

PWI talks to architect and illustrator Sumedha Sah about her work.

By Payal Khandelwal

Drawing and making notes about her daily life and musings in Auroville, Pondicherry eventually alchemized into a career in illustration for Sumedha Sah. A self-taught illustrator and architect with a master's degree in Sustainable Architecture, Sah now divides her time pursuing both her passions.

A major chunk of her work consists of editorial and book illustrations. She is also known for her personal project 'The Snail Mail Project', an initiative to revive the art of letter writing. As a part of this project, Sah invited people across the globe to send her a letter, to which she would reply by creating an original artwork.

We speak to Sah about her work. Edited excerpts:

Tell us a bit about the journey that finally got you to pursue architecture – specifically sustainable architecture?

I grew up in Kumaon, a quaint hill station in Nainital. When I was young, my grandfather, a follower of Sri Aurobindo, used to spend a month every year in Auroville. Not having been there myself, I was always intrigued by this place.

After finishing my Bachelors in Architecture, I lived and worked in Auroville for two years. In my time there, I worked as an architect and learnt how to build energy-efficient buildings using alternative materials. It was also my first exposure to a communal way of living. My time in Auroville made me interested in the idea of sustainability and made me pursue it further. At that point of time, CEPT University was the only college that was offering a masters in this field, so I went there.

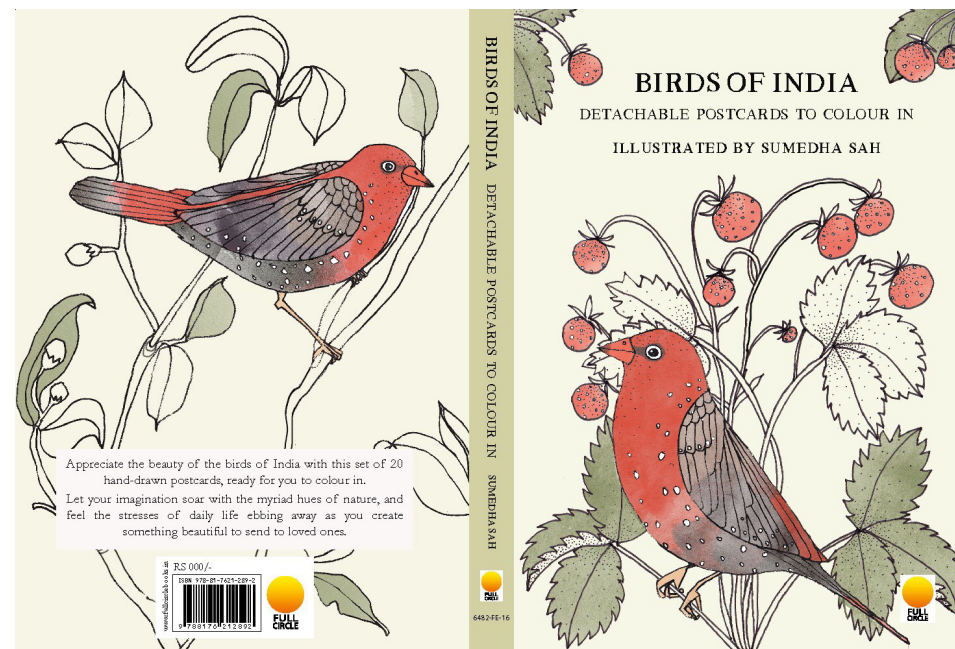
When did you realize that you want to pursue illustrations commercially?

I would say it happened by chance. In Auroville, I started keeping a diary to record my daily life and musings in the form of drawings and notes. I would also put them online in the form of a blog.

Then a friend introduced me to the

“All forms of art have innate connections”

Sumedha Sah



The music machine

Kyoorius website, and I discovered the 'Sketchnotes' section meant to showcase the work of students. I sent in my work and they published it. The art director of *National Geographic Traveller* discovered my work through that and contacted me to do an illustration for their magazine. That was my entry into commercial work.

You work with a lot of print magazines/book projects. Is that a conscious effort? What is it about the print medium that excites you the most?

I enjoy working with print magazines because it is fun and the turnover is quite fast. Working on a book, on the other hand, is like a collaboration between the author and the image maker. It is a long-term project ranging from three months to a year or more at times. It requires research and long hours of work.

I mostly like the physicality and reach of both mediums. It's exciting for me that something that comes out of my private studio is being seen by so many people across the world.

How challenging is it to pursue both architecture and illustration. And do they feed off each other in any way?

It has been challenging for me at times. I was lucky that I was trained in one subject while I taught myself the other.

All forms of art have innate connections. An architect, in order to express his/her ideas, picks up a pencil and draws. So does an illustrator or an artist. Just the language is different. The principles of art and principles of architecture overlap with each other. Here →



My city My dogs

we deal with symmetry, hierarchy, scale, proportion, balance, contrast, rhythm etc. on a daily basis. Both inform one another.

How do you create a balance between personal works and commercial projects?

It is a hard balance to achieve, but I do find the tune sometimes. Most of the times though, I struggle quite a bit. For an artist, personal projects never end, they just grow into something else. Personal work feeds your soul while commercial work feeds the body. Both are immensely important to survive.

Do you have a particular approach/process when you are working on a client project?

The first and the most important step- it is immensely helpful to understand what the client is expecting from you and whether you will be able to give it the time it needs under the monetary constraints presented to you.

After accepting the work and signing a contract, depending on the project, I create a set of drafts and work on the ones that are chosen after a round of discussion. Deadlines are very important for me as well. One has to be very professional at the end of the day.

What's been your most challenging illustration project to work on till date, and why?

There's a book I did with Pratham a year ago. Titled 'My City, My Dogs', the book was about the stray dogs of Bombay. It was a collaboration between photographer Hashim Badani and me. The author, Abodh (Aras), runs an NGO called The Welfare of Stray Dogs (WSD) which takes care of the street dogs in South Mumbai. Before we started the book, Abodh took me and Hashim for a walk and made us meet all the dogs he had written about.

For this particular book, I challenged

myself to get out of my comfort zone and work on a new style which combines photography. I used the medium of gouache for the first time in this book. It was fun and I learnt so much from it.

Lastly, what are some of the projects you are currently working on?

Since I have moved to Mysore and set up my personal art and architecture studio, I have been working on an exciting architecture project for the South Western Railways. I have designed a Rail museum which is in its final stage of completion and will be opening soon for the public. ■

You can view more of Sumedha Sah's work here: sumedhasah.com

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