

Historical Ornamentation of Ancient Narrative Scroll Painting Tradition of China, Japan and India

Dr. Brijesh Swaroop Katiyar, Head, Institute of Fine Arts, C.S.J.M. University, Kanpur

Abstract:

The richness of Chinese scroll paintings, Bengal Pattachitra and Kalighat Pattachitra depict various stories and activities from different epics, mythological stories, landscapes and ornamentations of activities of daily life; which has a very long and vivid historical background. This study is focused on the sequencing of the historiography of the scroll paintings of Far East and India. In Chinese scroll painting, stories and activities with interesting themes of painted landscapes, floral motifs, animals-birds, poems have been provided as illustration-subjects, along with this Chinese characters also played an important role. Chinese scroll painting is an important source of development and expansion from traditional to modern painting style. It depicts everything from courtly activities to personal memorable events and stories. The development of Bengal Pattachitra can be said to be an important phase in Indian painting to depict various themes of religious devotions, myths and other historical events; its artists depict Hindu gods and goddesses and other mythological characters and their subjects as themes from the Vedas, Puranas and Mangal Kavyas. The Bengal scrolls depict historical events as well as social and cultural activities of daily life; especially in the Kalighat Pattachitra during the colonial period.

Keywords: Epic, Ornamentation, Hindu Deities, Scroll Painting, Motifs, Illustration, Mangal Kavyas, Daily Life Activities, Pattachitra, Mythological Characters, Patuas.

Introduction:

Patachitra or Pattachitra is a general term for traditional, cloth-based scroll painting, based in the eastern Indian states of Odisha, West Bengal and parts of Bangladesh. Patachitra art-form is known for its intricate details as well as mythological narratives and folktales inscribed in it. Patachitra is one of the ancient artworks of Odisha, originally created for ritual use and as souvenirs for pilgrims to Puri, as well as other temples in Odisha. Patachitras are a component of an ancient Bengali narrative art, originally serving as a visual device during the performance of a song.

The scroll painting, art form practiced primarily in East Asia. The two dominant types may be illustrated by the Chinese landscape scroll, which is that culture's greatest contribution to the history of painting, and the Japanese narrative scroll, which developed the storytelling potential of painting.

Similarly, if throw light on Indian tradition of scroll painting or Pattachitra so; we can say that there are a huge variety of this type of traditional Indian painting forms such as Bengal Pattachitra, Kalighat Pattachitra, Odisha scroll painting, Nathdwara Pattachitra (Pichwai), Phad scroll painting, Cherial scroll Paintings, etc.

When we are focussing on the all three traditional styles of scroll paintings related to Chinese, Japanese and Indian, so that we can see many similarities painting techniques and pigments; but composition format, and themes of scrolls individually their own and original.



Figure 1, Astisan of Odisha Pattachitra displaying making process



Figure 2, Cherial Paintings scroll painting on the display

Historical Background:

There is a significant difference in the composition style of western and eastern painting. Unlike Western paintings, which are hung on walls and constantly visible to the eye; on the other side most of Chinese paintings are not meant for continuous viewing, but are only brought out for display from time to time. This occasional viewing has everything to do with the format. A predominant form of Chinese painting is the hand scroll, the tradition of formation of an image onto a continuous roll of paper or silk cloth of varying sizes. Such horoscope paintings can be seen only when they are unfolded. Chinese scroll paintings, art forms created mainly in East Asia. The two major types of these paintings are exemplified by the Chinese landscape scroll, which is that culture's greatest contribution to the history of painting, and the Japanese narrative scroll, which developed painting's storytelling ability. Early "illustrative" Chinese scrolls, precursors to the narrative type, date from the late 4th century AD and teach Buddhist moral lessons. The continuous scroll painting style was fully developed by the 7th century. Such scrolls open from right to left and are spread on a table for viewing. The landscape hand scroll (Makimono), a pictorial rather than narrative form, reached its greatest period in the 10th and 11th centuries with master painters such as **Xu Daoning** and **Fan Kuan**. The viewer becomes a traveler in these paintings, having the experience of walking through space and time. Streets or paths are frequently depicted which lead the viewer's eye to the work.

Such scrolls, in the size of only about 2 feet should be viewed at a time or the spirit of the work is violated. One problem felt by the artists was the need for multiple vanishing points to create a sense of perspective, as the imaginary viewer was not supposed to be stationary. He solved this in different ways, allowing one perspective point to slip unnoticed.



Japanese "Emakimono" scroll paintings from the 12th and 13th centuries, Chinese panoramic landscapes are often contemporary. These scroll paintings were represented in a vertical-horizontal format, and these scroll images were painted on picture panels 10 to 15 inches wide and up to 30 feet long. This painting tradition is called "Yamato-e", or Japanese painting, to distinguish it from Japanese work in the Chinese manner. In the earliest example of this style, The 'Tale of Genji', the great literary work of Japan, featured illustrations alternating with text. Ultimately illustration in such works was almost lonesome, and specific themes came to be inspired by stories and biographies popular during the middle Ages in Japan. Vivid expression was combined in these scroll paintings to suit the Japanese liking for sensation and drama. The built

Figure 5, 4. Artist: Attributed to Qu Ding (Chinese, active 10th-11th century), Title: Summer Mountain, Date: ca. 1050, Medium: ink and light color on silk, Dimensions: Image: 17 7/8 x 45 3/8 in. (45.4 x 115.7 cm), Credit Line: Ex collection of the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, Fund 1973

of the scroll paintings to suit the Japanese liking for sensation and drama. The built

Figure 5, 4. Artist: Attributed to Qu Ding (Chinese, active 10th-11th century), Title: Summer Mountain, Date: ca. 1050, Medium: ink and light color on silk, Dimensions: Image: 17 7/8 x 45 3/8 in. (45.4 x 115.7 cm), Credit Line: Ex collection of the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, Fund 1973

more

Figure 5, 4. Artist: Attributed to Qu Ding (Chinese, active 10th-11th century), Title: Summer Mountain, Date: ca. 1050, Medium: ink and light color on silk, Dimensions: Image: 17 7/8 x 45 3/8 in. (45.4 x 115.7 cm), Credit Line: Ex collection of the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, Fund 1973

back

Figure 5, 4. Artist: Attributed to Qu Ding (Chinese, active 10th-11th century), Title: Summer Mountain, Date: ca. 1050, Medium: ink and light color on silk, Dimensions: Image: 17 7/8 x 45 3/8 in. (45.4 x 115.7 cm), Credit Line: Ex collection of the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, Fund 1973

events into a smaller picture-space.

During the Renaissance of the Chinese tradition that followed the scroll painting tradition, an alcove intended for the 'Tokonoma', for holding images or flowers, was introduced. To fit this space, paintings were made vertical instead of



Figure 4, Chinese landscape painting

horizontal format. These hanging ‘**kakemono**’, with their static compositions and contemplative subjects, appear to be more equivalent in nature to Western paintings style.

The word “Patta” is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘**pata**’, meaning “a piece of cloth”. If the context of the above **Chinese** and **Japanese** scroll painting tradition refers to the ancient “**Patta-painting tradition**” of the Bengal province of India. **Pata** or **pot** as it is pronounced in Bengali means a ‘**woven surface**’, a paper or wooden panel on which painting is done. The Painters doing this type of work are known as ‘**Patua**’; but he is also known as Chitrakar, which literally means painter. It is interesting to note that the term has been adopted as a surname or cast title. The terms “Patua” and “Chitrakar” are used interchangeably, although artists usually use “Chitrakar” as their surname. Traditionally the patuas were men, who were assisted in several steps by their family’s women members; but in recent times women have also come forward to stake their claim as pata artists. These itinerant painters have a long lineage and their painting tradition has been passed down from generation to generation. In the past, the Patua used to travel long distances to perform in small villages and act out the scenes depicted by visiting their Pattas at different places or by displaying Pattachitra where invited for the same. For this work, they were given food, clothes or desired monetary payment as remuneration. Now, many patuas in more populated areas perform for people who come to them to buy their painted Bengal Patta scrolls. But the artists are still struggling and trying to earn money or in some other way trying to keep the age old art alive against every modernizing effect of the society.

It is difficult to ascertain the exact date of the beginning of the “**Patta Painting Tradition**” by the **Patua** painters in **Kalighat**, West Bengal, because of the paucity of authentic documents with reference to the history of the origin of Patta paintings there; But based on anecdotal evidence, it appears that the Patta paintings originated mainly in the area around the Kalighat nearby Temple of **Goddess Kali** in Kolkata, West Bengal, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and were associated with the goddess Kali visit to the temple. Devotees used to buy the paintings made by the local Patuas and take them with them as souvenirs, with the passage of time the creativity of these paintings further developed and stylistic enrichment, due to which this painting tradition became its own distinctive identity. Later, the Kalighat Pattachitra tradition came to be accepted as a separate school of painting. Patta paintings progressed to such a popular form of art in the past that they were replicated by institutions and government. In earlier times, Kalighat Patta painting came into existence with the aim of depicting various subjects centred on **Hindu deities** and other **mythological characters**. Expressive paintings of various occupations and customs were also popular, even contemporary events were chosen by many Patua painters as their subject matter of Patta painting, besides they painted secular subjects and personalities also.

By the early 19th century, the Kalighat Temple had become a popular destination for locals, pilgrims and some foreign visitors as well. With the rise in popularity and fame of Goddess Kali, many patuas and craftsmen settled in the surrounding of the Kalighat temple to capitalize on the new market by selling cheap religious souvenirs to visitors and became active in the creation of paintings. Soon after this many skilled artists from rural Bengal especially **24 Parganas** and **Midnapore**, West Bengal moved to Kolkata and set up stalls outside the temple. In the villages they painted long stories on handmade paper scrolls that often stretched over 25 feet in length and were known as Pattachitras used for storytelling. Each



Figure 5, Common theme of Bengal Patta chitra

section was known as a Pata and the performers were therefore known as patuas. The patuas travelled from village to village, opening the scrolls one section at a time and singing stories to their audiences. However, visitors to Kalighat did not want to buy long scrolls, which took a long time to paint. Patuas therefore also began to paint single portraits involving only one or two figures, which could be painted quickly with simple forms and non-essential details were removed by leaving the background plain.

Ornamentation

Scroll painting has a long history on the world forum and this intrusting art tradition has made a significant contribution to the decoration and totality of the main stream of art in many Asian countries such as China, Japan and India, whose creators used scroll painting as their original creativity; and chosen as the basis for their emotional expression, which have been prepared for smooth presentation and then rolled and unrolled for easy viewing or reading. These rolled writings range from ancient biblical texts to praises and royal appointments, to even the simplest messages. But that's not what we primarily think of when we think of scrolls.

When we think about scrolls, we may think of the paintings we've seen hanging in a museum or temple in China, Japan, India or any other country. Most scrolls, whether made in China, Japan or they painted on paper or silk in India, have a vertical or horizontal orientation; then affixed to a backing with a water soluble glue and then applied with a border; with a wooden dowel at the bottom of the scroll and a thin piece of wood at the top of the scroll and with a silk or cotton ribbon or string to tighten it when rolled. Now, of course, most scrolls also have downward scroll ends. These can be very simple, very elaborate in wood or porcelain, or silver, or enamel, etc. The purpose of the wooden dowels and scroll ends is to provide weight, so that when the scroll is unrolled and hung, it lies flat and the painting can be viewed easily. The upper piece of wood served the same purpose, but was thinner so that a neat package could be made when the scroll was wrapped and tied.

It has been a tradition to execute scroll paintings mostly in ink. They also included intricate and finely detailed highly colourful motifs and various type of figures as required, including **calligraphy**, **mythological subjects**, **historical events**, **human characters**, **animals**, and more in both Chinese and Japanese scrolls. His themes are also often religious in meaning, including **Buddhist**, **Daoist**, **Shinto** and others; which would include the deity, the attendants and the scenery. In China as well as Korea, many scrolls were ancestral portraits that honoured relatives and court figures. Religious scrolls prevailed in Tibet and Nepal as well as in China, Japan and India, some of which were called "**Tankah**" and were painted on cloth with images of various deities. As an aside, we should mention that there is also horizontal scrolling. These are generally called "**hand**" scrolls. They very often include calligraphic text or poems. They are sometimes praises or appointments from the royal court and sometimes they are very long continuous scenes. These scenes can be figurative, mythological, a combination of birds and flowers, animals, etc., and they generally range from 6 or 8 feet to 20 feet tall. Here are some examples of Chinese scroll paintings.



Figure 6. Unidentified Artists Chinese, 13th c.

The differences in paper, pigment, thematic and stylistics among Indian, Chinese and Japanese scroll paintings make it clear that they were produced by different hands and at different times. In the first part of the painting, the horses and figures are well delineated and there is a rough vigour in the depiction of the landscape and trees. The shading of the land forms and the bold modulated outlines defining the figures wearing typical ‘**Khitan**’ costumes most closely resemble murals done in the 11th and 12th centuries in northern China, then by the “**Khitan Liao dynasty**” (907–1125) governed. In the second half, unmodulated, “**iron-wire**” lines are used to describe the rider’s drapery layers, the heavy contours of the rock, and the dry calligraphic texture of the tree, which suggests a fourteenth-century date.

In 1689 the **Kangxi emperor** (r. 1662–1722), a Manchu whose forebears had conquered China in 1644, made a grand tour to consolidate his authority over southern China. The renowned landscapist **Wang Hui** was commissioned to record the journey in a series of 12 oversize hand scrolls. This scroll, the third in the set, highlights the emperor’s visit to Mount Tai, China’s “**Sacred Peak of the East**”. Although Wang based his design on maps and woodblock prints—he never visited the mountain—he also connected specific sites with imaginary landscape passages inspired by classical precedents and employed a traditional “**blue-and-green**” palette to underscore the emperor’s beneficent rule.

In Bengal, as I said earlier a traditional caste community of artist called patuas. Patuas like ‘**kumars**’ started out in the village traditions as painters of scrolls or patas telling the popular **Mangal stories of the god and goddesses**. For generations the scroll painters or patuas have gone village to village with their scrolls or pat singing stories in return for money or food. Many come from the Midnapur districts of West Bengal or else from 24 Parganas and Birbhum districts, also included Purulia, West Bengal and themselves Chitrakar. The patas or scrolls are made of sheets of paper of equal or varied sizes which are sown together. Originally they would have been painter on cloth and used to tell the religious theme based stories such as the medieval Mangal poem. Kalighat paintings were mainly sold as items of religious souvenir taken by the visitors to the Kali temple. It was thus obvious that the prime focus were given on religious and mythological characters.

In the 19th century, the only school of Patta painting that was flourishing in Bengal was the traditional art of scroll paintings that was popular in the rural areas. These paintings were done on cloth or patas. They depicted conventional images of gods and goddesses and scenes from epics like Tulsidas’ Rama Charit Manasa. The artists were villagers who travelled from place to place with their scroll paintings and sang the scenes from the epics depicted in the paintings during village gatherings and various festivals. These artists, called “patuas” or ‘painters on cloth’.

From the depiction of Hindu gods & goddesses, episodes from Ramayana and Mahabharata, scenes from the life of Lord Krishna to the other mythological characters, the Kalighat paintings developed to reflect a variety of religious themes. Amongst the deities, **Kali** (Goddess of power and destruction) was the favourite which was quite reasonable and apart from that **Shiva** (God of power and destruction) in the form of “**Panchanan**” or sitting along with **Parvati** (Shiva’s wife) on **Nandi** (Shiva’s Vahana) or carrying Sati, **Lakshmi** (Goddess of Money) herself or in the form of **Gajalakshmi** or **Chandi** as ‘**Kamalekamini**’, **Durga** as ‘**Mahishasur Mardini**’, and other gods and goddesses like **Kartikeya**, **Ganesha**, **Saraswati**, **Jagadhatri** etc. all were the popular themes of Kalighat paintings. Different incarnations of Vishnu like Parashurama, Balarama, Krishna, Rama etc. and series of scenes from life of Krishna like milking a cow, killing Putana, affair with Radha, Kaliya daman etc. all were represented in Kalighat repertoire.

In the village, unrolling the sequential frames of pictures of two great epics while chanting the story was all the part of the traditional performances of patuas in Bengal and Kalighat paintings were no exception to portray the episodes of two great epics. The Kalighat patuas painted stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in a quite fashionable way. The interesting thing in Kalighat painting was the presence of Islamic icons. A. N. Sarkar and C Mackay described that "It is important to note the presence of strong images from Islam and Christianity in the Kalighat repertoire. The painters sought to capture all slices of the truly cosmopolitan market available to them". One famous representation in Kalighat Paintings was "**Duldu Horse**" on which Husain, the younger grandson of Prophet Muhammad, was killed in the battle of Karbala. There were many such instances which pertained to Islamic mythology. Today they may be used to comment on social and political issues such as the evils of cinema or promotion literary. Their pata painters used colours which is available as plants and minerals to them to make pigments for the paintings. The gum of the Bel (Wood-apple) fruit and the seeds of tamarind fruit acts as a fixative and as a binder. Some of the colours and their sources are; lime powder for white, turmeric for yellow, and lamp black or crushed burnt rice for black, pomegranate juice or vermillion paste for red, indigo for blue, broad bean leaves for green. Some artists purchase commercial paints to use in their art works. Similarly, many artist use brushes that they make out of goat and squirrel hair while other purchase readymade brushes. Usually the dark outlines are added at the end of the painting process. Cloths are adhered to the back to strengthen the seams. Often old cotton sarees are used as the backing and the patterns of the fabric add visual depth to the patuas presentation.

There are mainly two categories of Bengal Patta painting:

- 1. Scroll Patta**
- 2. Square Patta**

The width of the scroll pata paintings are normally may be from one to two feet, while the length can be up to 25 feet. This can made with many pieces of papers, wet cotton rags are layered and pasted into cloths grounded with tamarind glue. And the sides of the square pata painting is remain plain and unpainted. There are some examples of Bengal pata painting and Kalighat pata painting.

Here is a condensed version of the story of Ganesha: the goddess Parvati was taking bath. She took the skin, she scrubbed from her body and made it into the shape of a boy. Ganesh, to whom she appointed as a guard and placed at the door of the bathroom, at that moment husband of Parvati, god Shiva came at home but Ganesh didn't allow him to enter in the home. Shiva got mad and cut off Ganesh's head. Parvati was upset and told Shiva that he had just killed their son. Shiva vowed to bring back Ganesha's life by replacing his head with the first one he saw on the way, with the help of other god Vishnu and Brahma. Shiva found an elephant, who was the first one he saw, whose head was transplanted into Ganesha's body and Ganesh was brought back his life. This is how the lord Ganesha got his elephant head.

The second story is based on a terrible flood, which happened many years ago in Midnapur, West Bengal. The mother Ganges, goddess of secret Ganges River was very angry. She released the water of the river on an area called Midnapur in West Bengal. There was a terrible flood; goat's, buffaloes, cows, trees, all kind fishes and even people began to float away. People finally arrived in boats and helicopters came to help them and provided medicine and food. Finally the water resides and lives are continued.

Conclusion:

Today the practice of Kalighat Scroll paintings are no more exist but the tradition of Chinese Scroll Painting and Bengal Pata painting still continues in the villages of different province of China and Bengal where the rich culture are

proudly being carried out by the artist, artisans and the patuas which are being handed down through the generations. This is surely a matter of great appreciation and a consortium is needed whose un-tired effort will revive the glorious past of Bengal and Far East.

References:

1. Desai, D. (ed.), Art and Icons: Essays on Early Indian Art. Aryan Books International. Mumbai, 2013.
2. Francaise, A. & the Craft Council of West Bengal Calcutta. Patua art: Development of the Scroll Paintings of Bengal Commemorating the Bicentenary of the French Revolution. Peerless. The Radiant Process Private Limited. Calcutta, 1989.
3. Gupta, S.D. "Village of Painters: a Visit to Naya, Pingla", Chitrolekha International Magazine in Art and Design. (ISSN- 2231-4822). vol. – 1. No. 3. Calcutta, 2011.
4. Jain, J., Kalighat Painting: Images from a Changing World. Mapin Publication Pvt. Ltd. Ahmadabad, 1989.
5. Korom, F. J., Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal. Museum of New Mexico Press, 2006.
6. Ranjan, A. and M. P. Ranjan (ed.), Handmade in India/ Crafts of India. National Institution of Design (NID). Ahmadabad. Council of Handmade Development Corporation (COHANDS). New Delhi, 2007.
7. Rawson, J., The British Museum Book of Chinese Art. British Museum Press Ltd. London.
8. Som, S., "The Nineteenth Century Art of Bengal- A Reappraisal". Rudrangshu Mukherjee and Sati Basu (ed.), Art of Bengal: Past and Present- 1850-2000. CIMA Gallery Pvt. Ltd. Kolkata, 2001.
9. Sullivan, M., The Art of China. University of California Press Ltd. London. England, 1967.
10. Tregear, M., Chinese Art. Thames and Hudson Ltd. London, 1978.

