

Chapter – 10

The Changing World of Visual Arts

Colonial rule introduced several new art forms, styles, materials and techniques which were creatively adapted by Indian artists for local patrons and markets, in both elite and popular circles.

The changes were seen primarily on paintings and print making.

New Forms of Imperial Art:

(i) In 18th century a stream of European artists came to India along with the British traders and rulers.

(ii) The artists brought with them new styles and new conventions of paintings. They began producing pictures which helped shape western perceptions of India.

(iii) The main feature of the European painting was realism, i.e., what the artists produced was expected to look real.

(iv) Oil painting was also introduced in India by the European artists. It enabled artists to produce images that looked real.

(v) Paintings were based on varied subjects. However, the European artist's common intention was to emphasise the superiority of Britain, its culture, its people and its power.

Looking for the Picturesque:

Picturesque is an aesthetic ideal introduced into English cultural debate in 1782 by William Gilpin. The term “picturesque” needs to be understood in relationship to two other aesthetic ideals: the beautiful and the sublime

(i) **Picturesque landscape painting** was one of the popular imperial traditions. It depicted India as quaint land, to be explored by travelling British artists.

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- (ii) The most famous artists of this tradition were Thomas Daniell and his nephew William Daniell.
 - (iii) They produced paintings of newly acquired British territories.
 - (iv) In some of the images they showed the British rule bringing modern civilization to India. In other images, depicting buildings reminding the glory of past and decaying ancient civilization.
 - (v) One of the image shows the modernizing influence of British rule, by emphasizing a picture of dramatic change.

Portraits of Authority:

- (i) Portrait painting was another tradition of art that became popular in colonial India.
- (ii) The rich and powerful people, both Indian and British, were very fond of self portraits.
- (iii) In colonial India, portraits were life size images that looked lifelike and real.
- (iv) The art of making portraits is known as '**portraiture**' that served as an ideal means of displaying the lavish lifestyles, wealth and status generated by British in India.
- (v) European artists like Johann Zoffany visited India in search of profitable commissions.
- (vi) He was born in Germany, migrated to England and came in India and stayed for five years.
- (vii) He depicted the British as superior and imperious, flaunting their clothes, standing royally or sitting arrogantly and living a life of luxury while Indians were portrayed as submissive and inferior serving their white masters and occupying a shadowy background in his paintings.
- (viii) Many Indian Nawabs got their portraits painted by European painters.
- (ix) Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan of Arcot commissioned two European artists- Tilly Kettle and George Willison to paint his portraits and gifted these paintings to the king of England and the Directors of East India Company.

Painting History:

' **History painting**' refers to any picture with a high-minded or heroic narrative.

(i) It was a third category of imperial art. These paintings dramatized and recreated various episodes of British imperial history and enjoyed prestige and became very popular in the late 18th and early 19th century.

(ii) British victories in India served as rich material for history painters in Britain.

(iii) They painted the various wars, in which the colonial rule had defeated the Indians and British were celebrating their power, their victories and their supremacy.

(iv) The first painting of history was produced by Francis Hayman in 1762, when the British defeated the Indian army of Nawab Sirajuddaula in the Battle of Plassey and installed Mir Jafar as the Nawab of Murshidabad. The painting shows Mir Jafar welcoming Lord Clive.

(v) Robert Kerr Porter, painted the defeat of Tipu Sultan of Mysore in 1799 at the famous battle of Seringapatam. It is a painting full of action and energy, the painting dramatizes the event and glorified the British triumph.

(vi) Imperial history paintings sought to create a public memory of imperial triumph to show that the British were invisible and all powerful.

What Happened to the Court Artists:

(i) There were different Indian traditions of Art in different courts. Some of them are as follows-

- In Mysore, Tipu Sultan resisted the European art and continued to encourage his tradition of mural paintings.
- The court of Murshidabad had different trend. The British had successfully installed their puppet Nawabs on the throne; first Mir Zafar and then Mir Qasim after defeating Sirajuddaulah. The Nawab encouraged local miniature artists to absorb the tastes and artists style of British.
- The local artists of Murshidabad began to adopt the elements of European realism. They used perspective, i.e., style of painting which creates a sense of distance between objects that are near and those at a distance. They used various shades to make the

figures realistic.

(ii) Local painters produced a vast number of images of local plants and animals, historical buildings and monuments, festivals, etc. and these pictures were collected by the East India Company officials and known as **Company paintings**.

The New Popular Indian Art:

(i) A new world of popular art developed in 19th century in many of the cities of India.

(ii) **Scroll painting**; *paintings on a long roll of paper that could be rolled up*, was developed by local villagers called 'patuas' and 'potters'.

(iii) Kalighat in Bengal was expanding as a commercial and administrative centre.

(iv) Mythological themes were the main art forms for the scroll painters producing images of gods and goddesses.

(v) Traditionally, figures in scroll paintings looked flat, not rounded.

(vi) Kalighat painters began to use shading to give them a rounded form, to make images look three dimensional but were not realistic and lifelike.

(vii) Early Kalighat paintings use a bold deliberately non-realistic style depicting large and powerful figures with a minimum of lines, detail and colours.

(viii) Many of the Kalighat pictures were printed in large numbers and sold in the market and the images were engraved in wooden blocks.

(ix) In late 19th century, mechanical printing presses were set up in different parts of India, which helped in producing larger number of printings.

(x) Calcutta Art Studio was set up in late 19th century in Calcutta and produced lifelike images of eminent Bengali personalities as well as mythological pictures.

(xi) With the spread of nationalism in the early 20th century, the studio produced popular prints with elements of nationalism. Some of them have Bharat Mata appearing as a goddess carrying the national flag or nationalist heroes sacrificing their head to Bharat Mata.

The Search for a National Art:

- (i) The impact of religions, culture and the spirit of nationalism on art was strongly visible by the end of the 19th century.
- (ii) Many painters tried to develop a style that could be considered both modern and Indian.

The Art of Raja Ravi Varma:

- (i) Raja Ravi Varma was one of the first artists who tried to intermingle modern and national style.
- (ii) Raja Ravi Varma belonged to the family of the Maharaja of Travancore in Kerala.
- (iii) He mastered the Western art of oil painting and realistic life study but painted themes from Indian mythology.
- (iv) He mainly painted scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.
- (v) Raja Ravi Varma set up a picture production team and printing press on the outskirts of Bombay.

A Different Vision of National Art:

- (i) A new group of nationalist artists in Bengal gathered around Abanindranath Tagore, the nephew of Rabindranath Tagore.
- (ii) They opposed the art of Ravi Varma as imitative of western style and declared that western and modern art could not be used to depict the nation's ancient myths and legends.
- (iii) He wanted to revive and turned for inspiration to medieval Indian traditions of miniature painting and the ancient art of mural paintings in the Ajanta Caves.
- (iv) He received inspiration from Rajput style of paintings.
- (v) His art was influenced by the Japanese paintings that can be seen in some of the paintings.