



Indian Works of Art

The Indian sub-continent has a tradition of visual arts going back more than 5000 years of its history. The development of sculptural arts has grown through centuries from the Indus valley civilization in the third millennium (2300-2250 BC). Beautiful objects in bronze, stone and pottery dating from that time have been excavated from two ancient sites in Punjab and Sind.

Advanced Knowledge

People possessed an advanced knowledge of metals and ornaments. From the Rig Veda and the later Vedic texts, more substantial evidence is available to trace the growth of religious belief and the consequential shaping of spiritual images of everyday life. The new religions, Buddhism and Jainism developed. The Mauryans in the North were superseded by the Sungas during 200-75 B.C. and the great stone stupas of Barhut and Sanchi with intricate carving in high relief are two important creations of that age. During the Kushana period around 1-500 AD a separate school of sculpture flourished in Gandhara, situated in Kabul Valley. The later Gupta period (300-600 A.D) has been called the classical or the golden age of Indian Art. In the later periods, a contemporary style of art was developed by the Chalukya and Rashtrakutas incorporating art in the architecture of temples and this influence continued through the Pallava and Chola dynasties until 800-1300 AD. During this period, a number of temples arose depicting various themes of Hindu pantheons of gods and goddesses, beautifully sculpted on stones. The sculptures depict a variety of subjects of everyday life, including erotic scenes. Khajuraho in Bundelkand was a great centre of art under the Chandila Kings during 950-1200 AD. In all, about thirty temples dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu and Jain pontiffs were built during this period. Individual sculptures of great beauty continued all over the country.

Casting Metals

Among the arts which figures prominently in the rich treasury of Indian culture was that of casting images in metal, which has a long and glorious history. An outstanding statue of dancing girl was found in Mohanjedaro from Gandhara and Satvahana period. Casting in bronze culminated in the remarkable images of the Pallavas and later of the Chola dynasties. In South India, Pallavas continued to produce bronzes between the 6th and 10th centuries AD the bronze Avalokiteswara of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London is a fine example. Some of the finest miniature and medium-sized bronzes of South India are characterised by their elegance and beauty, and the art of making bronzes continued and spread throughout the region under the Nayakas during the 17th and 18th centuries.

Decorative Wood

Several art historians claim that the use of decorative carved wooden features was in existence and incorporated in the earliest styles of architecture even before stone and brick became preferred building materials. Surviving examples of whole wooden temples, carved and architectural columns are found in Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Orissa. Owing to the abundant supply of timber, some of the earliest and finest woodcarving came from Kerala, which formerly comprised of Malabar and princely states of Travancore and Cochin. Wood naturally formed the principal material for the construction of temples, palaces and houses from the earliest times.

Temple Carving

The recorded history of woodcarvings began in Kerala from 1214 AD with the figures and friezes carved on the ceilings of the central shrine and prostration halls of the temple such as Mahadeva temple at Katinamkulam in Kerala. The roof is supported by carved bracket figures showing temple dancers. The neighboring states of Tamil Nadu also sustained an almost equally prolific guild of wood carvers from the 16th to the 19th centuries AD. The states of Gujarat as well as Orissa also produced some intricate woodcarvings where wood was used extensively for architecture during the 10th to the 19th centuries. Like the metal cast images, the art of woodcarving in India also continues as a living tradition to this day.



Two Millenia of Painting

Indian painting has a history that spans two thousand years. The earliest phase recorded was its glorious era between the 1st and 7th century AD in the Buddhist cave temples at Ajanta and the tradition of wall painting continued well into the 19th century.

The illustrated Buddhist and Jain religious manuscripts in eastern and western India date back from 1000 AD. First these were produced on palm leaves and during the last quarter of the 14th century, on paper. This phase continued for almost 600 years.

During the late 15th and early 16th centuries, the Muslim Sultans ruled a greater part of Northern India. During this period, some of the Persian and Turkish painters were employed by the Muslim rulers whose creations resulted in the development of two different styles. The first style was known as Chaurpanchasika, depicting more of Indian subjects, while the second style was everything Persian, in keeping with the preference of the Muslim Sultans.

Before his ascendance to the throne, Akbar, the founder of the Great Mughal Empire in India (1556-1605 A.D) had received training in painting from the celebrated Persian painter Mir Sayyad Ali and Abd Al Samed. He was particularly impressed with the works of Hindu painters and there are numerous references to show that he was passionately fond of painting. Royal patronage drew the best talent and artists of different styles came to the Royal atelier from distant parts of the country. The two Persian masters were put in charge of the Imperial Studio when Akbar moved his capital to Fatehpur Sikri. Jehangir, who succeeded Akbar, was connoisseur par excellence who, when he ascended the throne in 1605, pruned the Royal workshop, retaining only the most outstanding painters. Mughal painting continued its glorious course until about 1680.

Deccan Flowering

The second half of the 16th century saw the flowering of Deccan painting in the Sultanates of Ahmednagar, Bijapur and Golconda, who maintained a highly lyrical style born out of the fusion of Persian, Turkish and South Indian Hindu elements.

Pahari Painting

A number of Rajput princes were in command of the Mughal armies in the Deccan during the 17th century. Many of these princes came from Rajasthan, bringing along with them the essential trappings of the Mughal court including their painters. The beginning of the Rajasthan School of painting are contemporaneous with those of the Mughal School developing a style of Hindu devotional Bhakti movement and romantic subjects such as Gita Govinda, Balagopala Sthuti. Thereafter a number of Schools developed in Northern India more or less in the same style as that of Chaurpanchasika such as the Rajasthani Chawanda Ragamala and in some cases with Mughal influence in miniatures from Bikaner, Kisangarh, Jaipur, Ajmir, Mewar, Malwa, Bundi and Kota. However, it was not to last and in around 1680, Aurangzeb disbanded the Royal atelier and the unemployed artists dispersed in search of new avenues and patrons. Some of the artists went to the Punjab Hill states and are responsible for the creation of the Pahari style, as we know it today.

Ragamala Painting

Indian music since ages has been the subtlest instrument of emotional integration bringing together people of different faiths, traditions and customs. With its transcendental character and universal appeal music has never known barriers of caste, creed or sect but has rather been a major force in joining in harmony the hearts it had access to.

The theory of ragas – an unparalleled system – is the basis of Indian music. Ragas are said to have emanated in the past from rituals, but in their later innovations the adherents of all religious sects or composing their hymns practised them alike. Sufis had special fascination for ragas. Their seats echoed with them. Amir Khusro – the Sufi poet and musician – invented Sitar, an instrument without which Indian music would have been incomplete.



Ragas or musical mode have their specific intonations, time and situation; for when they are sung, they arouse specific emotions or rasas. The principal ragas are six and their offshoots, known as ragapatnis and ragaputras, vary from 84 to 108. Each raga or its offshoots, has the capacity of invoking one human emotion or the other.

The Indian master painters personified the spirit of the ragas turning them into visual forms encompassing contemporary social and cultural environment.

The immense lyrical and imaginative possibilities involved in such personifications inspired the Indian artists, both Hindu and Muslim, to strive for excellence in the visual representation of ragas. The ragamala paintings, unique to Indian art, communicate through lines and colours what has traditionally been conveyed through sound. The paintings are invariably based on the literary renderings of ragas.

Ragamala paintings have given to the art world some of its masterpieces. Ragas as a theme have been widely followed in miniature paintings by artists of all sects, schools and periods including pre-Mughal and post-Mughal. The painters of ragamala have followed the texts of Narada, Haribhallabha, Hanuman and Meshkaran for their artistic modalities of ragas, but their art innovations are quite different from the texts. The painters have created a new mythology of music. Muslim artists like Sahibdin of Mewar and Ruknudin of Bikaner have shown their great skills through ragamala paintings. Ragamala paintings, personifying ragas either as divine forms or as figures from mythology and court, are both universal and secular.

Dynamic and Prolific

As in the Rajasthan School, a number of sub-styles developed in Pahari painting and some of the earliest and most dynamic are Basohli, Mankot, Jasrota, Chamba, Jammu and Nurpur. Guler paintings of the second half of the 18th century are prized for their exquisite brushwork and lyrical talents. The most prolific school was Kangra under Raja Sansar Chand and the fine paintings continued to be produced until the first quarter of the 19th century.
