

HISTORY

Chapter 7: The Changing World of Visual Arts



The Changing World of Visual Arts

India had its own indigenous forms of art before the arrival of the British. The advent of the British brought several changes in art forms which were gradually assimilated in Indian culture. Printing and painting were two spheres which were influenced by the colonial art.

New Forms of Imperial Art

The British traders and officials in India were accompanied by many European artists. These artists produced several pictures which not only became popular in Europe but also helped in shaping Western thoughts and perceptions about India. Three main motives of European painters were

- They brought the idea of realism in their painting. This means that the artists had to depict and paint whatever they observed. The paintings also had to look real and lifelike.
- The technique of oil painting was brought to India by the European artists. Oil paintings enabled the paintings to look real.
- Many European painters emphasised on the superiority of the British culture, its people, Empire, and power.

In Search of Scenic Locations

- The British painters explored several pristine scenic Indian locations. Two of such famous painters were Thomas Daniell and his nephew William Daniell.
- Both of them stayed in the country (Calcutta) for seven years, travelling to the northern and southern parts of the country.
- They are credited for painting many beautiful landscapes in India. Their paintings were often exhibited in Britain for the people who were curious to know about the British Empire.
- In many of their paintings, they have depicted several local buildings in ruins which were once grand and magnificent. Through such paintings, they tried to prove that the symbols of ancient civilization of India are now in ruins and India's civilisation could modernise only under the British rule.
- In some of their paintings, the Daniells have drawn several pictures of new Calcutta depicting European-styled buildings, new modes of transport and buzzing activities on the streets. Through such paintings, they tried to show the positive impact of the British rule in India.
- Thus, the image of traditional India was shown as backward with paintings of fakirs, cows and boats sailing on the river, while modern India under the British rule was shown as

pictures of change by depicting grand buildings and new modes of transport.



Painting of civilisation of India in ruins

Portraits

- Portrait painting became hugely popular in colonial India. While in the pre-colonial period, portraits were of miniature size, colonial portraits were life-size images which looked big and real. This fact shows us the importance of the patrons who commissioned these portraits.
- Large-scale portraits were also the means of displaying extravagant lifestyles and the status of wealthy sections of society.
- Johann Zoffany lived in India for about five years. He painted portraits of British officials and depicted them as superior and authoritative. Indians were always depicted as servants in the background.
- Later, many of the Indian nawabs and kings also began to commission their portraits. Because the British Government had placed residents in their court, many nawabs adjusted to this interference by the British and adopted western styles and tastes.
- Muhammad Ali Khan, the Nawab of Arcot, was a pensioner of the British but he commissioned Tilly Kettle and George Willison to paint his large-size portrait. He then gifted these portraits to the King of England and the Directors of the East India Company.

Painting History

The third form of imperial art was known as 'history painting'. The painting of British victories over the native rulers was the chief subject of paintings related to history.

- European painters painted favourable images of the British actions in India. British wars and victories were depicted in the paintings.

- Robert Clive was able to win the Battle of Plassey through conspiracy. Thus, no war scene of the battle was depicted by Francis Hayman in 1762. Instead, a scene of Mir Jafar welcoming Clive and his troops was painted to show the power of the British.
- Tipu Sultan, a formidable enemy of the British, was killed in the fourth
- Anglo-Mysore War. The capture of the fort of Seringapatam by British troops has been the subject of many British paintings. These paintings have dramatised and glorified the British rule in India.
- In one painting, Tipu Sultan is shown as lying dead on the ground. David Baird, a British General, has been shown standing triumphantly besides Tipu's corpse. The painting seems to suggest the might of the British Empire. It also sends a message that people who oppose the British meet the same fate as Tipu.



A painting depicting the fall of Seringapatam by Henry Singleton

Fate of the Court Artists

In the wake of European painters showing the grandiose of the British Empire, Indian kings and nawabs were trying to preserve their local and traditional methods of painting.

- Tipu Sultan in Mysore resisted the cultural traditions which were associated with the British. He encouraged local traditions. The walls of his palace in Seringapatam were covered with mural paintings which depicted the victory in the battle of Polilur fought in 1780 in which the British were defeated by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan.
- In Bengal, the British had installed puppet rulers. The nawabs of Murshidabad encouraged local miniature artists to amalgamate the European techniques and styles of painting.
- The local artists at Murshidabad began to adopt the elements of European realism. Light shades were used by them to give a real look to their paintings.
- After the British conquered India, Indian kings began to lose their wealth and influence. Some court artists in order to earn a living began to produce images of local plants, animals, monuments, celebrations of festivals, castes and communities for the Company. The British East India Company collected these paintings in order to understand the country in which they were ruling. These paintings came to be known as Company paintings.

The Development of Indian Art

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, many new features began to develop in Indian cities. These were

- In Bengal, local scroll painters at Kalighat began to develop a new form of art. They painted images of gods and goddesses. Earlier, these images looked flat and not rounded. Now, the Kalighat painters began to shade the images in order to give them a

rounded and three-dimensional look.

- The Kalighat paintings in the initial years used bold and non-realistic styles. The images were shown as large and powerful figures.
- As time passed and many social and economic changes began to take place in society, the Kalighat painters began to depict social life under the British rule. These artists frequently mocked Indians who imitated British dressing and lifestyles.
- They also criticised corrupt priests and women who wanted to move out of their homes.
- These Kalighat paintings were engraved on wooden blocks, and the latter were engraved on paper and then hand-coloured.
- Later, the introduction of the mechanical printing press led to the production of prints in large numbers. Paintings became so cheap that even the poor were able to buy them now.
- Middle class Indian artists began to produce prints for markets after the introduction of the printing press. Most of them used oil in their paintings.
- Calcutta Art Studio produced life-size images of Bengali and mythological figures. These figures were drawn in scenic landscapes such as mountains, rivers and lakes.

As the Indian National Movement began to grow, popular prints carried national messages. Figures of 'Bharat Mata', national leaders and gods and goddesses killing the British began to be printed.

Famous Indian Painters

Raja Ravi Varman

- Raja Ravi Varman was a painter who mixed both modern and national elements in his paintings. He painted real-life paintings and used oil colours for depicting Indian mythological themes in his paintings.
- He depicted many scenes from Ramayana and Mahabharata. Later, he set up a picture production team and a printing press where his paintings were produced in large numbers which even the poor could afford.

Abanindranath Tagore

- A new group of artists in Bengal including Abanindranath Tagore rejected the art of Raja Ravi Varma as imitative and westernised. They contended that such a style was not suitable for depicting Indian mythology.
- They did not believe in the oil and realistic style of painting and looked towards miniature paintings and the art of mural paintings which was depicted in the Ajanta Caves.
- These artists were also influenced by the Japanese artists, and thus, the Asian art movement began to develop. Abanindranath Tagore
- Some paintings of Abanindranath Tagore were influenced by the Rajput miniature and Ajanta style of painting. He was also influenced by the Japanese style of painting.
- Later, in the 1920s, many artists began to break away from Abanindranath Tagore's style of painting. His paintings were rejected for making spiritualism as a central theme of Indian

paintings. To them, an artist has to believe in real life rather than painting from themes taken from ancient books.

- Further, they believed that contemporary themes such as folk dances and the tribal way of life should be subjects instead of just promoting ancient art forms



Abanindranath Tagore

Development of Photography in India

- By the middle of the nineteenth century, European photographers began to travel to India. In India, they photographed many locations, set up studios and established photographic societies for promoting the art of photography.
- While some photographers travelled the country looking for mediaeval ruins and picturesque landscapes, some began to take pictures of imperial officers. Photographers began to take pictures related to the cultural diversity of India with an aim of showing India to be a primitive country.
- Samuel Bourne visited India in the early 1860s and set up a famous photographic studio known as Bourne and Shepherd.
- Lala Deen Dayal was an important Indian photographer who was a contemporary of Samuel Bourne.

Changes in Building and Architectural Styles

- With the advent of the British rule, the architectural style also changed. Buildings began to be constructed in the Gothic style around the mid-nineteenth century.
- In the Gothic style, buildings were elongated and constructed with pointed arches. Most of the buildings were built in this style.
- In Calcutta, buildings with rounded arches and pillars began to be built. This feature was borrowed from the Greek and Roman styles.
- The British constructed buildings in a grand style to express their power and glory

MIND MAP : LEARNING MADE SIMPLE CHAPTER-10

