

Shikar Paintings : Contemporary Then, Traditional Now

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the development of court painting at Mewar and tries to re-read the paintings in royal collection with an eye of a contemporary artist, working in Mewar School medium. This tries to establish the fact that miniatures in Mewar were beyond intricate details and decoration. They were very intellectually composed narratives of the Maharana's life and hunt scenes. This article also extends the understanding of terms 'contemporary' and 'tradition' with respect to miniatures. As one can see the degradation of style of painting from court times into the now -a- day's bazaar, outside the palace, the whole experience of going through museum collection and understanding the painting tradition falls flat when we see bad copies in bazaar. My research article lies there, why and how we got here?

Keywords : Mewar Painting, Shikar Painting (Hunting Scenes), Contemporary, Traditional, Bazaar Art

Shikar paintings in City Palace Museum, Udaipur - An analysis into the contemporary world then, traditional now.

The city palace museum was founded by the late Maharana Bhagwat Singh in 1969, while its Zenana Mahal section, in former women's quarters of the palace, was opened in 1974. Few decades had passed since then the dissolution of the princely states after Indian Independence in 1947 and the death a few years later of Bhupal Singh, the last reigning Maharana of Mewar (b.1884, r.1930-55). In this period much of the old order has ineluctably passed away. Ancient traditions of royal patronage had to be relinquished abruptly, the elaborate forms of court ceremonial fell into disuse, and the old public festivals and splendid tamashas (spectacles) likewise ceased. At the same time, the rapid expansion of world tourism was providing a new role for the disused palaces of Rajasthan as museums or luxury hotels. The conversion of the 18th century island resort of Jagniwas into the Lake Palace Hotel in 1963 had enhanced Udaipur's position in the itineraries of foreign visitors. With growing public in mind, Maharana Bhagwat Singh opened up the City Palace and its Zenana, now no longer used as residences, installing in them varied displays of arms and armor, paintings and photographs, royal insignia, processional trappings and other objects evoking the history and traditions of the Mewar kingdom and its Sisodia Rajput chiefs.

Artistically the most exciting exhibits within the City Palace are a dozen very large Udaipur Court paintings of the 18th century and early 19th centuries.

The Maharanas of Mewar sought their artists to manuscript each and every aspect of their daily life events. The most widespread subjects painted were

court scenes, delegate meetings, festivals, celebration etc. but most enthralling of all of them are hunting scenes.

The day by day documentation in form of paintings is huge reserve from chronological point of view. A lot of the artist families linked with darbar or royal court were from Udaipur and many of them, drifted from close by towns like Nathdwara, Chawand, etc.

The artists were earlier engaged in religious sectors like temples or were portrait artists etc.

Produced by the hereditary artist families of Udaipur for successive Maharanas over a period of almost 250 years, the City Palace paintings as a group provide a unique record of Mewar court life in its final phases, with its spectacular public ceremonies and its elaborate social hierarchies. These pictures also represent the culminating achievement of an ancient artistic tradition, which only ended with Maharana Bhupal Singh.

One can see a whole assortment of painterly approach in these court paintings in Udaipur City Palace. Starting from landscapes, to portraiture to hunting scenes, court proceedings, processions, celebrations etc., there is a lot of borrowing from princely states in vicinity. The artists were aware of artistic changes and believed in keeping themselves in up to date avant garde with other stylistic changes. This mélange of diverse styles like Kota, Bundi, Nathdwara, Kishangarh, Bikaner, Mughal, Pahari and even from Deccani is quite noticeable in paintings.

There were lot of stylistic and technical exchanges and court of Maharanas always welcomed artists and artisans from neighborhood. This surely hints at a very contemporary and progressive nature of artists of those times. They were trying to paint in a naturalistic way and yet retained the classical traditional style.

Rana Kumbha (1433-68) was the most notable of several early Sisodia patrons of art and architecture, music, learning and literature. Although few documented examples of Mewar painting survive from before the Mughal period (c.1526-1858), it is likely that Chittor was a leading centre of the boldly colored and vigorously expressive Early Rajput style of manuscript illustration, typified by famous series of the tenth book of the Bhagvata Purana.

After the Mughal invasions, Maharana Amar Singh finally settled in Udaipur, founded by his predecessor Maharana Udai Singh. His successors were once again able to add to the palace buildings and cultivate the arts. Under Maharana Jagat Singh I (1628-52) the Early Rajut style became regenerated in the work of the painter Sahibdin (1628-55), who successfully combined its brilliant palette and poetic vision with more naturalistic methods deriving from Mughal art.



Fig: 1. (Maharana Jagat Singh watching the elephants Medani Mal and Gara Rao fighting near Shobhagpura ,Udaipur,1735. Image courtesy:The City Palace Museum Udaipur,Andrew Topsfield)

The art of realistic portraiture and court reportage had flourished in India at the Mughal court in reigns of Akbar (1556-1605). Keen and innovating patrons, both emperors encouraged their Hindu and Muslim painters to follow European models as well as their narrative Indian and Persian traditions.

It is only in the reign of Amar Singh II(1698-1710), a far more discriminating patron, that Mewar portraiture acquired its own momentum and a distinctive viewpoint, detachedly but comprehensively observant of both public life and private pursuits of the ruler.

By the time of Amar Singh's death, the enlargement of the picture format was very well established and most of the later themes of Udaipur court painting had already been adumbrated.

Sangram Singh II (1710-34) further pursued his father's initiatives in a huge expansion of painting activity. Every aspect of the ruler's public life was recorded in pictures of varying but generally large size. In many compositions the palace architecture was again employed to good effect as a backdrop or framing device.

The inscriptions from the reigns very often provide the artist's names, and confirm their practice of working in groups of two or three on the largest paintings. Pyara and Naga (son of Bhagvan), Syaji and Sukha, and Bhima and Kesu Ram are among the collaborating pairs. Such was the general consistency of style that their individual contributions are often not easily distinguishable.

By the end of the reign of the irascible and unpopular Ari Singh, the economy was in ruins and the Thakurs in revolt. Many of the better artists had left court, and one of them, Bakhta, pursued a brilliant career at Deogarh.

Numerous court and hunting scenes both small and large were executed for Jawan Singh (1828-38), though in a stiffer and more pedestrian style. This temporary decline was happily reversed by Tara (fl. 1836-68), the leading painter of Swarup Singh (1846-61), who resourcefully deployed his conventional skills to elegant and pleasing effect.

From the 1850's Tara, his sons and their followers, who were to dominate the final phases of Udaipur painting, inevitably became exposed to European pictorial techniques and the revolutionary art of photography. It says much for the resilience and consistency of the Mewar School that a range of naturalistic effects were gradually assimilated without serious distortion of its own characteristic vision, at least until the generation of the 1920's.

Thanks to this proud and austere ruler, tenacious of tradition and distrustful of modernity, court painting survived at Udaipur into the present century. Its most frequent subject was Shikar (hunting), Fateh Singh's one great passion and sole pastime. In the early years of the reign (c. 1884-90) Tara's gifted son Shivalal, assisted perhaps by his brother Mohanlal, was exclusively occupied in recording his royal patron's pursuit of tiger in the hills and jungles of the Chittor and Jai Samand regions. Such hunts were elaborate, quasi-military operations. Thousands of state troops could be mobilized as beaters, once the officer of the Shikar Department had received intelligence (khabar) of a suitable tiger in some distant jungle. The Maharana and his nobles, shikaris and hunt-followers would journey to the spot and take their stations either in the muls (shooting-boxes) which dotted the hills, or in specially constructed machans (tree hides). The beat would commence and its progress would be signaled to the ruler by heliographer, later, by radio. Shivalal perfected the art of recording the climatic stages leading to the kill as a dramatic continuous narrative, framed in thickly wooded landscapes of increasingly naturalistic detail. Grand Shikar subjects of this type, which are almost unknown outside the Udaipur collections, are perhaps the last wholly successful genre to be introduced into Mewar painting.

Following the transfer of power to the more progressive Bhupal Singh, stronger intimations of modernity are found in work of the leading painters Pannalal and his son Chagganlal. The later especially became at times over-fond of painting from Photographs.



Fig: 2 (Maharana Fateh Singh shooting bear, Udaipur 1916 or earlier. Image courtesy: The City Palace Museum Udaipur, Andrew Topsfield)

What one sees in Udaipur City Palace Museum and makes it distinctive is the large format of the paintings with intricate illustrations. Every detail is factual and it makes one understand the mindset of artists of those times. The landscapes painted by court painters are exact representations of locations, one can still see in Udaipur. The flora, fauna and details of animals and expressions of hunters, army, and beaters, all of them are peculiar and have a characteristic of their own.

Hunting scenes are narrative in context and have a multiple figure in the same landscape, so as to give an effect of story board illustration. This is something that was explored by the artist from Ragmala paintings or so but never before such an approach is seen in hunting scenes. This is a peculiar characteristic of Mewar hunting scenes. The understanding of multiple perspectives and the range of panoramic views with repetitive, yet characterized animal (e.g. Tiger) is something which was far beyond the understanding of a traditionalist. They were no doubt assimilating expression, emotions and factual data, all in one particular plane. The viewer moves his eyes on all over the painting and the feeling of being involved in the whole scene that takes one back to the centuries old hunt scene or leisure activities cannot be denied.

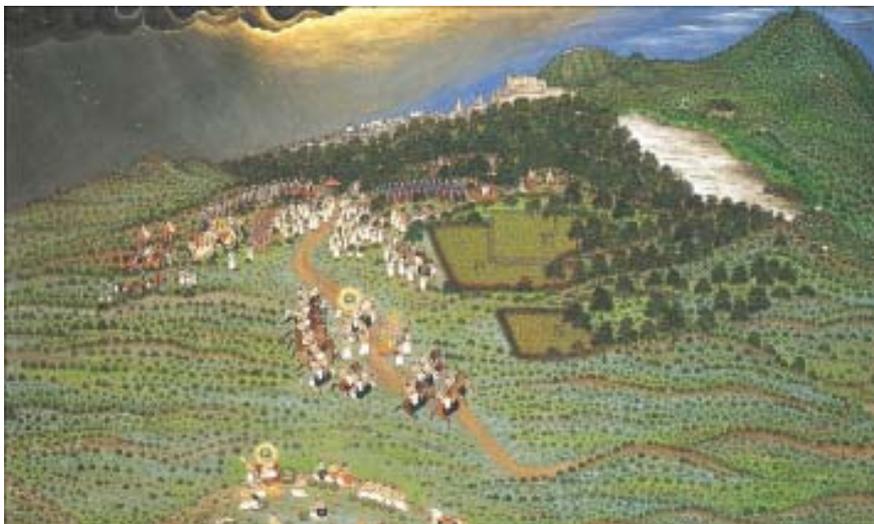


Fig: 3 (Maharana Shambhu Singh on a riding excursion during the rains, Udaipur, 1868, By Shivalal. Image courtesy: The City Palace Museum Udaipur, Andrew Topsfield)

The artist dealt with big landscapes and then the stories of hunt, portraits of every single person present during, is a massive commission dealt with all finesse.

The technique of painting is from earth and vegetable colors. The gouache and watercolor styled in Pahari and often Mughlai sensibilities. The way later naturalism and chiaroscuro effect came in paintings is a notable approach to new understanding of European art techniques. In 19th century paintings the hunt scenes are more detailed and a certain sort of three -dimensionality to the figures, yet keeping the background and foreground plain is interesting. The multiple point perspective, a peculiar feature of Indian painting and the use of basic primary colors. All in accordance with Indian painting sense.

On going through all the paintings in the Museum Collection, one can see the sensibility of artist of that time. Most of them were engaged in religious paintings and were not barbaric in nature. All the animals killed in hunt were depicted in a very sensitive touch. Even the kill was not horrifying at all. It was meant to glorify the king. The artist's main concern was on the details of king and kingsman. If we look closely hardly in any painting we can see a detail of flesh, wounds etc. the whole scene and drama was to create an act of glorification. This self glorifying aspect can also be seen in their court paintings. When one closely examines the way flesh or wound or kill is depicted in hunting scenes, one realizes that there is some sort of incompleteness to this particular part, a sort of leaving down the details. Painting kill and blood was something not part of

artist's sensitivity, yet he flew his imagination to a certain limit. Though, the later artists from Mughal Court brought a new light to hunt scenes.

These paintings were contemporary in their approach of narrative and representations on large format intricately painted illustrations. The acceptance of styles from nearby regions and adding new things by every generation shows the contemporary approach of the traditional artists and their hungering for more details and depth.

What has changed and how is the main question in recent times. In the meanwhile, when we look around in the city palace market, we see a huge array of replicas of museum paintings and still not that great as compared to the works done centuries ago. The animals painted on small scale fake handmade paper are grotesque and seems lifeless. The skill is something we have surrendered in name of modernity and these mementos that tourist take back home are just chest thumping nationalists who mistake craft for art. The discrimination between the two is yet to be established.

The art that assimilated so many tangents in past has surely lost its way in future trends of so called modernity.

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