

The Visual Vocabulary of India : Design Practice since the Indus Valley Civilization

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Abstract

There is huge variety of styles to be found in Indian art through ages. The first use of words 'DESIGN' is seen in VEDAS. Design has been an integral part of the profession for many of the communities in India. Design practices like other legacies, have been handed down generation after generation. Many of the symbols that we see today have their origin in the ancient past of the visual manifestation of forms. With a research in these design practices which were and are still carried out in India, in terms of tribal, folk and other religious beliefs and practices, I intend to look for certain design symbols or motifs which have left a mark in this abundant heritage either by repetition or because of its meaning. From the evidence we have of the primitive art i.e. cave paintings, we can say that they had a visual language known as the pictograms where they painted their daily life scenes etc. on the walls of the cave. Certain things that we perceive out of those paintings are: stick like human figures, usually in groups and bulls and other animals. It covers the transformation of complex Indian speculative thought into visual forms impregnated with symbolism. Finally we shall relate the relevance of the ancient and medieval art of India to contemporary art and design.

Keywords: Design practices; Diverse culture; Folk art; Indus valley; Primitive art; Symbol.

The Indus Valley Civilization is one of the earliest River valley civilizations of the world. When we see the seals of this time, we realize that they tell us two very important things: First, seals were used for trading purposes, as these Harappan seals have been found at various other archaeological sites too. Second, the visual on the seal was usually an animal or a deity along with some characters of their script. This was the identity of that particular civilization. Thus, it can be called the logo representing the civilization of the time.

Followers of almost all religions are found in india. Rites and rituals mark every stage of an individual's life from birth to death. Each community and

region has its own visual vocabulary and iconography. They are deeply rooted and have become a part of the essential practice in the society. Through the ages, the Indian subcontinent has been the field of great experiments in different permutatory forms of art. An innovation in one region of the country has been assimilated by the art forms prevailing in another region and new forms have evolved.

The people of India were united on the basis of certain broad philosophies of the Karma, the mysteries of death and the destiny of the consciousness after its separation from the body, which suggests the abundance of myths and beliefs that prevail in the society.

With a study of these symbols as well as the attributes and requirements of a good glyph-alpha logo design made with a combination of a symbol and letters/ words, I wish to observe how they merge together into one, showing that what may ever, an Indian designer is always connected to his/her roots.

Native design traditions:

Ancient and medieval folk art forms, like tribal art, appeal to us even today. This is because of the strong emotional content of traditional art forms with mysterious visual vocabulary and language. The magical appeal of our ancient art and revivalist attitude of present day artist and designer has strong visual connections. Ancient visual vocabulary has strong roots, that could be useful for present day visual communications. The graphic symbols and ritual Yantras, which are used in ceremonies related to birth, adulthood, marriage, religious and social rituals, impact deeply on our present day society. I am simply trying to understand and extract the essence of our ancient folk and tribal art, literary traditions, traditional craft, fabrics, ancient jewellery, dance forms, cuisine, religious beliefs, festivals, etc. For example, the great artist Picasso came out with revolutionary modern visual vocabulary by assimilating the influence of African and Ocea(nic) masks. He was interested not only in the powerful and magical abstract nature of tribal art, it served as an active inspiration for both his art and his attitude to life. He wanted to restore magical vocabulary by going back to roots.

To begin with, few questions that can be proved fundamental to find out answers for visual vocabulary:

- What do Om and Swastika represent?
- why are their graphic symbols appealing to designers and artists?
- Why were the patterns and colours that were used in Rangoli so fascinating?

- How is it that an inherent consistency marks these design even though they were practised in different geographical regions?
- What was the process through which reflective ideas were transformed into symbolic forms?

“From the known to the unknown” - is the concept underlying this study. Symbolism that is represented through various visual vocabulary would be helpful in our journey back to the source: the philosophy and inspiration underlying the Indian world of designs.

Rangoli and Kolam: The sanskrit word for Rangoli is Rangavalli, literally meaning a creeper drawn with colours. Rangoli is also known as ‘bhumichitra’ which means drawing on the ground. Rangoli is the art of the rural womenfolk of India. The structure of a kolam and rangoli is matrix of 3x3, 4x4, 5x5, 7x7, 8x8, 9x9 and 10x10 and sometimes up to 108 x 108 dots, both rectangular and diamond shaped grids. The calculation in the process helped rural women to learn simple counting and multiplication in a natural way.

The range of art is very wide. It includes the figures of gods and goddesses belonging to classical as well as the folk traditions; aspects of nature such as the sun, the moon, the oceans, the river, the hill and trees; creatures such as cow, the monkey, the snake and the eagle, and other figurative designs, are all within its purview. A common rangoli motif is the footprint - symbolic of the advent of a compassionate deity. Another favorite is the lotus by means of 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 16 or 32 petals. It is interesting to note the development of what may look like an abstract design converted to manifest design: first the footprints of goddess Lakshmi are drawn; next Lord Vishnu’s footprints are imposed upon them in a harmonious juxtaposition, and then both are surrounded by a protective border, thus, assumes the appearance of an abstract design. Rangoli is used as protection against the negative influences or the evil eye, its positive function being to invoke the benedictions of the deity. In rangoli, the use of mandala and yantra as protective symbols in pure geometric forms such as squares, circles, triangles, hexagons and octagons enclosed from all sides like a fortress from ancient times. In this form, rangoli is also known as ‘binduja’ or born of a dot. The dot signifies the ‘bija’, the energy or creative power of a goddess.

The same motifs and symbols are also used in the embroidery of their daily wear. They are also evident in the designs on household and temple articles, toys, and local idols known as Gramadevtas and Devis- the presiding deities of the village.

Traditionally the theme and motifs of rangoli also helped them acquire some basic knowledge of the myths, but over time, the esoteric significance of the designs has been lost or forgotten.

While on the planes of philosophy, literature, art and architecture, these developments resulted in volumes of reflective works and monuments of great planning and aesthetics. At the non-professional level they found expression in a visual vocabulary remarkable for its child-like simplicity and expressiveness which was the rangoli.

Kolam - South Indian version of rangoli is known as Kolam. The Kolam thus assumes the appearance of an abstract form of art and design. The South Indian Kolam also includes the planets representing the days of week: sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn. Appropriate symbolic designs are drawn to symbolize the Uttrayana and Dakshinayana, as well as the season's festive days, in both North and South India. Particularly every religious day has its specific projection in Rangoli or Alpona in Bengal, symbolizing legends and myths concerning the day, often elaborate illustrations cover the entire passage from the entrance up to the place of worship, the deity's altar.

Rangoli prevails as a folk art, used as pleasingly decorative design, popular form of art, it became charged with an esoteric significance during a certain period. whatever be the historical position, this art form is used as a protection against evil spirit. An example of its protective nature is the Lakshmana Rekha, a protective circular Mandala drawn with the point of an arrow around a hut. In rangoli, the Use of Mandalas and Yantras as protective symbol in pure geometric forms such as square, circles, triangles, hexagons and octagons that enclose from all sides like fort, existed from ancient times. The same motifs and symbols are also used in embroidery of their daily wear. they are also evident in the designs on household and temple articles, toys, and local idols.

Tantra and Yantra

The Tantrik yantras represented through design were drawn for the achievement of specific goals; aspirations of the soul's liberation or realization of the transcendent Divine, or prayers for the fulfillment of a vow and gratefulness at its fulfillment. In many cases the simple geometric designs have been enriched by the imaginative genius of rural women, as is evident in the transformation of the footsteps of Lakshmi and Vishnu into a symbol of harmony at home. A basic trait of Tantric art is, its geometric forms seem to aspire towards absolute geometric purity. This purity is not an end in itself, but a symbol or revealed image of an aspect of cosmic structure itself, in the same way as the very special mantra (monosyllabic mystic sound formula) Om functions. In its sound production no part of the palate is touched or it can be sounded without the use of the tongue.

Tantra is an action-oriented discipline with two vital components: Mantra and Yantra. Mantra are speech charged with power and Yantras are diagrams charged with power; the sole purpose of Tantra is to activate a special energy of consciousness, normally lying dormant, and evoke psychosomatic forces in our persons-the creative subtle centers in our bodies. By making these centers more active one can attain mastery over oneself, over Nature and realize Ananda (bliss). These centers are called Chakras. The Sanskrit word for painting, drawing or design is Chitra. the root word is Chitta, the mind. That which the mind, Chitta, has seen and not that your eyes have seen is Chitra, painting, design.

Religious Symbols

- **OM (AUM):** Represents the cosmic sound, indestructible sound, primordial sound, the Absolute, and the immensity. Brahmanda (Cosmos) is made up of OM and it is the totality of all sounds. According to Tantra, the cosmos has evolved out of 50 Matrika sounds. These Matrikas are the 50 letters of the Devnagari alphabet. Tantra has assigned colours to these letters of the Devanagari alphabet according to their sound vibrations. Hence the Devanagari script is called Varna, the colours. A basic trait of Tantric design is, its geometric forms seem to aspire towards absolute geometrical purity. this purity is not an end in itself, but a symbol or revealed image of an aspect of cosmic structure itself; in the same way the very special Mantra (monosyllabic mystic sound formula) Om functions. This symbolizes the Immensity, the Brahman. The crescent symbolizes air, while the circles stand for nada (sound). The semi circles below the circle denote the first wave of energy. The two semi circles below the first wave are successive waves of energy carrying sound to the wavy lines below indicating the primordial waters. Om, also a popular symbol used in contemporary body art and tattoos,
- **SWASTIKA:** Swastika means "auspicious" or is considered sign of auspiciousness. The right-hand path, also the male, and the left-hand path, the female are the extensions of the cross into the double swastika, indicating the Supreme Principle that can be reached by both paths. In a fully formed square enclosure of the yantra, the four gates opening out on all four sides are invitations towards the sacred center. To symbolize the link between the limited earthly space and the infinite heavens- a function that was performed by rising flames - the concept of Sthambha, the pillar was created. This symbolizes the offering of the venture to the powers above. The column is worshiped which marks the auspicious beginning. When the male and the female Swastikas come together they form four gates of knowledge, the four vedas in the Prithvi Mandala.

- **LOTUS:** The lotus image, like alternative Indian symbol, includes a metaphysical, or subjective, similarly as associate degree objective significance. Unmoving deep within the mud of a lake or watercourse and pushing its means step by step upwards through the water till its lovely flower blossomed within the light-weight of heaven, the lotus was Nature's own image of the non-secular method by that a human mind won liberation in Nirvana. Mahanirvana Tantra provides the mysticism through the means of this lotus symbolism. Lotus may be a vital image of Indian cultural heritage as a result of it's terribly sacred to the Gods. God Brahma and Buddha are delineated as seated on a Lotus flower. Lord Vishnu and immortal Hindu deity each hold a Lotus flower. The roots of a lotus are within the mud, the stem grows up through the water, and also the heavily scented flower lies pristine on top of the water, this pattern of growth signifies the progress of the soul from the primordial mud of materialism, going through the waters of expertise or experience, and into the brilliant sunshine of enlightenment. The lotus while all its life lives immersed in water, its leaves remain untouched by the waters of desire or attachment – the one and only principle of detachment leading and opening the door to Supreme Consciousness – or, the Cosmic Consciousness. The eight petals of the lotus flower represent, clockwise, - earth, water, fire, air, ether (sky), mind, intellect and ego. While the first five basic elements are physical, and the last three, the mind, intellect and ego, are mental. These eight, collectively is the lower Nature of the worldly. The gathering of self knowledge and making use of this knowledge, one can attain to the spiritual, the Bindu as the central point, or goal of existence.
- **SURYA:** The sun is one of the foremost of all deities of the Vedas. It is the symbol of sunshine, of warmth, of life and spirituality. The sun has thousands of rays, however, according to the Indian Vedic science, it emits rays in multiples of four, i.e., 8, 12, 16, 32. For thousands of years, Hindus have understood the significance of Sun worship. The rays of the sun help cleanse the atmosphere to purity, cure diseases, particularly those associated with the eyes, head and heart (seeing, knowledge and emotions). Several royal dynasties attribute the Sun to the powers of virility of the Eagle and the Lion etc. Rama's family line is believed to have descended from the sun god Vivaswan, from Vivaswan to Manu, to Ikshvaku, It is from King Ikshvaku that Lord Rama's dynasty begins. The association of Rama's birthday to a pageant dedicated to the sun is symbolic of this legend. Indian art and design has perennially used sun as a powerful symbolic image in various art forms.

- **SHANKHA:** The Shankha is associated with lord Vishnu. The Shankha or the Conch upon blowing, manifests the tremendous vibrating energy of the sound of AUM. Its sound waves are variously suggested as the rising and the setting sun, the lunar spiral or water. In Buddhism, it is the voice of Buddha telling about the cycle of birth and death. It is also symbol of goodness and temple power. Perhaps the best way to understand the symbolism of shankha is to compare it with experiments on sound waves. It will create visual image of space, gradually diminishing in range until it comes to rest.
- **TREE OF LIFE:** The concept of life and living as a multi-branched tree illustrates the idea that all life on earth is related and considered to be one. This symbolizes the link between heaven and earth. Imagine seeing a huge banyan tree on the banks of a river from the opposite side. The tree will appear an inverted image where the roots (that is, the origin) is clutched on to the earth, the branches spreading out to the skies and the leaves sitting on the heavens, tell of its story very succinctly. It also depicts protection and growth.
- **FOLK PAINTING:** Folk art has been an integral part of the Indian civilization. Folk painting did not emerge in chronological order but evolved in various regions of India based primarily upon rural cultures, mythological stories and rituals. The different types of Folk arts are 'Patachitra' of Bengal and Orissa, 'Talpatrachitra' of Orissa, Madhubani or Mithila of Bihar, Bundi of Rajasthan, Pahri of Himalayan region, Jain style of Gujarat, Warli of Maharashtra, Tanjore of Tamilnadu and many more... the list is endless. These folk paintings have the visual vocabulary of villages, which are marked by the subjects of daily practical lives, mythical stories, village life, birds and animals and natural objects like sun, moon, stars, plants and trees.
- **ART AND SCULPTURE:** Huge variety of styles and vocabulary is found in Indian art through ages. Some artists like the stone sculptors who carve divine figures on temples, continue a tradition unchanged for thousands of years. Other artists' style changed with outside influences- from Persia and China, or later with the arrival of the Europeans. This added new range of images to the vocabulary.
- **FABRICS AND WEAVES:** Indian fabrics have been exported across the world since time immemorial. Many of the world's fashion designers use the shimmering colours, flowing shapes, and traditional motifs of Indian clothes in their designs. This could not have been possible had there not been a universal appeal that time has not blurred out.

- **CONCLUSION:** Like a yogi concentrating within himself in Antar-Puja, a designer too withdraws or detaches his mind from the external world and concentrates on the solution to his design problem. He too has to transcend his passions in order to arrive at a pure and radiant symbolism. He must set his mind free from its preoccupation with all mundane considerations and surrender himself to the process of creative thinking. So far as the Tantric communication is concerned, it is a silent process, more in communion than communication. The receiving party does not know that the Tantric Sadhaka, the practitioner is sending a message. If the message does not evoke a response or resonance, it is not communication but communion. But if it does, it has reached the mind of the receiver. The communication can be said to be complete and successful.

India's treasure of heritage and culture is immense that has been brought together by the intuitive cultures and civilizations. A graphic designer is inevitably fascinated and inspired by the exquisite and amazing heritage and speaks to the masses of this treasure through his/her creative works.

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