

## 8<sup>th</sup> – The Changing World of Visual Arts I



Art and culture represent the life and philosophy of a nation. Art consists of all creative pursuits like painting, literature, architecture, music and dance. Colonial rule introduced several 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. In India, arts traditionally thrived under the patronage of the rulers and nobles. In ancient times, art was religious in nature, though secular works were also known. During lateral medieval period, Persian and Arabic influences dominated Indian art.

**Literature:** The coming of the British influenced Indian literature, mainly in two ways- the introduction of the English language, and that of the printing press.

### The introduction of English

Before the arrival of the British, Indian literature consisted of works composed in the classical court language (Sanskrit, Persian) and in the vernacular languages (Regional or Local). It was found that neither the languages of the elite nor the vernacular language had a vocabulary rich enough to express the new western thoughts. Soon, educated Indians developed a deep interest in English literature, modern science and political ideas. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, English became the language spoken by the elite in India. Influence by western ideas of rational thought, Indian writers started raising their voice against superstition and the ill-treatment of women in Indian society.

**Indian writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century:** Raja Rammohan Roy wrote elegant prose in English. Derozio was deeply influenced by English poets like Shelley and Keats. Yet, though he wrote in English, his themes were always Indian. Most of what the Indians wrote in English related to social and political issues. Michael Madhusudan Dutt was one of the best-known Bengali writers on the time. In the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, India produced a whole new generation of writers of plays, poetry, novel and drama. They include Bankim Chandra Chatterjee who wrote Ananda Math (the song Vande Matram is from this novel), Munshi Premchand (who wrote Godan) and Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay (who wrote Pather Panchali).

**The Printing Press:** In India, till the 16<sup>th</sup> century, manuscripts were handwritten and hence not freely available. Access to literature and written manuscripts was restricted to the elite few in society. In 1557, the Portuguese introduced the printing press in India, to help in the printing of Christian religious literature. Soon printing presses came up in several parts of the country. This revolutionised Indian literature. From being restricted to a handful of people, books were now available cheaply to all. The printing press also played a vital role in the spread of the freedom struggle. Several freedom fighters and social reformers set up printing presses from which they brought out newspapers and spread their revolutionary ideas. Newspapers such as the 'Sambad Kaumudi' started by Raja Rammohan Roy in 1821 and 'Kesari' started by Lokmanya Tilak in 1881 had a powerful influence on the people, awakening them to ideas of social reform and nationalism.

**New forms of imperial art:** From the eighteenth century a stream of European artists came to India along with the British traders and rulers. The artists brought with them new styles and new conventions of painting. They began producing pictures which became widely popular in Europe and helped shape western perceptions of India. European artists brought with them the idea of realism. This

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was a belief that artists had to observe carefully and depict faithfully what the eye saw. What the artist produced was expected to look real and lifelike. European artists also brought with them the technique of oil painting- a technique with which Indian artists were not very familiar. Oil painting enabled artist to produce image that looked real.

**Looking for the picturesque:** One popular imperial tradition was that of picturesque landscape painting. What was the picturesque? This style of painting depicted India as a quaint land, to be explored by travelling British artists; its landscape was rugged and wild, seemingly untamed by human hands. Thomas Daniel and his nephew William Daniel were the most famous of the artists who painted within this tradition. They came to India in 1785 and stayed for seven years, journeying from Calcutta to northern and southern India. They produced some of the most evocative picturesque landscape of Britain's newly conquered territories in India. Their large oil paintings on canvas were regularly exhibited to select audiences in Britain, and their albums of engravings were eagerly bought up by a British public keen to know about Britain's empire.

The image of British rule bringing modern civilization to India is powerfully emphasized in the numerous pictures of late- eighteenth-century Calcutta drawn by the Daniel's. In these drawings one can see the making of a new Calcutta, with wide avenues, majestic European-style buildings, and new modes of transport.

**Art:** British rule in India left a lasting impact on Indian Artists and their painting - the use of watercolors and oil paints was introduced in India for the first time. There was a shift in subject matter from the depiction of court scenes and aristocratic portraits to the depiction of ordinary people and their lives. When Indian artists lost the patronage of the rulers and the nobles with the coming of the British, they were forced to move away from capital towns and the cities in search of jobs. Many went to British settlements and hoped to get British patronage. Initially they were employed in decorating houses and drawing maps. Later, the British employed them to paint picture postcards of exotic Indian festivals and ceremonies to be sent to their relatives and friends back home. Influenced by the European style of painting, some Indian painters also moved away from the rigid 2dimensional lines of traditional Indian art to be more realistic and fluidic. Raja Ravi Varma (1848 - 1906) the painter from Travancore experimented with oil on canvas.

**Portraits of authority:** Another tradition of art that became immensely popular in colonial India was portrait painting. The rich and the powerful, both British and Indian, wanted to see themselves on canvas. Unlike the existing Indian tradition of painting portraits in miniature, colonial 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. This new style of portraiture also served as an ideal means of displaying the lavish lifestyles, wealth and status that the empire generated. A portrait painting became popular, many European portrait painters came to India in search of profitable commissions. One of the most famous of the visiting European painters was Johann Zofanny. He was born in Germany, migrated to England and came to India in the mid-1780s for five years. Many of the Indian nawabs too began commissioning imposing oil portraits by European painters. Later on the British posted residents in Indian courts and began

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controlling the affairs of the state, undermining the power of the king. Some of these nawabs reacted against this interference; others accepted the political and cultural superiority of the British. They hoped to socialize with the British, and adopt styles and tastes. Muhammad Ali Khan was one such nawab. After a war with the British in the 1770s he became a dependant pensioner of the East India company. But he nonetheless commissioned two visiting European artists, Tilly Kettle and George Willison, to paint his portraits, and gifted these paintings to the king of England and the directors of the east India company. The nawab had lost political power, but the portraits allowed him to look at himself as a royal figure.

