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A rare glimpse into a forgotten Hindu world

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WASHINGTON: Immense and infinitely diverse, India remains the great repository of hidden cultural secrets in South Asia. "Garden and Cosmos: The Royal Paintings of Jodhpur," at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery until Jan. 4 before reopening at the Seattle Art Museum on Jan. 29, reveals for the first time a virtually unknown school of monumental Hindu painting on paper that thrived from the 1720s to the mid-19th century.

Not even specialized scholars had set eyes on the 60 works from the Marwar area, now part of the state of Rajasthan, that are preserved in the Mehrangarh Museum in the Fort of Jodhpur.

The loan of important unpublished works of art by an Indian institution to a Western museum is a first in international museum relations. This sensational coup was pulled off by Debra Diamond, a curator at the Sackler Gallery, with the generous help of the maharajah of Jodhpur, Gaj Singh II, a direct descendant of the Rathore maharajahs under whom the school flourished, and of his spouse the Maharani Hemata Rajye. The curator of the Mehrangarh Museum, Karni Singh Jasol, gave his wholehearted support to this unique undertaking, which will culminate in Delhi when the exhibition reopens on its last leg in November 2009.

Another equally important coup was achieved by Diamond and Catherine Glynn, an independent researcher, in displaying paintings from a Hindu court, not as a succession of quaint images but as the expression of a culture, both in its literature written in Hindi and in its metaphysical aspects.

The result is a fascinating lesson in the avatars of Hindu life and history that comes together with the art.

Some early Jodhpur paintings show that the blending of elements taken over from the distant heritage of late-15th-century Iranian manuscript painting and of stylistic conventions rooted in the Indian past was already under way by the mid-17th century. A remarkable example of this artistic syncretism is illustrated in the important exhibition book edited by Diamond, but unfortunately did not make it to the show. The painted page, preserved in the San Diego Museum of Art, formed part of a series of ragmalas, or musical pieces, accompanied by poetical texts. The simplified figures and the naïve handling of the architecture have a kind of folkloric pithiness that was carried over in more polished form into 18th-century Jodhpur painting.

Another source of influence on Jodhpur art was court painting from the Moghul empire of which Marwar was part. A page from a dispersed album loaned by the British Museum portrays a character in Moghul garb, identified by Diamond as Gaj Singh I, one of the first Rajput princes on whom the Moghul emperor Shah Jahan bestowed the title maharajah. The carefully observed features bear witness to the impact that European figural art had on Moghul painting, but the return to the timeless stylization of the East is otherwise already manifest.

The rejection of naturalism was consummated when a new school of Hindu painting took off at Nagaur under the reign of Maharajah Bakhat Singh (1725-1751).

In a series of paintings from the 1730s, which relate to royal pastimes, any attempts at rendering perspective in Moghul fashion have been given up. No effort is made to convey depth or volume in essentially linear compositions.

Stylization and symbolism prevail in a scene where Maharajah Bakhat Singh and Prince Vijay Singh watch singers and dancers perform in the palace courtyard. The maharajah seated on his heel is twice the size of the young prince and the female performers, thereby signifying his exalted status, and the clouds in the sky are done like scrolling bands borrowed from Chinese decorative art.

In a large outdoor scene relating to the celebration of Holi, the great Hindu festival, the Moghul legacy survives in the importance given to the architectural setting that defines the composition, but the handling of detail is radically different. Oversimplification was setting in. The stereotyped faces are handled in quasi-cartoon like fashion.

The trend affected even scenes dealing with religious subjects. The "Maharajah Bakhat Singh Worshipping Krishna," hands raised in prayer, has a comical look. Yet, here too memories of Moghul tradition linger. Krishna is seated on a gold throne studded with green and red stones, probably emeralds and rubies or spinels, in the manner of Shah Jahan's throne described in the chronicle of his reign, the Shah Jahan-Nama.

A Moghul-style triangular banner is stuck on the dome of the open pavilion in which the god is seated and the Hindi inscription hailing the maharajah paraphrases the titlature of Moghul emperors that itself echoed the Iranian protocol. Add the golden vessels in wall niches following a Moghul custom that imitated the Iranian palatial style and the persistent admiration for past Moghul court fashion is not in doubt in this painting for a Hindu ruler.

Faint traces of this taste subsisted in the religious paintings produced in Jodhpur 10 or 20 years later. In "Vishnu and Lakshmi in their Heavenly Palace," painted around 1755-1760, the architectural setting is a throwback to the palatial courtyard in which Maharajah Bakhat Singh and Prince Vijay Singh are entertained by dancers and singers. But rhythmical stylization changes everything. Gone is the empty white ground. Instead, a scrolling pattern swirls around a lobed rosette borrowed from the Iranian art of the book via its Moghul derivations.

While the dainty white marble construction with red and green stone inlay may immortalize the memory of an actual palace, it looks more like an elevation produced in an architect's studio than a real monument. A powerful rhythm is created through repetition wherever feasible - in the flower beds, in the trees beyond the arcade, even in the peacocks perched in trees and the white geese flying across the sky.

Soon, rhythmical repetition became the painter's overriding preoccupation, leading to some of the most striking creations of the Jodhpur school of royal painting. Its most extraordinary works were inspired by the Ramayana, the ancient epic originally composed in Sanskrit. Recast in late-16th-century verse by the poet Tulsidas, who wrote in vernacular Hindi, the epic which recounts the story of the heroic god Rama gained a renewed popularity. By the second half of the 18th century, Diamond notes, the Hindi version of Tulsidas spread by itinerant ascetics had traveled from Varanasi in eastern India, where it was composed, to Rajasthan in the western part of the country. It was recited at court and selected scenes from it were re-enacted.

A series of monumental folios painted around 1775 deal with it, projecting visions of an enchanted fairy-tale world.

In a landscape representing the forest of the monkey kingdom Kishkindha, pink peaks shoot up above low turquoise-green hills where groups of seated monkeys deliberate. In the lower area, bears stand talking to one another. Right at the top, white geese perched in trees fly off into the sky. Colors and motifs achieve a rhythm in tune with the rhythm of chanted verse.

While the paintings are rather coarse, betraying the decadence that hit Indian art in the 18th century, the poetic feeling remains remarkable.

Not much of that spirit survived a quarter of a century later when Man Singh (1803-1843) redefined the royal regime in Marwar and made the cult of the immortal ascetic Jalandharnath an essential part of religious observance. In a painting that shows Man Singh worshipping the ascetic on Diwali, the Indian festival of lights, the maharajah is seen bowing deeply as Jalandharnath places a ceremonial shawl on his shoulders.

Diamond provides an illuminating analysis of the image and its meaning. The flame pattern on Man Singh's red robe, the candelabra and the many oil lamps all refer to Diwali. Jalandharnath is depicted with detailed precision in his personal appearance and his attributes. The ash pale skin, the saffron garment, the dreadlocks all identify him as a Shaiva ascetic while the conical hat and the deer horn whistle more specifically designate him as a Nath or member of a yogic order. The iconography is as rigorous as the art is dry. The spirit had ceased to blow in the art of India whether Hindu, Islamic or Sikh.

Yet the exhibition is gripping right through the end. The display is superb in an elegantly restrained manner. The concise labels like the book relate the images to their concepts. There is as much to think about as to gaze at. This is the great Asian show of the year.

Correction:

Notes:



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