

# PAINTING IN INDIA

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

**Overview** The art of combining colour and line to produce a picture is a long-established tradition in India. Like most cultural forms in the subcontinent, it has traditionally served ritual ends and employed religious iconography. Again, as with other aspects of Indian culture, painting has an 'ancient' tradition, which provides a legitimising heritage and yet also erects barriers that must be surmounted for painting to acquire a cultural identity in today's India. Modern painting has sought to synthesise an ancient tradition of wall-painting, a five-hundred year old tradition of miniature and trends from 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe and America.

## Early

**Wall Painting** The earliest surviving examples of painting are the cave wall-paintings at the stone-age site of Bhimbetka (c. 40,000-30,000 BCE) and pottery from the farming settlements of the Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 2500-1500 BCE). More sophisticated paintings are those painted in the Buddhist rock-cut caves of Ajanta (2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE- 5<sup>th</sup> c. CE) in Maharashtra. The walls and ceilings of monasteries and halls, cut inside the caves, were covered with images taken from Buddhist texts, especially the *Jataka* stories. The famous paintings at Ajanta probably represent one regional variant of a more widespread tradition since examples of a similar style, dated a few centuries later, are found in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Among these, the wall-paintings in Buddhist, Hindu and Jain caves at Ellora (8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> c. CE) are perhaps the finest.

**Frescoes** Painting for religious instruction, meditation and pleasure entered a new phase when free-standing Hindu temples were decorated with frescoes. Temples at Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu (11<sup>th</sup> c. CE) at Hampi, Karnataka (16<sup>th</sup> c. CE onward), and palaces at Madurai, Tamil Nadu and Padmanabhapuram, Kerala (both 17<sup>th</sup> c. CE) show a development from the linearity and angularity at Ajanta to a more decorative, two-dimensional treatment.

**Manuscripts** Painting on palm-leaf manuscripts and their wooden covers provides a transition from the early wall-paintings to miniature painting. The earliest surviving examples, which come from the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c. CE, show tiny Buddhist images, intended to protect the words inscribed in the manuscript and/or enable the viewer to visualise the deity. Jain manuscripts, with images of their ancient lineage of sages (*tirtankaras*), from about the same period, were produced in large numbers by merchant communities in western India.

**Indo-Islamic** Muslim rulers during the Delhi Sultanate (c. 1200-1500 CE) patronised Persian culture, especially new styles of painting. Another innovation in this period was paper, which led to the painted book. These painted books enabled larger spaces to be painted (compared with earlier palm-leaf and bark manuscripts), and this encouraged more complex scenes and decorative schemes.

**Bhakti** The Hindu tradition of illustrated manuscripts flourished as part of the *bhakti* movement that developed in north India from the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE onward. Krishna and Radha, in particular, are wonderfully rendered on versions of the *Bhagavata Purana*, and a whole new genre of painting (*ragamala*) appeared, in which a series of images symbolised musical modes.

## Mughal

**Miniatures** The Mughal court brought a significant change to painting. From this date forward, book-painting superseded wall-painting as the favoured form and eventually developed into a visual art altogether separate from a manuscript or a book. The names of individual artists were recorded, and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, if not before, the Mughal miniature was appreciated as an aesthetic object in its own right and hung on the walls of connoisseurs in London, Paris and New York.

**Akbar** These changes were largely engineered by the eclectic genius of the Akbar (1556-1605 CE), the Mughal ruler who assembled a large contingent of artists from all over his empire and put them under the instruction of a Persian master-painter, supervised by himself. Later Mughal emperors continued to patronise 'miniature' painting, as did local rulers in the Deccan and Rajasthan.

**Cloth** While court painting declined from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onward, painting traditions at the local level maintained their vitality. Painted cloth scrolls used as a backdrop to storytelling traditions are still found in Rajasthan, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, while wall-painting on houses and shrines continues in many areas.

Later

**Company Painting** In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Indian painters were commissioned by British officers and visitors to produce scenes of local life known as 'Company paintings.' Most of the results were mediocre, but some were outstanding. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, art schools had been established in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, and at least one raja (Raja Ravi Varma of Travancore) created his own synthesis of western and Indian painting.

**Modern** In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, painting sought to find a place within the politics of cultural nationalism. The oil paintings of the half-Hungarian and Paris-trained Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941) were inspired by the Ajanta and Ellora caves. But her paintings were rendered in a modernist idiom and were hailed as a new artistic awakening.

**M.F Husain** M.F Husain (1915-2011) was an eccentric and controversial artist, who never maintained a studio, painted Hindu deities in the nude and owned a collection of vintage sports cars. He borrowed the techniques of Cezanne and Matisse to paint scenes from the Hindu epics and myths.

**Bhupen Khakhar** Bhupen Khakhar (1934-2004) drew on a variety of modern western figures, especially pop artists and David Hockney, but he also studied colonial Indian painting. His flat surfaces and calendar-style paintings explore subjects outside the mainstream and celebrate everyday life.

## **Reading**

Milo Cleveland Beach, *Mughal and Rajput Painting* (Cambridge, 1992)

Partha Mitter, *Indian Art* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 168-239

Stuart Cary Welch, *India: Art and Culture, 1300-1900* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985)

Stuart Cary Welch, *Imperial Mughal Painting* (George Braziller, 1978)

Vidya Deheja, *Early Buddhist Rock Temples* (Cornell 1972)

Krishna Chaitanya, *A History of Indian Painting: The Modern Period* (Shakti Malak, 1994)

## **Discussion questions**

The Mughal miniature is the best-known form of Indian painting (if not of all Indian art). Analyse the development of this famous genre of painting. Pay attention to its predecessors and to the factors that led to its emergence during the Mughal Empire.

The paintings commissioned by British officers and visitors during the 18<sup>th</sup> century are a revealing mixture of native and foreign influences. Analyse their sudden appearance and equally rather sudden disappearance during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Describe their style, contents and materials, as well as their creators, patrons and audiences.

Analyse the historical development of Indian painting by focusing solely on the material surface. How did cave walls, palm-leaf, bark, cloth and paper influence the finished art work? What is the difference between murals and frescoes? And how did that difference affect the history of painting in India?

Analyse the place of modern (20<sup>th</sup> c.) painting in the long historical trajectory of Indian art. How does it fit into this narrative? And how does it represent a new phase? Conclude by focusing on the work of one modern painter and interpreting his or her contribution to the history of painting in India.