

8th – The Changing World of Visual Arts II



Painting history: There was a third category of imperial art, called “history painting”. British victories in India served as rich material for history painters in Britain. These painters drew on first-hand sketches and accounts of travelers to depict for the British public a favorable image of British actions in India. These paintings once again celebrated the British: their power, their victories, their supremacy. One of the first of these history paintings was produced by Francis Hayman in 1762 and placed on public display in the Vauxhall gardens in London. The British had just defeated Sirajuddaulah in the famous battle of Plassey and installed Mir Jafar as the Nawab of Murshidabad. It was a victory won through conspiracy, and the traitor Mir Jafar was awarded the title of Nawab. In the painting by Hayman this act of aggression and conquest is not depicted. It shows Lord Clive being welcomed by Mir Jafar and his troops after the battle of Plassey.

What Happened to the Court Artists? One can see different trends in different courts. 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 mural paintings done by local artists. This painting celebrates the famous Battle of Polilur of 1780 in which Tipu and Haider Ali defeated the troops.

With the establishment of British power many of the local courts lost their influence and wealth. At the same time, British officials, who found the world in the colonies different from that back home, wanted images through which they could understand India, remember their life in India, and depict India to the western world. So, we find local painters producing a vast number of images of local plants and animals, historical buildings and monuments, festivals and processions, trades and crafts, castes and communities. These pictures, eagerly collected by the East India Company officials, came to be known as company paintings.

The New Popular Indian Art: In the nineteenth century a new world of popular art developed in many of the cities of India.

In Bengal, around the pilgrimage centre of the temple of Kalighat, local village scroll painters (called Patuas) and potters (called Kumors in eastern India and Kumhars in North India) began developing villages into Calcutta in the early nineteenth century. This was a time when the city was expanding as a commercial and administrative centre. Colonial offices were coming up, new buildings and roads were being built, markets were being established. The city appeared as a place of opportunity where people could come to make a new living. Village artists too came and settled in the city in the hope of new patrons and new buyers of their art.

Many of these Kalighat pictures were printed in large numbers and sold in the market. Initially, the images were engraved in wooden blocks. The carved block was inked, pressed against paper, and then the woodcut prints that were produced were coloured by hand. By the late-nineteenth century, mechanical printing presses were set up in different parts of India, which allowed prints to be produced in even larger numbers. These prints could therefore be sold cheap in the market. Even the poor could buy them.

The search for a National Art: Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a stronger connection was established between art and nationalism.

8th – The Changing World of Visual Arts II



The art of Raja Ravi Varma: Raja Ravi Varma was one of the first artists who tried to create a style that was both modern and national. Ravi Varma belonged to the family of the Maharajas of Travancore in Kerala, and was addressed as Raja. He mastered the western art of oil painting and realistic life study, but painted themes from Indian mythology. He dramatized on canvas, scene after scene from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, drawing on the theatrical performances of mythological stories that he witnessed during his tour of the Bombay presidency. From the 1880s, Ravi Varma's mythological paintings became the rage among Indian princes and art collectors, who filled their palace galleries with his works.

Art School The British government started art school in India to teach Indians the European style of painting. Which the British thought to be far superior to the traditional methods followed till then. But their attempts were not successful for a long time.

Architecture: In the beginning of the 18th century, Indians continued to follow the existing Hindu and Mughal style of architecture. Palaces, place of worship and house were built in this style. The colonization of India by the Europeans had an impact on architecture too, as it did on other facets of Indian art. Of all the Europeans, the British had the greatest impact on Indian architecture. They, like the Mughals, used architecture as a statement of power. The British introduced elements of various styles of architecture into India, such as:

- The classical Greek style, which included the use of grand columns.
- Gothic (medieval) architecture, which involved the use of sharply pointed arches, soaring spires or towers, and stained glass windows.

The British style came to be called the indo-Saracenic style of architecture, which was a blend of the Hindu, Islamic and western style of architecture. Colonial architecture in India included institutional, civic and utilitarian buildings such as post offices, railway stations, rest house and government building. These buildings were erected in large numbers across the subcontinent. The British also built factories, forts, churches, schools and dak bungalows. Most of these were built in a practical style using brick and were painted over with lime. Greater attention was paid to the building of churches and public buildings like those at universities, courts and municipal halls.

