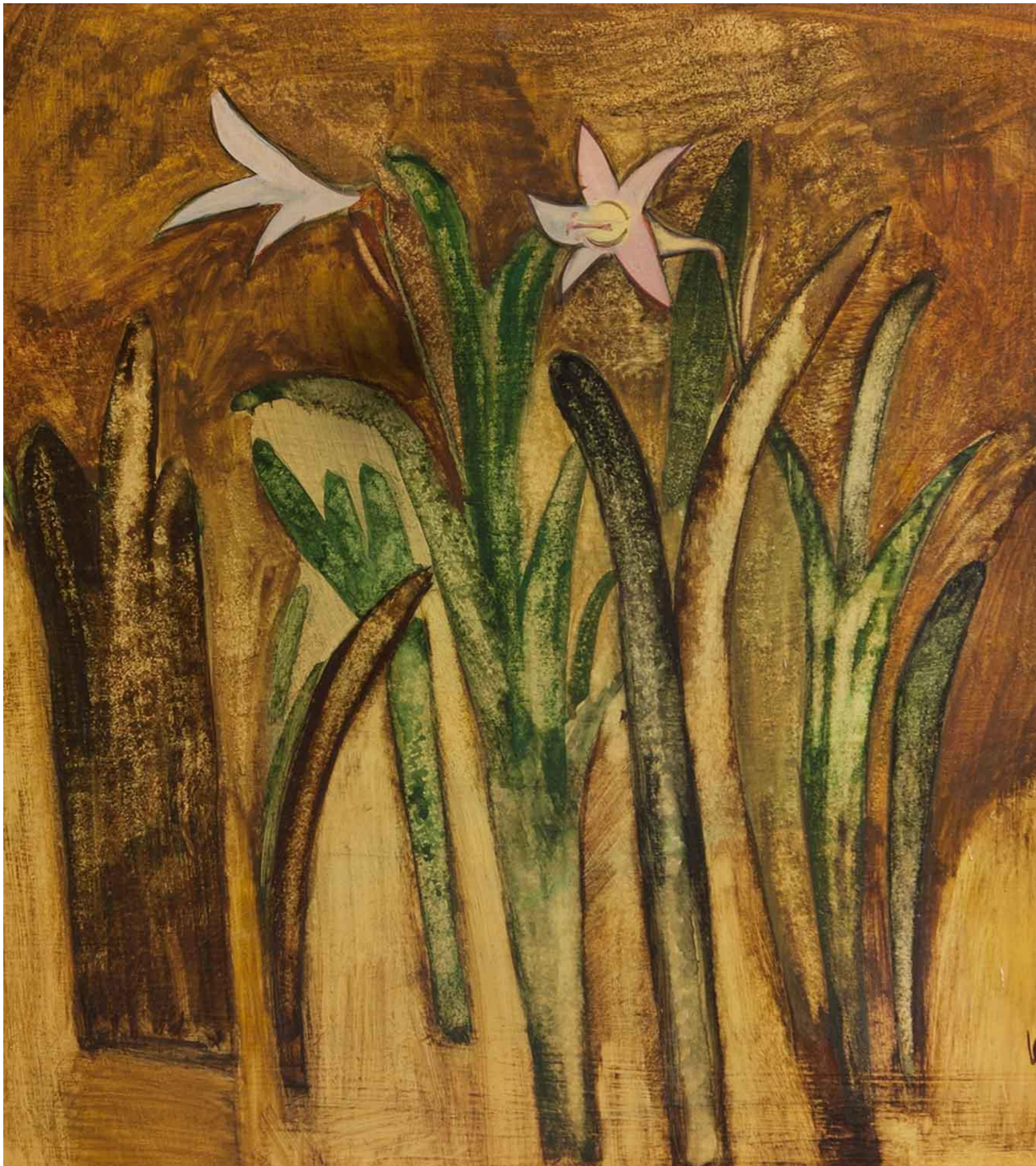
Does the style remind you of any other art making techniques that you know of?



Subramanyan's illustrations are very simple and graphic in style, but are often very imaginative and fun! Look at this example:

Do you see the sun?
Do you see the nose?
Do you see how the sun is warming the nose? Is that even possible in real life?

Be inspired by his play of words, shapes, lines and textures - head over to the **Stories With Art** extra to try something new!



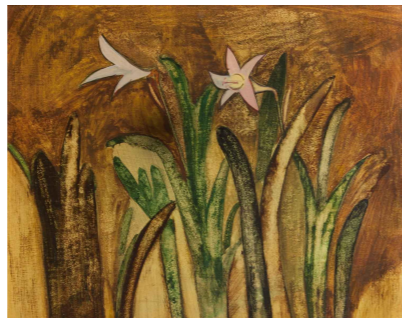
K.G. Subramanyan died at the age of 92 in 2016. He was awarded the Padma Vibhushan by the government of India, recognising his contributions to art and culture in India.

In his lifetime, he played many roles – from artist to scholar to mentor – and went on to mentor generations of artists and writers, who continue his legacy even today. A real polymath!*

*Polymath: A person whose knowledge covers many different areas.



Women with cows, 1979
K.G. Subramanyan
Terracotta
H. 52 cm, W. 50 cm
MAC.01405



Flower, 1989
K.G. Subramanyan
Oil on board
H. 29 cm, W. 29 cm
MAC.01166



Untitled, 20th century
K.G. Subramanyan
Watercolour on paper
H. 9.5 cm, W. 14.5 cm
MAC.01382



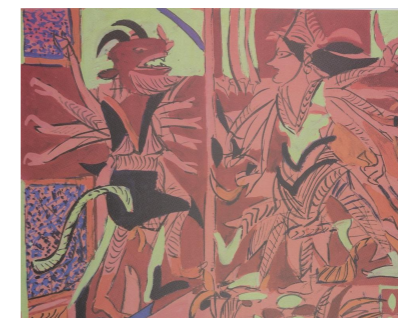
Untitled, 20th century
K.G. Subramanyan
Woodcut
H. 32 cm, W. 35 cm
MAC.02746



Jackfruit, 2006
K.G. Subramanyan
Acrylic on canvas
H. 47 cm, W. 51 cm
MAC.02926



Woman in the blue room, 1989
K.G. Subramanyan
Acrylic on canvas
H. 58 cm, W. 42 cm
MAC.00695



Untitled, 2009
K.G. Subramanyan
Print on paper
H. 58 cm, W. 42 cm
MAC.02774



A woman in her kitchen, 2012
Kalam Patua
Watercolour on paper
H. 51.1 cm, W. 37.7 cm
PTG.00217



K. G. Subramanyan Making Toys for the
Fine Arts Fair, Vadodara., 1967
Jyoti Bhatt
Digital file scanned from original
DC.00202



Still life with fish, Undated
K.G. Subramanyan
Oil on canvas
H. 58 cm, W. 43 cm
MAC.01359



Cat eating a prawn, 2016
Kalam Patua
Watercolour on paper
H. 41.2 cm, W. 33.7 cm
PTG.01622



MAP

Museum of Art
& Photography

MAP

Sua House
26/1 Kasturba Cross Road
Bangalore 560 001, India

map-india.org

 [museumofartandphotography](https://www.instagram.com/museumofartandphotography)

