

REFLECTIONS OF MINIATURE PAINTING IN INDIAN CULTURE; A COGNITIVE STUDY

Abstract

Nature is the best known artist. In nature's creation we see forms, but there is no out-line. The line is created by an artist. Miniature painting is an art of line. Miniature painting formally came to be known as a technique in the 17th Century AD, though it started its ovulation in the 9th century AD on palm leaves. Popularly painted subjects depicted court scenes, mythology and folklore under patronage of Indian maharajas, Indian Miniature painting, took an interesting twist under the colonial patronage from 1860s, with depiction of the common person and their life. Visually there was an amalgam of east and west, addition to a plain dull background in certain drawings. Bazaar art too gained a lot of popularity with the masses post partition in 1947.

The focus and concern of my research is & quot;Towards a Practice-based study of miniature and calligraphic Lines from the ancient art of miniature painting to contemporary times is ; based on the completion of my practice-based National Fellowship, & quot;Junior Research Fellowship for Outstanding Artist in the Field of Culture Archive" by the Ministry of Culture.

It is s an extension of a self initiated research that started in late 2014.

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"I see & think in lines.. for me a line is an emotion. It is the inner world of the artist and represents the "Bhao" in a painting.

While discussing the elements of a painting, the Chitrasutra says " The masters praise the *rekha's* –lines (delineation and articulation of form); the connoisseurs praise the display of light and shade; women like the display of ornaments; and , the richness of colors appeals to common folks. The artists, therefore, should take great care to ensure that the painting is appreciated by everyone".

Rekha cha Vartana chaiva Bhushanam Varna meva cha / vijnaya manu-sresta Chitra-karma tu Bhushanam /3.41.10 /Rekham prashamsam tya Acharyaha ,vartanam cha vichakshanaha / Stri yo Bhushanam icchanti , varnadai itare janaha / 3.41.11 /Ithi mathva tatha yatnaha karthaya chitra-karmani / sarvasya chitta-grahanam yatha sthanai manujottama / 3.41.12 /

Nature is the best known artist. In nature's creation we see forms, but there is no outline. The line is created by an artist. Miniature painting is an art of line. Miniature painting formally came to be known as a technique in the 17th Century AD, though it started its ovulation in the 9th century AD on palm leaves. Popularly painted subjects depicted court scenes, mythology and folklore under patronage of Indian maharajas, Indian Miniature painting, took an interesting twist under the colonial patronage from 1860s, with depiction of the common person and their life. Visually there was an amalgam of east and west, addition to a plain dull background in certain drawings. Bazaar art too gained a lot of popularity with the masses post partition in 1947.

The focus and concern of my research is "*Towards a Practice-based study of miniature and calligraphic Lines from the ancient art of miniature painting to contemporary times*" based on the completion of my practice-based National Fellowship, "Junior Research Fellowship for Outstanding Artist in the Field of Culture Archive" by the Ministry of Culture.

It is s an extension of a self initiated research that started in late 2014, primarily under the guidance of artist Ramu Ramdevji from Jaipur for 7 years and Vijay Sharma of Chamba for two weeks at their respective Kharkanas, also Mr Viren Bannuji of Jaipur for a brief visit.

During this period I got the opportunity to extensively study plates of the City Palace museum in Jaipur and Udaipur, Bhuri Singh Museum in Chamba, National Museum in New Delhi, State Museum Bhopal, National Gallery of modern art and private collections in Banaras, Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, Srinagar India. I also visited Karkhanas of miniature artists in the towns of Bikaner, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Ranthambore and Kishangarh in Rajasthan.

The study of mapping the lineage of linearity in miniature painting is based on strict practice, learning and observation. As a visual artist the best way possible at the time was to undertake *Guru Shishya Parama* in the *Karkhana*, I was sure I would find this more exciting and educational than enrolling in a Masters degree.

The training and research covered methodological, materialistic and technical approaches in miniature painting like preparation of natural and stone color through grinding, filtration, making adhesive i.e *babul ki gohd*, primer i.e preparation of Kharia, *wasli*, brushes, the process of grounding of paper to make the surface smooth, and concentrating on line by studying old masters. The training period also covered hands-on aspects of restoration, identification and conservation techniques in tandem to the artform.

Surprisingly, there is no provision or university in India offering courses on traditional techniques of miniature. In fact, students globally who are conducting research on miniature painting find it useful to visit *khakhanas* in India to get a better understanding as their programs offer only theoretical and historical insights.

In my four years of my research, I have interacted with art historians, researchers, curators and artists. The names include Mr, B.N Goswami, Mr. Vinay Sharma, Conversation Department of Shimla Museum, the first Nehru scholar from India), Mr. BK Kokhandr (the Assistant Curator at the Bhopal Museum, Akhilesh (artist, co-founder of Raza Foundation), Mr Sourabh Gosh (collector of miniature painting) and various others.

During this research I have observed through a personal lens and hands on experience that lines of various schools are impacted by personal, social, environmental, emotional, historical, and even biological (and\ DNA) factors.

By repetition and experimentation what starts as an accident gradually evolves into a shape of a style. In most Northern schools the angle at which furniture or architecture is drawn in the miniature painting is isometric at 30 degrees. This addition was probably introduced by an artist and subsequently developed into a style. The color palette, landscape, vegetation and animals are very cool in nature and could have been influenced by the climate and environment in the Punjab Hills.

A line is a dot which goes for a walk” is a quote which deeply inspires my artistic mind. One can close their eyes and imagine how a thought or an intent starts with a dot and goes on to form a line. Paul Klee was a draftsman first, and then a painter. He had a knack of combling lines and tonal value as one. I find his symbolic approach of line in his works very interesting.

Studying a miniature painting virtually, in print versus *visa viz* seeing the work physically upfront are two contrasting encounters. In context of the visual appeal and details like the *partash* (which is a constellation of small lines meant for shading), how the lines deviate into loops and swirls which depict the the flow of water, a cluster of swirls taking the form of clouds in the sky, two curves twining into leaves and petals in the *hashias* or borders. As mentioned in the beginning, to me a line depicts emotions and has a lineage.

Rangreet, officially the first miniature painting school in involved in teaching miniature painting and structuring courses at introductory, intermediate and advanced level in Rangreet, a miniature painting school in India started by my guru Ramu Ramdevji is where I have been actively involved in teaching miniature painting and structuring courses at introductory, intermediate and advanced levels.

Apart from this, conducting workshops to spread awareness and accessibility of miniature painting at galleries, private universities and schools of economically weak strata of society pan India has been received well and created further interest.

Miniature painting is a diminishing art form; only a miniscule fraction of researchers, scholars and artists in modern and contemporary times have taken interest in its revival. The topic of lines is almost an untouched area, where no one has done an extensive and in-depth study. It merits a very small mention in a large area of research of topics such as narratives, methodology, material, history and conservation.

In this section we will briefly highlight the reflection of miniature painting on selected post modern artists. A part also explores the impact of training and research in my contemporary art practice.

Based on studying plates of miniature painting spanning over decades the following observations are made to identify different schools.

The lines of Rajput miniature are majestic, darker but extremely precise. Whereas the Punjab hills or Pahari miniature have thinner, sharper and precise lines as can be seen in Kangra. The lines change their rhythm to bold and fast in Basohli, almost giving forms of voluminous quality. The Chamba school lines can be identified somewhere in the middle of these two schools. Lucknow schools are highly influenced by the Mughals. They have a shrunken needle-like precision, still maintaining the natural romantic flow of the needle tip brush to create extremely small forms.. The Maratha Schools, which are an extension of the Deccan school have a distinctive feature of the line creating a purposeful swirl on-point with the tip of the brush on the lip line. The lines are bold, fast creating a roundish quality of forms in the Maratha school.

As we go on to the British times the quality of line changes. There is drawing like handling the brush in miniature painting. In the Bengal schools artists use the technique in their own unique way adapting to their culture and style of the local gouache and watercolor techniques.

In my contemporary art practice I see the line evolving along the journey. Shifting from the approach of research and training in traditional *Karkhana* to cosmopolitan residency spaces where an artist has a chance to explore, converse, engage and observe new elements. These experiences give birth to creative processes, further influencing my lines.

Self-knowledge is a work in progress for me, both as an individual, and an artist. Am I separate from my art, I wonder. I don't think I am. With time (which is constantly changing) thoughts evolve and change, new questions arise about existence and perception, as well as ideas and beliefs on art, politics, emotions, people, incidents and indeed, life. Space plays a key role in the process of painting. The space of the past from where I have traveled, my existing space and the space to which I would like to travel. These spaces are as physical as my surroundings, the surface of my painting and the internal space of my mind.

Miniature painting requires synchronization of mind, body and soul and discipline of the mind. Your line says everything about “you”. The process of Miniature painting teaches you ritual, patience, attention, layering, composition, narrative, stylization, methodology. The skills serve as reliable support for spontaneous narratives and a language to a concept. The first step is to recognize emotion, then search for your self expression and validate it. Art is the conscious act of expression, which takes the longest time. Inspired by the tradition of miniature painting and living as an urban artist, is both an interesting experience and a challenge for me.

The politics of the past and present coexist in my art practice through the presence of tradition, despite not identifying as a traditional artist. I am a student of miniature painting, which is often debated upon as a craft or a traditional art form which has come into the genre of art of late. Evolving from a traditional approach, miniature painting is the art of line. The process of shading is also an amalgamation of small soft lines, painted to achieve the desired tonal value. The movement of the “needle -tip” brush touches the paper and moves like a feather to achieve softness and rhythm in the line. These very lines have mapped an important aspect in the lineage of traditional Indian visual culture.

Art is a mirror of the contemporary life in society which the artist is exposed to. Art is so powerful, that since the dawn of time it has existed as visual language, symbolism, expression, imagination and also as a documentation of human evolution. Apart from traditional miniature artists, contemporary arts of the post modern time, took inspiration from this ancient art form.

In my recent visit to the collection of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, I made some keen observations on Amrita Shergil’s paintings and her inspiration from Rajput and Pahari miniatures. The paintings show a distinctive style of interaction of people, in the composition similar to that of Rajput painting with slight influence of Mughal miniature. It was also visible in the artist’s color palette, especially her application of the color red. (reference to Basohli school). The way she portrayed the common woman with a sensuality and keen observation reminded me of the rhythm of the figures in miniatures.

Another observation I made was of Raza’s and Gaitonde’s paintings exhibited at an auction preview in New Delhi. Raza’s earlier landscapes and geometrically composed paintings remind me of the energy of a Pahari miniature painting. The intelligent placement and the combination of the colors show a remarkable study of miniatures. Making circles starting from the center point is a popular exercise given to beginner's to develop concentration and the flow of line in traditional miniature *kharkhanas*.

Gaitonde’s power was in how he painted the narrative through understanding of space, use of texture and play of line. Seeing his early traditional figurative of 1940s and 50s which look largely inspired by folk and Jain miniatures, to his large scale non representational canvases depicting his own narrative to find himself to his calligraphic figures or lines on paper to me show a very obvious attraction from traditional Miniature in context of line.

Gaitonde’s journey is very personal for me as I instantly connected with the line in his work, as for me line is an emotion.

I feel that the modernists and postmodernists were interested and explored miniature painting, largely due to patronage in commercial and academic spaces. This sadly lacks in contemporary times and there is a bridge that needs to be built for miniature painting to be revived and re-innovated.

Another reason can be positioning miniature painting as emporium and bazaar art, leaving miniature artists unemployed or earning meager amounts. Additionally lack of educational infrastructures available in academic spaces for students to get a chance to learn about this tradition and explore it further. It leaves interested students the only option of visiting *kharkhanas* and spending a long time learning the tradition through *guru shishya parampara*. It is a beautiful tradition and builds a sense of community but may also create a colonial attitude to explore miniature in a linear process.

Academicians, gallerists, educators and their sycophants are more interested in promoting international artists than uplifting the the existing community of miniature artists in India, which also gives them a lesser understanding of seeing and being open to new inventions and evolution of miniature or art inspired by miniature in a different way. The limited mind set of wanting to see references from traditional art works in new miniatures or the positioning of new media in miniature in a way set by international artists are only validated.

If miniature is revived in institutional spaces, patronage will increase in private and public spaces towards traditional miniaturists adding a certain support, solidarity and open mindedness towards re-innovation of traditional miniature to new artists and researchers.

Structures created to empower go a long way replacing and evolving colonial mindsets towards a linear growth to an attitude of creation through re innovation.

Through my research I hope to provide an impetus for the revival of schools of miniature painting. The identification of lines will make the process easier for visitors and viewers to understand and recognise specific periods and schools and how they impact each other, as miniature painting is the art of line. I aim to generate interest in miniature painting, and make it more accessible, less intimidating and easier to understand.

Miniature painting is a vast ocean of knowledge and creativity and there is so much to learn. It is essential it becomes universally approachable as an art form, through lines. My comparative study is based on observation and practical study, which I will explain in a simple language. This will be backed by my experience of introducing miniature painting to students via teaching, talks and workshops. It is important to offer those interested a chance to study and experiment this art form in a way that they find comfortable. I want my study to cater to a wide audience and prove a useful tool to art historians and scholars. I hope to go a step further and open doors for new interpretations on what lines have to offer as an art form.

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