



# Chitrolekha International Magazine on Art and Design

ISSN 2231-4822 ♦ www.chitrolekha.com ♦ Email: editor@chitrolekha.com

Volume V, Number 1, 2015

Themed Issue on

**“Visual Culture in the Indian Subcontinent”**

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# Indian Art: a Colourful Kaleidoscope through Time and Space from around 2500 B.C. to Early 19th Century

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## Overview

India's rich and captivating tapestry of paintings and sculptures is assiduously woven with the varied threads of traditions, set of rules, sophisticated symbolism and skilful craftsmanship. The Indian art is inseparable from the very inherent characteristics of the regions and the point of time at which they were conceived and produced. Like the paintings itself, the influences and the physiognomies of the styles have been highly determined by the multiple layers of the society. Due to which these art forms have evolved slowly through time. Though forms and styles didn't suddenly change they gradually morphed into a newer altered form. Thus it is essential for one to see these paintings and sculptures through the overlapping frames of time and techniques. This paper combines the extensive historical data of the Indian Art and the analytical reasoning behind it, into a comprehensive reading for a first hand reading of understanding these art forms through the perspective of a time-line.



Figure 1: The Priest with Trefoil Drape  
[www.exoticindiamart.com](http://www.exoticindiamart.com)

The presence of a civilization in India was known to the West way before the arrival of Alexander the Great. They were later evident from the records (around the later 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.) found of the Greco-Roman merchants, who described the port and the goods used for the commercial activities. One has to bear in mind that, back then the knowledge was a prime possession of a few and was hence passed over orally, and thus it lacked any written records. It is through the rare accounts of the travellers that we can get some preview of the past. It was as late as the 18<sup>th</sup> Century when the European scholars took up exploration of India's past, studying the scriptures and *Vedas* and formed the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. This is when we start seeing the written data on Indian history. It was these paintings and sculptures that provided the

researchers with the insight of the whole new world of symbolism and iconography which was the key to understating the Indian society. Ironically, the history of Indian art that we study, is the interpretation of the early European researchers which sometimes overshadows critical nuances known only to the Indians due to the practice of those traditions. Approximately after a century of the Asiatic Society, in 1862 the Archaeological Survey of India was formed. It was after this year that there were scientific studies of cultural objects against the mythical prejudices.

### **Time-line and Art forms**

The history of societies of India is a crucial part in the history of man-kind. The earliest being the nomadic cattle herders from the Urali Mountain ranges came and settled on the banks of the Ganges and the Indus. Though one finds no evidences of their origin, the *Vedas* i.e. the sacred texts are the only proofs we have. Even though they were written centuries later after being passed on as oral traditions. The scientific proofs being the excavations carried out Mohanjo-daro and Harappa, which have brought to light the earliest work of Indian art to light. The major art works from this era are the inscribed seals, statues and painted pottery. The important pieces being the bust of a priest like figure from Mohanjo-daro, the bronze statuette of a dancing woman and the terra-cotta figures. These terra-cotta figures are possibly from the prehistoric matriarchal cult of Mother Goddess worship. The applied ornamentation and the animal figurines on the seals showcase the artist's high level of sensitivity and sharp observation skills. The cult of Mother Goddess worship has perpetuated from time to time. One must also keep in mind that these iconographies have extended into the Maurya period palette, as seen on the pillar of Ashoka. The graphical language of the bull and other animals in this era is strikingly similar to the one seen in the cultural objects of Indus valley civilization.

The period between 1500 B.C. to 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. faces a void due to lack of evidences and predominance of oral tradition. Whereas the 6<sup>th</sup> century seems to have been the most important phase of Indian history in terms of thought processes. That phase saw the evolution of Brahmanism from the Vedic period and later that gave the offshoots of Jainism and Buddhism. The founders of both of these are heavily embellished in the Indian art landscape. A wide range of early Buddhist art in-terms of exquisite bas reliefs, sculptures and carvings of Stupa are evidences of the Maurya and Shunga dynasty. Here the Buddha is seen in various symbols like the tree, the wheel of Dharma, grove with deers and so on, as the figure form of Buddha evolves much later. The sculptures had reached a high level of sophistication and finesse. For example the railings of the Buddhist *stupa* served a double purpose of ornamentation as well as educating the masses who visited the *stupa*. In terms of Buddhist paintings the rich treasure trove of the Ajanta Cave murals captivates the viewer's eyes. The theme here is taken from the life of Buddha and the Jataka tales that surround him.

The paintings are rendered with highest level of complexity in terms of their composition, where the characters and the iconography act as the link between these continuous paintings on the walls of the caves. It is interesting how the mood of the

character is reflected in the background details as well. For example, a sad scene has even the flora depicting it to the last detail. The focus of these paintings is mainly on the human anatomy which is so well brought out through the expressions and the poses of the characters of the mural. Though the purpose was religious but the ultimate aim was to convey the teachings and story of Lord Buddha. The paintings not only decorate the wall but also the ceiling. Themes for which were borrowed from the templates of flora and fauna, something very dear to Indian artists across time. The most interesting thing about these paintings is the process and methodology of application of the paints as is the multiple layering method that gives it this sheen and has stood the test of time. In parallel to this, Jainism also has various sculpture art mainly in the Deccan plateau. The sculptors borrowed the template of the Buddha figure and were differentiated by the nudity and other *chinhahs* i.e. symbols. But the striking art form of Jainism was the Kaplasutra i.e. painted manuscript showcasing the life of Mahavira.



Figure 2: Ajanta Cave Murals ([www.indian-heritage.com](http://www.indian-heritage.com))

This painting style evolved from leaf-painting to being painted on paper but retaining its style and set of rules that give it a distinct character. The main features being the red background and border, use of aquamarine colour, side profiles and black outlines for the body. Following this we have the Kushana dynasty and the Andhra dynasty dating 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. It is during this time that the form figure of Buddha appears.

This period also highlights Graeco-Buddhist art, where one sees straight away clear Hellenistic influence in terms of Greek motifs, vine leaves, indianised version of the Greek column and other elements. Two very important styles of Indian art are seen to surface at point of time, namely Mathura and Amravati style. The Mathura artists showed immense skill in ivory carving. The Amravati school perpetuated the styles from the artists from the Bharhut and Sanchi. Following two centuries 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. are seen as the peak points of Indian art with the advent of Gupta dynasty which also gives the name to

the art style. This is the first time one sees the path breaking free self-standing “temple-architecture”.



Figure 3: Jain Manuscript painting ([www.jainismus.hubpages.com](http://www.jainismus.hubpages.com))

Something that was a totally new concept for an Indian mind and this followed the generation of Brahmanic art forms. These Brahmanic temples were ornamented with decorative sculptures which were of outstanding finesse which were concentrated mainly in the south-eastern part of India, most famous being the Khajuraho temple complex. These sculptures had very stylised features in their anatomy and their expression. Though on the first glance they come across as amorous couples, they had a deeper tantric connotation to it.



Figure 4: Greco-Buddhist Art ([www.flickr.com/photos/jamyang190/7783151992](http://www.flickr.com/photos/jamyang190/7783151992))



Figure 5: Temple Architecture (Photo by Siddhant Shah)

By the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the Indian sub-continent sees the invasions by the Arabs. This event led to a drastic downgrading of the native art styles of India, the Buddhist art had vanished by 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and what remained of the Brahmanic art form was mainly the temples in Rajputana and the south. Temples and sanctuary icons lost their artistic rendering and innovativeness, and were simply created or rather it would be ideal to say that they were blindly produced to set principles and rules. Around 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. one sees the end of Buddhism and the same period marks the foundation of Delhi Sultanate in India. This period sees the late Buddhist works of the Pala style and Dravidian style which perpetuates till the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Early 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. is seen as very important period in terms of Indian art scope as it is during this time that the Muslim rulers introduced Persian miniatures giving a whole new boast to the Indian artists and their creativity. Mughal and Indian miniatures both followed the similar multi layered process of painting which was similar to those undertaken for the mural paintings in the past. Indian miniatures though weak in terms of dimensions and perspective, were extremely strong in captivating a frozen moment of time which was extremely well rendered. The visual languages of these paintings were humanitarian as well as abstract. The themes took in to consideration the different notional feelings like love, devotion, anger and others and also concepts like the Tantra, Mantra and Yogic practices. The miniatures consisted of a prescribed background being the formal architecture elements and the conceptual nature, the hidden iconography, the costumes and detailed ornamentations, and the borders. Though these portable paintings were a rage but were not something new to the Indian art scene as their predecessors were the palm leaf



Figure 6: Mughal Painting  
<https://paintingatruart.wordpress.com>

paintings related to Jainism and Buddhism. The early miniature paintings are Pala and Jain followed by Rajasthani, Mughal, Pahari and Deccani. Rajasthan had major centres of miniature painting styles, namely Mewar, Kishengarh, Bundi and others. Bundelkhand painting seen in Orchha (Madhya Pradesh) were highly influenced by the Rajasthani painting styles. Mughal miniature paintings are categorised in three parts which are early, late and provincial Mughal styles.

During the reign of Akbar, these miniatures were on the peak of their creations with many ateliers running successfully with the royal patronage. These ateliers produced some well know artist who later became the veterans on their own. These painting were not necessarily completed by one artist only. There were different set of artists who focused on borders, facial rendering and the armatures were given the jobs of tracing and maintain those tracing templates. Meanwhile the Deccani style was constant and showed unique rendering skills of Hindu and Muslim themes.



Figure 7: Company Art in Colonial India (<http://ashleydawson.info>)

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a new feature in the Indian art scene with the arrival of East India Company. Curiosity and amazement of the new flora and fauna along with the enchanting ruins of the allowed the English officers document these exotic landscapes in well drafted drawings and paintings. These English artists took help of the local Indian artists and in way trained a whole new set of artists to work in European styles and with the subtle colour palette. The medium of these “Company” paintings was watercolours and the technique was drafted perspectives. By early 19<sup>th</sup> century,

enterprising had started mass producing these paintings for the tourists of the then “Grand Tours”.

### **Conclusion**

The essay presented above is a time-line journey of the Indian art epoch. Intangible aspects of “Time” and “Thoughts” are very well capsulated by these tangible art pieces. The kaleidoscope is a true metaphor for this Indian art scene, as it changed with the turn in the society to paint and render the striking reflections of those ideas on the society.

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Siddhant Shah is an Architect pursuing MA in Heritage Management (Greece) with Majors in Indian Aesthetics. He has been associated with the State Archaeological Department (Mumbai) and has undertaken Heritage Volunteer training with UNESCO and ICOMOS regarding the Cultural Objects. He focuses on Research of Indian Art & Architecture Styles, Cultural Marketing and Disabled-Friendliness of Archaeological/Heritage Sites.

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