All eyes on India
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Full Text:

If you have never before encountered a painting by traditional artists of the Indian subcontinent you are likely to be delighted when you see your first one. This is especially true if you are tired of endless scenes of Dutch landscapes, Renaissance Madonnas, pop art and the many abstractions that come pouring from the brushes of American and European painters.

Manuscript Painting from 1100-1500

The earliest surviving examples of the art of India are Buddhist manuscript pages from monasteries and date from around 1100. These were created on palm leaves by Buddhist monk artists in Bengal, today's Bangladesh. Most were opaque watercolors illustrating either scenes from the life of Buddha or scenes from Buddhist mythology.

You are likely to notice differences with Western art in addition to the opaque watercolors used. For example, Indian artists did not know how to handle perspective, so there is a certain flatness to their compositions. But the coloring is absolutely magnificent. The greens and yellows especially have a richness often absent in Western art. You will notice that many of the gods are rendered in a deep blue. There is a reason for this. A woman demon tried to poison the god Krishna, but he sucked her dry without in any way doing harm to himself, and the milk of her poison turned him blue.

In addition to portraying the lives of the aristocrats, native Indian painters pioneered the art of botanical and animal illustration with deer, a variety of birds, and of course, the ubiquitous elephants and tigers as their subject matter.

The Mughals: Invaders of the Subcontinent

The Mughals were the rulers of much of India from 1536 to 1858 but their origin was Persian. Consequently, Mughal period paintings, murals and manuscripts offer a unique blend of Indian, Persian and Islamic styles. The Mughals religion which was Muslim is especially important in present day Asia and ultimately led to the creation of Pakistan and Bangladesh.

When the Mughals came to India they were accompanied by a full complement of scribes and artisans. Although the Mughals were Muslim, their Indian subjects were Hindus. Upon completion of the Mughal conquest they began recruiting native Indian craftsmen and architects. Artists accompanied the Mughals when they went hunting or engaged in military adventures of various types. Artists also captured other events in the rulers' lives including the visits of neighboring nabobs (rulers) on foot or horseback, or in the audience chamber.

The capital of the Mughal empire was in Agra, where the Taj Mahal stands today. There as you probably know, the wife of one of the Mughal emperors, Shah Jahan, is buried. The most famous of the Mughal emperors was Akbar, a progressive and visionary man who encouraged cultural pursuits and innovation. Among his many accomplishments Akbar created sumptuous gardens and luxurious residences. By the time he died in 1605 the course of India's artistic future was assured.

In images produced after 1536 AD, you are likely to encounter Rajahs (the Indian equivalents of counts and princes) on horseback hunting tigers, elephants and other wild animals. Artists painted in superb gouaches in which water colors are mixed with a zinc compound to give a characteristic dense appearance. The horses have elegant saddles, stirrups and other trappings. The hunting scenes depicted usually take place in a mountainous landscape, luscious with flowers and meadows. Or you might see Rajahs courting their ladies on elegant balconies or in the splendor of palatial gardens.
The Influence of Hinduism and Classical Tales

It would be incorrect to assume that the Mughals were in full control of the subcontinent. Independent rulers (Maharajahs) were ensconced in the Himalayan foothills and the Punjab. They, of course, had their own entourages and produced art that differed from that sponsored by the Mughals. Among the Indian courts that were not ruled by the Mughals and which produced outstanding gouaches, miniatures, manuscripts and murals were Mewar, Bikaner, Guler and Bundi.

Hindu art was often based on mythology and folklore. Museum paintings demonstrate this regional influence. For the most part they tell the stories of the great Hindu gods. They often involve Vishnu, one of the principal deities in the Hindu pantheon. Vishnu is typically depicted in the person of Krishna, a prince who is shown in blue, wearing a crown as well as exquisitely made garments. Krishna is often seen courting the beautiful Radha, who is not a princess, but a cowgirl. Because cows are sacred in Hinduism, Radha's portrayal as a cowgirl seems perfectly appropriate. The happy young pair seems always to be in search of one another in mysterious woods, meadows and along calm streams.

The Bhagavad-Gita is a religious text written in Sanskrit, which is the standard classical language of ancient India. Hundreds of colorful images found in Indian miniatures and gouaches are based on the themes and stories that originated in the Bhagavad-Gita.

The Ramayama, a classic Indian tale of treachery and deceit, also provides favorite themes for the region's arts. It relates the story of Rama, a ruler who was toppled from his throne, and who goes into exile with his wife Sita. The couple seeks refuge in the allied kingdom of the monkeys. The chief of the monkeys frees Sita who has been abducted by the enemy and helps Rama return to his throne.

Yet another area on which Indian artists have concentrated is the Ragamala. It is an art form dating back to the Middle Ages. It represents an amalgamation of poetry, art and music and is interpreted through special paintings or drawings. Most ragamalas present musicians playing ancient instruments. They have a folkloric quality about them, concentrating on love scenes as well as the joyous seasons, such as the time of the spring rains. Women are shown weaving textiles or preparing food. Wrestlers and acrobats perform. Magicians conjure the world of make belief.

Producing Miniatures and Watercolor Images

The processes involved in creating the characteristic Indian miniature paintings were developed many centuries ago and are still followed to this day. The basic steps begin with the creation of special papers, several sheets of which are laminated together with a binding medium. A sketch of the drawing is then worked in outline form with a charcoal stick or brush. When all details have been rendered, a coat of white primer is applied. The paper is then turned over and the back side is burnished with shell or agate stone. A master painter will then take over, refining every color, burnishing gold highlights and adding trim. Very fine tools are used to apply detailed effects. Among these tools are special brushes, some of which are made of squirrel tail fur. Only when the master painter is completely satisfied with his creation is it submitted to the client or his representative.

With the abolition of the sultanate system after the British conquest of India in the 1870's, many of the nabobs and maharajas sold their centuries old paintings. It was only then that Indian drawings and miniatures became available on world markets, and collectors were eager to acquire these precious images of a long ago time.

Should you live in the greater New York City area you will no doubt want to view the current exhibit of Indian art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Featuring more than 220 images of gouaches, manuscripts and drawings from 40 artists, it is the most complete exhibition you are likely to see for a long time. The works on display span a period of 800 years (1100-1900), and many are on loan from
museums across the globe. Of course, many regional museums also have fine examples of Indian art. Visit them and enjoy!

Fred Stern, a poet and writer on the arts, has written more than 40 articles on various aspects of the arts for The World & I Online since 2004. His poetry collection 'Corridors of Light' is available from Booklink.com and on the web.

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