

“Paper is the simplest and most complex medium.”

Sabeena Karnik

PrintWeek speaks to the illustrator and typographer about her work in paper sculpting and 3D illustration

By Payal Khandelwal

Colours, letters, and paper coalesce to narrate beautiful stories in Sabeena Karnik's work. Karnik is an independent illustrator and typographer who specialises in paper sculpting and 3D art. Her strong inclination towards art right from her childhood effortlessly transitioned into studying Applied Art at Sophia Polytechnic, Institute of Art and Design. Post her education, her love for typography and paper came together through a personal project she worked on and eventually led her to where she is today.

We speak to Karnik about her journey so far and her work process in detail. Edited excerpts:

Could you tell us about some of your early experiences that led you to pursue visual arts?

As a child, it was very apparent that art was in me and that it would be the vocation I would eventually pursue. I was always drawing and decorating the last pages of my notebooks during my school years. It would transport me to this another world that I was creating, and the results were always interesting.

You specialised in typography in college -





what was it about typography that first piqued your curiosity?

Ever since I remember, I was always into decorative lettering. It was fascinating for everyone around me that I had the ability to effortlessly letter people's names and quotations when I was in school. I would be assigned to do that with chalk on the school blackboards. When I got into Sophia in 2004, I came to realise that Typography is a subject that's given the least importance in communication.

The language of letters requires it to be designed expressively and aesthetically, since letters have the ability to convey so much more than what meets the eye. This led me to major in the subject, so that I can create letters, which are designed specifically for a subject and speak for themselves.

How did you start dabbling with paper and when and how did you realise that you wanted to completely focus on it as an art form?

I was always fascinated with paper and creating things with it. Towards the end of my art school years, I wanted to be a paper artist, but didn't know how to take it forward. Things took a turn one day when I thought of combining my two passions. It began as an experimental personal project, which involved creating A-Z alphabets only using paper. There was never any intention to pursue it as a career until I started getting jobs from clients wanting to use my work for their campaigns.

I wanted to use this art to communicate words in an expressive way, not just how it is normally used to make flowers in greeting cards etc. At that time, I didn't even know it was called quilling. Never in my wildest



dream did I expect that paper type would garner so much interest from people in the future or that it had the potential to become a full-time career. So it has always been a very organic process and it still is. Even today I experiment and try out new methods, so as to not be repetitive in my approach to the subject.

What are the things about paper as a medium that you like? And what are the disadvantages of working with it?

Paper is the simplest and the most complex

medium. Its simplicity makes it unique. It can be shaped anyway you like; it's very easy to work with; and doesn't require any special training to handle - except gentleness and a lot of patience. It's a two-dimensional medium, which can be made into something 3D using a bit of imagination. The most amazing thing about working with paper is the realisation that how little of it is used in creating my work, contrary to what one might think.

The downside of it is that it's fragile. But then you can always start over if you make a mistake.

What is the most challenging project you have worked on till now?

I would say every assignment has its share of challenges. However, the hardest one so far was the Google Doodle (which I created along with nine other designers from around the world) in 2019 for International Women's Day. It was the first time I worked with a non-English script - Hindi and Bengali. So for this project, I had to understand the form of Bengali letters and create an artwork based on a quote and bring out its meaning through the style of illustration. Same for the Hindi quote. It really tested and pushed my ability as a designer and craftsman.

What's been your most exciting experiment or breakthrough in your work so far?

Being able to create a style, which puts the spotlight on letters, is something I am most grateful for. Since I don't just use traditional quilling techniques but also paper sculpturing and layering, every piece created is a breakthrough. I always come across a lot of →



surprises because the results are always very different.

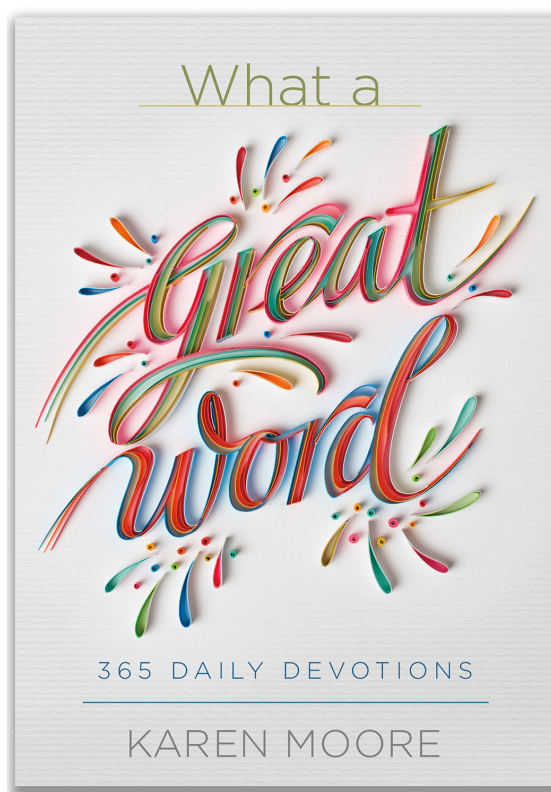
Could you tell us more about the papers that you work with? And what are the tools that you use?

Since paper is the hero in my work, I am always scouting for them wherever I go. I use all kinds of paper. I use Italian and Indian brands like Fabriano, Cordenons, Arjo Wiggins, and Sona commercial papers. And non-branded regular ones too. The texture doesn't matter as long as it's in a variety of colours and heavy. The more heavy the paper is, the more it can be shaped, moulded, and glued. Generally, I end up mixing all kinds of paper in one job. I use box cutters to cut papers into strips, a paper-cutting knife for cutting the shapes, and good old fevicol to paste them, along with a quilling needle or cocktail sticks to give it a shape.

Do you create sketches first or do you directly start working with paper?

Every process for me starts with the idea. The idea can grow only with a sketch. Through my work, I always try to communicate most things in the easiest way possible, adding surprise elements when I can. I combine a lot of textures and styles to add effects and depth in every piece. That's always a part of the design process.

I start by drawing with pencil a particular letter or word or a sentence by thinking of what it signifies. It could be a form or an object, or something abstract with texture and vibrant colours. For example, my single letter series is always inspired by a word starting with that letter such as the Sea, Summer, Singapore, Swan, etc. I focus on a characteristic from these words into my letter.



Once the drawing and concept is done, I decide on the colours and style in which to execute the design. Then I choose the papers and start cutting them into strips and different shapes for layering and bringing out the 3D aspect of the design.

When the artwork is complete, it is photographed using different lighting to get the perfect shot. The colourful papers reflect beautifully on white when the light is used well. It's very tricky to get the best shot and

to ensure that the image doesn't look flat. Since all of my works are 3D, it is the photograph of my work, which is eventually printed and published.

How do you balance between personal and commercial projects?

That's a tough thing to do! While working on the commercial jobs, I miss the experimental freedom of personal work. And when I do personal passion projects, I miss the interaction with clients and understanding their vision. I usually squeeze in a personal piece when there's a gap between jobs. It's so important to have a mix of both to help one's work and techniques grow.

Who are the visual artists around the world that you like?

I am enamoured by a mix of artists. One of the biggest inspirations for me has been Kumi Yamashita, a Japanese shadow installation artist. Herb Lubalin is someone every graphic and type designer will know. He is the reason why I decided to study typography. Jeff Nishinaka and Jen Stark are two paper artists I love for their gravity defying pieces.

What are you currently working on?

At the moment, I am creating an album cover for a music production company. Also, there are two pieces for Earth Day that have been commissioned for a social media platform, and a book cover for an Indian publishing house. ■

You can view more of Sabeena Karnik's work here: behance.net/sabeenu

Payal Khandelwal is an independent journalist and editor of *The Floating Magazine* (thefloatingmagazine.com)