Nawalgarh Haveli Paintings: A Theme Depended on Ramayan

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Wall painting as an art genre enjoyed great popularity in India starting in the 2nd century B.C., but attaining its pinnacle only in the 6th century A.D., with the splendid paintings of Ajanta and then others. In the 16-17th centuries they underwent a vigorous revival and played an important role in the decoration of the royal palaces, in the homes of the noble and rich, in temples and cenotaphs. Unfortunately the inveterate Indian custom of periodically 'renovating' the decoration of homes and temples by repainting them or drastically erasing parts of them is leading to the destruction of important works of art from the past. The aim of the present book is also to document the serious damage caused to this Indian artistic heritage.

The earliest examples of Indian painting, that we find evidence of, are on the walls of some of the caves in the Kaimur Range of Central India, Vindhyha Hills and some places in Uttar Pradesh. Nawalgarh is a town in Jhunjhunu district of Indian state Rajasthan. It is part of the Shekhawati region and is midway between Jhunjhunu and Sikar. Nawalgarh is famous for its fresco and havelis and considered as Golden City of Rajasthan. It is also the motherland of some great business families of India. The theme of the wall painting or frescoes decorating the beautiful “havelis” of Shekhawati region has changed over a period of time. In the earlier days at the time of its inception, mythology dominated the themes of frescoes, which shows the local legends, animal, portraits, hunting and wrestling. But a century later there was a change in the theme of the paintings to reflect the British influence in Indian culture. The traditional subjects were replaced by cars, trains, balloons, telephones, gramophones, men in suits hunting and portraits of haveli owners immaculately dressed.

Introduction:
Shekhawati has ever marked its presence on the national and international arena throughout trade and industry. However, during past few decades it has well registered its name with the world tourism too. Never would it attract the foreign visitors in so vast numbers as it has been attracting during past three decades. This part of the northeast Rajasthan about 100 to 200 kilometers north of Jaipur falling within the Sikar, Jhunjhunu and Churu districts has so far had an image of a sandy desert. The grand majestic forts, temples, palatial mansions or havelis. Nevertheless, they remained unnoticed. For, they remained unexposed to the eyes of the ruling Thikanas (small princely states), notably of Madawa, Dundlod, Fatehpur, and Nawalgarh did feel an urge to present these hidden treasures of art and culture before the eyes of the world community. Nawalgarh is a heritage city in Shekhawati region, 40 Kms. from Jhunjhunu and 27 Kms. from Sikar and 132 Kms. from Jaipur.

There are about 100 havelis in Nawalgarh with beautiful paintings and frescos on walls. The havelis began to come in to existence after the last quarter of the eighteenth century. They are creations of the rich merchants built between 1780 to 1900-35. The beautiful paintings and frescos on the wall of havelis do not only feast the eyes of the visitors, but they also mirror the contemporary Shekhawati life, the ways, the customs, the faiths and beliefs of the people, and also the craftsmanship of the unlettered artists. Hear visitors come in large numbers from various countries of Europe such as England, France, Germany and Italy. The foreigners see paintings but they do not sufficiently understand the thematic aspects of the subjects presented. Perhaps the escorting guides also do not or cannot give adequate information. I have tried to explain the thematic aspects as are required by a common viewer.

Majority of the paintings presents the religious and spiritual aspects of life. They present either gods or their incarnations, or the holy sages and their lives as given in the Holy Scriptures. However, a sizeable portion of them presents other aspects of life too. Man lives in a civilized society and endeavors of life. He cannot feel contended, directing his energies towards dharma (a righteous life) and moksha (liberation from birth and death) alone. As he lives in the world and for the world, it is only natural for him to pursue arth (wealth) and kaama (carnal pleasures) too.

The Indian scriptures have divided the historically recorded time into four Yugas (long ages). Chronologically they are: the Satya Yuga; the Treta Yug; the Dwapar Yuga and the Kali Yuga (the current one). Thousands of years ago, in the second Yuga i.e. the Treta yuga, Dashrath, the king of Ayodhya (in the present province of Uttar Pradesh) had grown too old to run the affairs of the vast empire. He needed an able heir to relieve him. Though he had three queens, they all were childless. They could bear him no son to succeed him as his heir. Therefore, the kingdom was going to be heirless. The king approached the family guru maharishi Vashishth and urged upon him to find some remedy to the problem. The maharishi advised him to perform a putreshti Yajna (a yajna for having a son). On guru’s advice, the king invited one more rishi, called Shringi, to conducted and at the end of it, the kheer (the sacred offering of the Yajna) was given to the three queens. They received and consumed it. In course of time, the three queens were blessed with four sons. Ram was born to the eldest, Kaushalya; Bharat to Kaikeyi; and the two sons Lakshman and Shrughna were born to the youngest, Sumitra. Ram is considered one of the twenty-four avataras of lord Vishnu. He came and shone as a glorious king and an ideal ruler over the throne of Ayodhya. Apart from this, also one more reason is stated behind his incarnation. The gods were greatly oppressed by Ravan, the contemporary king of Lanka and the grandson of Pulistya (once the ruling king of Lanka). Ravan developed hatred and became enemy of all: the Brahmins, the rishis, the gods and even to the gentle and righteous public. He stopped the rishis from conducting Yajnas. He burnt and turned into ashes their habitats and the forests. His followers began to oppress and kill the sages. Even Lord Indra, the king of gods, felt defeated and helpless. No longer, mother earth was able to suffer his tortures; Lord Ram took birth from the womb of Kaushalya.

KEYWORDS
Wall paintings, Nawalgarh, Themes, Havelis, Frescoes, Merchant class.
Important characters and events related to His Life:

1. Maharishi Vishwamitra:
The four princes had already crossed the threshold of boyhood. They turned into fully grown youths, bustling with power and strength. The family guru Vashistha had trained them very well in all arts, including the arts and skills of war and fighting. One day, maharishi Vishwamitra happened to come to Ayodhya. He used to live in an ashrama (hermitage). The demons used to create disturbances in his yajnas, and so, Vishwamitra boiled the rishi’s ire through his help of the princes Ram and Lakshman to protect his yajna from the demon attacks. The father, Dashrath could not ignore the rishi’s request. He sent his sons with the rishi, though somewhat hesitatingly, as they were too young to deal with the mighty demons. The princes gladly accepted the challenge and escorted the rishi to his ashrama. On their way to the ashrama, they met several demons. The demons they met were Tarka, she-demons; Sibahu and his brother Manich. They successfully fought with the demons and killed them, ensuring peace and relief to Vishwamitra.

2. King Janak and his Daughter Sita:
Janak was the king of Videha. Mithila (also Janakpur) was the capital of the kingdom. The palace was not too far from maharishi Vishwamitra’s ashrama. Janak had a daughter named Sita. Also, she is called Vaidehi as she was the daughter of the kshatriya rishi Vashistha. She was not a huge bow. The story goes that there was a pitcher buried underneath the earth. King Janak was ploughing the field and pot got excavated. Curiously enough, Janak removed the lid of the pot and he found a girl inside it. He took the girl to his home and adopted her as his daughter. He brought her up with due care and affection. Now, since she came of age, the king decided to find a suitable groom for her. For this, he announced and organized a swayamvar. The test was to be a king of open contest, usually organized by a king for choosing a suitable husband for his daughter. He would invite the deserving princes. The king would set a challenging task as the qualifying condition. The girl would marry him who would qualify at the test by performing the given task successfully. Janak invited maharishi Vishwamitra with Ram and Lakshman. Vishwamitra accepted Janak’s invitation and taking the princes with him, left for Janakpur. First, the princes were taken around the city. They found the city quite attractive as it had attractive buildings, wide and straight roads; and green and beautiful gardens. As the princes were taking a round in the king’s garden, Sita happened to be there with her attendants and female friends. Suddenly, their eyes fell on to each other and they exchanged glances. At once, they felt attracted and developed liking for each other. However, the king knew it, they felt extremely sorrowful. For, since he was gone, their hopes of life were also gone. So, they cursed the king that he would also suffer his son’s separation and die in sorrow. Therefore, he shot an arrow, which struck deep into Shrawan Kumar’s heart. He died on the spot. When the blind parents knew it, they felt extremely sorrowful. For, since he was gone, their hopes of life were also gone. So, they cursed the king that he would also suffer his son’s separation and die in sorrow, like them. Bharat was a loyal and devoted brother. A few days after Ram had left, he went to search for him. After long search, he found Ram in the forest. He requested him to return to Ayodhya and take charge of the throne. He himself would like to work under his guidance. However, Ram refused to go back to Ayodhya. For, he was not to believe the promise that his father had made to his step-mother. Bharat came back, without him. And even after two years though, he never sat on the throne. Instead, he placed Ram’s khadau (wooden chappals) as his representatives on it and conducted the business of the state in his name.

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to wash the Lord’s feet and get His blessings, the greatest re-
ward one could aspire for. He succeeded in that, as the king
and merciful Lord granted his request of washing His feet
before boarding the boat. After crossing the river, they kept
on wandering from place to place across various forests for a
long time. During this period, they visited many rishis, notably
maharishi Atri and Agastya at their ashramas. They encoun-
tered and killed many demons as they continuously created
troubles in the forests. They made it difficult for the rishis
to live peacefully and perform yajnas. Finally, they reached
Panchvati (a garden with cottages) in the Dandak forest. They
stayed there for some time.

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