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Historical paintings: Retelling stories

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Abstract

Paintings form a very important part of our cultural heritage. They are a primary source of information for historians and archaeologists and reveal about the differences in the lives of the people as we move across the region and the time. The aim of this paper is to study the different types of paintings that existed in the Indian subcontinent across different time periods by quoting examples from famous temples, monuments, caves, etc. which are now places of tourist importance owing to the rich and artistic historical backdrop. In doing so, we will also study the common as well as different themes across these paintings and would appreciate the techniques with which these paintings were made that had beaten the test of time.

Keywords: Pre-historic paintings, cave paintings, temple art, Mughal art, miniature paintings

Introduction

Remember reading in school about the early man. The very existence of the early man and their way of life was told by the stories carved in walls of the caves where they used to live. These graphics, though faded with time, gives us a reasonable idea about how our first humans used to live. Since then as time passed, the technique became sophisticated but the method to express remained the same.

The paintings form a very important part of the Indian History and are also the primary source of information for many historians and archaeologists. They adorn the walls of our famous monuments, temples, caves and other places of historical importance in some form or the other. Each painting is unique in its own way and have some or the other story to tell to reach out to the wider mass. The aim of this paper is to bring out some common themes that were used by our ancestors by quoting examples of different styles of paintings. In the process, we will also discuss the technique and the finesse with which these paintings were made. In the course of this paper, we will focus on the following types of Paintings:-

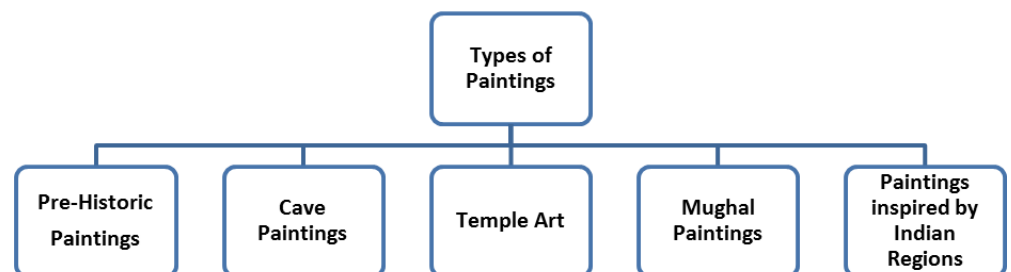


Fig 1: Types of Paintings

Pre-historic paintings

History of India is divided into different phases. Generally, we get information about a particular phase of history by the inscriptions, manuscripts or monuments instated during that period. Paintings too supplement the same. However, there is a period in the Indian History for which no written records are available. This is called the Pre-Historic period. Here wall paintings become crucial to understand the lives of the people in those times. The cave walls became the canvas for the ancient painters.

We would emphasis on 3 periods of the prehistoric era as mentioned in the flowchart:-

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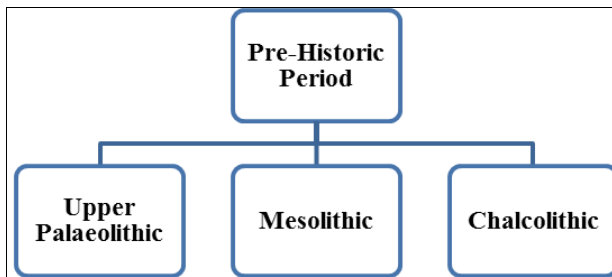


Fig 2: Types of Pre-Historic Paintings

The Upper Palaeolithic paintings are close to 40,000 to 10,000 years old. They mostly had themes from the forest like depiction of giant animals like Bison, Elephants, etc. Human beings were depicted as stick like figures.

The Mesolithic Period had predominantly hunting themes. It is important to note that these paintings depict the themes of the lives of the people in those days. Hunting was the primary activity for survival; hence there is more focus on the kind of tools used to hunt and the animals hunted.

The Chalcolithic Period depicts the paintings of the copper age. This was the time when agriculture too started to flourish. There are themes depicting mutual exchanges between the people.

It is imperative to note that we are talking of an era where paintings were the means of communication and are the sole piece of information available with the historians to get the idea of the lives of people in that era. It is equally important to see that these paintings were not made from the kind of paints and emulsions that we use today. These were made from the locally available rocks like limestone, haematite, Chalcedony, etc. with the mixture of probably animal fat or parts of trees as binding agents. Nor were there sophisticated brushes like we use today. Twigs, Branches, fingers, etc. might have been used for painting. Yet these paintings have passed the test of time. The ancestors have left a glimpse of their lives for many generations of their posterity.

Madhya Pradesh houses some of the caves having the paintings from this age.

Bhimbetka Shelters is one such cave. It is the UNESCO World Heritage Site. The caves were first discovered by V.S. Wakankar in 1957-58. The paintings on the themes elucidated above can be found here. It is being said that the caves were able to house these paintings for such a long time because of the chemical reaction with Oxide present on the surface of the caves. Some paintings are also found in the unoccupied caves, meaning they were used as warning signs as well.

There are other prehistoric paintings caves like Garhwal-Kumaon Range where in Centres like Lakhudiyar and Dalband, themes like dances of a group of humans are depicted. In Mahadeva Hills in Panchmarhi Area of Madhya Pradesh there are caves like Bazar Caves, Mahadeva Caves, etc. which depict hunting scenes and daily activities, etc. Even in South India have centres like Kurnool, Hasan Parti, Kazipet, etc. where pre-historic caves depicting animal scenes can be found.

Cave paintings

Though the Pre-Historic paintings are mostly cave paintings, in this section we will elucidate about the paintings in the part latter to the pre-historic period in History, where we started having other sources of historical

accounts apart from the Paintings as well.

Starting with the first in the list are the cave paintings of Ajanta and Ellora Caves. These caves are also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The caves are located in the state of Maharashtra, near Aurangabad.

Ajanta Caves were excavated at various times, between the 2nd century B.C. to the 6th century A.D. The cave paintings in the Ajanta Caves majorly focus on Lord Buddha, his teachings and the Jataka tales. There are close to 29 caves which were home to Buddhist monks and disciples, which is why we clearly see the influence of Buddhism in these caves (5 as chaityagrihas (prayer hall) and rest as viharas (monastery). The Ajanta Caves is famous for its Frescoes Painting, which is a technique where painting is done on the wet lime plaster and it dries with the said. These paintings adorn the walls and ceilings of Ajanta Caves. The Ajanta paintings from the fifth century CE employ outward projections technique. The lines are very rhythmic and well formed. The outer line and the body colour combine to create the illusion of volume.

Next in the list is the Ellora Caves. The caves have close to 34 monasteries and temples which date back to 600 to 1000 A.D. The caves have major themes from Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. The excavation activities of the caves happened in 3 stages with each phase belonging to the religions stated above in the same order. The Buddhist caves have paintings from the life of Buddha. There are twelve Buddhist caves with Vajrayana Buddhist images such as Tara, Mahamayuri, Akshobhya, Avalokiteshwara, Maitrya, Amitabha, and others. Hindu paintings are linked to the Hindu mythology with the depiction of plants, nature, gods and goddesses in the paintings. The most famous painting is of Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi with clouds in the background. Many Paintings are devoted to Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva, with the single –rock cut Kailash Temple just in the vicinity. The next comes the Jain Caves which also have mural paintings and decorative walls and ceilings with the images of Jinas and *yaksa-yaksis*.

Next we move on to the Sittanavasal Caves of Tamil Nadu. The caves date back to the 2nd Century. The caves have figures of ducks, fish, dancing figures, and inscriptions from the 9th and 10th centuries, and are thought to have been home to Jain priests who had come down from the eastern parts of the country to spread Jainism. Vegetable dyes are said to have been used in their development. The intricately crafted borders that run the length of the walls and roof are a sight to behold.

Moving to the north most corners of India, we have Saspol Caves in Leh District, depicting an amalgamation of Buddhist and Tibetan Art. These paintings were created over 14th and 15th Century and are famous for their vibrant colour scheme. Hevajra, who represents the final stage of medicine and is a completely enlightened being, and Samvara, a guardian deity, are amongst some of the images. Apart from the above elucidated, there are some other caves which are famous for their paintings like Elephanta Caves in Maharashtra, Jogimara Caves in Chhatisgarh, Badami Caves in Karnataka, etc.

Temple art

Indian temples have a speciality to adorn the pillars, walls and ceiling with beautiful images of nature, god and goddess which gives the spiritual environment an ethereal look. The South Indian temples, in particular, have

examples in history displaying exemplary works of temple art.

The Pallava kings of Tamil Nadu painted exuberant and majestic depictions of Siva in the temples of Panamalai and Kailashanatar in Kancheepuram during the 7th century. In the 8th century, the magnificent Kailashnath temple was carved out of a mountain at Ellora. Murals once adorned the walls and ceilings of this temple. The art's elegance and quality can be seen in the fragments that have survived.

The Chola Fresco Paintings were found in the passage of Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu. These large paintings were painted with natural organic pigments in such a short period of time. These are amongst the most beautiful paintings ever made on Siva's theme.

Temple walls in Pundarikapuram, Ettumanoor, and Aymanam, amongst other places, are adorned with well-preserved Kerala mural painting.

The Lalitpur district of Uttar Pradesh has temples dedicated to Lord Siva and Lord Vishnu known as Kacheris. On the ceiling of the Choti Kacheri are the remnants of magnificent 13th-century paintings. These paintings are highly important since they are the oldest remaining paintings of India's northern plains.

Paintings from the 15th century embellish the ceiling of Hampi's Virupaksha temple. They narrate the story of the Vijaynagar Empire and the images of the gods and the spiritual gurus.

The Lepakshi Temple of Andhra Pradesh have some of the finest mural works painted on walls and ceilings of the temple. These are magnificent examples of Vijaynagar paintings.

Mughal paintings

Mughal paintings are an amalgamation of Indian, Persian and Islamic Art. Battles, court scenes, legendary tales, hunting scenes, wildlife, portraits, etc dominated the Mughal paintings in India. The Mughal Art can be traced back to the reign of Emperor Humayun who was accompanied by two Persian artists, Mir Sayyid 'Alī and Khwāja 'Abd al-Šamad to India.

Many Historians suggest that Akbar had studied painting under Abd as-Samad, and hence had a taste for the art. During the reign of Akbar, a series of large miniature paintings called "Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamzah" were build which had an unusual size of 22 by 28 inches and were some 1400 illustrations. There were a lot of paintings revolving around epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata and Persian epics during this period. Another important painting of this time was the "Tutinama Painting: Tales of a Parrot".

The period of Jahangir was also known for his love for Art and paintings and the period saw some of the most revered artists like Abū al-Ḥasan, known as the "Wonder of the Age"; Bishandās, known for his portraiture paintings; and Ustād Mansūr, who excelled in animal studies. The main themes during this period were the episodes from Jahangir's life, many of which can also be seen in Jahangir-Nama, the biography of Emperor Jahangir.

Jahangir in his book, "Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri" mentions about his expertise for painting which is as follows:

"As regard myself, my liking for painting and my practice in judging it have arrived at such a point that when any work is brought before me, either of deceased artists or those of the present day, without the names being told me, I say on the spur of the moment that it is the work of such and such a

man. And if there be a picture containing many portraits, and each face be the work of a different master, I can discover which face is the work of each of them. If any other person has put in the eye and eyebrow of a face, I can perceive whose work the original face is, and who has painted the eye and eyebrow" Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri (vol. 2, pp. 20-21).

Jahangir's period saw a new level of expertise where 5 to 6 artists worked on a single painting, each master of their own domain. The period also saw influences of European art since Jahangir used to receive gifts from the crown.

Paintings inspired by Indian regions

India is a country of rich cultural heritage and the same is reflected in its historical paintings hailing from different geographies. The craft has its own taste as we move across the kingdoms. The Madhubani Paintings are famous in Mithila, Bihar region. Traditionally, done by women as a wall art on plastered mud walls, the paintings depicts scenes from ceremonious occasions like marriage, child birth, festivals, etc. Deities, natural objects like sun, moon, religious plants, etc. are also the part of the painting.

Miniature Paintings were handmade paintings which were colourful but were small in size. Its earliest origins can be traced back as old as 7th century AD. , in the period of the Bengal Palas, where themes related to Buddhism were displayed on palm leaves.

In the 11th century, the Jaina school of Miniature painting gained prominence with religious texts like 'Kalpa Sutra' and 'Kalkacharya Katha' depicted in miniature paintings. Precious stones, Natural gold and silver were also used in the paintings.

The Rajasthan School of Miniature Paintings had various divisions like Mewar, Marwar, Kangra, etc, where different styles of Rajputana lifestyle were depicted. Many paintings were inspired by the Hindu mythology like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

Then there were the Orissa School of Miniature paintings that depicted themes from Hindu Mythology like "Krishna Leela" and "Gita Govind".

Pahari School of Miniature Paintings came from the hills of the northern India and had portrayal of the scenic and ethereal beauty of the Himalayas. There were other themes as well which were inspired by the Mughal and the Rajasthani School of Miniature Painting.

Conclusion

The history of paintings, perhaps, traces back to the period when the term "History" was not even coined, i.e. the "Pre-Historic Era". These paintings play not only an important part in studying the lives of the people belonging to each period in the history, but also, are an important part of the cultural heritage of the country. These paintings have not only adorned the walls and ceilings of the famous historically relevant tourist sites, but have also truly beaten the test of time, thanks to the historical artists and their innovative techniques. In studying various types of paintings, we also saw that though these paintings vary across time and space and thus, makes one type apart from the other, yet there are themes that integrates them together and intertwine them in a thread of time and space. Religious themes, depiction of flora and fauna are some of the themes that can be commonly seen across all periods. Thus, we can easily say that paintings are a mirror to the past and they

truly retell the story of the lives and the beliefs of our ancestors.

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