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Rimpy Agarwal
Assistant Professor,
Apeejay College of Fine Arts,
Jawahar Nagar, Mahavir
Marg, Jalandhar, Punjab,
India.

Painted wooden covers of early Indian manuscripts: A significant part of Indian painting

Rimpy Agarwal

Abstract

Painting started with the birth of man. Till 7th century, art in India flourished in the form of monuments, temples and wall paintings. Then there was a sudden transition in art and it donned miniature form. The miniature paintings initially emerged in eastern India. These miniature paintings were used to prepare with Palmyra or palm leaves which were very small in size. These paintings were set in the format of 22" by 2.5". But only 2.5" by 3" of space was left for painting. The Artists were not supposed to paint the manuscripts according to their free will but they had full liberty to paint the wooden covers as per their whims and fancies. As a result many a time the wooden covers turn out to be a better piece of art than the manuscripts bound inside. Painted book covers not only quench our curiosity about Indian art but they also acquaint us with the shapes of paintings which were executed on a wider scale on wall and cloth. Their significance cannot be ignored because wooden covers have made a gigantic contribution in the development and spread of art and religion. These wooden covers are sometimes used to be more meritorious than the paintings preserved inside.

Keywords: Indian Painting, Miniature Painting, Manuscript Painting, Painted wooden covers

Introduction

The origin of Indian painting dates back to the origin of man. Painting started with the birth of man. The early man started depicting his inner feelings by paintings and inscribing on walls of cave. Eventually man and civilization progressed and art followed the suit. Till 7th century, art in India flourished in the form of monuments, temples and wall paintings. Then there was a sudden transition in art and it donned miniature form. Art attained the form of manuscripts and miniature paintings were executed. A number of factors were responsible for the emergence of this form of art. One of the prominent reasons of this trend was the arrival of Muslim invaders who started destroying the temples and the monasteries. The invaluable heritage of art was vandalized. Another reason was that the Buddhist monks wanted to spread Buddhism to other countries. This aim was attained through portable art i.e. manuscripts embellished with paintings. This effort successfully bore the results.

The miniature paintings initially emerged in eastern India. The Pala kings patronized this form of art and buoyant to spread Buddhism. They made immense contribution in encouraging this form of art as well as spreading Buddhism. This new type of art was developed mainly in Bihar and Bengal. These manuscripts were used to prepare with Palmyra or palm leaves which were very small in size. These paintings were set in the format of 22" by 2.5". But only 2.5" by 3" of space was left for painting. The rest of the space was used for writing some religious text whose content was least related to the painting. This text was written in Devnagri script. These painted manuscripts on Palmyra leaves arranged in bundles were tied inside then binded with wooden covers. As it is evident, the subject matter of these paintings was based on Buddhism. The painters were especially instructed to paint manuscripts based on life style of Lord Buddha. The painters had to paint as per instructions given. They were not supposed to paint the manuscripts according to their free will but they had full liberty to paint the wooden covers as per their whims and fancies. As a result many a time the wooden covers turn out to be a better piece of art than the manuscripts bound inside [1]. It had been possible because the artists were at complete emancipation to express their feelings to paint these wooden covers. These wooden covers have acquired the same importance as the rest of the paintings. Although these wooden covers have carved a niche for themselves in the history of painting but still they have not been highlighted properly. The immense importance of these wooden covers can be explained through some examples.

Correspondence
Rimpy Agarwal
Assistant Professor,
Apeejay College of Fine Arts,
Jawahar Nagar, Mahavir
Marg, Jalandhar, Punjab,
India.

One of these manuscripts titled as *Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita* executed in 11th century is quite famous. Its wooden covers were embellished with various scenes from Buddha's life. Except this manuscript numerous manuscripts had the scenes depicted from *Jataka* stories. These scenes depicted on wooden covers enriched the manuscripts [2]. Most of the book covers found in Bengal and Nepal are Buddhist. The Brahmanical miniature found from Nepal stand last in this series. Indian gods Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, Ganesha, Kartikya and a Sivalinga have been painted in Pingalmata, a tantric text in Darbar library copied in 1174 A.D. Although their style lacks the firmness of earlier miniature but still this form was a major landmark in the journey of art. It is well known fact there have been no survival of palm leaf paper miniature and wooden book covers of eastern and western India in medieval times. But painted book covers not only quench our curiosity about Indian art but they also acquaint us with the shapes of paintings which were executed on a wider scale on wall and cloth. We can very well gauge the value of these documents worked as a link with ancient tradition which was actually a great inspiration for manuscript paintings [3].

The Bramnical manuscripts found in Nepal also have painted wooden covers. In these paintings *Sivadharma* and *Lalitavistara* have been executed in Saivite text, which were executed in 1036 A.D. The story of *Lingodbhavamurti* has been depicted on one of its covers. But the paintings of Hindu subjects on wooden covers and palm leaves show a deep impact of ancient origin. Paper manuscripts of the *Sivadharma* 1220 A.D. have magnificent painted wooden covers depicting *Uma-Mahesvara*, *Saiva* saints and lay worshipper [4].

The Western Indian manuscripts were also executed on palm leaf paper and cloth. They also had painted wooden covers. Mostly Palm leaf manuscripts were executed before 1400 A.D. These leaves used to be divided in to 2 or 3 panels for writing. Their division depended on the size of the leaves. A margin of 1.5" was left on both sides of the leaves. Later on they were tied together by punching them. Finally they were covered with polished wooden covers. During the 12th century the best and the most beautiful example of wooden covers depicts one incident from the Jain doctrine. It can be seen in the library of Jaisalmer. Through this painting the religious disputation has been shown between *KumudaChadra*, The *Digambara* scholar and *Vadi Devdasuri*, the *Svetambara* logician. These paintings also show a glimpse of lives of ordinary people [5].

Other than this the previous nine lives of *Neminatha* and *Rajimati* from Jaisalmer have also been portrayed, these manuscripts are the best examples of wood covers. Although the wooden covers (13th and 14th C.A.D) found later on in Jaisalmer depicting the life of *Mahavira* are more complicated. But some such manuscripts with wooden book covers have been found which are fully embellished with decorative elements. Paintings on palm leaf and wood covers were also executed in south India but this tradition can be seen only in palm leaf manuscripts of *Dhavta* and *Mahadhavata* the *Digamber* texts written and illustrated between 1113 and 1120 A.D. in the collection of *Mudbidri* temple. These manuscripts were related to Jain religion [6].

The survey of palm leaf manuscripts and painted book covers will be incomplete if *tankas* or painted banners are not mentioned. But at present no painted banners from Bengal and Bihar are found anywhere. We know that the banners of

Nepalese origin were found in the cave temple of *Tun-huang*. These silk paintings have inferior workmanship and show the localized Nepalese version of *Magadhan* tradition. These wooden books covers also show a bit of modeling. Later on the workmanship of *Mandalas* in *Magadha* and *Nepal* attained refinement [7]. The students and pilgrims all over south East Asia use to flock to *Nalanda*, *Odantatpuri*, *Vikramsila* and *Somarupa* for educational and religious instructions. On their way back to home, they used to take the bronzes and manuscripts of *Pala* Buddhist art as paradigm along with them. In this way *Pala* style spread quickly among countries like *Tibet*, *Burma*, *Srilanka* and *Java*. Most of the examples of *Pala* School are related to *Vajrajana* School. This form of art also reflects some approach of *Ajanta*. After the invasion by *Muslim* invaders, some monks and artists fled to *Nepal*. It helped in strengthen the existing art tradition there. The art form depicting *Jainism* was patronized by the kings of *Chalukya* dynasty who ruled *Gujrat* and *Malwa* [8].

I have cited only some examples of wooden covers which were made in abundance to illustrate the fact that they were a valuable expression of art and were as important as the manuscripts that they contained. Their significance cannot be ignored because wooden covers have made a gigantic contribution in the development and broaden of art and religion. These wooden covers used to be more meritorious than the paintings preserved inside them because the artists who painted them, did not have to follow any rules or regulations. These covers have also kindled a curiosity among the viewers and literary persons as these cover paintings could entice both the common as well as the specific people towards them.

Conclusion: The origin of Indian painting dates back to the origin of man. The early man started depicting his inner feelings by paintings and inscribing on cave walls. Eventually man and civilization progressed and art followed the suit. In 7th century art attained the form of manuscripts and miniature paintings were executed. The subject matter of these paintings was based on *Buddhism*. *Buddhist* monks wanted to spread *Buddhism* to other countries. This aim was attained through portable art i.e. manuscripts embellished with manuscripts. This new type of art was developed mainly in *Bihar* and *Bengal*. The painters were especially instructed to paint manuscripts based on life style of *Lord Buddha*. The painters had to paint as per instructions given. They were not supposed to paint the manuscripts according to their free will but they had full liberty to paint the wooden covers as per their whims and fancies. As a result many a time the wooden covers turns out to be better piece of art than the manuscripts bound inside. It had been possible because the artists were at complete liberty to express their feelings to paint these wooden covers. These wooden covers have acquired the same importance as the rest of the paintings. Although these wooden covers have carved a niche for themselves in the history of painting but still they have not been highlighted properly. These covers have also kindled a curiosity among the viewers and literary persons as these cover paintings could entice both the common as well as the specific people towards them.

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