

Indian Miniature Paintings

The wonderful world of small paintings has long fascinated many a collector. From the times when people like Ernest Binfield Havell and Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy discovered and started collecting what we can rightly call the gems of the Indian Medieval art world, a lot of research has gone into gathering data on this medium. With the tireless efforts of connoisseurs like Rai Krishnadasa, Karl Khandalavala, W.G. Archer and many more scholars Indian Miniatures are today a well researched, well documented and well established stream in the world of Indian Art. Depending on the region where they were painted and the style that was followed they are classified into Schools. The main schools can be broadly divided as follows:

1. Mughal
2. Deccani
3. Rajasthani
4. Pahari

Apart from the above main schools you also have others like the Mysore miniatures, the Maratha manuscript pages, Paithans, etc from various parts of the country.

Each of the main Schools also have sub-schools with distinct features that make them unique. They offer not only an interesting insight into the life and times of the Indian royalty, but are also a thrill for the art lover, as one virtually gets to see the evolution of art styles across centuries and the manner in which various schools influenced one another.

Miniature paintings are also an interesting insight as to how marriages, conquests and rivalry influenced the style of painting in each region. The Mughals derived inspiration from Persia whereas the Deccan Schools were inspired by Iran. Several Rajasthani Schools which had their own local style were strongly influenced by the Mughals from the reign of Akbar onwards.

The reason for such a fine standard of quality in indian miniature paintings is the patronage that it received. The ateliers were given great importance across geographies. As per documents and records it is very clear that master artists were very well taken care of.

They were well paid, paid extra for commendable works and often granted land, villages, gold etc for their valuable contribution. This in turn made art a worthy profession for the talented. Most indian miniature paintings give importance to the work and not the painter. Hence each painting was looked at and judged for what it was worth. Due to this most of the works remained unsigned. Very few artists were allowed to sign their paintings and even the ones who did did not sign all of their works.

There are various factors that go into judging the value of an indian miniature painting like the quality of work, school, period, subject, condition etc. Quite ideally it isn't the age alone that is the deciding factor.

Over the decades great art experts have painstakingly created a strong foundation for indian miniature paintings. They have done commendable research. Their collective research today helps us in knowing the region, school, age etc of an indian miniature painting. It is shocking to see that people like Ananda Ketish Coomaraswamy managed to differentiate between the schools at a time when hardly any data was even available to begin with.

Indian miniature paintings first came into the market from the royal families and families associated with them. In the initial days they used to come in trunks and collectors could actually sit down and make their selection. It is interesting to see that some paintings even have small price markings on them stating price rupees ten or important rupees fifty etc. In the days of abundance it wasn't considered a big mistake to deface the front or back side of a painting with such writing.

It is amazing to see the variance in the styles of indian miniatures. It is baffling to see that this very same peninsula produced schools of work so different from each other. Whilst the Mughals produced fine detailed paintings in the 17th Century the artists in Basohli were producing strikingly dissimilar works with primary colours. It is also interesting to study the various phases of evolution of indian miniatures within a School itself. Whilst the early phase of the Bikaner School produced works using primary colours the later phase produced detailed paintings comparable to the best of Mughals.

Indian miniatures are highly addictive. It's a joyful hobby that puts collectors through an amazing historical journey. Although indian miniatures are small in size they are actually the most specialized and extensive world within ancient indian art.

Correctly speaking we ought to be calling miniatures - the Big world of Small paintings.