

Doordarshan's :
The Paintings of India

The Glory Unfolds
(Covering the development of the Indian mural
painting tradition in the 1st Millennium)

By Benoy K Behl

**India Habitat Centre, Gulmohar Hall on Sunday, 21st March
at 6:30pm.**

The greatest and most sublime art of painting in India flowered at Ajanta and spread from there to all parts of India. From the 2nd century BC to the 6th century AD, the walls of the caves of Ajanta were painted by guilds of painters. The themes were Buddhist, the patrons were Hindu kings and the painters belonged to guilds whose 'dharma' or 'duty in life' was to paint. Whether it was Buddhist caves, Hindu temples or palaces.

The art and techniques of painting were carefully studied and put down in the Chitrasutra of the Vishnudharmottara, which is the oldest known treatise on painting in the world. How to depict different themes effectively, the proportion of human figures, the use of colours to help in the communication of ideas, the fine details of movements and stances of the human body in different situations and in different moods and so many other ideas and details to instruct the painter... These were carefully formulated to be passed on over the centuries and through guilds of painters from father to son. The purpose of this documentation was to preserve the legacy of the collective understanding of the finest minds.

There are many remnants of ancient paintings found in all corners of the Indian subcontinent, belonging to practically every century of the last 1500 years and more. These display the fact of a great and unified tradition of painting in ancient India.

There are fragments of the art of the time of Ajanta which survive at sites like Pitalkhora in Maharashtra. In these we see the fine fusion of the heart and mind and the unbroken tradition of noble themes painted by hands of individual inspiration.

Very little of the paintings survive in the 6th century caves of Badami in Karnataka. What remains evokes the magic of a world of painted splendor, when all the walls and ceilings were covered with murals. The paintings of Badami are amongst the earliest surviving in Hindu temples, just as the paintings at Ajanta and Sittannaval are the earliest Buddhist and Jain murals.

In the meantime, in the 7th century, the Pallava kings of Tamil Nadu gave exuberant and glorious expression to themes of Lord Shiva in the temple of Panamalai and

Kailashnath in Kanchipuram. The walls of the Pradakshinapath or the outer ambulatory path, of the Kailashnath temple were once covered with paintings of brilliant colours. Traces of these are still discernible.

The Pallavas were very fond of the theme of Shiva's family. Shiva is regal and yet a fond family man with his beautiful wife and child. In these paintings we see the high quality of painting of the classical Indian style, with beautiful rendering of form and volume. An easy style which transcends mere pictorial representation to present us a depiction of the feelings within the figures.

In the 9th century Jain caves of Sittannaval in Tamil Nadu, we see some of the last paintings which continue the humble and gentle humanity of the Ajanta painters. The name Sittannaval itself literally means the abode of the Siddhas, or Jain saints who have won their liberation.

The cave at Sittannaval has a marvelous painting of a lotus pond made on the ceiling. It is a scene of the faithful gathering lotuses to place upon the resting place of a tirthankara, a Jain saint. Elephants, buffaloes, geese and fish frolic in the waters which are overflowing with beautiful lotuses.

The painter has used the occasion to present us a joyous world. He brings to us a sense of sublime happiness...As fish swim in the waters, an elephant appears to smile, and gentle men gather lotuses which are larger than themselves. It is a gracious world. The lotuses are large and shaped with tender care, reflecting the beauty and grace of the human figures. Indeed, this may be one of the most beautiful depictions of flowers in the entire realm of art.

One needs a clear vision of the divinity beyond the veil of the material to present the world in such a joyous manner. The lotuses and the figures are in the world, as we know it. But their expressions indicate that they respond to a different sense of harmony.

The grand temple stands tall reaching for the skies. The powerful king Rajaraja Chola built this majestic temple to reflect the glory and grandeur of 'The Great Lord' Shiva. The temple stands in testimony to the great wealth and power of the Chola Empire during his time.

In the heart of the temple of Brhadisvara, protected by massive walls of stone, are perhaps the greatest paintings of the theme of Lord Shiva ever painted. Towards the end of the 10th century, King Rajaraja Chola expressed his devotion and also his power and grandeur by commissioning murals on a spectacular scale. These were made across the walls of the dark inner ambulatory corridor of the Brhadisvara temple.

There are two layers of painting here, one of the Nayaka period of the 17th century on top and below that the earlier Chola layer of painting. Most of the Chola paintings have been recently rediscovered.

These paintings reveal to us the life and the culture of Chola times. The military visions and ideals of the Cholas, and of Rajaraja in particular, are symbolically expressed in the great masterpiece of Shiva Tripurantaka on these walls.

If expression is to be taken as the criterion by which a great painter has to be judged, it is here in abundance in these Chola paintings. In these paintings, we see the Navarasa or the nine emotions depicted with rare sensitivity. The sentiment of heroism, virarasa, is clearly seen in Tripurantaka's face and form. The vigorous attitude of the demons determined to fight Lord Shiva and the wailing tear-stained faces of their women clinging to them in despair, suggest raudra and an emotion of pity, karuna.

The colours in the paintings are soft and subdued, the lines firm and sinuous and the expressions are true to life. More than ever before, we see the artists' lavish use of embellishments of crowns and jewelry portraying the royal splendor of the times.

In the Brhadisvara temple, we see one of the earliest royal portraits in Indian painting. King Rajaraja Chola with his guru Karuvurar. It is an idealized portrait, quite unlike the formal depictions of kings to come in later centuries.

The painter in ancient India seems to have had such a deep mastery over his technical skills, that his work appears effortless. There is a natural quality and grace in his work which communicates instantly what he wishes to depict. We see a perfect understanding of anatomy. The outline is strong and very sure and there is an easy and natural depiction of volume. Most of all, there are the touches, the details, which bring the painting alive; which communicate a sense of the life in the painting.

As we follow the trail, which emerges from precious fragments of murals left on the walls of caves and temples, we find that there was a brilliant and sophisticated tradition which flourished throughout the country. This tradition finds expression in different artistic styles as it was nurtured and inspired by different philosophies. The response of the artist to the world within and that around him reaches out to us despite the ravages of time.