

The Role of Indian Paintings in Shaping Cultural Identity of India

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Abstract

This research paper excavates the pivotal role of Indian paintings in crystallizing the cultural identity of India, traversing the labyrinthine corridors of art, history, and philosophy. Through a critical analysis of diverse painting traditions including Buddhist, Jain, Hindu and Composite, this study delineates the iconographic, symbolic, and narrative strategies employed by Indian artists to convey the nation's cultural ethos. By examining the intersections of artistic expression, mythological themes, and historical contexts, this research illuminates the ways in which Indian paintings have reinforced cultural values and traditions and fostered national pride and identity.

Keywords: Indian paintings, Cultural identity, Buddhist paintings, Jain paintings, Hindu paintings, Composite paintings

Methodology: Qualitative analysis of Primary sources (paintings, texts, and artifacts) and Secondary sources (art historical literature, cultural studies).

Introduction

“Just as Sumeru is the foremost among mountains,
Just as Ganga is the foremost among rivers,
Just as the Sun is the foremost among heavenly bodies,
Just as Garuda is the king of the birds,
Just as Indra is the foremost among gods,
so is painting the foremost among skills

This was spoken by Brahma, the Hindu god of creation in a book titled Chitralakshana, written in early fourth century AD¹.

"Indian paintings serve as vibrant windows into the nation's rich cultural tapestry, intricately weaving together the threads of tradition, heritage, and identity. With each delicate brushstroke and bold colour choice, these visual masterpieces breathe life into the customs, myths, and legends that define India's diverse populace. From the majestic epics of the Ajanta and Ellora caves to the delicate miniatures of the Mughal era, Indian paintings have long been the unsung narrators of the country's storied past.

As dynamic representations of India's cultural DNA, these paintings not only showcase the nation's artistic prowess but also convey the values, beliefs, and practices that have shaped its people across centuries. They are testaments to the resilience and diversity of Indian culture, reflecting the ever-changing tapestry of its history, mythology, and everyday life. By examining the narratives embedded within these paintings,

we unlock a deeper understanding of India's multifaceted identity and the enduring power of art to capture the essence of a nation."

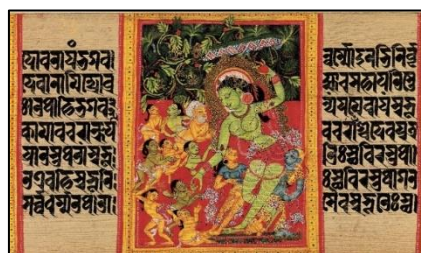
Buddhist Paintings



Fig. 1. Bodhisattva Padmapani, Cave 1, Ajanta Caves, Maharashtra, India

The Indian mural tradition had a profound impact on Buddhist painting, society, and cultural values. Buddhist murals, particularly those in the Ajanta Caves, exemplify the synthesis of art, spirituality, and narrative. These murals visualized Buddhist scriptures, illustrating the life of Buddha and Jataka tales, which not only conveyed moral teachings but also reflected the socio-cultural context of ancient India. The murals' intricate compositions, vibrant colours, and emotive expressions infused Buddhist philosophy into the fabric of Indian society (Fig. 1¹)ⁱⁱ, influencing cultural values such as compassion, non-violence, and spiritual pursuit.

The murals also played a significant role in disseminating Buddhist ideas beyond India, as seen in the influence of Indian art on Southeast Asian and Tibetan Buddhist art. The depiction of Buddha's life cycles and mythical narratives reinforced the importance of karma, rebirth, and enlightenment, shaping the worldview of Buddhist practitioners. Furthermore, the manuscript paintings emphasis on feminine energy (Fig. 2²)^{iiiiiv}, as embodied in goddess figures, underscored the significance of female spirituality and agency in Buddhist thought.



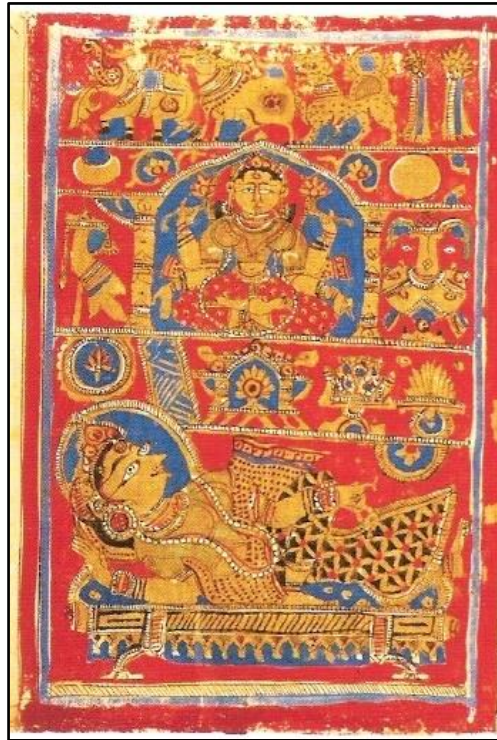
(Fig. 2) Green Tara Dispensing Boons to Ecstatic Devotees: Folio from a Manuscript of the Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom) Mahavihara Master early 12th century

¹ "The Bodhisattva Padmapani mural is one of the later murals, and it is regarded as an excellent example of the style of that era. It shows an unprecedented attempt at realism, which was uncharacteristic of Indian painting at that time. The artist understood the use of light and shade in order to stress the importance of the protagonist. The natural pigments of green, black, and red were painted onto an added surface of lime plaster. The thin, black outlines of the figure as well as the delicate treatment of the face result in a deep, emotional, overall effect".

² "Tara, a bodhisattva of compassion and protection, is shown dispensing boons to the surrounding devotees, as indicated by her lower hand held in Varada mudra. From the tips of her fingers, she drips nectar into the mouth of the hungry ghost (preta) who sits below, his belly swollen because of starvation. Unlike the male bodhisattvas in palm-leaf illuminations, she is presented in a dynamic twisting posture that emphasizes the volumes of her body and shows clear connections with the larger pan-Indian goddess traditions".

Sociologically, the murals facilitated dialogue between Buddhist monks, patrons, and artisans, fostering a sense of community and shared cultural identity. The patronage of Buddhist art by Indian rulers and merchants reflected the intersection of politics, economy, and spirituality, demonstrating the integral role of art in ancient Indian society. The murals' aesthetic appeal, symbolic language, and narrative power continue to inspire artistic expression, scholarly inquiry, and spiritual reflection, testifying to the enduring legacy of India's great mural tradition.

Jain Paintings



(Fig. 3) Queen Trishla, Mahavira's mother has 14 auspicious dreams. Folio 4 from Kalpasutra series, loose leaf manuscript, Patan, Gujarat. c. 1472.

Jain painting is a vital component of Indian art, showcasing the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of Jainism through vibrant and intricate artworks. These paintings reflect the core principles and mythology of Jainism, emphasizing non-violence, self-liberation, and spiritual enlightenment. The artworks beautifully depict enlightened beings, known as Tirthankaras, especially Mahavira and Parshvanatha, in meditation or preaching poses, symbolizing spiritual guidance.

Intricate geometric patterns, or cosmic diagrams, represent the universe and the path to spiritual liberation, while scriptural illustrations bring Jain texts like the Kalpasutra (Fig. 3^{3v})^{vi} to life. Divine creatures from

³ "According to Jain mythology, Trishala Mata, the mother of Lord Mahavira, experienced 14 extraordinary dreams during her pregnancy, foretelling the arrival of a remarkable being. These prophetic visions signalled that her child would possess exceptional strength, courage, and virtues, destined for greatness as a spiritual leader or monarch. The dreams intimated that he would rejuvenate the religious order, guiding all sentient beings toward liberation and salvation, ultimately achieving enlightenment himself.

The 14 auspicious dreams that revealed Lord Mahavira's destiny were: A majestic elephant, symbolizing strength and wisdom. A powerful bull, representing courage and resilience. A regal lion, embodying fearlessness and spiritual authority. Goddess Laxmi, bestowing divine Favor and prosperity. A resplendent garland, signifying spiritual growth and inner beauty. A full moon, illuminating the path to enlightenment. Radiant sunlight, representing wisdom and guidance. A majestic flag flying on a golden staff, heralding victory and leadership. A golden vase filled with crystal-clear water, symbolizing spiritual nourishment. A serene lake filled with lotuses, representing spiritual growth and self-realization. The vast ocean, signifying depth and spiritual expansiveness. A celestial plane,

Jain mythology, including gods, goddesses, and mythical beings, are also prominently featured. The paintings are characterized by vivid colours, geometric patterns, and ornate details, creating a sense of spiritual energy.

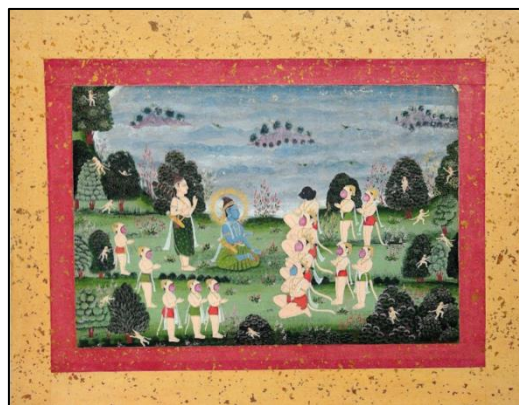
Regional styles, such as Rajasthani, Pahari, and Gujarat miniature paintings, contribute to the diversity of Jain art. These styles have flourished in Western India, particularly in Gujarat and Rajasthan, where Jainism has a significant presence, dating back to the 11th century. The influence of Jain painting can be seen in other Indian art forms, such as miniature painting and manuscript illustration.

Today, Jain paintings (Fig. 4)^{4vii} are preserved in museums and private collections worldwide, with ongoing conservation efforts to protect and digitize these valuable artworks. As a testament to India's rich cultural diversity and spiritual heritage, Jain painting continues to inspire artistic and cultural appreciation, promoting understanding of Jainism's rich heritage. Its unique blend of artistic elegance and spiritual significance ensures its enduring legacy.



(Fig. 4) Harinaigamasin with Trishala

Hindu Paintings



(Fig.5) Scene from Ramayana, 1775/1799 AD, Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad

connecting to the divine and spiritual ascension. A treasure trove of jewels, representing spiritual wealth and enlightenment. Smokeless fire, purifying and transforming the soul”.

⁴ “This painting depicts Harinaigamasin, depicted with a human body and head of an antelope, Commander of Infantry of Sakra (Lord Indra of the heavens), who is approaching Trishala to exchange the embryo of Mahavira formed in the womb of Brahmani Devananada, wife of Rishabhadatta, with that in the womb of Trishala. Sakra knows by his powers that Mahavira has descended on earth, and since all “tirthankaras” are born only in families of the ruling Kshatriya caste, this task is carried out”.

Hinduism's profound impact on Indian society and culture is palpable in its resplendent artistic legacy, particularly in painting. The sacred Hindu scriptures - the Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads, and epic narratives like the Ramayana⁵ (Fig. 5⁶)^{viii} and Mahabharata - have catalysed an efflorescence of artistic expression, inspiring Indian artists to create masterworks that encapsulate the spiritual, philosophical, and cultural essence of Hinduism. These texts have informed the thematic concerns, iconographic motifs, and symbolic lexicon of Indian painting, yielding a visual idiom that transcends the mundane.

The majestic pantheon of Hindu deities, avatars, and mythological events has been rendered in an array of artistic mediums, including miniature paintings, murals, and temple sculptures, showcasing the technical virtuosity and creative genius of Indian painters. These artworks not only convey complex spiritual and moral paradigms but also epitomize the synthesis of aesthetics and spirituality.

The indelible influence of Hindu texts is evident in the chromatic intensity, ornate patterns, and iconic imagery that characterize Indian art. Vibrant colour palettes, intricate geometries, and hieratic compositions coalesce to convey the cultural values of dharma (duty), karma (action), and moksha (liberation), perpetuating these principles across generations.

Through these paintings, Hinduism has facilitated a profound engagement with its philosophical underpinnings, mythological narratives (Fig. 6⁷)^{ix}, and symbolic vocabulary, thereby enriching Indian society and culture. Moreover, Hindu paintings have played a pivotal role in preserving and disseminating India's cultural heritage, influencing art forms across the subcontinent and beyond, and cementing their status as an enduring testament to the nation's artistic and spiritual patrimony.

⁵ "Ramayana has been depicted in many paintings, notably by Indian artists. The story and episodes of Ramayana have been captured on various media like textile, rock, stone, terracotta, and wood, ivory and in miniature paintings from different Schools of India. There is a Ramayana panel on the staircase at Kailasa temple, Ellora, Maharashtra, intricately carved. The Solar Jung Museum has an interesting collection on depiction of episodes from the various parts of the Ramayana. The media are also various and include, textile, terracotta, metal, wood, ivory, miniatures and modern paintings on paper. There are also dispersed pages of illustrated manuscripts depicting the epic".

⁶ "Painting to represent meeting with the monkeys who are seated and standing before Rama and Lakshmana and some monkeys are on the mango trees. The monkey army offers to help find Sita in the epic who has been kidnapped".

⁷ "When the atrocities of Mathura's King Kamsa became unbearable, the gods pleaded with Lord Vishnu to relieve them of the tyrannical king. He assured them that he would incarnate as Krishna - Devaki's son. In this painting, Krishna the Saviour is saving the people of Braj from the wrath of Indra. Every year the people of Braj performed sacrifices to appease Indra. Krishna opposed this sacrifice and this greatly infuriated Indra. There was chaos everywhere and Braj was in deluge. The people of Braj prayed to Krishna for help. He raised Mount Govardhana on his little finger like a great big umbrella so that all the people and animals could take refuge. The torrential rain continued for seven days and nights. Finally, Indra's pride was humbled and he realized that Krishna was none other than Lord Vishnu. He came down from the heavens with Devasurabhi (cow of the Devas) and bowed down to Krishna in humiliation proclaiming Krishna as the Supreme Lord. Krishna was thus given the title of Govardhan Dhari or the one who lifted Mount Govardhan. Here, Indra's pride is shown as being humbled by Krishna, who is holding the mighty mountain on the tip of his finger, and Indra is paying obeisance to Krishna.

This painting from Jaipur depicts the scene very aptly. Dark grey clouds cover the skies, and there is only darkness. After Indra's surrender, the clouds that hide the sunlight break open and the sun begins to emerge above the mountain guaranteeing a brighter future. Uprooted trees can also be seen in the floodwaters of the River Yamuna. Despite being crowded, this composition is highly impressive. On one side stand all the men with Nanda and Yashodha, and on the other Radha and all the women with their children. Krishna, in yellow garments, stands in the centre of the mountain and is encircled by a glowing aura. The animals - cows, rabbits, birds, peacocks and snakes all turn their heads towards Krishna in adulation.

This theme has been popular for centuries. The bright colours of the costumes contrasted with the deep green colour of the flora in the foreground and background is meticulously rendered. The painting is surrounded by two borders - the first a thin blue border with a gold leaf pattern and the other a larger red border with a meandering floral gold pattern".



(Fig. 6) Lord Krishna Lifting Mount Govardhan, Unknown, 1800 AD, National Museum, Janpath, New Delhi

Composite Imagery

The paradigm of composite imagery in Indian painting embodies a venerable artistic tradition wherein disparate elements, forms, and figures converge to form a singular, harmonious image. This aesthetic hallmark permeates various genres of Indian art, including traditional and folk painting styles, exemplifying the syncretic and symbolic language inherent to the region's cultural narrative.

Characterized by the amalgamation of multiple figures or forms, the integration of human, animal, and divine elements, and the deployment of vibrant chromaticism and intricate details, composite imagery transcends mere representation, instead serving as a visual metaphor for the interconnectedness and unity of existence.

Exemplars of this artistic approach abound in diverse Indian painting traditions. The Pahari Miniatures of the 17th-19th centuries feature fantastical composite creatures such as the Hari-Hara and Avtaras of Vishnu, embodying the confluence of opposing forces. Similarly, Mughal Miniatures, Rajput Painting and Deccani Paintings (Fig.7⁸)^x leverage composite imagery to depict mythological scenes and fantastical creatures, while Tantric Art employs this technique to represent the union of dichotomous forces.

Folk art traditions, such as Warli and Madhubani Painting, utilize composite figures to symbolize the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, as well as the personification of mythological and spiritual concepts.

The artistic significance of composite imagery in Indian painting resides in its capacity to convey complex spiritual and philosophical ideas, while simultaneously underscoring the balance and unity inherent to existence. This aesthetic approach has influenced modern art, with contemporary Indian artists continuing to experiment with composite imagery, and its echoes visible in art movements such as Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism.

Ultimately, the composite imagery in Indian painting serves as a testament to the region's rich cultural heritage and philosophical traditions, offering a visual representation of the intricate relationships between

⁸ "Painting depicts a "Pari", an angelic figure riding a horse composed of many animals, holding the reins which are snakes. She wears a colourful costume and golden headdress".

human, animal, and divine forms, and inviting the viewer to contemplate the profound interconnectedness of all things.



(Fig. 7) 'Pari' on a composite animal, 1800-1899, Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad

Conclusion

In conclusion, the preservation of India's rich painting heritage is a testament to the nation's unwavering commitment to its cultural legacy. Through a harmonious blend of traditional techniques and modern conservation methods, India's artistic treasures are safeguarded for posterity, ensuring the continued inspiration and education of future generations. The meticulous conservation, scholarly research, and community engagement endeavours have not only protected the fragile pigments and delicate brushstrokes of Indian art but have also revitalized traditional painting styles, fostering a vibrant cultural renaissance. The arts elegantly encapsulate the essence of cultural identity, crafting a vibrant tapestry that interconnects humanity. By transcending borders and boundaries, artistry ignites an odyssey of self-discovery, pride, and intercultural appreciation, culminating in a resplendent celebration of global diversity. Through this creative symphony, individuals and communities proudly proclaim their unique heritage, contributing to the ever-unfolding narrative of human experience.

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