

SIGNIFICANCE OF ART IN INDIA

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Indian art has been produced by professional craftsman.....“In India the same qualities pervade all works, of any given period - from pottery to architecture, and all are equally expressive - the smallest fragment of a textile portrays the same as the most elaborate temple
In other words, there are no distinctions of fine and applied and decorative art and no surmountable barrier dividing the arts of the folk from the canonical arts.....

In these words, Dr. Anand Coomaraswamy, a great scholar, has assessed the traditional Indian Art.

From the myths and imagery projected in the ancient texts, we can arrive at certain key-concepts in the Indian tradition. From Rigveda to Samarangasutradhara, there is ample proof of the conception of the world, as the creation of the master craftsman - an Artist. The mythical Vishva-Karma is the counterpart of Tandua and Bharata of the Natya Shastra. Both have to be understood as the indicators of the high place given to arts in Ancient India.

As we probe deeper, several other points strike us, which tell us about the artist and his place in society. From the law-books, the ‘Niti-shastra’, from the writings of Manu and Kautilya, we learn the responsibility of the state and the public to protect and patronise the artists. The system of taxation makes it compulsory for society to foster and support the artists.

The artist so supported and patronised by the society is no ordinary craftsman Vishva-Karma as he is called is an artist who is polyvalent of skills. Specialisation is no doubt a virtue, but versatility is at a premium. The stone reliefs of Sanchi are the work of ivory carvers from Vidisha, the famous dwarf of Pitalkhora, the work of a goldsmith. The inscriptional records bear testimony of the fact the artists could handle a variety of media and were proficient both, in sculpture and painting. The artist-craftsman having a creative mind was concentrating like a “Vogi” to give form to his inner vision and deep aesthetic experience. Therefore, Dr. Coomaraswamy writes: Art is a form of Yoga.

Most important was the place of arts in education. The kings, noblemen, middle-class gentry and the craftsmen, were all adept in the art. Bhoja of Ohara, Vil^lramaditya of Western Chalukyan dynasty and many others who were the successors of the legendary heroes received a well rounded education in science – like mathematics, astronomy and medicine, and the arts-like architecture, sculpture, painting, music and dance. In short, most of the legendary and historical figures and historical figures were well-trained in disciplines of polity, sciences and the arts alike.

The ancient texts have also included the training of the spectator. The discussions on the initiated spectator and appreciative audience are presented in these texts. There has been a critical evaluation of the merits and demerits of painting in Sanskrit literature, ranging from Kalidasa to Rajasekhara, All these writers exhibit a rare, sensitive and technical understanding of the content, form and technique of Indian painting.

Regarding the techniques of fine arts like painting, sculpture and architecture there are several texts written from time to time, beginning from the 5th Century A. D.

The notable among them are:

Vishnudharmottara, Abhilashitarth Chintamani, Samarangana Sutradhara, Shivatava Ratnakar, Shilparatna, Naradashilpa, Saraswtishilpa, Prajapatishilpa.

These texts describe in great detail the concepts and techniques of the arts of painting, sculpture and architecture. The Chitrasutra in Vishnudharmottara mentions the six canons of painting - namely Rupabheda, Pramana, Bhava-yojana, Lavanya-yojana, Sadrishya, and Varnicabhanga. These forms mean - distinction of form, proportion, infusion of emotion, creation of charm and lustre, resemblance or likeness and colour harmony and tone value. This text also describes the types of man and woman, principles of perspective termed as Kshayavidhi, and classification of pictures - like Satya, Vainik, Nagara, and Misra - meaning - Natural, lyrical, sophisticated and mixed.

Rendering methods are described as Vartana. Iconography of Gods is discussed to identify the Deities. The texts on sculpture define several terms and mention in detail the technical matters. Properties and usage of materials like stone, metals, wood, ivory etc. are analysed, Laws of relative proportion, rhythm and movement are discussed in detail.

Early traditional sculptor was well versed in “Murtishastra” - the knowledge of icons. The iconography of Gods and Goddesses was religiously followed. The canons prescribed to establish the image of the deity were learned by heart. There are certain communities of traditional “murtikar” are still following the same system. This glorious art tradition continued for centuries, inspite of invasions, social and political disturbance, through the passage of time many dynasties and kingdoms, rose to great heights and vanished. However, they left behind them immortal and monumental images in painting, sculpture and architecture. Wonders in the form of caves of Ajanta, Karli, Ellora, Elephanta, Badami and the architectural sculpture such as Mahabalipuram, Konark, Khajuroho and the likes, stand before us for centuries, to give us evidence of the unparalleled concept of art, besides the superhuman skill and workmanship of generations of artist - craftsmen, who worked with rare dedication and discipline. Here, art becomes the religion of man.

The art of painting flourished till 10th Century. Many murals were painted in the caves of Ajanta, Badami, Ellora, Sittanvasal, Later between 14th and 18th century murals were executed in the shrines and temples in Tanjore, Lepukshi, Chidambaram and Cochin, Jain paintings on palm leaf and in manuscripts were executed in great number, between 12th and 16th century. Jain art flourished more out of support of affluent merchants.

By 16th century new form of painting emerged, known as Miniature painting. This was initiated by Babar the first Mughal King, who invited two Persian artists to set up an atelier in Delhi. After him, Humayun continued the patronage and called another renowned painter - Mir Sayad Ali, and assigned him to illustrate the manuscript, named Amir Hamza. Akbar, too was a great lover of all arts, and in his time about 100 artists were constantly employed, many were Hindus amongst them. At the time of

Jehangir the style of miniatures become more refined. Portraits, court-scenes, landscapes and animal studies were executed in great number. Jehangir himself was a great connoisseur, as he claimed that by merely seeing the painting he could recognise the artist who painted it. Shahajehan was more interested in architecture, but he too patronised painting. Paintings of his period mainly depicted the pomp and splendour of the court. Aurangazeb showed no interest in any fine art, so the mug hal art declined by 18th century.

Almost during the same period another school of miniature painting emerged, known as Rajput painting. It also enjoyed the Royal patronage. However, unlike Mughal painting Rajput painting was mainly dedicated to Hindu epics, myths and legend. Several series of paintings were executed on the themes of the divine love of Krishna and Radha, episodes from Ramayana and Mahabharata. Another theme was Ragamala - a series of 36 or 42 painting based on Ragas - the musical compositions. Paintings were also executed on poetry of Jaideo and Keshavdas - named as Gita-Govinda and Rasikapriya.

In Rajput painting (here are several schools or styles, Prominent among them are Mewar, Bundi, Kishangarh, Malwa, Basholi, Kangra, Jammu & Guier.

This glorious tradition of Indian Art lost all its patronage in early 19 th century when the East India Company gradually began to establish the British rule in the country. By the middle 19th century new art schools were established by British and started teaching painting and sculpture in Western style. By about 6th decade of the century murals, miniature painting, and temple sculpture faded into in Significance. To add to this the British critics like John Ruskin, Roger Fry, Prof. Westmacott, George Birdwood etc. severely condemned Indian Art stating:

“The art of India formed its compositions out of meaningless fragments of colours and flowings of lines

The monstrous shapes of Puranic Deities are unsuitable for the higher forms of artistic presentation; and this is possibly why sculpture and painting are unknown as fine arts in India”

But this criticism was short lived, as the great defenders of Indian art like Dr. Anand Coomarswamy. E. B. Hawell, Aurobindo, Sister Nivedita and others wrote exhaustively to revel the Sprit of Indian Culture and propounded the basic philosophy of Indian Art. Through their critical and comparative study of Oriental and Western art they established the true aesthetic level of Indian art. Soon the traditional Indian art was acclaimed as the classical art, throughout the world. Thousands of Indian paintings, sculptures, bronzes and other art objects, belonging to different periods are seen today in almost all the major museums in the world. The viewers of different cultures see these works of art and try to understand the spiritual depth of our culture.

Yet, there are several other folk arts and crafts which are deeply blended with the life of the people. They are being perpetuated till today.



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The cheque red history of Indian art reveal to us, the national wealth of unique artistic creations. These creations have been executed and accumulated for centuries by communities of artists belonging to different religions - different faiths. Yet, through their art, what we obviously notice is, their oneness with art, which is full of harmony, rhythm and rare aesthetic charm.

The spirit behind this Indian Art has a unique quality. The quality of maintaining in itself the eternal truth – the inner, intuitive and spiritual truth, which offers life a rare aesthetic experience of the universal level.
