



Rajput Miniature Paintings: Critical Enquiry From The Perspective of The Design Elements - Line, Shape, Color, Texture and Space

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore Rajput paintings from the perspective of a few fundamental design elements that became a part of design pedagogy in the Western world in the 20th century with the rise of industrialism and mass production. The paintings have been selected from the centers of Mewar, Marwar, Bundi, Jaipur and other neighboring princely states in modern Rajasthan, executed between 17th and 18th century. The design elements selected for the study are line, shape, color, texture and space.

KEYWORDS

Rajput Miniature paintings, Design Elements, Line, Shape, Texture

Introduction

Miniature painting, which found currency between early 16th century and late 19th century, from Punjab hills in the north to Deccan in the south, stands out like a jewel in a crown in the Indian painting tradition. Within the world of miniatures, Rajput painting, from the regions such as Mewar Marwar, Jaipur—all in present day Rajasthan, holds a special place. On a global scale, in late 19th century, in the light of mass industrialization across the western world and increasingly prosperous masses, the need for aesthetically designed functional goods lead to the modern discipline of design, and the associated fundamentals of design as part of design pedagogy. In the following sections this paper explores a selection of Rajput paintings from the perspective of some of the fundamentals of twentieth century design.

Rajput Painting

Rajput painting refers to painting that originated in regions that are entirely within modern day Rajasthan, and flourished between sixteenth century and nineteenth century. Key regions of painting in Rajasthan were Mewar (includes Udaipur), Bundi, Kota, Amber, Jaipur, Marwar (includes Jodhpur), Bikaner and Kishangarh. Many historians consider Bundi and Kota painting to share a lot of similarities of style; genesis of this is thought to be the sharing of resources between the two states as Kota was carved out of Bundi territory¹. Amber and Jaipur too shared a refinedness of style, attributed to their proximity. Sirohi painting is limited to a few folios of ragamala painting, leading to some historians questioning the attribution². Prominent artists of Rajput painting were: Nasir ud din and Sahibdin in Mewar in seventeenth century; Bakhta and his son Chokha in eighteenth century Mewar; Ruknuddin in Bikaner; Ustad Sahibdin in Bikaner of 18th century; Bhavani-das in Kishangarh, who was earlier in Mughal court, followed by son Dalchand; Nihalchand of Kishangarh, known for Krishna-Radha paintings.³

Design Vocabulary

Twentieth century design has evolved to inculcate principles and elements approach into design pedagogy.⁴ Young (1985) documents one such approach to include the following: Elements—Line, Form, Tone, Texture, Color; Major Principles—Repetition, Rhythm, Proportion, Balance, Emphasis; Minor Principles: Alternation, Sequence, Radiation, Parallelism, Transition, Symmetry, Contrast. Wong (1993) discusses visual language of two-dimensional design to include Form, Repetition, Structure, Similarity, Gradation, Radiation, Anomaly, Contrast, Concentration, Texture and Space⁵. White (2011) puts down the design components to be: Space, Unity and gestalt, Point-

line-plane, Scale and dominance, Hierarchy, Balance and Color⁶. Kepes (1969) discusses the "Language of Vision" in terms of Spatial Forces, Color Balance, Nearness, Similarity, Continuance, Closure, Size, Transparency, Line and Perspective⁷. Anderson (1961) develops the elements of design in terms of Space, Line, Form, Texture and Color⁸. In the book A Primer of Visual Literacy Dondis (1973) examines the basic elements as Dot, Line, Shape, Direction, Tone, Color, Texture, Scale, Dimension and Movement⁹. Lidwell, et al (2010) list down the following principles among many others: Closure, Color, Figure-Ground, Shaping and Symmetry¹⁰.

For the purpose of this discussion we choose the following six principles: Line, Shape, Color, Texture, Scale and Space. These principles have been chosen given their presence in almost all discussions. They might sometimes be called by different names – for example, Shape could be referred to as Form, or Scale could be called Size. Some of the principles can be classified as sub-principles or closely related to other principles. Contrast, Tone and Transparency are closely related to Color.

Selection of Paintings

For discussion in this paper following paintings have been selected:

Place of Creation	Painting Title	Brief Description	Creation date / period	Reference in this paper	Source
Marwar	Hari Singh with water-pipe and attendants	A Court painting showing Hari Singh, dressed in all white, seated on a terrace, supported by a large bolster, smoking a hookah.	ca. 1710, CE	Fig 1	S1 ¹¹
Mewar	Folio from Jagat Singh I Ramayana	A horizontal frame shows melee of monkeys and asuras fighting on a green background, and high-horizoned sky.	ca. 1652, CE	Fig 2	S2 ¹²
Sirohi	Kedar Ragini	A man and woman seated in palace, next to a half-revealed tree.	ca. 1680, CE	Fig 3	S3 ¹³
Bundi	Vishnu and Lakshmi on Garuda	A well composed painting where the background looks to be seen through a fish-eye lens shows Vishnu and Lakshmi atop Garuda.	ca. 1770, CE	Fig 4	S4 ¹⁴

Kota	Rao Madho Singh Hunting Wild Bear	A sparsely painted image that makes delightful use of line drawing on a sparse background shows the Rao hunting wild boars in the desert-like wilderness.	ca. 1720, CE	Fig 5	S5 ¹⁵
Kis-hangarh	Radha and Krishna	A close-up of blue bodied Krishna caressing Radha on a terrace.	19 th Century	Fig 6	S6 ¹⁶
Jaipur	Nayika combing her hair	A refined rendering a bare breasted woman at a window combing her hair.	ca. 1780-1800, CE	Fig 7	S7 ¹⁷
Amber	Kedar Ragini – folio from Manley Rag-amala	An ascetic listening to a musician in the company of nobleman and an attendant, near a temple, a water-body with lotuses, and some trees in the background.	ca. 1610, CE	Fig 8	S8 ¹⁸
Bikaner	A woman and child making an offering to an ascetic	Rendered in sub-imperial Mughal style the painting shows in the backdrop of well-framed tree and a mountain, an ascetic, a child, a lady and an attendant.	ca. 1700-1750, CE	Fig 9	S9 ¹⁹

Table 1: Paintings referred to in this paper

Critical Analysis

In this section we critically analyze the paintings selected in the above section on the basis of the design elements selected in the “Design Vocabulary” section. We will focus on purpose fulfilled by the selected elements of design, idiosyncrasies of a particular execution—representational to metaphorical, difference of execution between regions and uniqueness to a region.

Line: Lines are rarely seen in nature but heavily used in paintings and designs as the basis of all work. Quality of the line work can have a huge effect on the final rendering. Miniature artists frequently use lines to delineate one shape from another, or to bring out form, as see in Fig 2, 3 and 7. Lines are also used heavily in rendering of clothes, as see in Fig 1 and 6. Fig 5 is a wholly interesting work that relies heavily on line-work as the means and end in depiction of the hunting scene; the grasses growing in the wild are shown solely with fine lines, imparting an energy and dynamism to the work; branches of the trees have been delineated with simple, coarse lines, investing a rawness in the image. In Fig 3 lines take on a completely decorative quality – they are used very effectively to adorn the tree and the arches. Line-work in Fig 6 and 7 is delicate and carefully in keeping with the theme of the images.

Shape: Shapes or forms in paintings almost always represent an object—real or imaginary. It is only in twentieth century art that shapes started getting used as an end in themselves, as we see in Kandinsky's work. In miniature paintings all depiction is through realistic, representative shapes usually associated with the objects. Shapes can be rendered with shading, scale and lines to bring out three-dimensional form, or they can be rendered flat in a collage-like manner by use of flat color or delineating lines, or both. Fig 1 uses refined use of lines to bring out volume in shapes. Fig 4 and 9 rely heavily on shading to bring out form and volume in the shapes; note the use of shading of arms, legs and faces in Fig 1; similarly in Fig 9 we see refined use of shading to bring out the form of the mountains and tree-trunk. Fig 2, 3 and 7 rely heavily on flat, different colored shapes to tell the story. The shapes in Fig 6 are slender and elongated, revealing a delicate look to the painting. Shapes in Fig 1 and 7 are bulbous and rounded, giving them a stable impression. Fig 2 is an interplay of myriad small shapes of different colors, often delineated, to bring about an amazing energetic image.

Color: Color is a complex attribute made up of three sub-attributes—hue, saturation and brightness (or tonality). In daily usage when we refer to color, we mean hue. It is this hue, and the related attribute saturation, that helps us associate emotions with the world around us. On the other hand tonality is absolutely necessary for our perception of the world. As Dondis puts it – “It is possible to think of color as the aesthetic frosting on the cake, rich, and in many ways useful, but not absolutely necessary for creating visual messages.”²⁰ In the selected paintings, except paintings in Fig 6 and 8 all are predominantly warm hued, reflecting perhaps the liking of the patrons and the painters. Warmer hues of Fig 9 are tempered down by the deeper tones (in the tree) and the use of greys and blues, giving the painting with the ascetic an ethereal look. The warm colors of Fig 2 aptly convey the heat of the battle. Similarly, Fig 6 fittingly conveys the excitement of the moment and the desert heat. The warm pastel shades of Fig 3 enhance the decorative look of the painting. The big patch of yellow in the center of the painting of Fig 4 brings out the flying garuda, which has been rendered in deeper hues; the yellow color also succeeds in imparting a sacred look to the painting. The white transparent upper garment on blue bodied Krishna, set off in front of a neutral dark background, in Fig 7 give the painting a soothing ambience, reflecting the mood of Radha and Krishna.

Texture: Texture is “the visual element that frequently serves as a stand-in for the qualities of another sense, touching.”²¹ Except Fig 2, all paintings have excellent textural qualities. One can almost feel the texture of the bolster in Fig 1, the roughness of the leaves of the tree in Fig 3, the silky nature of elements in Fig 4, the sharpness of thorns and foliage in Fig 5, the smooth and transparent upper garments of Radha and Krishna in Fig 6, the mild, marble-like skin of the courtesan in Fig 7 complemented by the silky garments and carpets, and the coarse and irregular feel to the tree, tiger-skin and other elements in Fig 8. The textural quality of Fig 7 – a mix of smooth and silky, adds to the erotic element that the painting conveys. The agitated and inconsistent nature of the elements in Fig 5 brings out very well the sense of heat and action in the wilderness. The glossy border, the silky red garments and the shiny quality of the painting afforded by the gradations in rendering of the yellow background, help transport us into a mythical and ethereal world that is not bound by the coarseness of reality.²²

Space: “There is no such thing as strictly flat two-dimensional image.” Each of the paintings considered bring out depth by depicting foreground, middleground and background in their own unique ways. Middleground is where we see the action happening – fighting, flying, hunting or sitting. The background, which contributes significantly to bringing out the sense of depth, has been rendered in a unique manner in Fig 1, 2 and 3 – the horizon is pushed to near the upper margin and the sky depicted in a flat color, giving maximum focus to the stage-like middleground setting; Fig 4, 8 and 9 have naturalistic rendering of the sky and background, a direct influence of Mughal painting. Fig 3 and 6 depict a juxtaposition of frontal view on top view in the middleground – the seated figures are a frontal view set on a top view of the carpet on which they are seated. The painting in Fig 2 has a collage like quality where the sense of space is embraced through the overlapping fighting figures; the collage-like depiction of space in this painting heightens the sense of tumult in the fighting action.

Conclusion

Exploring Rajput miniature paintings from the dimension of twentieth century design brings together two different fields, from two different contexts, giving rise to many interesting viewpoints at the points of intersection—the dynamism of lines, the volume afforded by the shapes, the sense of space, the tactile quality, among many others. Similar work with other schools of painting, with a larger set of design elements would make for further engaging studies.

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