

INDIAN CULTURE- Painting

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Overview

Painting, or 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 religious 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 a two-thousand old tradition of mural-painting, a five-hundred year old tradition of miniature and trends from 20th century Europe and America.

Murals

Bhimbetka The rock paintings at Bhimbetka (modern Madhya Pradesh) are one of the largest known collections of stone-age art in the world. The 243 caves there form part of a group of about 750 rock shelters in this part of central India. Sixteen different colours were used at Bhimbetka, made from minerals mixed with water, animal fat, animal marrow or egg whites. A pale white, made from limestone, and a dark red, made from iron oxide, are the dominant colours used to depict a wide variety of animals and human figures. Archaeologists assume that the brushes (which have not survived) were made of twigs and animal hairs.

Ajanta and Ellora More sophisticated paintings are those executed in the caves of Ajanta (2nd c. BCE- 5th c. CE) and Ellora (8-9th c. CE) in Maharashtra. The walls and ceilings of monasteries and halls, cut inside the caves, were covered with images taken from Hindu, Jain and Buddhist texts. Many of the portraits of deities, rulers and dancers are life-size and painted with considerable skill. These paintings were done in the 'dry fresco' style on a dry plaster rather than wet plaster. Even in their damaged condition today, these detailed and sensual images are unforgettable.

Free-standing temples Painting for religious instruction, meditation and pleasure entered a new phase when free-standing Hindu temple walls were decorated with frescoes. Temples at Tanjore, Tamil Nadu (11th c. CE) at Hampi, Karnataka (16th c. CE onward), and palaces at Madurai, Tamil Nadu and Padmanabhapuram, Kerala (all 17th c. CE) show a development from the linearity and angularity at Ajanta and Ellora to a more decorative, two-dimensional treatment.

Illustrated Manuscripts

Painting on palm-leaf manuscripts and their wooden covers forms an important transition from the early wall-paintings to miniature painting. The earliest surviving examples, which come from the 11th-12th c. CE, show tiny Buddhist images, intended to protect the words inscribed in the manuscript and/or enable the viewer to visualise the deity in meditation. Jain manuscripts from about the same period, with images of their ancient lineage of sages (*tirtankaras*), were produced in large numbers by merchant communities in western India. The Hindu tradition of illustrated manuscripts flourished as part of the devotional movement that emerged in north India from the 15th 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. Turkic and Afghan Muslim rulers during the Delhi Sultanate (c. 1200-1500 CE) patronised Persian cultural traditions, which included not only new styles of painting but also books of paper. Painted books now had a larger space, which encouraged more complex scenes and rich decorative schemes.

Mughal Miniatures

The Mughal court of Akbar (r. 1556-1605 CE) brought a significant change to painting. This eclectic polymath 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.

During his rule, book-painting began to supersede wall-painting as the favoured form and eventually developed into a visual art altogether separate from a manuscript. The names of individual artists were also recorded, and by the 19th century, if not before, the Mughal miniature was appreciated as an aesthetic object in its own right, hung on the walls of connoisseurs in London, Paris and New York.

Early Modern Painting

Regional styles A variety of regional painting styles emerged during the 16th to 18th centuries, partly as a result of political fragmentation. These distinctive schools of painting focused largely on religious themes, especially the Krsna story, which was a major thematic focus of the devotional movement that swept over the subcontinent at the time. Major styles developed in Kangra, Mysore, Tanjore, Bengal, Orissa and Mithila. Scenes rich with colour and mythological imagery were painted on various surfaces, including interior house-walls, parchment, cloth scrolls, leather and glass. At the same time, Muslim rulers in the Deccan patronised court painters who adapted the Mughal style and produced highly-regarded works.

Company painting In the 18th and 19th centuries, local 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. British residents and travellers also painted and drew aspects of Indian society and landscapes, notably the works by Thomas and William Daniell. By the end of the 19th century, art schools had been established in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, and at least one Maharaja (Ravi Varma of Travancore) developed his own synthesis of western and Indian painting.

Modern Painters

In the 20th 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 cave works but rendered in a modernist idiom. 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 (1934-2004) drew on a variety of modern western figures, from pop artists to David Hockney, but also studied colonial Indian painting. His flat surfaces and calendar-style paintings explore subjects outside the mainstream, in both modern and folk painting, and celebrate everyday life. All these modern painters attempted to negotiate the gulf between Indian decorativism and western naturalism in an attempt to create a modern synthesis.

Reading

Partha Mitter, *Indian Art* (Oxford, 2001)

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

Joan Cummins, *Indian painting: from Cave Temples to the Colonial Period* (Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 2006)

B.N. Goswamy, *The Spirit of Indian Painting* (Allen Lane, 2015)

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

Discussion/questions

1. The Mughal miniature is the best-known form of Indian painting (if not of all Indian art). Analyse the historical 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.
2. 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?

3. Analyse the place of modern 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.