



Advent and the Development of Miniature Painting in North India

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Art, North India, Miniature painting, Manuscript painting

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ABSTRACT *The followers of Buddhism made strenuous and fresh efforts to spread their religion across the boundaries of India to foreign lands. Thus came the emergence of the manuscript paintings. The Pala rulers became the main patrons of this art form. The main subject matter of this new art form was Buddha. In the beginning of the 13th C.A.D., there was a spurt in manuscripts. This was due to the spread of Muslim power, because it was easier to preserve manuscripts than to protect temples and wall paintings. 16th C.A.D., miniature painting had spread from western India to many regions. Northern India was fast becoming a major hub for miniature paintings and Mughals had now become the chief patrons of this art. Simultaneously, the art was going through an emerging phase in Punjab too. The real form of miniature painting originated in the Himalayan foothills, the Pahari Painting. Pahari (hill) painting style had its commencement even in the 16th C.A.D.*

Conclusion: Although miniature art form was new, yet Ajanta was the inspiration behind it. But these artists of manuscript paintings could not execute these manuscript paintings like the supremacy of wall paintings. Missionaries took responsibility to broaden the new style of painting (Pala style) from monasteries to other foreign countries like Nepal, Tibet, Burma, Ceylon and Java. Later emerged Mughal art. Mughal art may have come from foreign shores, but it touched new heights in India and also became an indigenous art as well. The contribution of Akbar and Jahangir to Mughal art is unparalleled. The Mughals had achieved expertise in the art of miniature paintings but the main manuscript pattern was developed from palm leaf and western early paper manuscript. As Aurangzeb ousted artists from his court disgracefully, consequently a large number of artists settled in Punjab hilly areas. This also benefited Punjab hill states in some ways as the technique of these expert artists began to show its impact on Pahari paintings and later on Punjab Sikh School.

The first example of art can be seen in pre-historic art which was created by the cave men. After the pre-historic cave art, a very superior kind of art emerged called mural paintings in which the Ajanta paintings were the most renowned. Ajanta cave art was totally dedicated to 'Buddha'. No doubt the era of wall paintings which were used for embellishment of cave temples and temples continued till the 12th C.A.D., but it saw its decline in 9th-10th C.A.D. A new art form was to come in existence. The followers of Buddhism made strenuous and fresh efforts to spread their religion across the boundaries of India to foreign lands. Thus came the emergence of the manuscript paintings. Although this art form was new, yet Ajanta was the inspiration behind it. But these artists of manuscript paintings could not execute these manuscript paintings like the supremacy of wall paintings.

The Pala rulers became the main patrons of this art form. This art form continued from 7th C.A.D to the middle of the 12th C.A.D. The main subject matter of this new art form too was Buddha. This art form was prevalent mainly in Bihar and Bengal which were under the Pala kings. Later on, Nepal too contributed a lot to this art style. The man-

uscript paintings were made on the Palmyra or palm leaf and were very small in size. These leaves were set in a format of 22" x 2 1/2" but a space of only 2 1/2" x 3" was left for paintings and rest of the space was meant for writing some text which was out of context with the paintings. The language scripted was Devnagri.¹ A keen observation of these pictures leads to the conclusion that they are nothing but a continuation of the old tradition.

Unlike what is seen in Persian and Mughal paintings, the text in these manuscripts were not related to the paintings itself because the main motive behind these pictures was to produce and impart a magical and devotional impact. The style of these paintings is regarded as the best and elegant which has been borrowed from Ajanta murals.² Now the art in a form of miniature painting was at its zenith.

Missionaries took responsibility to broaden the Pala style from monasteries to other foreign countries like Nepal, Tibet, Burma, Ceylon and Java. The students and pilgrims from south East Asia and other countries who used to come here for academic purpose and for learning arts had full freedom to copy these art works and while going back to their homeland, they were allowed to take their self made manuscript along with them.³ These were the Palas who witnessed the last great phase of Buddhist art in India. As a result, Buddhism rapidly spread to other countries.

By the beginning of 12th C.A.D., Gujarat (Western India) became the main centre of manuscript paintings. Even if Gujrat comes under the Western India, but its contribution for the development of miniature painting was very significant. In the 14th C.A.D., paper replaced palm leaf, but the painting style continued to be as it was on palm leaf. In the 15th C.A.D., however, it changed completely and delimitation started both in text as well as in painting in manuscript.⁴ Jainism was patronized by the Jain kings of Chalukaya dynasty, who ruled over Gujarat, parts of Rajasthan and Malwa from 10th C.A.D. to the end of the 13th C.A.D. An enormous number of Jain religious manuscripts were commissioned from 12 to 16th C.A.D. by the princes, their ministers and rich Jain merchants, to earn religious merit.

Mahavira became the main subject for the miniature paintings, the principal organizer of Jainism. The ministers and merchants played a main role in building temples and religious libraries to safeguard these religious manuscripts.⁵

Western miniatures or Gujarati manuscripts were executed on three types of surfaces, namely, palm leaf, cloth and paper. In the beginning of the 13th C.A.D., there was a spurt in manuscripts. This was due to the spread of Muslim power, because it was easier to preserve manuscripts than to protect temples and wall paintings. With the spread of this Muslim impact, the Persian impact on western Indian paintings started to amplify and then with their impact the probabilities increased for the Indian artists to understand and work with foreign conventions. The Persian paintings provided the new concept of draughtsmanship. In spite of having a powerful impact of Persian Mongol, the western school did not adopt the text related elements of the Persian painting in which the text was related to the Persian painting.⁶ Islam taught the Indians the book tradition of Muslims. This tradition was mainly Iranian and it influenced the style of western Indian paintings in particular. Its main effect was the acceptance of paper for manuscript illustrations. However, the centuries old palm leaf method of manuscript illustration continued for many more centuries in the Hindu and the Jain manuscripts.⁷

16th C.A.D., miniature painting had spread from western India to many regions. Northern India was fast becoming a major hub for miniature paintings and Mughals had now become the chief patrons of this art. The cultural background of Mughals (who were basically Turkish) was Persian due to which their earlier paintings had many Persian elements.⁸ That's why they initially used bright colours in their paintings. Before entering India, the paintings that revived in Persia under Mughal rule were especially nurtured in Chinese school which was itself inspired by the great school of India. It is believed that in the earlier Christian era, the Buddhist missionaries and craftsmen had carried the tradition of Indian religious art to Turkestan and China. Moreover the Chinese students had been coming to Indian universities to acquire education. In the prevailing circumstances the mixture of Indian idolism and indigenous naturalism gave birth to modern schools of China and Japan which eventually became more popular amongst the European artists and cities than in India. With this Indian inspiration, the Chinese paintings of the 7th C.A.D touched those heights which even surpassed the European Contemporary art. At the same time even the Indian pictorial art was at its pinnacle.⁹ Though this art did not flourish in Persia, one thing that becomes clear is that miniature painting was being pursued in India's neighbouring countries as well. One reason for this could be the impact of manuscripts that were sent to neighbouring states in 8-9th C.A.D. to spread Buddhism.

Before Babur's era the art was prohibited and even the later kings were not able to revive it completely because in Mohammadan era the calligraphy was the only art practiced and human figures could not be displayed in the Mughal art. It was strongly believed in Islamic law, if someone painted an animal or human being that particular person would have to give his soul on the Day of Judgment and he would have to suffer in hell. These practices continued for ages. People were still not allowed to paint deities. Akbar the Great who was the prime factor in spreading Mughal art even could not allow the portrayal of religious deities.¹⁰

The Persian classics were illustrated in India by Indian artists for the first time during the period of Lodhi sultanate (1451-1526 C.A.D.) in the pre-Mughal era. These artists though trained in northern Jain tradition were, highly influenced by Persian manuscripts (14th and 15th C.A.D). Although these manuscripts, aesthetically, were not very good but Islamic manuscript illustrations, belonging to the Lodhi kingdom were quite important from the Indian historical perspective.¹¹ Mughal art may have come from foreign shores, but it touched new heights in India and also became an indigenous art as well. The contribution of Akbar and Jahangir to Mughal art is unparalleled.

Akbar added two types of elements in his court paintings. The first was book illustration and calligraphy from different Islamic Schools, and the second was indigenous element which had been influenced by the folk tradition and mural painting of ancient India. With the amalgamation of these two elements Akbar established a distinct school. There was another facet of Mughal art. As Mughal art had originally developed from calligraphy art so the stiffness and conventionality was still visible in this art. On the contrary this stiffness was not the feature of the Hindu artist in Mughal court because these Indian artists were inspired by the technique of Ajanta paintings, and they had learned the fresco and miniature painting rather than calligraphy.¹²

The painters succeeded in a brilliant way in expressing the ideals of amity and synthesis preached by their imperial patron. These artists had so beautifully blended Muslim subject matter with Indian elements that a magnificent Indian art came to the fore. In this atelier of Akbar, manuscript paintings were executed in every subject. The chief among them being historic, romantic, poetic myths, legends and fables of both Indian and Persian origin. The figure of collected manuscripts in Akbar's library almost reached 24,000.¹³

Portraiture was the main interest of Mughal period and its influence could be seen in the Rajput school of art also.¹⁴ During the reign of Akbar (1556-1605 C.A.D.) and the Jahangir (1605-27 C.A.D), most of the portraits were in a standing position that was in most conventional way, a profile face with a flower, bird or jewel in the right hand with one foot placed forward. Delicacy and subtleness were presented beautifully. Highly developed skill in portraiture seemed to have swamped the sense of design and decoration.¹⁵

Akbar laid the foundation stone of art which touched the heights of glory in the time of Jahangir.¹⁶ In the time of Shah Jahan, the style and volume of miniature paintings and manuscript painting may have been maintained at the same level as at the time of Jahangir but the main theme changed to architecture. As a result, we do not find any new developments in the field of paintings in the later era of Mughal.¹⁷ The distinguished feature found in the painting during the reign of Shah Jahan was the paintings of dervishes and holy men which emphasized more on the emotion.¹⁸

In 1658 C.A.D., Aurangzeb put his father Shah Jahan under arrest and crowned himself as emperor under the title of Alamgir. He was a religious fanatic and was against the Hindus. Due to his policy of religious orthodoxy, Rajputs kings opposed him. He was so averse to painting that the highly amplified art of miniature painting towards for a steady decline. Later, he declared painting as an anti-religious activity. The artists were forced to abandon the court

and seek shelter in small neighbouring principalities. Most of them settled in the hill states.¹⁹ For this reason, Pahari art got influenced by Mughal art. Actually the policies of Aurangzeb consequently proved to be a boon for the art of Punjab plains as well as hills because the artists who were demoralized by the Mughal court, they took shelter in these areas. As a result, more creativity came into miniature paintings of hilly areas.

The Mughal art, in fact, became the backbone or spinal column of Indian miniature art. If Mughal art had not been established in India, then perhaps Pahari School and Rajasthani School, too, would not have developed so much.²⁰ Rajasthani School was flourishing simultaneously along with the Mughal School of art. Although it is believed that it had its origin in the 16th C.A.D., yet it reached its zenith in the middle of 17th C.A.D.²¹ Mewar, Bundi, Kishangarh, Malwa were main centers of this wonderful art. It was manifested that being contemporaries both Mughal and Rajasthani art influenced each other. In this process, Muslim art turned into Mughal or Indian art. However, the two art forms retained a distinctive feature as well. But it is important to know the Mughal art was more realistic whereas the Rajput paintings were mainly the amalgamation of symbolism and poetic metaphor.

The portraiture style which was rare during the early years of Rajasthani School became very common by the 18th C.A.D. Prominence was given to court, sports and hunting scenes. Krishna in all his varied activities was the central figure of the paintings. The Vaishnav cult greatly influenced the artists of that period. The painting was mostly the art of people and was closely associated with religion.

Simultaneously, the art was going through an emerging phase in Punjab too. The glimpses of Sikh art can be felt in three kinds of works which are portraits of Sikh gurus, the paintings in Janam Sakhi (Manuscript related to birth stories of Guru Nanak Dev) and the illustrated manuscript of Adi Granth²² (The holy book of Sikh religion). As Aurangzeb ousted artists from his court disgracefully, consequently a large number of artists settled in Punjab hilly areas. This also benefited Punjab hill states in some ways as the technique of these expert artists began to show its impact on Pahari paintings and later on Punjab Sikh School.

After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 C.A.D., the Mughals had become considerably weak. The different art forms of paintings and other activities had almost crumbled to pieces in Aurangzeb's reign. As a result, the miniature painting was now confined only to the Punjab hills and the local painters were working only for the local princes and their courtiers.²³ No Mughal king could establish his supremacy after Aurangzeb. Considering it to be a good opportunity, Ranjit Singh took possession of Lahore court and proclaimed himself to be the Maharaja in 1799 C.A.D.²⁴

Ranjit Singh was the first Jat Sikh monarch who proved himself as a successful ruler for forty years in Punjab region.²⁵ In spite of being unlettered, Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a king who was an efficient leader, capable of decision making, kind hearted, merciful and able to differentiate between right and wrong. As a result, peace and stability prevailed in the kingdom. There were people of all religions and sects in Maharaja's court. Due to his great taste, inclination towards fine arts and his aesthetic sense, he made his contribution in the fields of painting, manuscript, illumination and architecture.²⁶

The real form of miniature painting originated in the Himalayan foothills, the Pahari Painting. Pahari (hill) painting style had its commencement even in the 16th C.A.D. but its full evolution occurred by the end of 17th C.A.D. as Basohli art style. With the little influence of Rajasthani paintings, during the reign of Raja Kirpal Singh (1678-1763 C.A.D.) it flourished to its the fullest in an elegant manner. In the beginning years of Pahari School, Basohli School of painting used bold, flat and intense colour scheme and the figures were executed in different kind of profile.²⁷

Basohli miniature is the oldest style of painting of Pahari miniatures. Then Basoli style came into being by the mixing and interaction of Mughal and Pahari folk art. The transparent veil of ladies and apparels of men are in Mughal style and the depiction of facial features is in local style which appears to have evolved from basic folk hill art. The distinctive features of Basohli School of painting such as poetic beauty, simplicity of expressions, bright colourisation differentiate it from Rajasthani and Kangra School of painting.²⁸

In the early part of 18th C.A.D., under the patronage of a small hill state, another art style was being evolved and it was the birth place of beautiful Kangra style.²⁹ The Pahari painting attained its apex in the Kangra region. The credit of giving a freshness and novelty to the Pahari art goes to its ruler Raja Sansar Chand. The most distinctive feature that beautifies the Kangra miniature painting is the lyrical quality that has been delineated in linear style thoroughly.³⁰

At the end of the 18th C.A.D. and in the beginning of 19th C.A.D. art had attained a prominent place in Punjab. To some extent the reason behind it was Kangra paintings. Due to the attacks of Gurkhas (1805-1812 C.A.D.) the prominent charm and splendor of Kangra Kalam was diminishing. Therefore majority of artists established themselves in Punjab, especially in Lahore court. As Maharaja Ranjit Singh occupied the territory of Guler, therefore the artists of Guler also began to settle themselves at Lahore Darbar. The pomp and show of wealth and power of Maharaja Ranjit Singh became a way to attract the Pahari artists. The work of art which was initiated by these artists under Sikh rulers, fully contributed to the development of Sikh School.³¹

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