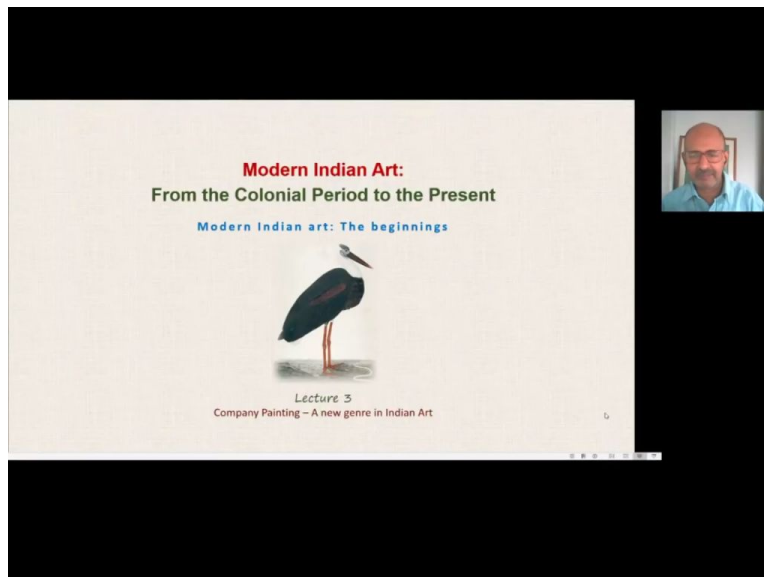


Modern Indian Art From The Colonial Period to the Present
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Lecture 3
Company Painting - A new genre in Indian Art

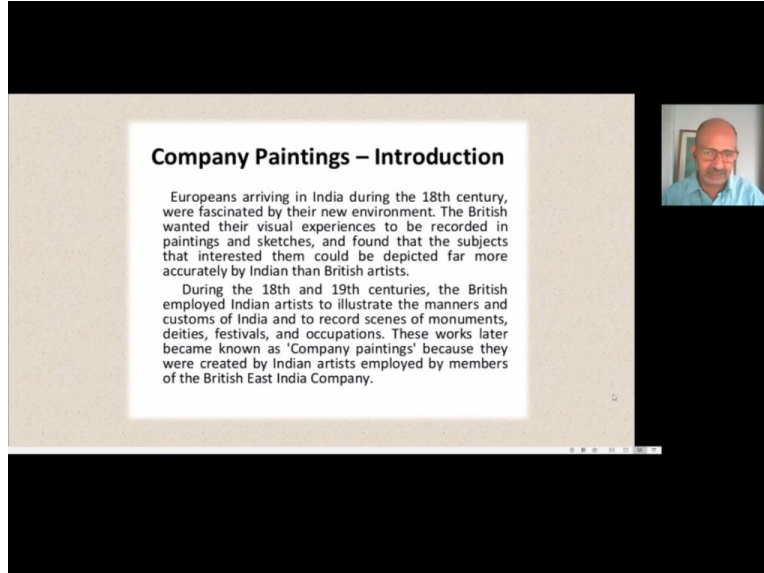
Welcome viewers to NOC's online course on the Modern Indian Art from the Colonial Period to the Present. This is the third lecture from the first week. And today we are going to discuss a very interesting phase from the early modern Indian art and it is called Company painting.

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Now the word Company painting might misleadingly refer to the art that was produced by the East India Company, but we know that it is not so. It is a new genre in Indian art, and not only that, despite the fact that Company painting was actually sponsored by or patronised by the British East Indian Company, the art that this Company painters produced, who were primarily Indian artists, they stylistically, and in terms of sensibility, claim a very important position in the early history of modern Indian art. The question is how and why? This is what we are going to discuss today.

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Company Paintings – Introduction

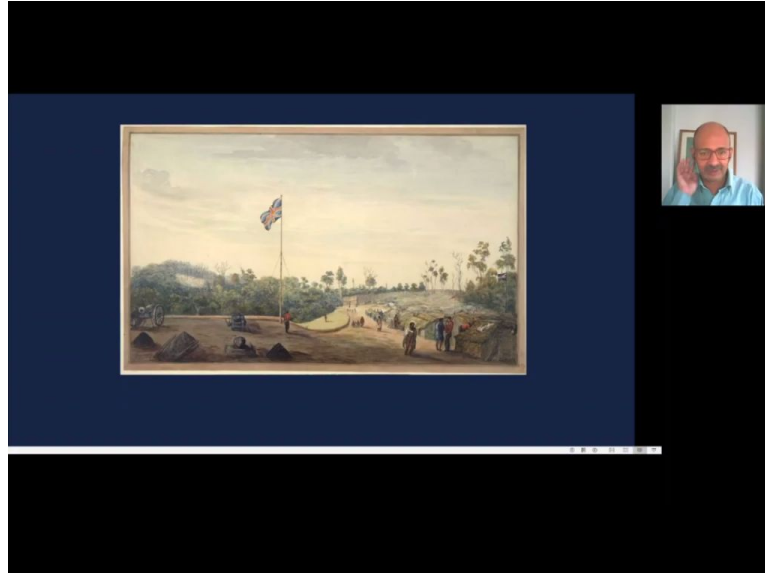
Europeans arriving in India during the 18th century, were fascinated by their new environment. The British wanted their visual experiences to be recorded in paintings and sketches, and found that the subjects that interested them could be depicted far more accurately by Indian than British artists.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the British employed Indian artists to illustrate the manners and customs of India and to record scenes of monuments, deities, festivals, and occupations. These works later became known as 'Company paintings' because they were created by Indian artists employed by members of the British East India Company.

Now, if we have to introduce Company paintings, if we have to define Company paintings in words, how do we go about it? It is simple, fairly simple. You have to keep in your mind the arrival of Europeans once again during the 18th century, who were fascinated by the environment and they wanted some Indian painters who could actually truly respond to the Indian ethos- cultural, social, natural ethos, wanted those Indian painters to paint the Indian subject matters, the real life Indian subject matters No more mythological, no more imaginative, no more even from religion, but all the Company paintings in terms of the subject matter are going to address the actual real life situations, events, phenomenon, characters of Indian subjects.

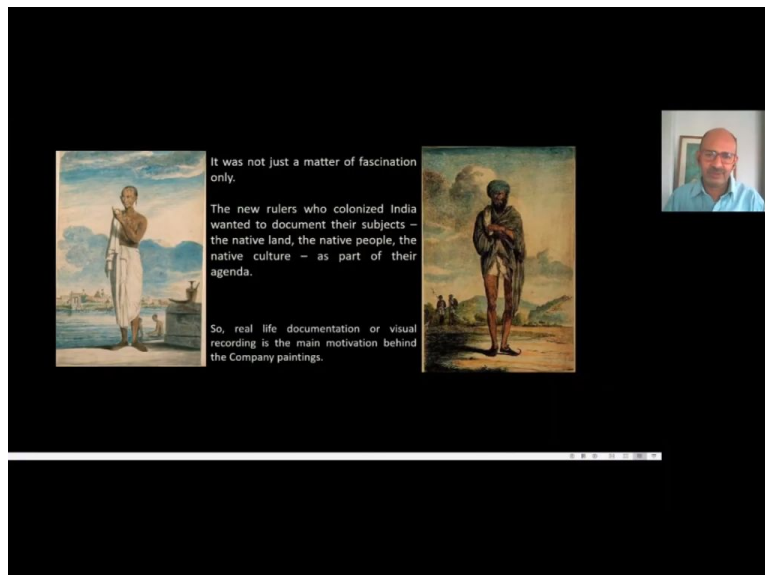
Sometimes you do find, once in a while, the presence of some one or two stray British characters, but that is rare. Mostly, and by and large, all the Company paintings depict Indian subject matters and it happened during the 18th and 19th century. From the mid-18th till mid-19th century, you get to see some very interesting developments happening in the visual art field of India. Some centers like Calcutta, Murshidabad, Patna, Madras, Delhi, emerged as new centers for these Company paintings. So, primarily you find that manners and customs of India and to record the scenes of monuments, deities, festivals and occupations- that was why the British employed Indian artists here to do the Company paintings.

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Now, this is one painting which very symbolically defines or states the claim and the power of the British empire over India.

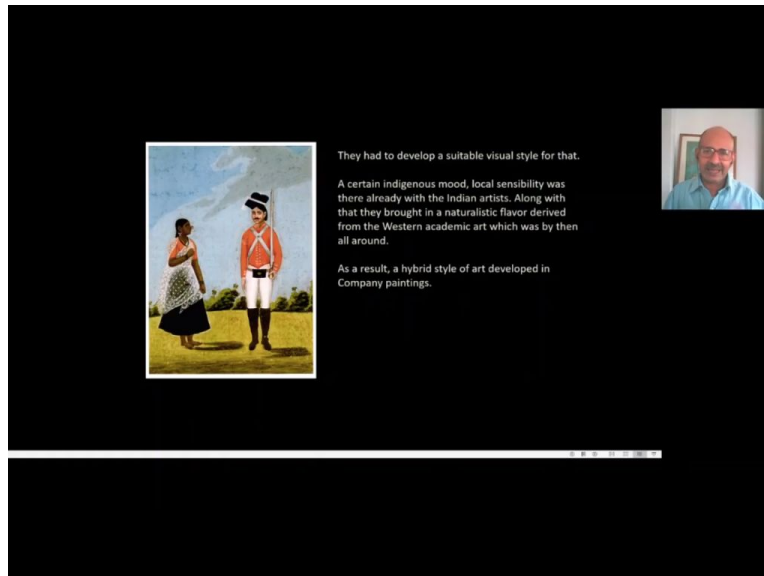
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Now, this is also true, that it was not just a matter of fascination only, when we say that the British rulers were fascinated by the Indian climate, the Indian society, Indian religion, etc. and that is why they undertook this project. They asked the Indian painters to paint Company paintings, partly true, but not wholly, because it is very important to realize that these new rulers

who colonized India wanted to document their subjects, their native land, the native people, the native culture as part of their agenda. So, getting these paintings done under this category called Company painting by the Indian painters to paint Indian subject matter was also in a way to document the newly occupied, newly colonized country of India. So, real life documentation or visual recording, I think, was one of the main motivations behind the Company paintings.

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They had to develop a suitable visual style for that.

A certain indigenous mood, local sensibility was there already with the Indian artists. Along with that they brought in a naturalistic flavor derived from the Western academic art which was by then all around.

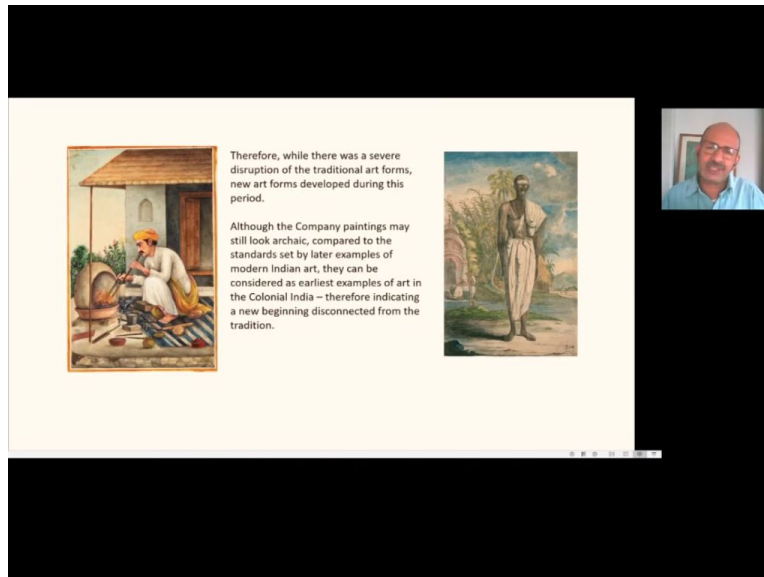
As a result, a hybrid style of art developed in Company paintings.

Now, the next important problem that these Company painters had to solve was to develop a suitable visual style to do justice to the subject matters. Now, we must remember many of these painters hailed from traditional painting families or painter's families. If not they themselves, but their forefathers did work in traditional courts of royal families, where these forefathers used to do some paintings. And these Company painters, naturally, they inherited some of those sensibilities that primarily belonged to those traditional painting schools.

So, they did carry some indigenous mood, some local sensibilities. They did carry something that was truly Indian in ethos. But along with that, they also brought in naturalistic flavor derived from the Western Academic art which was by then all around, it was everywhere in India. So, it was not at all impossible that these Company period painters actually were exposed. They could see some real examples of Western Academic art and they felt the necessity to adopt them to some extent and this necessity was partly also made to feel by the patrons, that is the British

rulers. So, as a result, what we see is a hybrid style. A completely hybrid style developed during this period under the Company paintings.

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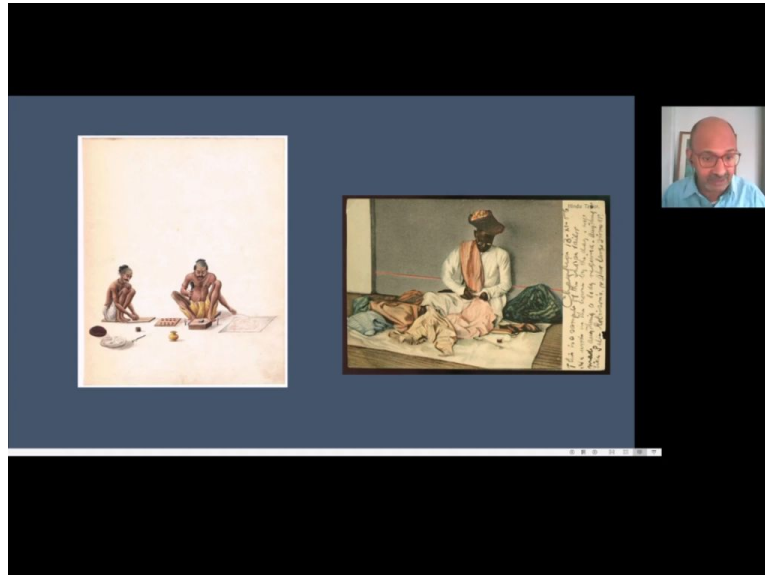


Therefore, while there was a severe disruption of the traditional art forms, new art forms developed during this period.

Although the Company paintings may still look archaic, compared to the standards set by later examples of modern Indian art, they can be considered as earliest examples of art in the Colonial India – therefore indicating a new beginning disconnected from the tradition.

So, it is true that there was a severe disruption of the traditional art forms, as we discussed in our last lectures, due to the advent of the British rule. But it is also true that new art forms developed as a result. So there was a consequence of that disruption. Now, although the Company paintings may still look archaic compared to many of the standards set by the later examples of modern Indian art, but you should consider them as some of the earliest examples of art, modern art in the colonial India, and therefore, Company paintings do demand a very thorough study on our part. And that apart, that is apart from its historical reasons, these paintings by themselves are no less fascinating.

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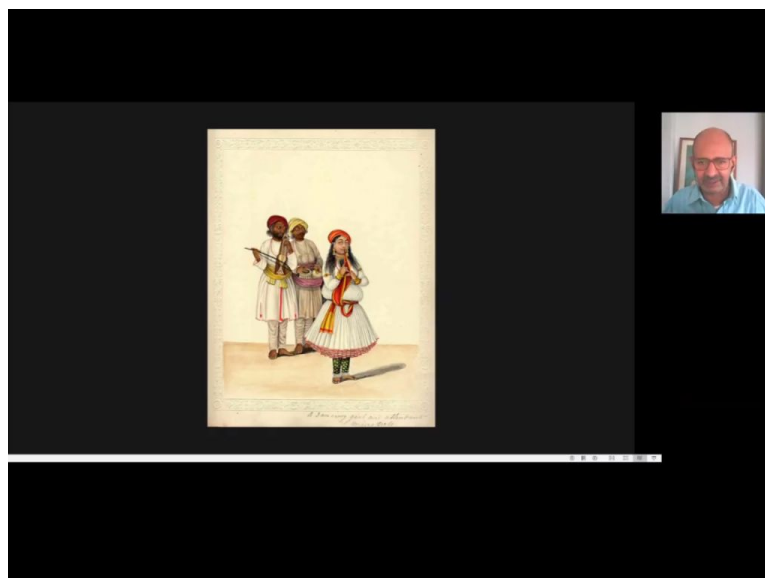
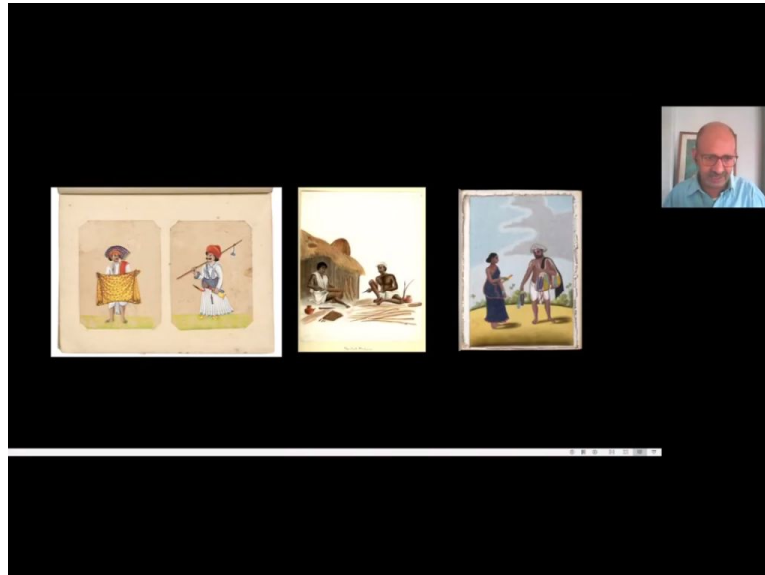


Now, as you can already see in these images that we have just seen that the subject matters have got nothing to do with anything mythological or religious. The subject matters are clearly and evidently derived from everyday life, from the Indian social and cultural and even economic activities. These are all professionals in various fields and they are doing their job.

So, in a way, these paintings are documents, visual documents of these professional people. So, there was a Hindu tailor. There was somebody who was making ropes. There will be somebody who will be making baskets. So, you have a picture of basket weavers coming up next.

Now, one important aspect that I must draw your attention to right now is whereas on the right hand painting you see that the tailor is drawn in a way, that he is seated in a place which has a background, possibly a wall like thing. Whereas the painting on the left hand side has a completely blank or neutral background. And this is quite a recurrent feature in many Company paintings where the background is completely blank or neutral or anonymous or without any specific identity.

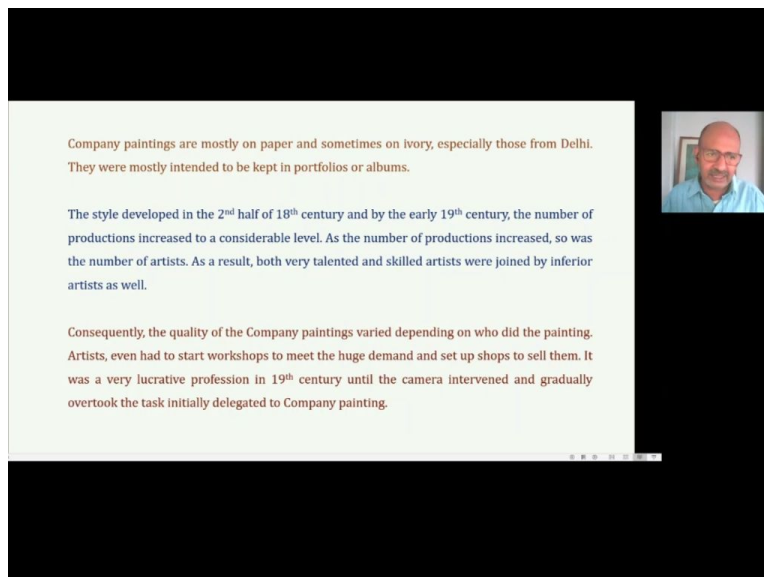
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So, in Company paintings, you see Indian people from different walks of life, the labor class, the working people, the professionals who are experts in particular jobs. For example, the basket weavers, the basket makers in the painting in the middle. Then, also these kind of moments where an Indian woman meets an Indian man who seems to be a religious figure in the sense, a pilgrim or a devout religious follower and probably the woman is trying to give him some alms or the traveling musicians who were quite common in colonial India, in 19th century India.

Here you see them being depicted. But once again, though you can see their dress, their costumes, their activities, even their look, their gaze, their ornament, jewelry in somewhat accurate details, you do not have any clue regarding their background, location, where exactly they are standing. You can even see shadows, yet you do not know anything about the background. So, this is something strange that you find occurring again and again in Company painting.

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The slide contains the following text:

Company paintings are mostly on paper and sometimes on ivory, especially those from Delhi. They were mostly intended to be kept in portfolios or albums.

The style developed in the 2nd half of 18th century and by the early 19th century, the number of productions increased to a considerable level. As the number of productions increased, so was the number of artists. As a result, both very talented and skilled artists were joined by inferior artists as well.

Consequently, the quality of the Company paintings varied depending on who did the painting. Artists, even had to start workshops to meet the huge demand and set up shops to sell them. It was a very lucrative profession in 19th century until the camera intervened and gradually overtook the task initially delegated to Company painting.

So, Company paintings are mostly on paper and sometimes on ivory, especially those from Delhi. So, they were mostly intended to be kept in portfolios or albums. And the style developed in the second half of the 18th century and by the early 19th century, the number of productions increased to a considerable level. There were Company paintings everywhere. As the number of productions increased, so was the number of artists. As a result, both very talented and skilled artists were joined by inferior artists as well.

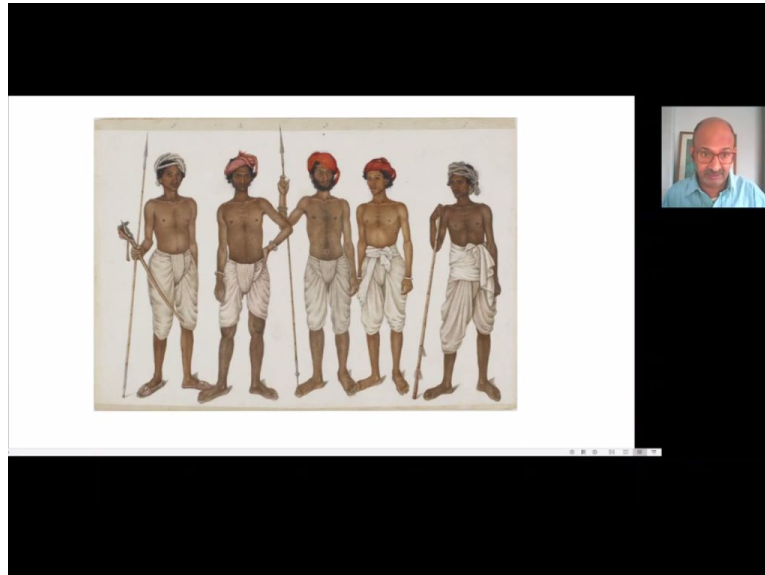
Consequently, the quality of the Company paintings varied depending on who did the painting and artists even had to start workshops to meet huge demand and set up shops to sell them. It was a very lucrative profession in the 19th century until the camera intervened and gradually overtook the task of documenting real life, delegated to Company paintings initially.

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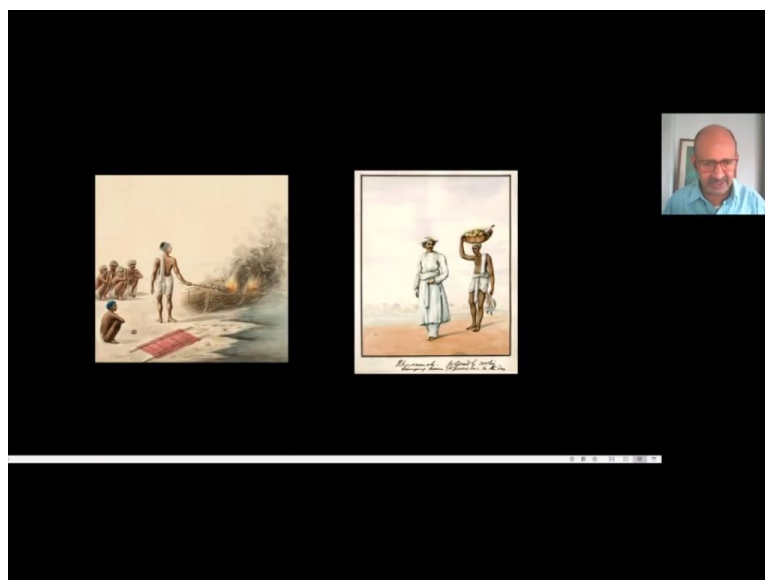
Now, let us look at some of these examples from the Company painting. Let us not miss out on this fact that how meticulously the painter here is trying to create a sense of depth and space using perspective. Perspective was hardly used in traditional Indian painting. But the Company painters are trying to use them, trying to create a sense of perspective, but they are yet to arrange and place the human figures convincingly. I mean, there is a lack of air or distance between the different human beings. They seem to be piled one upon the other. Even anatomically there might be some errors, but that is what Company painting is all about. It is not perfect, but the imperfection actually becomes a very interesting and a fascinating aspect to look at.

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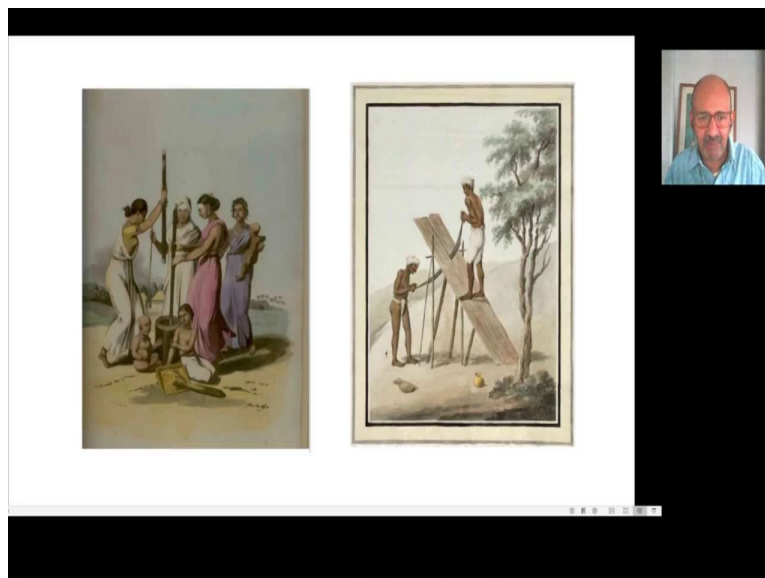
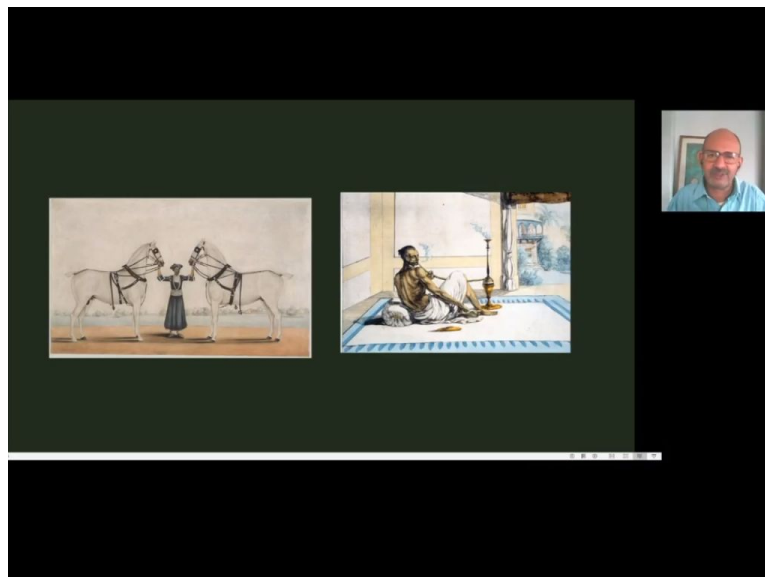
Here, of course, you see these people who seem to be like security guards, very strong young men. They have been depicted with meticulous accuracy. The artist, the painter certainly has paid great attention to the details. But again the problem remains- where are they standing? What is the context? What is the background? Nothing is shown here. So, this neutrality of the background becomes a hallmark for many Company paintings from this century late 18th and mainly 19th century.

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Sometimes like the painting on the right hand side, maybe in the horizon, there is a slight indication, suggestion of some background, but otherwise the space is left very neutral, very blank.

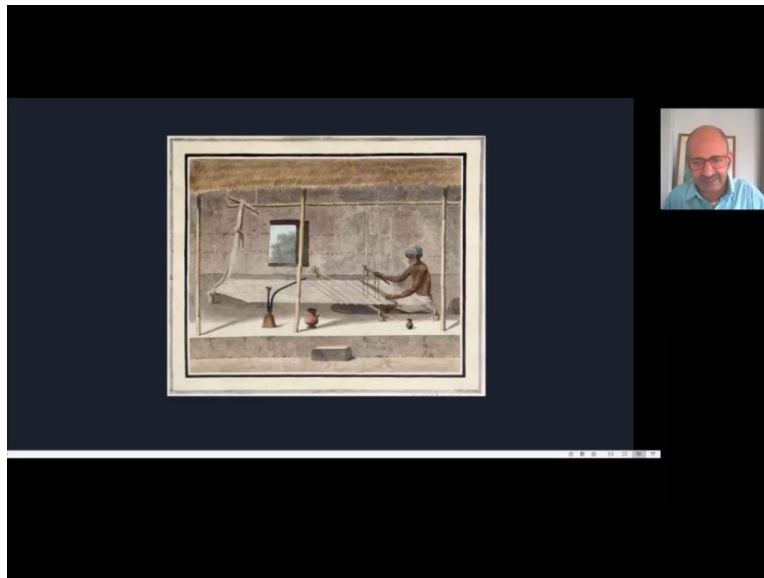
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So different kinds of professions and the depictions of these professions in a particular way, whether it is about somebody who takes care of horses or a man smoking hookah or somebody like this, take a group of women engaged with some regular life activity, domestic activity, pounding some grain maybe or some woodcutter, maybe carpenters. Now, it is very, very

interesting how now the Indian painters are paying attention in their paintings to all these details of Indian life. And thanks to the British patrons. It is because they wanted that this life should be documented that this is happening.

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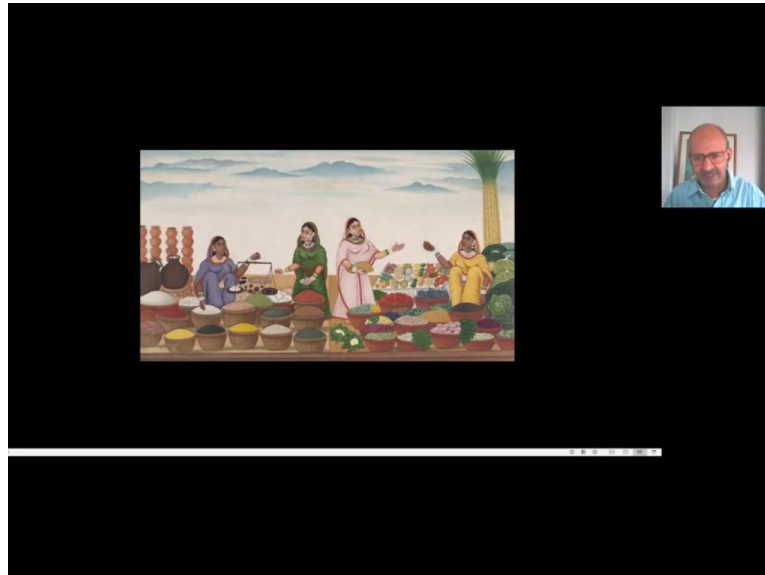
Now, there are examples like these. For example, this picture of a weaver. An old weaver seated at his loom, where the space is clearly described that there is a small hut, a thatched roof, there is a window through which you can see outside, the objects placed in front of him. So, there are examples where the background is not neutral like this one.

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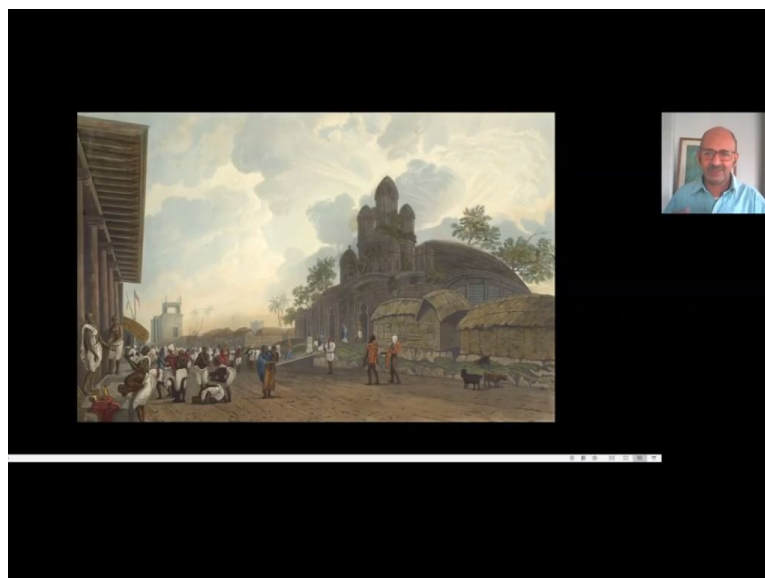
Again, palanquin and the palanquin bearers, we just do not have any idea where they are going, through which road they are going, what is the background? Of course, this lack of the background description could be slightly disturbing to us, because we do not get the clue of their location and also we do not have any narrative clue. We really do not know the story of these people. But on the other hand, they are almost like very objective documentation, visual documentation of different people engaged with different professions, where you do not want to make anything narrative about them. Straightforward, you want to simply show them associated with their specific profession.

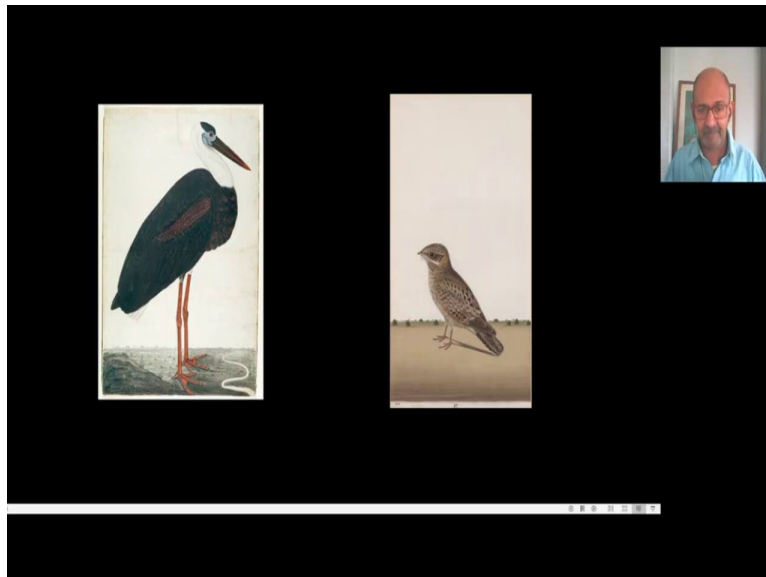
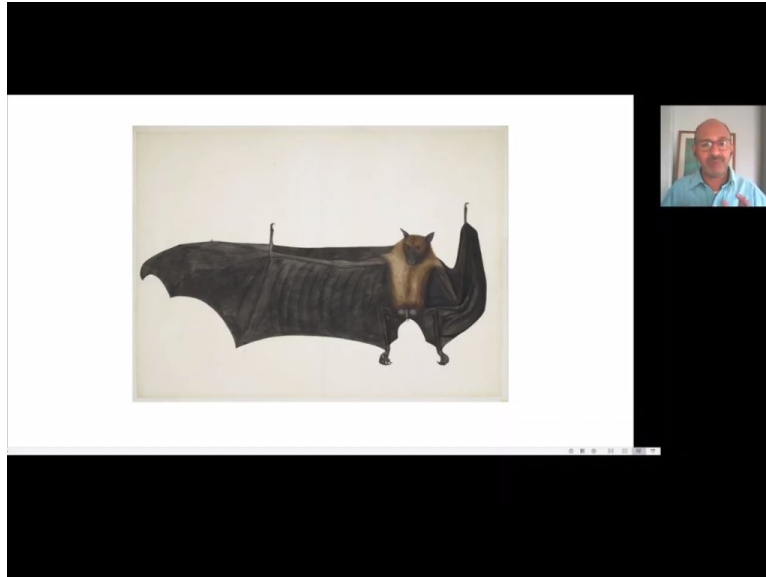
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And there are many such examples here, for example, vegetable, fruit and grocery sellers in a market. And what is interesting about this painting which you can already see is that both the sellers and the customers are all women. So, this is also a very important glimpse at a social reality of the 19th century which you may not find anywhere else, but in Company paintings.

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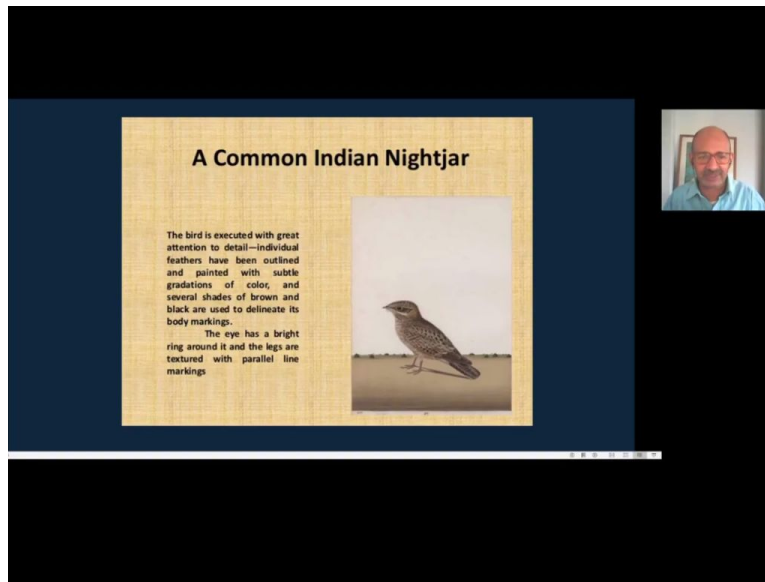


So, that is why besides our fascination for Company painting styles and all, Company paintings are very important documents for the historians, for the anthropologists, for the cultural historians and etc., because for them when there is no photograph, they can at least depend on these visual documentations and not only of people and places, but also of birds and animals like this.

In fact, this meticulous detailing of birds and animals come from the legacy of Indian Mughal painting. If you have seen any example of Mughal painting describing an animal or a bird, you would know what I am talking about. You can easily connect that this Company period painters

were actually greatly indebted to their predecessors in the Mughal painting tradition, because this meticulousness of depicting the details of birds and animals comes not from the Western academic realism, but from the Indian and specifically Mughal painting.

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So, when you look at a simple painting like this common Indian Nightjar, you can see that the bird is executed with a great attention to detail, individual feathers have been outlined and painted with subtle gradations of color and several shades of brown and black are also used to delineate its body markings. The eye has a bright ring around it, and the legs are textured with parallel line marking. So, so much to see if you look at the details of this bird.

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Important centers of Company painting are:

1. Calcutta
2. Murshidabad
3. Patna
4. Lucknow
5. Delhi
6. Madras
7. Tanjore

Well known artists from Company painting are :

1. Sewak Ram (Patna)
2. Mazhar Ali Khan (Delhi)
3. Gulam Ali Khan (Delhi)
4. Dip Chand (Murshidabad)

And many others...

Now, let me at this point say or at least mention some of the important centers of Company painting, which were Calcutta, Murshidabad, Patna, Lucknow, Delhi, Madras, and Tanjore. Then we also have names of some well known famous Company paintings with the artists from Company paintings, like Sewak Ram, who was working in Patna; Mazhar Ali Khan and Gulam Ali Khan, working in Delhi; Dip Chand working in Murshidabad.

So when you say this particular artist or these artists were working in one place, it means that place by then had emerged as a center for Company paintings, because there were people, mainly the British patrons who were patronizing. And once they collected a bunch of paintings, they would create an album. And that is how we have this famous Fraser's album in Company painting comprising the paintings that Fraser patronized and he got done by the Indian painters. So, we find most of these Company paintings in an album. But now, of course, they are dispersed. You find them in many museums and in different collections.

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Now, around this time, something very significant happens worldwide and India was also not out of it. You all know around 1840 photography started its journey, the camera was invented and photography started its journey all over the world, including India. Very soon, the camera was found to be in the hands of Indian photographers like Lala Deen Dayal and many others. They went on clicking photographs of Indian life, Indian subject matters, just the way the Company painters were doing. This is very interesting.

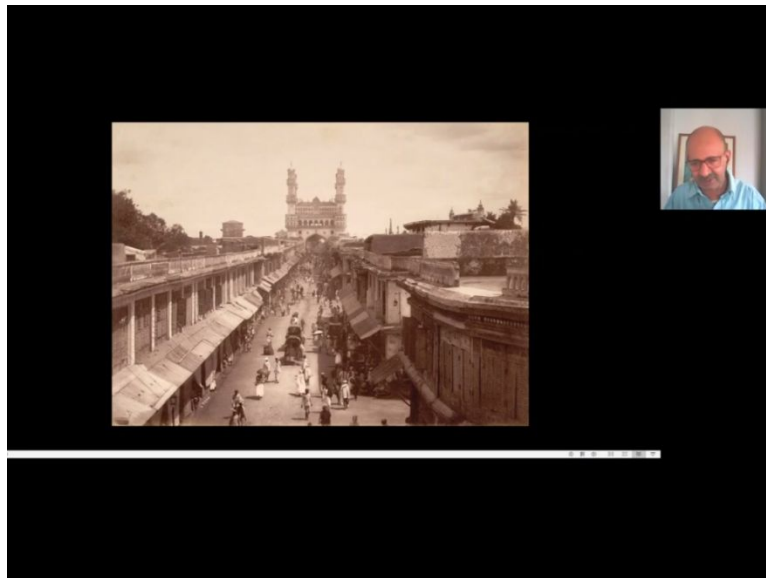
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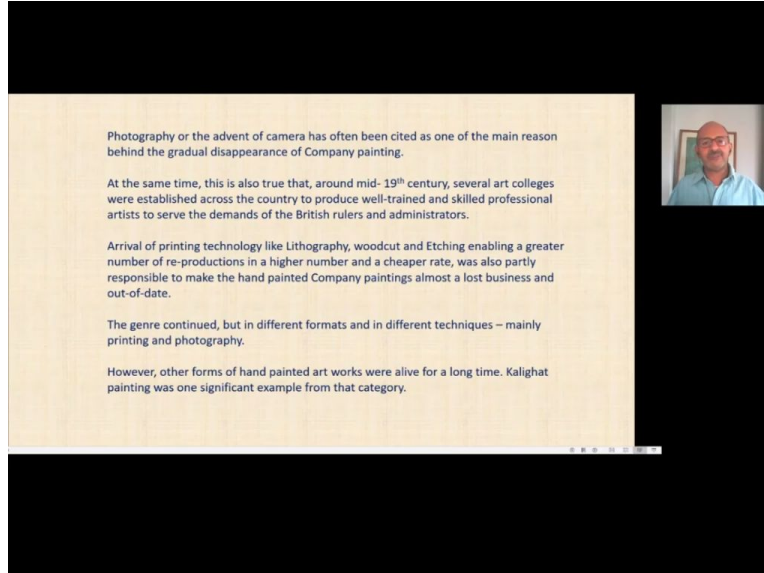
And not only photographs of landlords and Raja and Kings, but also these professional people, exactly the way the Company painters were doing or large scenarios or some events. And that is why we often have a hunch that the arrival of photography and gradual spread of photography....

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well, was that the reason, at least partly, for the decline of Company painting, because when you see these kinds of photographs, it is impossible to deny that photography was gradually or tending to gradually replace Company painting.

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Photography or the advent of camera has often been cited as one of the main reason behind the gradual disappearance of Company painting.

At the same time, this is also true that, around mid- 19th century, several art colleges were established across the country to produce well-trained and skilled professional artists to serve the demands of the British rulers and administrators.

Arrival of printing technology like Lithography, woodcut and Etching enabling a greater number of re-productions in a higher number and a cheaper rate, was also partly responsible to make the hand painted Company paintings almost a lost business and out-of-date.

The genre continued, but in different formats and in different techniques – mainly printing and photography.

However, other forms of hand painted art works were alive for a long time. Kalighat painting was one significant example from that category.

So, photography or the advent of the camera has often been cited as one of the main reasons behind the gradual disappearance of Company painting. Now, at the same time, it is also true that around the mid-19th century, several art colleges were established across the country to produce well-trained and skilled professional artists to serve the demands of the British rulers and administrators. In fact, we have evidence to say that artists or students from the artist family, traditional artist family or Company painter's family also joined this newly founded art schools in Calcutta, Madras, Bombay.

And the arrival of printing technology like lithography, woodcut, etching also created a kind of competition. So, hand painted Company paintings almost failed to compete with the technologically produced and reproduced paintings or prints of the same subject matters.

So, it is only natural, it was only a matter of time that Company painting would lose the business and it would become very out of date, but the genre continued in different formats, in different techniques and mainly in printing and photography. However, other forms of hand painted art works were alive for a long time. Kalighat painting was one of them and this is something that we shall discuss in the next lecture. So, our next lecture will be on Kalighat painting. Thank you.