

Introduction to Indian Art – An Appreciation
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Module – 05
Formats of Indian Painting
Lecture: W1 – L5

Welcome you all to MOOC online course on introduction to Indian art an appreciation. This is the 5th module of the first section introducing Indian art and in this module we will be talking about the various formats of Indian painting. Needless to say Indian painting is found everywhere, not necessarily only on paper or wall. It is also found let us say on the walls of the pottery, it is also found on the floors. Even today untrained common people are practicing painting in the form of Rangoli, Alpana in and in various kinds of floor decorations. So, in a general sense Indian painting can be seen evident on various kinds of surfaces done in various kinds of techniques and by different people on different occasions.

But as far as the main history of Indian painting is concerned, in terms of format Indian paintings can be divided into several categories.

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Three main formats of traditional Indian Painting

1. Mural Paintings:

Large scale paintings done on the walls of Caves, Temples, Palaces and Havelis

2. Manuscript Paintings:

Small paintings on the pages of palm-leaf or paper manuscripts

3. Miniature paintings (also known as Court Paintings):

Small or big size paintings done either on the pages of the books, or as a part of a collection of paintings/folio or independently.

First the mural painting, mural painting or paintings done on wall various kinds of walls may be walls of the caves, maybe interior or exterior walls of the structural temples, maybe walls of the palaces, maybe on the walls of the havelis. But wall happens to be a very favorite surface for the Indian painters. And we do have a very rich tradition of wall painting or mural painting in the history of Indian art.

The second category of Indian painting in terms of format is manuscript paintings. Now this is a very interesting format because it resembles to modern day illustrations. The way we get our books particularly if the books are written for children, profusely illustrated and the way we have visuals in between the textual pages. Similarly in ancient times, people used to create not books, but hand written manuscripts primarily on palm leaves.

Later on when paper was discovered, or rather let us say invented, they started using paper. But the format basically is like a book and it is called manuscript and we come across not one or two, but several such manuscripts with paintings on the inner pages as well as paintings on the cover pages. The covers are usually made of wood. So, you have wooden covers two wooden covers one on top another at the bottom in between this wooden covers, you have several pages either palm leaf pages or paper pages.

Now, if the first category that is mural painting in terms of scale is generally found to be very large very big and obviously, it is so, because they are doing the paintings on the walls of the caves, on the walls of the palaces, on the walls of the temples. So, they have huge spaces to be covered with paintings. On the contrary, the manuscript paintings are very small in size. Because the manuscript themselves very small and the manuscript pages are mostly covered with texts or ascriptions. Hence a little bit of space is usually left for the painters to fill up with certain kind of images. We shall see examples of both these kinds very soon. The third probably one of the most well known and globally reputed form or format of Indian painting is what we generally known as miniature painting.

Miniature painting can also be called court paintings, because most of the miniature paintings were done at the court and under the patronage of some king or the other. So, miniature paintings can be small. There are a few examples of miniature paintings which is slightly bigger, but never as big as a mural painting and never as small as a manuscript

painting. So, when we are talking about the format of Indian painting in terms of these three categories, mural painting manuscript painting and miniature painting, we are also indicating the size and scale of these paintings.

Now scale and size of paintings is a crucial factor because that in a way determines certain skill content. I mean if it is a big size mural painting. You can move your entire hand from elbow to the wrist or from shoulder to till the tip of your finger. You have a huge space to cover; you have a different kind of body movement when you are doing a mural painting.

But when you are doing a manuscript painting, you have to you are bound to develop and acquire certain skills which are very delicate and not only delicate which are intricate kinds of skills. Because you need to fill up all the details within a given space which is very small and some of the manuscript paintings are as small as two inches by two inches or two inches by two and a half inches or two inches by even a one and a half inches yes as small as that.

Comparatively miniature paintings are slightly bigger. There are many miniature paintings which are of, let us say to use a modern day term A4 size paper or even bigger than that. So, three formats suggest that they have to view in three slightly different ways. Secondly, these three different formats also suggest that they need slightly different kind of skills to achieve a beautiful piece of painting.

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Now, before we come to mural painting or manuscript painting or miniature painting, let us not forget that first traces of Indian painting are found not on the walls of Ajanta caves not on the pages of any manuscript painting produced by any Jain or Buddhist monk, not on the pages of Mughal painting patronized by King Akbar and Jahangir. But on the rock shelters on the surfaces of the rock shelters of let us say Bhimbetka, one of the most famous prehistoric sites in India. These paintings can be dated back to 10,000, 15,000 or even 20,000 BC but since they belong to the prehistoric era, we do not count them as an essential aspect of Indian painting history as far as the historical tradition is concerned.

But still we cannot simply forget that 15000 year back 20000 BC years back some unknown people, anonymous people, prehistoric people with hardly any improved facilities of life they had this wonderful skill and imagination. With that they filled up huge rock surfaces of Bhimbetka and the journey of Indian painting began there. We will look at more such examples of Bhimbetka painting in one of our 4th coming modules.

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So, when we are talking about the formats of Indian painting tradition, we are in a way also trying to look at the different locations of Indian paintings. Where do you find them? Not geographical location, I am talking about the physical location. So, if we are referring to Bhimbetka, then paintings have to be found on the rough uneven surfaces of Bhimbetka rock shelter. So, it is amazing that this kind of surfaces can be or can be considered as a surface for painting.

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Similarly, we get some of the most beautiful and gorgeous paintings in Indian painting tradition. Not on paper, not on pages, not on palm leaves but once again on the interior and sometimes on the exterior walls of Ajanta caves, this is one example but we have several such examples of cave paintings in India done not by prehistoric people anymore, because now we are talking about a 5th century AD painting.

So, by that time Indian society had developed and by that time particularly in the Buddhist communities, they had chosen the interior of caves to be the best place to get their images about Buddhism Painted profusely, brightly with lot of colors. Since they wanted at least they wanted these paintings to remain forever or as long as possible. So, technically they developed, technically they devised certain ways of painting right from the stage of preparing the ground.

So, while the Bhimbetka people they painted directly on the uneven rock surface, this Ajanta painters before they began painting on the walls, they prepared the wall they prepared a ground, a lime plaster ground on which they get their paintings. So, caves interiors of caves can be another very important location where you find numerable examples of Indian painting.

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This is one such example and if I do not tell you if I do not let you know that this image or these paintings are from Ajanta caves. Looking at the paintings, it is impossible to

imagine that these paintings were painted on the interior wall surfaces of a cave. That was carved out from a solid mountain. So, you see right from 5th century AD we are getting examples of paintings which are not just merely beautiful in terms of their style and features and content. They are also significant because of the technique involved introducing these techniques this paintings.

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Now, we can move away from cave paintings. Look at another very interesting kind of painting or let us say format of painting that is simply what is known as album painting. In medieval India particularly, we get several such paintings collected together as an album. These paintings are not very big even smaller than an A4 size paper and these paintings have lot of narrative content in it. These are story telling paintings.

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Now, once again when you go back to Ajanta and if you start looking at the various portions of various places where you find the paintings will be amazed to see let it is not just the walls. Of course, lots of these walls at Ajanta have paintings walls on the interior as well as the exterior walls. But you also see Ajanta paintings on the ceilings, you also see Ajanta paintings on the pillars, you also see Ajanta paintings on the portico.

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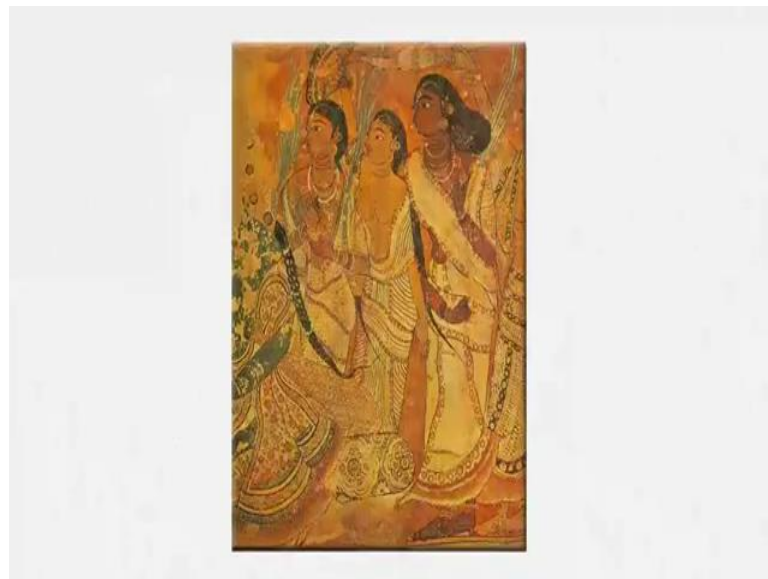


So, every kind of wall surface whether it is a ceiling or the wall or the pillar can be used as a surface of painting. And in this connection I can give you a an amazing piece of

information, that another very important and a very well known site of cave painting cave sculptural painting not within India outside India is Tumu Wang. At the north western border of China on the path of silk route and Tumu Wang as an art and cultural center is also a part of the central Asian culture. In Tumu Wang caves it is seen that they have not even left the floor blank. They got the floor also painted and sometimes even sculpted. So, this is one amazing thing about Indian artists that they can transform any given surface in to a surface for painting or sculpture.

Now, this example that we looking at right now is another well known and a beautiful example of wall painting from Lepakshi. The other one the previous one was from Ajanta. Which is located in the western India this is Lepakshi this is south India. So, do remember our second module or rather the first module on geographical expansion and now you will be able to connect that how various examples of painting of a similar format can also create a certain kind of map in your mind.

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This is also from Lepakshi in present Andhra Pradesh. This is also from Lepakshi and these are not cave paintings whereas, the Ajanta paintings where cave paintings Lepakshi paintings are paintings done on the walls of the temples, structural temples.

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This is slightly later example of another beautiful wall painting. This is from Hampi name of the temple is Virupaksha temple and Virupaksha temple at Hampi has some amazing paintings not only on the pillars or on the upper portions of the walls, but on the entire ceiling. This is one such example. Hampi is located in south India in Karnataka.

Say again you can see a map of Indian traditional mural painting is emerging when you are looking at this various examples.

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So, coming back to our 2nd category of or 2nd format of painting; this image moral is gives us an idea about the size and the positions of these paintings on any given page of a manuscript. So, manuscripts are usually oblong in size and shape and usually the length would be in anything between 17 inches and 22 inches and the height of this manuscript pages would be maximum two and a half inches though the space that is allotted for the painter to produce his images is actually very small.

Yet with meticulous kind of skill and a skill of doing the details within a small painting, these painters of manuscript painting have produced some amazing paintings produced under the patronage of Jain religious community as well as Buddhist religious community. The Jain paintings where produce mostly from the western India, whereas the Buddhist manuscript paintings are found to be produced in eastern India during the Pala period.

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So, now we shall look at a few examples of Jain paintings. This one is painted on a paper you find Jain paintings painted both on paper and palm leaf. Usually it would it was palm leaf, paper was not available but the moment paper become available for them, they gradually gave up paintings on palm leaf and they adopted paper as the new medium new surface for painting for various practical reasons.

One of the reasons I believe everybody could guess that paper gives you more freedom in terms of the size and shape and you can have a bigger manuscripts, whereas palm leaf is more kind of limited in shape and size.

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This is one example of Buddhist manuscript painting. If I do not show you the entire length of the page it is difficult to actually imagine how small these paintings are.

But the moment I tell you this is a very small painting with the dimension of 2 inches by 2 and half inches. Then you can begin to appreciate the skill of the painter the meticulous detailing that are found in the painting and a certain kind of image imaging power I would say, which is not possible unless you have mentally adopted yourself to this particular scale.

So, if you bring if you ask a mural painter to do a small size painting on a manuscript page, it may not be possible at all for him to say yes and go ahead, because one is used to a certain kind of format a certain kind of size and scale. For each format you need a specialized team of very expert team of painters. This is another example of Jain painting painted on paper.

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So, manuscript paintings actually form a bulk of this category of Indian painting. This image gives us more or lesser reasonably good impression. An idea of how this pages were made, the format of the painting and at the top and the bottom of this image you can also see not pages, but covers wooden covers. Since wooden covers usually do not have any ascription no scripts.

Hence the painters have the complete freedom to cover the entire covers with paintings. So, if you see any oblong shaped piece of painting which looks like a manuscript

painting, but without any script you can feel assured that this should be not a page from the manuscript, but a cover of the manuscript a few more images like this.

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In fact, this is a very pertaining point to mention that, where as in mural paintings the entire walls or ceilings or pillars whatever the painter are painting on is for them. They have the whole space to cover up with their paintings, but for the manuscript painters, they have to keep in their mind that there would also be lot of writings, lot of inscriptions and lot of scripts around the paintings. So, they only have the limited amount of space left to them after the scribes have finished doing their writings.

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This is one thing and secondly, the painters would also do their paintings in a way that the inscriptions and the images do not look discordant. They should have a relationship visually integrated to each other and though painters usually would not write, the writings would be done by the scribes. They would not do the paintings. I am sure it was programmed in such a way that that harmony was never lost.

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Now, this is just to mention that it is not only in India even in the entire Europe there existed this tradition of paintings on the leaves of the books. In the European context it is

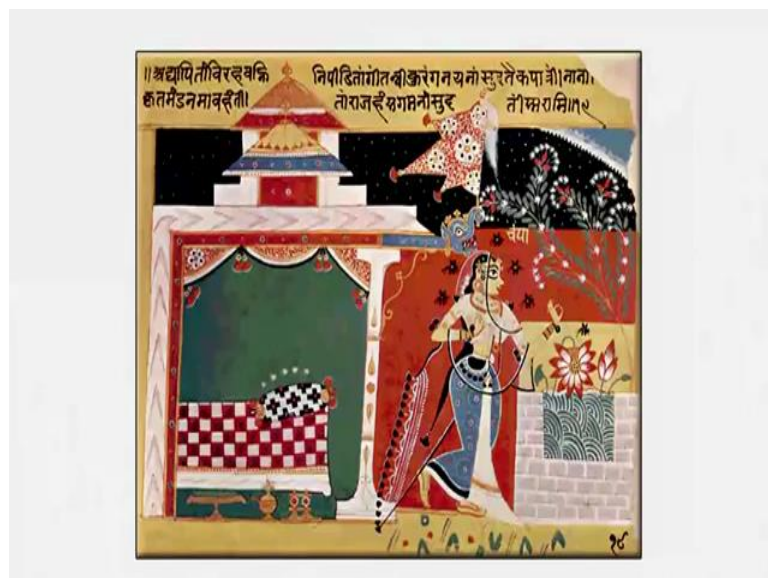
known as illuminations. You illuminate the page with your visuals, with your visual imaginations in the context of what is written in the text.

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So, now we move on believe the manuscript paintings behind and we go to the third category which is miniature painting. Initially the miniature paintings also had a little bit of script on top or at the bottom like this one which is known as Chaurapanchaska painting from early 16th century AD.

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Another painting from the same series, this is a different painting from a different series, but more or less from the same time 16th century. Here you can still see some evidence of that script or the writing on top of the painting. But at the same time the painter is taking more and more freedom in the way he is organizing or composing his art work within the given space.

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Then we arrive at examples of painting where the script or writing is completely removed. If there was any date of putting any kind of writing, any kind of inscription

they would do it, they would write it on the back of the painting no more on the front of the painting. Like this one.

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Please try to notice that, as the format of painting is becoming more and more independent of sculpture, independent of architecture, independent of even writing. The painter is also able to explore more into the possibilities of painting in terms of its aesthetics and in terms of its language. We can discuss more about it in one of our subsequent modules on Indian miniature paintings.

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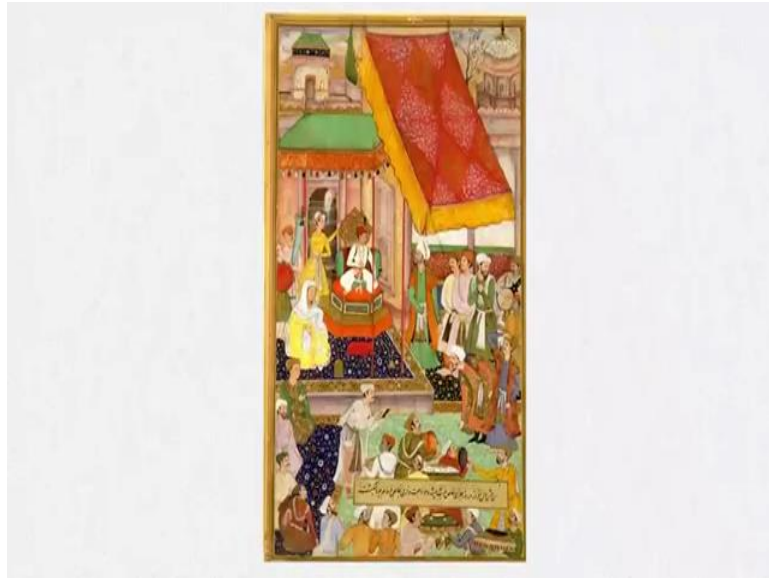


As of now we are simply looking at the formats and we are trying to see that how the change is in the formats are actually in a way determining the imagination of the painters, the character of the paintings and even the quality of the painting to some extent.

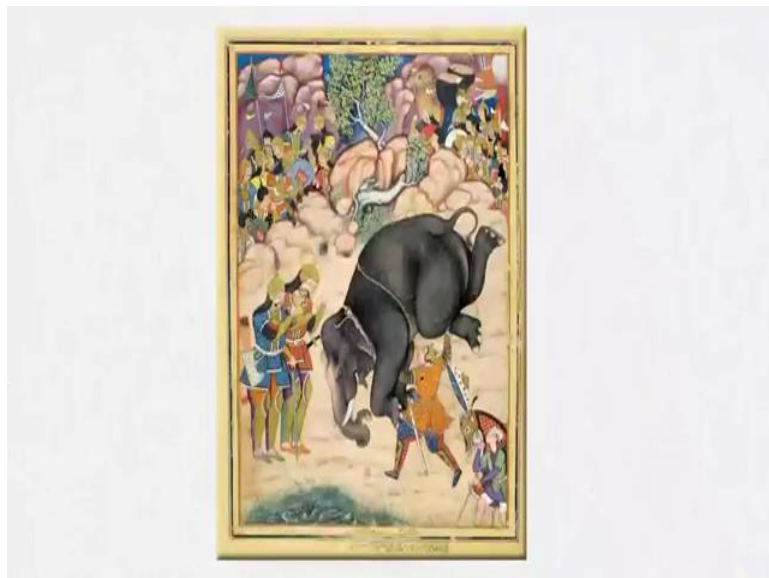
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So, we are now looking at some of the gorgeous paintings at the end of (Refer Time: 26:41) of the Indian art history that is Mughal painting. There we see that all this some of the Mughal paintings do allow the script to have a place within their painting, but usually they are conceived independently with a great amount of creative freedom by the artists.

Thank you so much.