

Folk and Minor Art in India
Prof. Shatarupa Thakurta Roy
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

Lecture – 31
Characteristics of Contemporary Collection-Semiotic Analysis

So, we are going to discuss, and the different layers of viewing any visual, from any culture. In terms of the examples that we are collecting from Indian folk and minor art, this is a common way of looking at visuals, especially in the area visual art, to break it into different sections, in different layers. Either they are steps, or there are also instances, where we look at them in different categories, which are not placed in a linear pattern. For example, when we look at a narrative visual, and try to interpret that in a 4 stepped method, prescribed by (Refer Time: 01:09), which is very popular all over. There are steps, like description, analysis, interpretation, and conclusion. So, in those 4 steps, what happens that, we look into the visuals, we try to describe, what we get to see, just to understand the arrangement, what are things that are there, and it, it totally depends on an individual's observation. We may miss out on certain aspect, that we get to see in our following views, but it is very important to be neutral, and look at the visual, and describe them without any judgment.

So, after that state, after that state, we get into the position, to analyze all the images that we get to see, and then, we are in a position to make comments, whether the visual arrangement is appropriate or not. In a way, when we talk about the form, in the analysis part, we also talk about the form and content together. To understand whether the content is matching with the form or not, or kind of style, that is a combination of common content, whether the style is appropriate for that particular expression, or it is not so, not so appropriate. And that way, we slowly get into the third step, which is interpretation, and from the third step, we can, then through a add different kind of research, if we feel that there are other additional information, that will enrich our viewing, then we look for that, and then we interpret it, and at the last step of the 4 steps, which is conclusion, that includes a lot of judgment.

So, conclusion part makes us evaluate the visual that we get to see. We do not do that at the first go. But then, when it is comes to the traditional art work, which are not done in

the conventional academic style, we have this general tendency of looking at it from a different perspective. Every time we try to understand the theme, that is working as an operational factor, behind making this painting. There are also reasons, and we need to understand that that it is of course, they can today's contexts, we can always state that, this is not the right way to view it, but there are certain reasons, why people look at them. That is very natural phenomenon, that the like, if you go back and look in to the history, we feel that, those kind of traditional paintings, which came into the form of narrative, they were made with the purpose, and the purpose was mostly to provide an alternative mean to the viewers, those who are not literate, you know, conventional sense.

So, it is almost like the paintings were made, the images were created to compliment the literary texts, which were written in some languages, which are not practiced by the common people. So, to make things work with everybody, to the common mass, there had been illustrations, that were initiative. So, because of that reason, what we see that, the interpretation part is totally done, on the basis of the theme. So, even if the art work is not very nicely done, or even there are suggestions, which tell us very clearly, that they are not following certain rule of painting, we ignore it for the purpose, that those paintings are connected to a great story, from some epic, it also had some religious connect. But in today's context, we cannot mercy on all those things. So, viewing folk and minor art is getting a new light, and that is positive in a different sense, that we are somehow, respecting the individual expression, the individual understanding, and we are putting the art works, into a different pedestal.

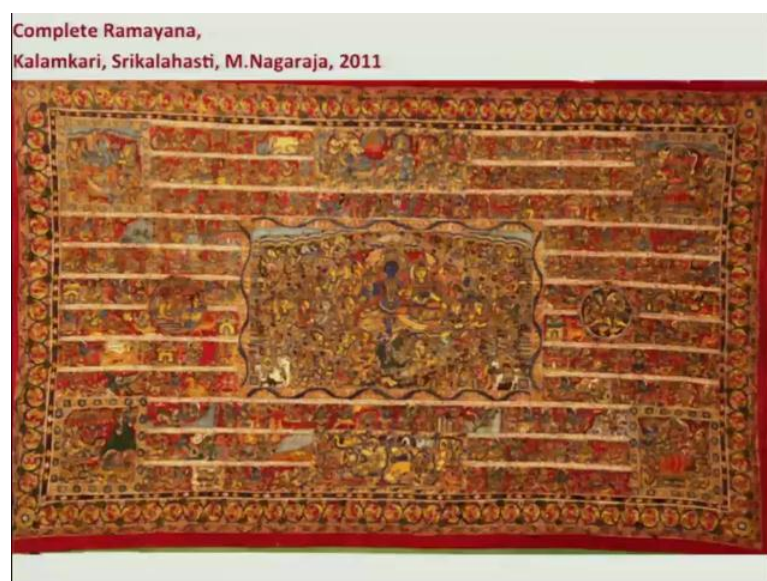
So, let us view one of the art works, which is done in a recent time, as I discussed in our previous modules. Some of the art works, some narrative scroll paintings, from 17th or 18th century, even like, late 19th and 19th century, 20th century Patachitras. This is something what is done in 2011, which is like just 5 year back. So, it is very important to see, when the contemporary mind, the artist of today's time, is depicting the same theme, in the same style, in the same manner, and coming up with the same depiction, of the age old saga, which is Ramayana again. As I mentioned earlier also, that I am using a similar Thematic content, and we are picked up Rama, Ramayana for the context. So, that the story of Rama, and Seeta, and Lakshmana, that is known to most of us, like that is already known, and that does not need to be described many times, and then we can

focus on the visual presentation, and the different stylistic variation, that are available in our country.

However, when we look at this particular art work, by M Nagaraja, from Srikalahasti, Andhra Pradesh, Chittoor district; what we see here is again, the story of Rama, and Lakshmana, Seeta, the story of Ramayana depicted in a single frame. So, it is unlike the scroll paintings, where the story is goes in a horizontal or vertical format. Here the entire story is depicted in a single frame, but some space deviation, but of course, it is a Ekhachithra, a single frame painting, but it is also a narrative painting, where the story is told throughout, and the entire epic is put under one umbrella that is a single frame.

So, ah, I will show the image, and explain things into 3 different layers. Let me make that very clear in the beginning of the lecture, that this 3 layers are, the Semiotic layer, Iconic layer, and the Thematic layer. So, in the Semiotic layer, what we are going to emphasize on, is totally regardless of its Thematic content, which is the story, and the background related to that. It is the emphasis, on the use of space, the use of line, color, tone, texture, form, style and stylistic arrangements, influences, etcetera, etcetera. In the Iconic layer, we are going to understand, some of the images with their symbolic identity. So, that will involve some additional information to it, that is based on, theme based research, and then in the Thematic layer, we are again trying to look at the story, from it is Thematic perspective.

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So, let us see the image, and talk about it. So, what we see here, is the Ramayana, the Ekhachitra painting, done on a 4 by 6 and a half feet scroll, that has the entire story of Ramayana depicted into it. So, when we describe the painting, in the Semiotic level, what we see here is the, border that is painted with same decorative motifs, which is repeated, and it is floral. It also has a bright red border, to hold the frame, the entire composition, is full of intricacy, in terms of the figurations.

The lines have very close with each other, it also has certain sense of symmetry, into the composition, that has somehow, held the entire dynamism that was provided by the asymmetry, of the story telling that is there. And the pictorial problem is solved, with symmetrical arrangements of space, where we see that in the center, there is one rectangle, the entire frame is rectangular, with continuous border, and then in the middle, there is a smaller rectangle, which is another border, which is also very prominent. So, there is some serpent like formation, with this somehow like making the area confined. At the same time, because of the similar stylistic identity, of the images which are getting repeated all over, we can very clearly make out that this is not isolated part of the painting, and that way, the middle part, the center, is getting connected to the entire picture.

So, this is also relevant, that the kind of color, that is used here, are also very restricted. So, in this pallet, what we are going to see is, there is a yellowish base throughout, and there is another layer, that is there in the background, which is flat red. Previously, we talked about the narrative scroll of Bengal; we also talk about the Cheriya paintings, and other patachitras, like Mata Ni Pachedi, or Pabuji Ki Phad, of Rajasthan and Gujarat. Everywhere, we have seen that, there is Indian red or orange reddish tint, that is painted, at the background, and they are painted in a flat order. So, they do not show much of a special depth, when you see a warm color, at the background, which is flat, it suddenly does not absorb anything.

So, the backdrop in a way is quite bleak, and it does not penetrate much of attention. So, that gives it a 2 dimensional quantity throughout. At the same time, what you see in the picture, I will show you the close up and it will be easier for you to understand, that there are certain borders, which are passing through the entire frame, in a horizontal order, and all those borders are of white in color, and it has some Telugu script written on it, and there, there is a very interesting use of the Telugu scripture, that tells the description of

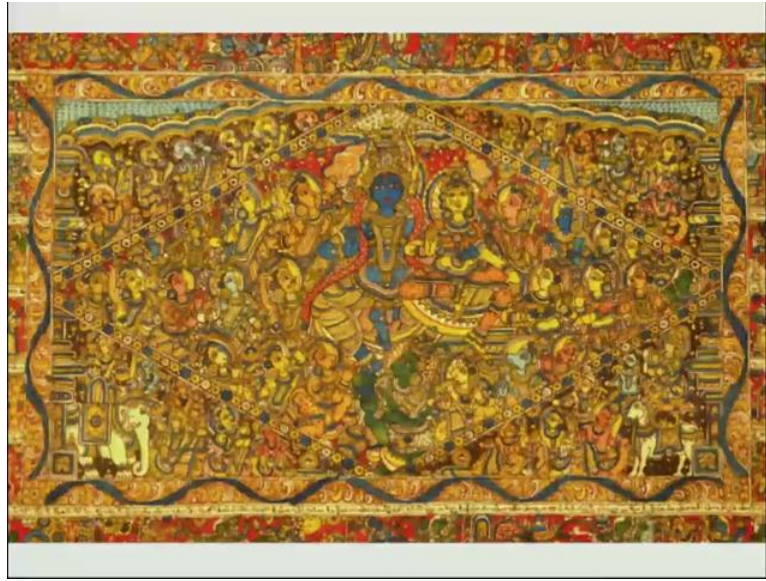
the stories, and suddenly like not the entire story, but the different episodes of the story, which is written in it. And the formation of all those letters, also similar to the figuration, the images that are made, has certain affinity with the letters, the fonts of the script.

So, that makes it all the more unified, and it gives us a very smooth spatial harmony, throughout. The distribution of color, is also as we say it has a restricted pallet, that has yellow, rust, indigo, blue, and the special Kalamkari black, which is not a peach black, but it is a mixture of brown and blue, that gives us a certain depth. And all the borders in the human figures and other recognizable images, which are semi abstract, at the same time highly representational, they are all confined by the black border, all over, that makes it look flat, at the same time, it also makes the narrative depiction much more clear to the viewer. So, with those black borders and well defined contour, it becomes easier for us to understand the, the subject of the story, and also the subject of the painting, in a much better manner.

So, there are other spaced vision, that I must also mention, and they can be look at the painting at the first glimpse, we can always focus on the whole, over the parts, and that is the beauty of this narrative, that our attention goes to the overall picture, and then slowly it goes down to it is different parts, and that way, the entire viewing gets, it takes place in a very smooth manner. So, there are a 4 square frames, at 4 of the corners of the painting, that those are the key frames, there are also 2 rectangles, on top and bottom of the center rectangle, which is slightly smaller than the center rectangular part. There, there are also two circular frames, at the both sides, that is. In fact, emphasizing the order which is quite symmetrical in this art work. So, these are the key frames, and these are part of the narrative at the same time, they are the highlighted parts of the whole story, and that is very important, where the artist is taking the liberty, of skipping a few frames, and highlighting, a few very important and well known incidence, which has a larger visual possibility, to his favor, for his creative expression to take place, and take place in a effective manner.

So, this is how the space is divided, and in between we see, there are lots of images, which are very intricate, but then they repeated, and together, the intricacy is adding to the balance of the entire large frame. So, that is a beauty of the theme.

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Let us see some of the details, and understand it better. So, this is the frame, that was there in the center, and what we see there, that it also has a diamond shape, which is slightly stretched, horizontally, and there are the central figures. One figure, right at the center, which is a main character, and we will come to the Thematic reference in the next step. So, what we see there is a blue, which is very prominent, and the blue is also distributed in many different places, in both the parts, to give it a symmetrical balance. There is another shade of blue that is distributed at the 2 sides, to balance with that. The border also has some emphasis on the same color, though the blue is contour, and bordered by the Kalamkari black, the vegetable black.

It also has some maroon, yellow, red, rust, and different tones of that. So, there is one emphasis of yellow, ochre, orange, red, and most of the colors are the like warm shades, except for the blue, that is there. So, it is a colorful painting, at the same time, the colors are of a similar kind, that gives it a very strong pictorial identity. We also see green, in one part, that is in the lower half of the diamond, which is not very prominent, but it is also getting repeated at the corner of the diamond. It is just twice, and there is a scale change in that. What we see there is one figure, and the green is also made by mixing the blue dye, with the yellow one, that is existing in the picture.

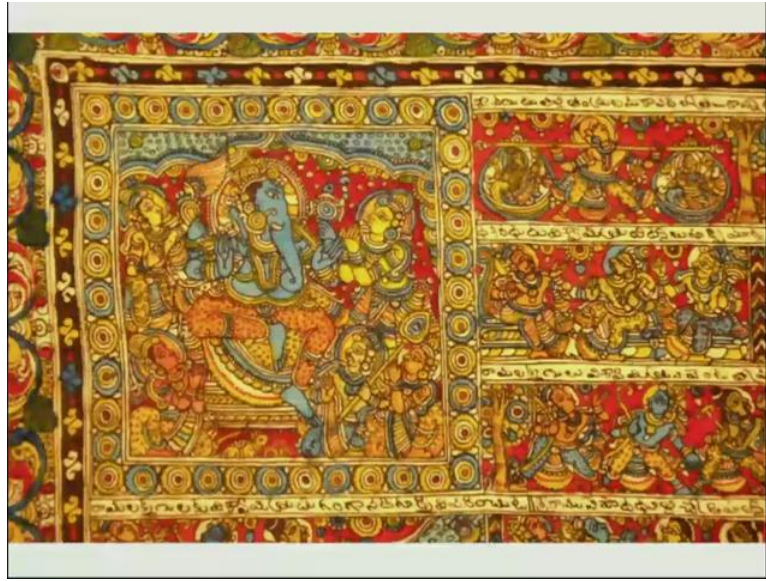
So, that makes it all the more, ah, intricate, for the viewer, to know the real identity of this characters, who they are, and who they may be because some of the prominent

characters can be very easily identified, if one is, like, one belongs to the Indian culture. They belong to a part or their aware of the story, but many are the characters are to be identified, there are also some religious symbols, some secular symbols, here and there, there are flora and fauna, and other motives which are highly simplified, and decorative. And there is also some architectural passable pillars etcetera, to depict certain things in a very simplified and basic manner. Also there is another theme that we must notice, that the figures from the both sides, they are facing towards the center to give it the symmetrical order.

So, all the figures are facing each other, from both the side, except for the main figures, which are slightly larger in their size. So, the figures at the center are the largest. That shows us a hieratic scaling, that is also traditional. So, if this is made in 2011, as I mentioned in the beginning of the lecture. It does not go with a modern sensibility. So, it, it is going towards certain order, where the artist is using his freedom, of depicting the images, at the same time, he strictly adhering to the traditional principles, where the main characters has to be larger than the other characters, were actually not physically small, but they are smaller in their importance, and their hierarchical positions.

So, all those things, makes it all them more important and intriguing to look at, and also it is very important to see from this detail of the painting, how the flatness is maintained here. So, the artist makes sure, that the space does not get any kind of illusion of depth. So, they are completely 2 dimensional, and to maintain that, the artist had to put some efforts, to fill up the background, almost everywhere, there is there is hardly any empty space that is shown throughout. So, wherever there is some empty space, the artist made sure, that he painted those parts with some maroon, or rust, Indian red kind of shade, to give it a flat look. And that is keeping it much more decorative and 2 dimensional throughout.

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This is the frame which was there, at the beginning of the frame, if we go from the order, which is left to right, in the whole Ekhachitra canvas.

So, here in this image, the borders also very prominent, what we get to see is, the different patterns in the borders, including the letters, which are the readable letters. Now I would like to mention here, that when I interviewed the artist, he said that those who can read Telugu, will read it, and those who cannot, can really, they are not deprived of anything, because it is equally beautiful as a script, and can be simply enjoyed as a decorative pattern, which is very important to see, that how typographic images, also has the decorative identity, that can add to the picture. So, even if we feel that, this is not readable for all viewers, it is highly iconic, and culture specific. One has to understand the script, and decipher it in terms of the knowledge.

It is also very interesting to see, how the figurations are matching, with all those fonts. There they have the similar roundity, in it is depiction. So, everywhere they are clear, contoured objects. The images are not very long in proportion, rather they are slightly dwarfish, and they are, proportion is also highly ideal and stylized. We never see proportion which is a close to a normal human proportion, rather, they are the decorative forms, that depicts the human identity in the figures, and that is also applicable when we see certain suggestion of water, or there are other elements also, stones and all, that they are in following frames, but everywhere, the decorative quality is maintained.

So, in the beginning of the picture, we see that again, there is a distribution of blue, and the red background, which is there, the flat background, that is getting, that is proceeding towards the from left to right. They are flat and continuous, to connect the confined frame, with the rest of the narratives. So, that is another character that we discussed earlier, and it is getting repeated in almost, throughout

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Here, we see the border again, with some zigzag lines, and it is foliage, which is known to be the creeper, or Latham. So, it is a simplified form of the creepers that is very common feature in, in all the Patachitra paintings in India. We see similar formations in the Patachitra of Orissa, but the angularities are more than this, because they have lot of western Indian influence into it, that made it a little more angular in their formation. In the roundish areas, we see some formation of the motives, which are often like the Hamsa, or the bird motive, and the negative positive ground is very well handled, where the images are looking slightly ambiguous.

So, there is a connection of a creeper, and the form of a bird. So, all the natural formations, that are getting simplified here, we discussed about the Islamic influence in Kalamkari paintings, that did not give it any kind of a Persian identity, but this was for sure, they had been a culture of looking at it from a simplistic perspective, where the natural objects were all brought down, to a simplistic level, where the essence of the basic form where very effectively captured, and then in the figuration, we see the there is

a simplified decorative order throughout. So, we cannot call them decoration, it was in one point, when Kalamkari tradition was going on, but making the identifiable figures which will present nature, was a not liked by the Islam, by the rulers who believed in Islam, but Kalamkari survived, because of a certain qualities which are not making it totally realistic. Though it was not patronized, but it survived, and the practice was not totally prohibited.

So, it just got confined into a small zone, that is Srikalahasti and Machani Patanum was totally taken over by the Muslim rulers, who practiced Islam, and they get them an alternative of using block prints, and making things much more simplified. So, what we see in the picture is the decorations in the borders, even in the borders, there is no place which is, in fact, very empty. So, wherever there is some negative space, they make sure that is filled up with some decoration or the other. At the same time, the decorations are also continuous.

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In another picture, ah, in another frame, which was at the bottom of the entire picture, that is another smaller rectangle, and we see the same happening going on. So, there is a whole lot of scale change, in all the images, that makes it very important.

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So, we will see another frame, and try to understand the quality of line, in the picture. This is one frame, where we are taking a closer look at the linear formation. So, all the borders or contours, the other lines that are meant to be line, there is a linear emphasis everywhere, they are all done with a some even manner. So, we do not see much of a variation in the line, they are mainly the flat linear quality that is continuous. So, it, it never tells us about the volume, through the line. So, lines are just the outline, it has got nothing to do with the natural rendering, of light and dark, and unlike the urban folk art of the Kalighatpat, and other things that we are going to discuss in our following lectures. So, it has some traditional identity, but the lines are there everywhere, there is no single theme, which is not defined by a contour.

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So, the lines are basically present here to delineate forms of all kind. In this frame, we see some interesting elements into it, which are coming as some texture. So, when we see the texture, which is made, with the repeated circle, and lines on the blue, it gives us a sense of ripple on the ocean, also similarly, there are certain circles with some scratches on it, and those are the stones. Now, these are some symbolic creation, that is quite iconic, and we need to understand the identity of those objects, with the knowledge of it. Otherwise it, it is not having some like, we cannot say that it has certain resemblance with the natural elements, and it is easier for us to identify those objects as water, and stone, from like, if you look at it from the naturalistic perspective. But they are symbolic, and one has to have the knowledge to decipher them, and there we need some guidelines, and perhaps that is one reason, while the episodes are the described on the stories, which are taken from the story of Ramayan, and they are just the highlights, that are there.

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And then there are other elements also, which are actually very important. There is a use of a speech bubble in one of the place, which is not very traditional, because having a character using certain dialogs, in the picture, can be shown in many different ways, but here, what we see is that the speech bubble is coming out from the character, and there are certain words which are written there, that clearly tells us what is he uttering.

So, that is something which is very different here, there are other iconic forms, where we need to extra knowledge to understand that. We cannot decipher it totally from our commonsense like for instance, when we see that there are, there is one human figure which is interacting with another bird, and the human figure has a more than one head. So, that is also another iconic identity that is there. So, in the iconic level, we can always identify, that this is one character, which is the different from the other human beings, is Ravan, and he is the negative hero for the whole story, whereas, on top of the frame, it is the blue bodied Rama, who is there.

So, all this iconic features clearly tells us the about the characters, and many of the characters are not so well known to us, but there are certain iconic identity to each and every character, that makes them different from the other character. Apart from a group of a monkey soldiers, that are there. So, there are images of monkeys, the images of human beings, birds, also some abstract formation, fonts, letters, and many other things, that make it very interesting. It is a combination of many different elements, which are

different in their stylistic identity, but at the same time, because of the uniformity of the line, tone, color, texture, and the application of all those things, it becomes quite unified. So, we will try to see this now, from the Thematic perspective.