

The Changing World of Visual Arts

New forms of Imperial Art: From 18 century, European artists visited India. They painted what they perceived in India. They brought with them new techniques such as oil paintings, which made painting lifelike. These new art forms were instantly adopted by Indian artists.

Looking for picturesque: In this kind of painting style, India was depicted as an unexplored land with wild and untamed landscapes. Thomas and William Daniell were two painters, who projected India in this way. Their paintings had great demand in Britain as people wanted to know about the Company's new Empire.

What happened to the Court Artists: The Court of Mysore resisted the new trends and its ruler, Tipu Sultan, encouraged local traditions such as Mural paintings on the walls. In the states conquered by the British, painters adopted the change and one such example was the use of perspective in their paintings.

The New Popular Indian Art: In the early 19th century, new popular forms of Indian art developed in various parts of India. In Bengal, local scroll painters were developed around pilgrimage centers. These painters moved to new cities and developed new art forms such as Kalighat,

The search for National Art: Nationalism also spread through the media of paintings. Many painters attempted to develop an art style that could be considered modern as well as Indian.

The Art of Raja Ravi Varma: Ravi Varma belonged to the royal house of Travancore and attempted to develop an art style that could be modern as well as national. He mastered the Western oil paintings and realistic life study, but painted scenes from Indian mythology.

A different vision of national art: A new group of nationalist artists emerged under Rabindranath Tagore. This group rejected Raja Ravi Varma's style to be considered as national. They laid emphasis on the spiritual essence of the east rather than of the west in the paintings.

A lot of changes came in the world of visual arts during the British period in India.

A colonial rule introduced many new art forms, styles, materials and techniques which were creatively adapted by Indian artists for local patrons and markets, in both elite and popular circles.

A stream of European artists, who came to India from the 18th century, brought with them new styles and new conventions of painting. The pictures that they produced shaped Western perceptions of India.

These artists introduced the idea of realizing. This was based on careful observation and the faithful depiction of scenes which they saw with their own eyes.

The technique of oil painting, which was a new thing for the Indian artists, was also introduced. This type of painting enabled artists to produce images that looked real.

The European artists chose varied subjects for their paintings but they never missed to emphasize the superiority of Britain—its culture and its people, its power.

Picturesque landscape painting was a popular imperial tradition. This style of painting depicted India as a quaint land, to be explored by traveling British artists, its landscape was rugged and wild, seemingly untamed by human hands. Thomas Daniell and his nephew William Daniell painted within this tradition. They produced of the most evocative picturesque landscapes of Britain's newly conquered regions in India.

Portrait painting was another tradition of art in colonial India. The portraits were life-size images that looked lifelike and real. The size of the paintings itself projected the importance of the patrons who commissioned these portraits.

Portrait painting became famous. As a result many European portrait painters came to India in search of profitable commissions. The name of Johann Zoffany is worth-mentioning in this connection.

The third category of imperial art is known as history painting. This tradition sought to dramatise and recreate various episodes of British imperial history.

British victories in India provided a rich material for history painters in Britain. These paintings once again celebrated the British, their power, their victories, their supremacy.

Imperial history paintings sought to create a public memory of imperial triumphs.

Different courts had different trends. In Mysore, Tipu Sultan not only fought the British on the battlefield but also resisted the cultural traditions associated with them. He continued to encourage local traditions and had the walls of his palace at Seringapatam covered with rural paintings done by local artists.

The court of Murshidabad had a different trend. Here, after defeating Sirajuddaulah the British had successfully installed their puppet Nawabs (Mir Zafar and Mir Qasim)

on the throne. The court at Murshidabad encouraged local miniature artists to absorb the tastes and artistic styles of the British.

As the British established their power in India, several local courts lost their influence and wealth. They could no longer support painters and pay them to paint for the court. As a result, many painters turned to the British, who welcomed them.

British officials wanted images through which they could understand India, remember their life in India and depict India to the Western world. Local painters got work. They began producing a vast number of images of local plants and animals, historical buildings and monuments, festivals and processions, trades and crafts, castes and communities. As these pictures were collected by the East India Company officials, they became famous as Company paintings.

There were also painters who were not associated with any court. These painters developed a new world of popular art in many of the cities of India during the 19th century.

In Bengal, around the pilgrimage center of the temple of Kalighat, local village scroll painters and potters began developing a new style of art. They moved from the surrounding villages into Calcutta in the early 19th century in the life of new patrons and new buyers of their art.

Before the 19th century, the village potters and painters had painted on mythological themes and produced images of gods and goddesses. But the images were not realistic and lifelike.

After the 1840s, they began producing paintings on social and political themes.

Many of these Kalighat pictures were printed in large numbers and sold in the market. In the beginning, the images were engraved in wooden blocks. The carved block was inked, pressed against paper, and then the woodcut prints that were produced were colored by hand. In this way many copies could be produced from the same block.

By the late 19th century, mechanical printing presses were established which allowed prints to be produced in even larger numbers. As a result, these prints became accessible for the poor too.

Middle-class Indian artists also set up printing presses and produced prints for a wide market.

With the spread of nationalism, popular prints of the early 20th century began carrying nationalist messages. In many of them one can see Bharat Mata appearing

as goodness carrying the national flag, or nationalist heroes sacrificing their head to the Mata, and gods and goddesses slaughtering the British.

The images of India were produced by photographers too.

European photographers traveled to India and took pictures. They set up studios and established photographic societies to promote the art of photography.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the painters began to develop a style that could be considered both modern and Indian.

Raja Ravi Verma was one of the first artists who created such a style. He mastered the Western art of oil painting and realistic life study but painted themes from Indian mythology. His mythological paintings became popular among Indian princes and art collectors.

However, the nationalist artists in Bengal did not approve the art of Ravi Verma because it was imitative and westernized. They declared that such a style was unsuitable for depicting the nation's ancient myths and legends. They felt that a true Indian style of painting had to draw inspiration from non-western art traditions and try to capture the spiritual essence of the East.

They broke away from the convention of oil painting and the realistic style and turned to for inspiration to medieval Indian traditions of miniature painting and the ancient art of mural painting in the Ajanta caves.

Convention: It refers to a norm or style that has been accepted.

Engraving: It refers to a picture printed onto paper from a piece of wood or metal into which the design or drawing has been cut.

Picturesque: Scene.

Portrait: It is a picture of a person in which the face and its expression is prominent.

Portraiture: It is an art of making portraits.

Commission: Choosing someone to do a special piece of work usually against payment.

Mural: It is a wall painting.

Perspective: The way that objects appear smaller when they are further away and the way parallel lines appear to meet each other at a point in the distance.

Scroll painter: One who does painting on a long roll of paper that could be rolled up.

Life study: It is the study of human figures from living models who pose for artists