



Interpretating Indian Miniature Paintings Through Lens Of Traditional Knowledge System

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Abstract – Indian art holds a distinctive and significant position in the history of world art. It not only reflects the technical and aesthetic dimensions of different historical periods but also serves as a visual mirror of Indian culture. The Indian Knowledge System integrates ancient, holistic, and sustainable values into contemporary education, and Indian art plays a vital role in this integration from prehistoric times to the modern era. Among the various forms of artistic expression, Indian miniature paintings occupy a unique and prominent place. These paintings provide valuable insights into traditional culture, social practices, religious beliefs, and courtly life, distinguishing themselves globally through their intricate detail, symbolism, and narrative richness.

Keywords- Indian knowledge system, Indian art, art , Indian miniature art, miniature art, Indian culture

Introduction- Indian art has always been renowned throughout the world for its continuous artistic evolution and development. History bears witness to how, since the prehistoric period, Indian art has consistently provided valuable insights into the nation's history and culture. It would not be an exaggeration to say that without art, it would have been difficult to understand the culture of earlier times as comprehensively as we do today. Over time, this accumulated artistic heritage has illuminated knowledge in every direction.

During the medieval period, miniature paintings created in India not only illustrate the diverse painting styles practiced across different regions of the country but also depict the lifestyles, preferences, and social environments of kings as well as common people. Moreover, through their subject matter, these paintings visually narrate many well-known texts and mythological stories, ranging from the Vedas to manuscripts composed up to the fifteenth century.

Indian Knowledge System–The Indian Knowledge System is a tradition that integrates ancient Indian knowledge, including science, philosophy, art, society, and morals. The major sources of this knowledge are the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, and other mythological texts. Philosophy and spirituality also hold a special position within this system. The Indian Knowledge System emphasizes

holistic development and explores the relationships between humans and nature, humans and society, and art and society. It seeks to bring balance among science, culture, art, and spirituality.

Indian painting during pre medieval period (from prehistoric period)- Indian painting has rich historical legacy from pre historic art. Prehistoric paintings, expressed through distinctive lines and symbolic forms, offer valuable insights into the culture and traditions of their era. When it comes to the civilization era, although not many paintings were created, the ornamental designs on utensils reveal the stylistic approach of the people of that time. During 1500 BC when Vedas comes in written form and Mythological texts also carry references to paintings from different eras which completely shows profound engagement of that period with paintings

Indian miniature during medieval period

Pal miniature– The Pala Empire of eastern India represents the final flourishing phase of Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent. Pala miniature painting primarily depicted Buddhist themes, especially images of Vajrayana deities, and was commonly executed on palm-leaf manuscripts. Major centers in eastern India, such as Nalanda and Vikramashila, were renowned hubs of Buddhist learning. Students and pilgrims from across Southeast Asia visited these monasteries and carried back examples of Pala Buddhist art, particularly illustrated manuscripts, to their homelands. The defining characteristics of Pala miniatures include graceful, flowing, and continuous lines combined with subdued color tones. These features are clearly visible in palm-leaf Buddhist manuscripts such as the Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita, which exemplifies the elegance and spiritual refinement of the Pala artistic tradition.



Plate 1 : Bodhisatva Maitreaya , Leaf from dispersed Ashtasahasrika (Perfection of Wisdom), Pala Period, 12th century

Jain or Apabhramsa miniature– Among the most widely illustrated canonical texts in the Jain tradition is the Kalpa Sutra, which recounts the lives of the twenty-four Tirthankaras. It narrates key events such as their conception, birth, renunciation, enlightenment, and liberation. The manuscript is typically divided into sections to accommodate these different episodes. Its illustrations are distinguished by the use of bright, vibrant colors, intricate textile patterns, and delicate, thin, wiry lines that create a refined decorative effect. Parallel to this development emerged a stylistic phase often referred to as the Apabhramsa style. This style is associated with illustrated manuscripts such as the Anagasutra, Nishithachurni, Durgasaptashati, and Vasant Vilas. Paintings in this style are characterized by pointed noses, double chins, folded hands, stylized and exaggerated anatomical

features, toy-like animals, the use of brilliant colors, and generous application of gold.e

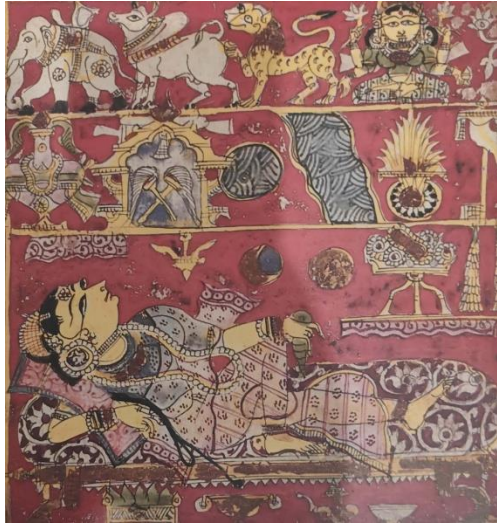


Plate 2 : Kalpasutra – Trishala’s (Jain Tirthankar Mahaveer’s mother) fourteen dream,

Rajasthani miniature– Rajasthan was historically composed of several princely kingdoms and thikanas, including Mewar, Bundi, Kota, Jaipur, Bikaner, Kishangarh, Jodhpur, and Malwa. The fifteenth century is considered a period of renaissance in literature. It was a time of remarkable growth not only in literary traditions but also in the development of painting. During this period, miniature painting flourished and introduced innovative technical features. These paintings beautifully integrated literature, music, and visual art into a unified artistic expression. In Rajasthani miniature painting, Ragamala paintings and depictions of Nayika Bheda became especially famous worldwide. These artworks gave visual form to abstract concepts—for example, representing musical ragas, which are inherently abstract, as personified deities or human figures.

Miniature paintings also depicted various mythological themes such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vishnu Avatara and the stories of Radha and Krishna. These paintings provided visual knowledge of Indian culture and religion. One can say that these miniatures are unique not only because of their color schemes and technical qualities, but also because they reflect religious and mythological texts in a vivid and meaningful way.

Rajasthani miniatures are known for their use of flat yet bright colors, delicate brushwork, and detailed representation of human figures and ornaments. They beautifully portray the clothing, jewelry, and physical features of people in Indian culture, which has helped them gain recognition throughout India.



Plate 3 :Gajendra Moksha Bundi style , 18th century

Pahari miniature—The famous art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy classified Rajput paintings into two main groups: Rajasthani paintings and Pahari paintings. The Pahari school of painting includes styles such as Basohli, Guler, Kangra, Kullu, Chamba, and Garhwal.

Although it was inspired by contemporary miniature styles, the Pahari school developed its own distinct features. These include detailed depictions of nature and architecture, graceful human figures, expressive facial features, and the use of soft, rainbow-like colors.

The Kangra school of Pahari painting is considered the most developed among all the Pahari sub-schools, both in technical skill and thematic expression. One of the most distinctive themes in Kangra miniature painting is the depiction of Ashtanayika (the eight types of heroines). These paintings beautifully express the emotions of the nayika (heroine), often shown in different moods and changing natural settings. In many compositions, the figures of the nayaka and nayika are represented as Radha and Krishna. The Pahari school is also known for its rich depiction of nature. It carefully portrays the natural beauty and landscape of the mountainous regions of India, with lush greenery, flowing rivers, and scenic hills.



Plate 4 : God sings and dance for Shiva and Parvati , Knagra school (Pahari), 1780-90

Mughal miniature— The sixteenth century, marked by the arrival and expansion of the Mughals in India, brought many cultural and social changes to the country. These changes were also reflected in the field of art. The miniature paintings of this period are known for their sophisticated techniques and wide range of subjects and themes.

The Mughals were great patrons of art, and each emperor contributed according to his own taste and interests. Mughal paintings play an important role in understanding political history and the genealogy of the Mughal rulers. Through Mughal miniatures, we learn about Akbar's interest in literary texts, Jahangir's fascination with nature and experimentation with different artistic techniques, and Shah Jahan's love for architecture.

Mughal miniature paintings usually show a blend of Indian techniques with strong Iranian influence. They often include features such as the one-eyed profile face (ek chashma chehra), decorative borders, detailed nature studies, fine lines, rich ornamentation, and the use of gold and silver.

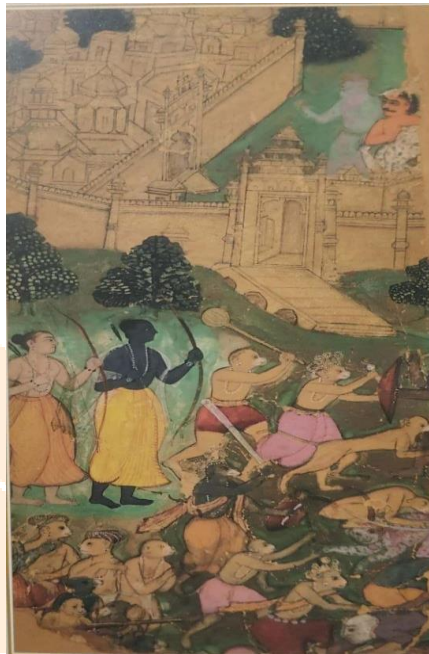


Plate 5 : Rama and Lakshmana at Lanka (Folio from Ramayana) , Mughal miniature 1600-10

Indian knowledge system reflecting from Indian miniature paintings— From prehistoric times to the medieval period, paintings—especially miniature paintings—have reflected not only historical events but also the religious, mythological, and cultural life of India. These artworks act as a mirror of their time. At the same time, they continue to provide deep insight into the social, cultural, and spiritual aspects of each era. Miniature paintings have also created a strong indigenous impact on society by preserving traditions and expressing Indian identity through art.

Conclusion - Indian miniature paintings, in particular, demonstrate this continuity across different periods. The Rajput and Rajasthani schools translated literary, devotional, and musical themes into vibrant visual narratives. The Pahari schools, especially the Kangra style, brought lyrical beauty and emotional sensitivity to themes of love, devotion, and nature. Mughal miniatures introduced sophistication, realism, and a fusion of Indian and Persian elements, documenting courtly life, political history, and individual personalities with remarkable detail. Each phase contributed new techniques, themes, and aesthetic values while remaining rooted in indigenous traditions.

Thus, miniature paintings of different periods not only preserve historical and cultural knowledge but also embody the philosophical and artistic foundations of the Indian Knowledge System. They continue to serve as visual documents of India's pluralistic heritage, offering insights into its social structures, belief systems, and artistic innovations. In this way, Indian miniature painting holds an enduring and distinguished place in the history of world art, representing both continuity and creative evolution across centuries.

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