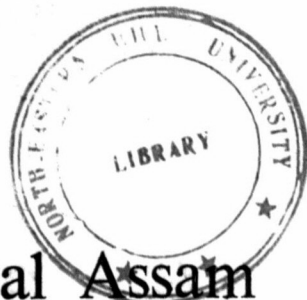


ART OF MEDIAEVAL ASSAM

F237  
1073



# Art of Mediaeval Assam

By  
**Rajatananda Das Gupta**  
Dept. of History of Art, Banaras Hindu University

Published by  
Rajatananda Das Gupta



**COSMO PUBLICATIONS**  
NEW DELHI 1982

Published by  
Rajatananda Das Gupta  
Cosmo Publications  
1, Ganga Road, Darjeeling,  
West Bengal-744002.

Printed by  
Bharatiya Prakashan,  
1, Ganga Road, Darjeeling.

His

Art of Medical Investigation

NEHU Library

Acc. No. 95261

Acc. by M.

Class by

Sub. Heading by

Cata. by

Transcribed by

26/10/84  
4/6/85

NE

700.54162

DASJ1

Rajendra Das Gupta

Dept. of History of Art, Faculty of Arts, University of Delhi

First Published 1982

© R. Das Gupta

Published by

Rani Kapoor (Mrs.)

Cosmo Publications

24 B, Ansari Road, Daryaganj,

New Delhi-110002.



Printed by

Parashar Printers,

Delhi-110153.

NEW DELHI COSMO PUBLICATIONS

1982

NEW DELHI

*Dedicated To My Daughter*

**SUVARNA SRI**

**(18.3.'65—10.12.'81)**

## INTRODUCTION

**Dr. Rajatnandan Das Gupta** has long been interested in the art of Eastern India and hence it is appropriate that the present publication should be on Assam, an area which has been somewhat neglected by scholars but unjustifiably so. To understand the art of the peoples of any particular province it is essential, I believe, to have an acquaintance with their history and their religious and social background. Dr. Das Gupta is attuned to this viewpoint and accordingly this monograph on Assam is not merely an account of its architecture, sculpture, painting and other arts but also provides the essential coverage of the land and its people. Assam has a long past and was known to the Mahabharata and Ramayana and to the Chinese pilgrim Yuan Chang. Situated as it is, it inevitably formed a link, cultural and social, between India and South East Asia, a factor of considerable importance in understanding its artistic heritage and achievements. Strangely, Buddhism made no effective inroads into this area and the dominant faith was Hinduism tempered at times with the usual beliefs common to many races in spirits, good and bad, powerful demons and a variety of godlings. As with Sufism in northern India, the activities of certain Muslim divines also attracted to them both Hindus and Muslims. The history of Assam is somewhat complicated with the distribution of centres of power amongst the Chatiyas, the Ahoms, the Jaintias, the Bhuyias and others and then the Muslim domination. But the efflorescence of art in any area usually depends on some great religious upheaval and this also took place in Assam with the advent of a fervent movement or god-love inspired by the creed of absolute devotion to Vishnu in his incarnation of Krishna. No account of Assamese art can afford to ignore the spread of this creed by the gossellor saint Sankaradeva.

A second source of inspiration to artistic activities was the Satra, an illustration both monastic and semi-monastic yet not existing in isolation but penetrating deep into the life of the people. Predominantly concerned with the great Vaishnava movement it left its impress on all forms of art and literature in Assam be they folkish or courtly. One is reminded of how the gospel of Buddha produced a revolution in many parts of India outside Assam in the lives of millions resulting in great artistic achievements.

Much of the early architecture of Assam has disappeared but accounts thereof remain. Nevertheless the existing monuments offer not only variety but also indications of how differing styles came into existence due to influences

emanating from other regions as in the case of the Jainteswari temple. As with many other regions so also in Assam we find Islamic buildings with local influences which are discernable even in the austere and standardized plans of these houses of worship. New architectural forms also came into being such as the Sildole temple of Sibsagar evolved from the Dvaikuta class of temples. Temples abound in Assam and though of later dates present a variety of inventive architectural devices. There are also brick temples and temples with terracotta panel facings as also with panels and reliefs in stone. So also civil architecture such as the Gorhgaon palace has novel features rising as it does from an architecturally oriented base and not just from a high platform. Even different centres of Assam developed their own styles of architecture. Various influences have crept into Assamese architecture as for instance from Bengal and even Cambodia. This does not occasion surprise. The famous Kamakhya temple, despite restorations, affords a study in how the Assamese integrated constructional and stylistic features taken from different sources into their own distinctive creations.

In the realism of sculpture which, apart from metal images, is mostly an integral embellishment of architecture, the origins were in wood and this wooden tradition asserts itself in the medium of stone and terracotta. Local features and folkish elements are repeatedly to be observed alongside more classical forms. Assam also has its own *maniere* of metal images. The ten-armed Durga from Tinsukia, with her superbly fashioned stylized vehicle, the lion, viciously attacking Mahisha, is conceived most quaintly in a folk tradition but nevertheless exudes the concept of her invincibility through a form of composition not to be seen in other regions of Eastern India.

The art of Assam in many other forms such as snake boundary pillars, curiously shaped metal wares, wood carvings, pottery and terracottas reflects a distinctive civilization which becomes more understandable against the detailed background of history, social life, customs and religious beliefs which the present monograph has rightly laid marked emphasis upon. Art exists not in a vacuum but as a reflection of the life and times of those who created it.

One of the most appealing forms of Assamese art is that of painting. How vivid were the painted Assamese book covers in the recent exhibition at the British Museum, London, in connection with the Festival of India in Britain. This charming aspect of Assamese art is fully dealt with.

The author has rendered a signal service to the art of Assam and the background against which it comes into being and flourished.

## PREFACE

The work *Art of Mediaeval Assam* is the result of my post doctoral researches. It was financed by the University Grants Commission, New Delhi in 1969 under the Financial Assistance to Teachers schemes.

The history of Assam had attracted very little attention of scholars both Indian and foreign. Her art is still less known. Situated between the cultural borders of India and South East Asia Assam has been left out in studies of Indian art history as well as that of South-East Asia. But my ten-year stay in Assam revealed to me the uniqueness of Assam's culture and art. Assam serves as a bridge between the cultures of South East Asia and India. In the mediaeval times under the rule of the independent Ahom dynasty Assam seemed to have drifted away from the mainstreams of Indian cultural and artistic activities. But due to her independence from Islamic rule (which pervaded over most of India) and resulting isolation of many old styles, motifs and designs (which had undergone a process of metamorphosis and assimilation in the rest of the country) were preserved and continued in the arts of Assam till the 19th century.

The entry of the Ahoms, a branch of the great Tai race into Assam in the 13th century and their rule there till the British occupation of Assam in the early part of the 19th century was a turning point in the art history of Assam. Isolation was greater during this period. But a regenerated culture flowered in the valley of the Brahmaputra nurtured by the Ahoms and their contemporary rulers of the Koch, Kachari and the Jaintia dynasties. In this crucible of cultures inhabited by members of the Aryan, Dravidian, Austric and Tibeto-Burman races developed a culture which was as much Indian as it had a personality of its own.

In my present work an attempt has been made in the direction of studying the art of mediaeval Assam as a whole keeping in view the different ethnic elements that went into its making. In spite of Assam's isolation artistic ideas and ideals of the Islamic period of India filtered into Assam. This is noticeable in the new motifs and designs, techniques of production and forms in architecture of mediaeval Assam. Again, the affinity of Assam's art with that of South East Asia has also been indicated at relevant places.

The sphere of art in which Assam excelled in the period under review is that of manuscript painting. Excellent examples of manuscript paintings produced during this period was the result of Vaishnava regeneration under Sri Sankaradeva (1449-1568 A D). The Ahoms also continued a school of manuscript illustration having a close affinity with those developed in Tai regions outside India.

The work is amply illustrated with black and white and colour plates as well as line drawings. I am thankful to the Archaeological Survey of India, Eastern Circle, the Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Calcutta and the Bharat Kala Bhawan, Varanasi, for the supply of photographs used in this book. My thanks are also due to the authorities of the Assam, State Museum, the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Handicrafts Museum, the Gauhati University library all at Gauhati for a large extent of help and supply of relevant photographs.

The late Prof. S.K. Saraswati not only provided me with constant guidance and encouragement but also graciously permitted me to photograph objects from his personal collection. Prof. Nihar Ranjan Ray was another guiding force behind this work and his constant suggestions and constructive criticism were heaped upon me till his last days. Prof. A.L. Basham had also taken an equally keen interest in my work.

I shall fail in my duties if I don't express my gratitude to the University Grants Commission but for whose financial assistance the book would not have seen the light of the day. I also express my thanks to my friends and students in India and abroad who have assisted me in many capacities in the process of producing "The Art of Mediaeval Assam." I am deeply indebted to Mr. Karl J. Khandalavala for writing the foreword of this humble book.

VARANASI.

18.3.1982

Rajatananda Das Gupta

Department of History of Art

Banaras Hindu University

VARANASI-5

## LIST OF CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
Preface	xv
(i) The Land and the People	1
(ii) Architecture	38
(iii) Sculpture	69
(iv) Pottery and Terracotta	85
(v) Painting	95
(vi) Minor Arts	
(a) Wood Work	149
(b) Ivory, Bamboo and Wicker Work	156
(c) Metal Ware and Jewellery	166
(d) Textiles and Costumes	188
Bibliography	209
Index	217

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- |     |   |           |
|-----|---|-----------|
| 1.  | A Perforated Pottery  | Kamrup    |
|     | B Terracotta Plaques  | Gauhati   |
| 2.  | Terracotta Pillar Nal Math  | , ,       |
| 3.  | A Terracotta tile with arabesque motifs                                       |           |
|     | B Terracotta tiles  |           |
|     | C Terracotta Plaques  | Gauhati   |
| 4.  | A Terracotta dolls  | Kamrup    |
|     | B Terracotta Plaques  | Gauhati   |
| 5.  | Terracotta lamp Stand   | Gauhati   |
| 6.  | (i) The Lion carved on the km-myakanch bridge K+J hills                       |           |
|     | (ii) Rail of moulding corner pillars  |           |
| 7.  | A Naginis. Gossanimori  | Kamatapur |
|     | B Gopis & Krishna. Gossanimori  | Kamatapur |
| 8.  | A Parasurama. Grey sand stone.  | Tezpur    |
|     | B Brahma. Grey sand stone   | Tezpur    |
| 9.  | A Rama, Sita and Lakshman-Stone relief  | Sibsagar  |
|     | B Sukleswar Temple. Gauhati, Stone relief                                     |           |
|     | C Lions, Grey sand stone  | Maibong   |
| 10. | Snake Boundary Pillar, Sadinga<br>Grey sand stone                             |           |
| 11. | A Brass Lion  | Sibsagar  |
|     | B Brass and Bronze utensils of the Ahom Age. Utensils of<br>the Native design |           |
|     | C Metalware of the Ahom Age. Utensils with the Islamic<br>influences          |           |

12. A Durga from Tinsukia. Bronze  
B Bronze Lamp stand Assam
13. A Icon of Shiva. Umanande Temple Gauhati  
B Icon of Devi
14. General view of Siva Temple, from West Nigriting
15. A Wood carving on Walls Barpeta  
B Details of Simhasana Carving-Painted wood work Gauhati
16. Simhasana for a Namghar. Painted wood work Barpeta
17. Dola or Litter (Ahom Period) Wood and Metal
18. A Wood Carving on Walls Barpeta  
B Dola or litter with seen-shade. Wood Metal & Bamboo work
19. A Upper stage of the Wooden Simhasana Gauhati  
B Lowest stage of Wooden Simhasana Gauhati  
C Second stage of Wooden Simhasana Gauhati
20. Border design from Phulam Gamochas
21. A Kachari Costume Goalpara  
B Bihu Dance in Traditional Dress
22. Border design from Phulam Gamochas
23. A Drawings from the Sankha chads Vadha mas  
Krishna in the guira of saukha chnda talks to Tulsu  
Ticha offers pan to Krishna  
B Rama, Sita and Lakshmana
24. A Bhagavata Book. X Ahom Style Gauhati  
B Danalila. Book Cover Goalpara
25. A Bhagavata Book X  
B Book Cover Assam
26. Ahom Mss. on Natch Making Sibsagar
27. A Lava Kussa Yuddha Manuscript  
B Lava Kuska Yuddha Manuscript 17th Century
28. A Bhagavata Book VI Details of Golophone  
Page. Date 1659 Gauhati  
B Krishna & Brahma, Painted Book Cover.

29.	Gorhgaon Palace, from South	Sibsagar
30.	Mosque from Souta West	Goalpara
31.	General View of Kamakhya Temple	Kamrup
32.	General view of Sivdol Temple	Sibsagar
33.	Wood carving on Walls	Barpeta
34.		
35.	Wooden architecture Kamalabari	Sibsagar
36.	A Ranachadi Temple	Khaspur
	B Baraduari (Close view)	Khaspur
37.	Terracotta Panel	Coachar
38.	General View of Sibdole Temple	Sibsagar
39.	Painting Ahom Style Book X	Gauhati

### About the Author

Dr. Rajatananda Das Gupta is a Reader in the Department of History of Art, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University. He has been teaching History of art since 1962, first at the Department of Ancient History and Culture, Punjab University, Chandigarh and then since 1964 at the Banaras Hindu University.

The present work is the result of extensive and long researches in the history of Assam and her artistic activities in the mediaeval times. During the research he was encouraged by eminent art historians and Indologists like Prof. A. L. Basham, and the late Professors S. K. Saraswati and Nihar Ranjan Ray. In course of his findings he had travelled widely in Assam, Tripura, Bangladesh and Nepal. He also visited Greece in 1980 to study the archaeological sites and Museums in that country.

Dr. Das Gupta's field of specialization is Indian Painting. Apart from Indian Painting he also teaches and guides researches on subject pertaining to Indian folk arts and crafts and Indo-Islamic art. Presently the author is engaged in a research project on North Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi.

Dr. R. Das Gupta is an ardent collector of folk art objects and takes to cine and still photography as hobby.

"The Art of Mediaeval Assam" is a study in the arts of this frontier region of India from the 13th to the 19th centuries till it succumbed to British imperialism. During the above period Assam had maintained her independence from Islamic conquests as result of which much of ancient Indian art forms had been preserved there. Being a melting pot of races, Assam had a many faced culture which flourished, under the Ahom kings of Tai origin. Hence Assamese art serves as a bridge between those of India and south east Asia. By studying arts of Assam we are able to follow the process of Indianisation of south east Asia.

The author has dealt in this book not only with the usual art forms in such a study but has also discussed the minor arts and crafts which reveal the talents and vitality of folk culture. Hence the present work is of immense value to students of art history as well as anthropology. The author had lived long in Assam and has also travelled widely in eastern India, Bangladesh and Nepal which has enabled him to give an account of Assam and her arts by coming in direct contact with the traditional artists and craftsmen of the area.