PANORAMA OF
Indian Painting

PUBLICATIONS DIVISION

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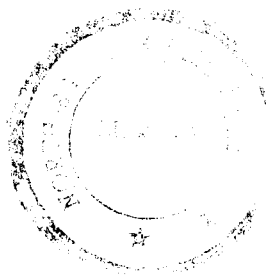

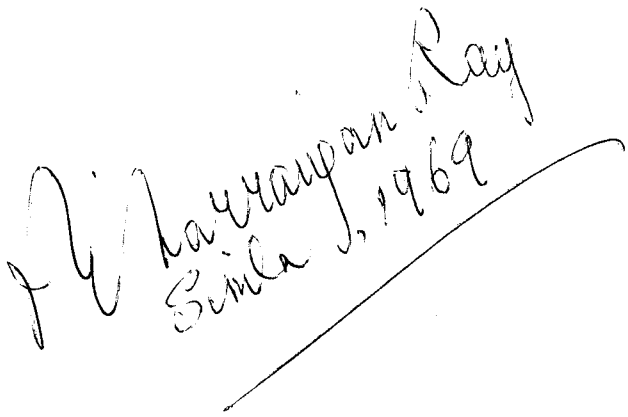

PUBLICATIONS DIVISION
MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

INTRODUCTION

WITH a tradition spanning two millennia, Indian painting presents a stylistic variety as great as its continuity. The series of National Programme talks from All India Radio, made available here in print, covers the highlights of the long evolution.

The compilation in no way claims to be a complete history even in outline, for tracing the continuity of all the threads that have gone into the making of the fabric can be attempted only in a large volume. But the great epochs, the distinctive historic styles, have been presented in intelligent and intelligible framing here. The publication therefore will enable the layman too, besides the scholar, to assimilate a world heritage.

In the opening talk, Dr. O. C. Gangoly makes a fascinating collation of data from artefacts and the earliest literary strata to reconstruct the beginnings of the tradition. In the study of Ajanta and Bagh, the first great efflorescence, Sri Asok Mitra has an original contribution to make regarding the treatment of perspective. In the cultural sphere India has given bountiful gifts to the world and assimilated as readily intimations from afar. Dr. Moti Chandra studies the Indianisation of the Persian miniature under the Mughals who also came from beyond the borders to settle down as sons of India. Dr. Nihar Ranjan Ray traces the perfect blending of Western Indian and Persian miniature traditions in Rajput art, while Dr. Randhawa deals with the freshness of lyricism acquired by this art when transferred to the picturesque valleys of the Himalayan piedmont. And lastly, Sri Sanyal surveys the contemporary scene when the Indian painter confronts myriad challenges represented by the dissolution of tradition and the accelerated coming together of cultural and stylistic impulses from all over the world, today no longer far-flung as when the creative adventure started.

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THE GLORIOUS BEGINNING

O. C. GANGOLY

IT is well known that a new and brilliant horizon has been presented to the history of Indian painting by the epoch-making discovery of the records of the Indus Valley culture at Mohen-jo-Daro, at Chanchu-Daro and at Harappa and other related centres in the Indus Valley in Sind, with analogous painted pottery at a place called Nal in Baluchistan, just across the Indian border. The enormous quantity of painted pottery, mostly in fragments, which has been dug up at these prehistoric sites, datable between 3,000 and 2,250 years B.C. provides astonishing data and materials for the study of pictorial art which reveal a developed phase of the art, of wonderful aesthetic merit, distinguished by highly imaginative and naturalistic quality and marvellous power of design and of invention.

Painting of this epoch was merely the decoration of pots and pans, a mass production of folk art, which cannot be treated on the same level as the aristocratic style of the steatite seals with remarkable effigies of bulls and other animal types.

The pictures, drawn in swift slapdash black lines, show a mixture of geometrical motifs, criss-cross lines, scales, chess board patterns, rows of dotted circles, or of intersecting circles with almost naturalistic representations of leaves, trees, birds, sometimes peacocks, occasionally also deer, goats, jackals, and sometimes lions. An American scholar has critically studied the designs and patterns of these painted wares and has classified them according to their component designs. His classification includes straight line borders, loop patterns, conventionalised patterns of human forms, and wavy lines of river pattern. Some of these "river pat-

THE AJANTA AND BAGH STYLES

ASOK MITRA

THEY work like magic incantations, the names of the caves—Ellora, Kanheri, Bhaja, Vedsa, Bagh, Badami, Junnar, Elephanta, Ajanta—like magic casements opening on the foam of perilous seas in fairy lands forlorn. They invite you to untold wealth, never to be found in such abundance in any other part of the world, the brightest jewels of them all being Bagh and Ajanta. Together they achieve the high watermark of painting : on the one hand, as the truth of dogma translated into forms and symbols, the visible world seen for its own sake in its essence; on the other, the essence retranslated into the intense, individual, sensory experience, into strangely moving, personal, plastic expressions, moulding icons into personal portraits.

The best of the cave paintings of Ajanta and Bagh have been placed between the second and seventh centuries. Art technologists have argued whether the murals are fresco buono, wet fresco or fresco secco, dry fresco. It now seems beyond doubt, particularly from the evidence of restoration work, that the murals were executed in tempera on dry plaster, the plaster being as thin as egg-shell in some places. The insides of cave surfaces can hardly be smoothed sufficiently to take wet fresco. Besides, they sweat a great deal and that is not very good for wet fresco either. The pigments used oil which is generally ruled out in wet fresco.

The Ajanta artist began with the same faith in the realness of the image that was shared by the Egyptian sculptor and painter. This faith brought in its train a whole system of plastic conventions which assumed in Egypt a sacred character but remained empirical in India. They required that the image should reproduce the model in its entirety and not with the incompleteness of

MUGHAL PAINTING

MOTI CHANDRA

THE sixteenth century is an exciting period in Indian history. The old order was disintegrating fast and the new order had not yet been established by the conquering Mughals. It is, however, significant that though the Sultans spent most of their time in internecine wars, architecture, music and literature flourished and some of the provincial courts like Jaunpur, Ahmedabad and Mandu became important centres of Islamic culture.

There is, however, not sufficient evidence to prove that the Sultans made any conscious effort to improve the state of painting, though material is gradually turning up to support the view that in the first half of the sixteenth century, efforts were being made to evolve a new style which, though maintaining certain features of the Western Indian school, eliminated some of its characteristic features such as the extension of the farther eye. By toning down the angularity of the draughtsmanship, and by eliminating the indiscriminate use of ultramarine and gold, the emerging style laid stress on a new mode of expression. This new style also did not fight shy of accepting certain foreign elements which it Indianised.

From the available material it is evident that it had both a classical and a folk phase. The classical phase represented by the *Nimat Nama* and *Laur-Chanda* series reveals an advanced technique with careful draughtsmanship, a sober colour scheme and a pleasing approach to landscape and architecture. However, the problem of grouping the figures in a convincing manner had not been solved even in the vertical composition. In the folk phase a persistent effort to blend the Persian and Indian

THE RAJPUT STYLE

NIHAR RANJAN RAY

RAJASTHANI or Rajput painting as it is popularly known is that school of traditional Indian painting which flourished, speaking generally, in the medieval feudal courts under the patronage mostly, if not exclusively, of the feudal lords and nobles of Rajasthan, notably of Udaipur, Chavanda and Chitor in Mewar, Bikaner, Jaipur and Jodhpur, from about the end of the sixteenth century to about the end of the eighteenth or even the beginning of the nineteenth. Side by side with contemporary Rajasthani lyric and romantic poetry, it was one of the means of cultural expression of the Rajasthani feudal elite, and reflected their ideas and ideologies, tastes and preferences, emotions and sentiments. These were all pegged on themes drawn from Hindu traditions and mythology, mainly though not exclusively Vaishnava, or from courtly and feudal pride as in portraiture, and courtly preferences as in scenes of love and romance, of riding and hunting, of sieges and battles. Reverberations of the school were heard as far east as Assam, Bengal and Orissa, as far west as Gujarat and Saurashtra, as far north as the Punjab Himalayas, and as far south as the Deccan, that is, as far as Rajput armies and Rajasthani trade and commerce could make themselves felt during those centuries.

Since Coomaraswamy published, well-nigh half-a-century ago, his *Rajput Painting*, now a classic on the subject, and put this school of painting on the map of Indian and world art-history, chance and knowledge and effort of more than one generation of Indian and foreign scholars have brought to light and interpreted a huge mass of material of Indian art, especially in the field of medieval Indian painting. This has obliged almost a

THE KANGRA SCHOOL

M. S. RANDHAWA

"WHAT Chinese art achieved for landscape is here accomplished for love. Here if never and nowhere else in the world, the Western Gates are opened wide. The arms of the lovers are about each other's necks, eye meets eye, the whispering Sakhis (confidante-maidens) speak of nothing else but the course of Krishna's courtship, the very animals are spell-bound by the sound of Krishna's flute, and the elements stand still to hear the Ragas and Raginis (melodic moulds)."

This was Ananda Coomaraswamy's comment on Rajput painting of the Kangra School in 1916. I came across this passage in 1927 while studying in Government College, Lahore.

People knew about Mughal painting but few had heard about Rajput painting. The fort and the royal mosque at Lahore were visible reminders of the Mughals, but very few, even in the Punjab, knew anything about the hills of Kangra and their contribution to art. On reading Coomaraswamy's *Rajput Painting* my imagination was excited and I wanted to see specimens of Rajput painting.

I had my first glimpse of Kangra paintings in the Museum at Lahore in 1932. I again saw a collection of the paintings of this School in the British Museum, London. I started my research on this subject in 1950 when I happened to pay a visit to the Kangra Valley and made a systematic search into the Valley. The masterpieces discovered in these journeys were published in a book entitled *Kangra Valley Paintings* in 1954. This was followed by more intensive search and study which ultimately led to the publication of four monographs by the National Museum. These are *Kangra Paintings of the Bhagavata Purana; Kangra*

MODERN INDIAN PAINTING

B. C. SANYAL

IN the long past, the geographical position of the Indian sub-continent was naturally inducive to cultural isolation and insularity. This brought about a certain inbreeding of artistic idealism. But the gifted Indian people had at the same time cultivated the ability to accept and assimilate experiences other than indigenous in the sphere of visual and plastic arts. They allowed such fusion that did not compromise the artistic identity. Thus Indian art in general has been an expression of a way of life and a unique civilisation. In the long stretch of time, the practice of the arts built up a unity of Indian tradition—tradition of architecture, sculpture, dance, music and painting. The continuity of the tradition had, however, a setback centuries earlier than our times—certainly so in painting.

By the 18th century, India was in the melting pot politically, with diverse forces crossing swords and intriguing against one another for supremacy. The great Mughal Empire already on its last legs conceded the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to the English East India Company. Bengal was ravaged by famine and mis-rule of the Company and the Nawabs. The vacuum in Punjab politics paved the way for the rise of the Sikhs. Foreign adventurers—Portuguese, Dane and Dutch, French and English—were marking their time to strike for ultimate political power. The English indeed had entrenched themselves to take the best advantage of the situation and launch their agonisingly long imperialist regime.

Art cannot flourish when life is unstable. In the foregoing state of instability, Indian painting followed a path of decline and finally degenerated into soulless imitative skill of artisans only.