



# “Visual Interpretations and Transformations of Mythological Elements in Indian Painting: From Traditional to Modern Perspective”

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## Abstract

Indian painting has historically maintained a profound relationship with mythology, functioning as a visual language through which religious, philosophical, and cultural ideas are communicated. Mythological elements—derived from texts such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas—have been continuously interpreted and reinterpreted across different periods of Indian art. This paper examines the transformation of mythological imagery in Indian painting from ancient mural traditions to contemporary artistic practices. It analyses stylistic, iconographic, and conceptual changes while situating them within broader socio-cultural, political, and aesthetic contexts. The study argues that mythological elements in Indian painting are not static but dynamic constructs that evolve in response to changing historical conditions, artistic innovations, and ideological shifts.

**Key words:** mythological elements, Indian Painting, symbolic, visual representation, metaphysical, painting traditions,

## Introduction:

Mythology occupies a central place in the Indian cultural imagination. It permeates literature, performance, ritual practices, and visual art. In painting, mythological narratives have served not only as subject matter but also as a framework for symbolic expression and aesthetic exploration. Unlike purely decorative traditions, Indian painting often engages with deeper metaphysical and ethical concerns, using mythology as a vehicle for visual storytelling. The relationship between mythology and painting in India is deeply rooted in religious practices and patronage systems. Temples, courts, and later colonial institutions shaped the production and dissemination of mythological imagery. Over time, these images underwent significant transformations—stylistically, technically, and conceptually.

This paper explores how mythological elements in Indian painting have evolved from traditional representations rooted in spiritual and devotional contexts to modern reinterpretations that engage with contemporary issues such as identity, nationalism, gender, and politics. The discussion spans major historical phases: ancient, medieval, colonial, modern, and contemporary.

Myth, as understood in art historical discourse, is not merely a story but a symbolic system that conveys collective beliefs and values. Scholars like Ananda K. Coomaraswamy have emphasized the metaphysical dimensions of Indian art, where visual forms serve as manifestations of spiritual truths rather than mere representations of physical reality. Similarly, Stella Kramrisch interpreted Indian art as an embodiment of

cosmic principles, where mythological imagery reflects universal patterns of existence. In this framework, the depiction of gods, goddesses, and mythological events is not literal but symbolic, encoded with philosophical meanings. In modern art historical discourse, scholars like Partha Mitter and B.N. Goswamy have examined how colonialism and modernity reshaped the interpretation of mythological imagery, introducing new aesthetic paradigms and ideological concerns. Thus, the study of mythological elements in Indian painting requires a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating iconography, semiotics, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory.

### Mythological Narratives in Ancient Indian Painting:

The earliest surviving examples of Indian painting, such as those in the Ajanta Caves, provide a rich source for understanding the visual representation of mythological narratives. Although primarily Buddhist, these murals incorporate mythic storytelling through Jataka tales, which share structural similarities with Hindu mythology. The Ajanta paintings are characterized by:

- Rhythmic compositions
- Expressive gestures
- Subtle colour gradations
- Narrative continuity

These features enable a dynamic storytelling mode, where multiple episodes are depicted within a single frame. Mythological elements here function as moral allegories, emphasizing compassion, sacrifice, and ethical conduct. Importantly, the visual language of Ajanta reflects a synthesis of naturalism and stylization. Figures are rendered with a sense of volume and movement, yet they retain an idealized quality that transcends physical realism. This balance between the material and the spiritual becomes a defining feature of Indian painting traditions.

### Medieval Transformations: Devotion and Aesthetic Refinement:

The medieval period witnessed the proliferation of regional painting traditions, particularly the Rajput and Pahari schools. These styles were deeply influenced by the Bhakti movement, which emphasized personal devotion and emotional engagement with the divine. Mythological narratives from the Bhagavata Purana, Ramayana, and Gita Govinda became central themes. Unlike the monumental murals of earlier periods, these paintings were often small-scale miniatures, designed for intimate viewing.

Key characteristics include:

- Stylized forms and flat perspectives
- Vibrant colour palettes
- Symbolic use of landscape and architecture
- Emphasis on rasa (emotional essence)

In Rajput painting, mythological scenes often convey a sense of grandeur and heroic valor, while Pahari painting focuses on lyrical beauty and romantic devotion, particularly in depictions of Krishna and Radha. These transformations reflect a shift from didactic storytelling to experiential aesthetics, where the viewer is invited to participate emotionally in the narrative.

### Colonial Encounter and the Emergence of Realism

The colonial period introduced significant changes in Indian painting through the influence of Western academic art. Concepts such as linear perspective, anatomical accuracy, and oil painting techniques were adopted by Indian artists. A pivotal figure in this transformation was Raja Ravi Varma. His work represents a synthesis of European realism and Indian mythological themes. By depicting gods and goddesses in a naturalistic style, he made mythological imagery more accessible to a broader audience. Ravi Varma's paintings also played a crucial role in the development of popular visual culture in India. Through lithographic

prints, his images reached a mass audience, shaping the visual imagination of mythology for generations. However, this shift towards realism also marked a departure from traditional symbolic representation, raising questions about authenticity and cultural identity.

#### Nationalism and the Revival of Indigenous Traditions:

In response to colonial influence, the early 20th century saw a revivalist movement in Indian art, led by artists associated with the Bengal School. This movement sought to reclaim indigenous artistic traditions and reject Western academic realism. Mythological themes were reinterpreted in a more spiritual and symbolic manner, emphasizing:

- Simplicity and elegance
- Subtle color harmonies
- Emphasis on line and mood

Artists drew inspiration from Mughal, Rajput, and Ajanta traditions, creating a hybrid style that reflected both historical continuity and modern sensibilities. Mythology, in this context, became a tool for cultural nationalism, representing India's spiritual heritage and resistance to colonial domination.

#### Modernist Reinterpretations: Breaking Tradition:

The mid-20th century marked a significant shift in Indian painting, as artists began to engage with global modernist movements while retaining elements of their cultural heritage. Maqbool Fida Husain emerged as a key figure in this phase. His work reinterprets mythological themes through a modernist lens, characterized by:

- Fragmented forms
- Bold lines and colors
- Symbolic abstraction

Husain's depiction of mythological figures often transcends traditional iconography, presenting them as dynamic, evolving symbols rather than fixed representations. Other modern artists similarly explored mythology as a means of addressing contemporary issues, including urbanization, identity, and political conflict.

#### Contemporary Perspectives: Myth in a Globalized Context:

In contemporary Indian art, mythology continues to be a vital source of inspiration, but its interpretation has become increasingly diverse and experimental.

Artists engage with mythology in various ways:

- Deconstructing traditional narratives
- Reinterpreting symbols in new contexts
- Addressing issues of gender, caste, and politics

For example, feminist artists have reimagined mythological female figures such as Draupadi and Kali as symbols of resistance and empowerment. In a globalized art world, Indian mythology is also being recontextualized for international audiences, leading to new forms of hybridity and cross-cultural dialogue.

#### Conclusion:

The visual interpretation of mythological elements in Indian painting is a dynamic and evolving process that reflects broader historical, cultural, and ideological transformations. From the spiritual narratives of Ajanta to the experimental works of contemporary artists, mythology has remained a constant yet adaptable theme. This study demonstrates that mythological imagery in Indian painting is not static but continually reinterpreted in response to changing contexts. It serves as a bridge between tradition and modernity, enabling artists to engage

with the past while addressing the present. Ultimately, the transformation of mythological elements in Indian painting highlights the resilience and adaptability of Indian cultural traditions, affirming their relevance in a rapidly changing world.

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