

Understanding the Visual Language of Artists Recreating the Theme of *Ramayana*

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The Indian style of painting succeeded in the regions like Gujarat, Rajasthan and Malwa which were deeply rooted in the Indian traditions, taking inspiration from Indian epics and mythology. The *Vaishnavism*, *Shaivism* and *Shakti* cults were most frequently practiced influencing the pictorial art of these provinces. The themes from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, *Jayadeva's Gita Govinda*, *Bhanudatta's Rasamanjari*, *Kesavadasa's Rasikapriya*, *Bihari's Sat Sai* and *Ragamala* etc., provided a rich variety of matter to the artists who with their artistic expertise and dedication made a noteworthy contribution to the growth and expansion of Indian paintings. Among these, *Rama* and *Krishna* theme were the most enduring one's that inspired the patrons and artists providing plentiful situations in which both could have been imagined.

During 16th century the primitive art styles existed there in Rajasthan and Central India which served as a foundation for the development of various schools of painting during 17th century. The Malwa painting of Central India is noticeable for its bold drawings and application of strong and contrasting colours emphasizing the narrative interpretation of the themes. Fondness for rigorous flat compositions is clearly visible. Flat treatment of figures without any attempt of showing naturalistic perspective is also noticeable. At first glance a division of various colours filled into several compartments can be perceived through these paintings which are done in order to separate one scene from another. Visuals possess figures illustrated against the solid backgrounds of black or dark-brown colour patches and architecture ornated in lively colour. The most appealing attribute in these Malwa style paintings is the primitive charm and very simple childish visualization.

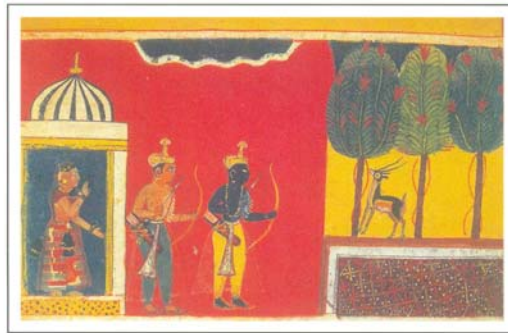
Visualizing miniature paintings from Malwa region on *Rama's* story provides a description about what literatures speaks about *Ramayana* and how painters interpreted them into their works. The overall study aims at understanding the soundless language of the paintings done on *Ramalila* theme with different perspectives. It is a study of enquiring how time, situation, place and historical circumstances left their mark in the painting style and translated earlier conceptions within the modern form and its implication. As paintings are intimate and viewing is subjective, it is totally a personal vision and perceptive about the *Ramayana* visuals. Because one sees each painting and enters into it in the direction painter tries to take viewer but understand the picture and draws the meaning according to his own capability and interest.

In the *Ramayana* painting from Malwa region here, one can notice all these features discussed above. *Ravana* in the form of multi-headed and many-armed demon and *Rama* and *Lakshmana* with their bows and arrows ready to strike are encased separately in two compartments. *Sita* in striped garment is shown in the

third smallest section above at the centre. She is framed almost like a photograph on the wall of some interior, although the scene takes place in the open air with lush green foliage and stylized patterned rocks in the background. All the figures are in profile as they are flat and one-dimensional. The divine heroes are placed at an ornate pedestal possessing an interesting design which seems to be a blend of Indian as well as Persian motifs. This suggests that there have been multicultural influences in the region of Malwa, each contributing towards arts. This picture exhibits a recognizable style of Malwa School paintings in a consistency of staging and appearance. However, there are many disparities in the layouts, ideas and the moods in Malwa visuals. Another picture from Malwa also



Rama and Laksmana Attacking the Demon Ravana
Malwa. 1640 A.D.



Rama & golden deer Maricha, Malwa, circa 1634 -40 A.D.,
National Museum, New Delhi

possesses three sections compartmentalized, each housing different episode separately. Intermingling of folk elements with bright primary colours and faces in profile are the common attributes of Malwa miniatures visible here. Again scene of outdoor is identifiable through lush trees blossoming at bright yellow section with deer in profile placed on a pedestal as above.

Next is an example of two paintings from Kalighat of *Ramayana* episodes. One is of *Rama*, *Sita* and *Lakshmana* seated on a couch and *Hanuman* kneeling down and another is of *Hanuman* fighting with multi-armed ferocious *Ravana*. These are 19th century paintings and thus possess simple but distinctive characteristics. The artist had defined figures of deities with skillful dynamic sinuous sweeping lines. These visuals have an astounding magnetism for the modern art of India with long bold sweep of the brush lines, strong directness, pulsating colours and rhythmic vibrant compositions altogether. *Rama* is represented here as high class wealthy gentleman who can be characteristically recognized with nicely oiled hair and a cap above, pleated upper garment falling from his shoulders resembles like the '*babu*'. Because *babus* are exemplified in Kalighat style painting as rich man usually holding *hukkah* in his hand which the artist portrayed *Rama* very cleverly in same seated posture with one hand raised as if



Rama, Sita and Lakshmana.
Kalighat, 1875
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smoking a *hukkah* but he is holding an arrow in one and the bow in another hand. At first sight one cannot identify the picture as of *Rama* and *Sita*, it appears as the scene of *Babu's* way of life because Kalighat paintings exhibit the bulk of similar compositions of a rich man's lifestyle. Interestingly portrayed is Hanuman bowing his head down in the first picture is similar to another combating with *Ravana* in the second painting of Kalighat in the form of monkey or *langur*. With very few components in the picture of Kalighat paintings like green curtain rolling above in one and a tree in another are just few props used by an artist to suggest the scene of indoor or outdoor. Despite these limited elements in the painting, background has been left flat wherein dominance is of the figures only which is absolutely different from that of Indian miniature paintings as can be seen in above discussed Malwa paintings also. The overall composition is very simple and direct having plain backdrop and no rendering of splitting up of the background and the foreground

is there. The chief factor that creates difference amongst the Malwa miniature paintings and Kalighat paintings of similar theme and similar characters represented in two different manner is the formation of figures which is front and three fourth here in Kalighat whereas complete profile is noticeable in Malwa miniatures. Another aspect that creates divergence is the manner the artist of Kalighat deals with the illustration of idols of gods and goddesses, like *Rama*, *Lakshmana*, *Sita* and *Hanuman* along with *Ravana* here occupying almost the larger part or the pictorial space of sheet with all their codified postures and gestures and iconographic attributes. Whereas in Malwa paintings, the whole environment is suggestive of the region through elements present in surrounding and characters appear as if they are performing on a well set stage. For example the architecture, rocky background and variety of trees, horizon



Hanuman fighting with Ravana
Kalighat, Calcutta, late 19th c.

etc in Malwa visuals helps in understanding the whole situation in narrative manner as if the painter had tried to create a mood of the scene through them. Colours also play an important role here as the golden beam of golden deer is suggested through bright yellow where as vibrant red behind *Rama* and *Lakshmana* suggests their keenness in catching the golden deer. In another Malwa picture also pulsating red is filled behind *Rama* and *Lakshmana* to depict their rage and aggression while fighting with *Ravana* and same red is in the compartment at the centre where *Sita* is seated to reveal her agony and restlessness. To its very opposite, Kalighat paintings have flat almost pale background.

Raja Ravi Varma, modern Indian artist was also famous for his paintings on grand Indian epic poems and many more like the *Jatayu Vadh* from *Ramayana* theme. This was the phase when at the stage of an identity crisis, Ravi Varma came into prominence with his style of compositions possessing the influence of British academic tradition in style and technique. His *Jatayu Vadh* also displays the western pattern of working with a composition and handling the oil medium for the first time in India. Ravi Varma's *Ravana* is a modified version of a mythical character which is totally different from that of earlier noticeable *Ravana* of Malwa miniatures. He does not look demonic from his physical appearance as this character appeared again and again in Indian paintings, furious and many a times ten armed. In fact *Ravana* looks masculine and haughtily egoistic here.



Jatayu Vadh by Ravana, Raja Ravi Varma, 1895

And as this episode suggests multi armed *Ravana* on his chariot, the artist diverges from the descriptions of poetic exaggerations to generate a fantasy that is indeed creative. Here flying chariot is not shown, still *Ravana*'s mystic skill of floating in the sky with all his demonic power is clearly visible. The complete scene has been dramatized here with theatrical effects expressing multi emotions at once in all the three characters of the composition. *Sita* is distressed at *Jatayu*'s slaying whereas *Jatayu* is fighting valiantly with *Ravana* and on the other side *Ravana*'s posture, expressions and body language is filled with annoyance, arrogance and confidence. Such emphasis on facial expressions was the western idiom and was not seen in Indian paintings earlier. These kind of significant shifts were brought about by the artists from time to time in order to break free from the leading art

movements of the early 20th century. And these shifts suggest an experimentation done by various artists from the decades of very deep concern towards the regeneration and recovery of Indian roots.

In this manner artists composed *Ramalila* theme and illustrated them with innovated lyrical compassion, delicate and graceful draughtsmanship and colours of their own taste. The artists gave lively forms to these verbal images and provided strikingly new dimensions to the theme of Ramayana. But while recreating or redesigning an episode each detail has to be worked out by artist with meticulous care and especially when the theme is based on God because it is about religion, faith and belief. The most important challenge for every artist during each recreation of the narrative was to give a fresh look while painting the same repeated theme Ramalila and give it a layer of contemporary meaning through his world of picturesque imagination, symbolic as well as aesthetic depiction. Artists render Ramayana episodes on canvas using variety of ideas and their innovative thoughts. Such comparisons display and open up the mystery of the creative world where countless ancient Hindu mythological tales are illustrated in numerous contexts. When looked at closely, the details appear both diverse, amusing and awe-inspiring.

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