The Role of the Painter in Indian Painting

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An ever increasing role is being given in current scholarship to patrons—at the expense of the artist—in the creation and development of Indian miniature painting. This has generally been the case for the Mughal style, but is now being extended to works belonging to the Rajsthani styles as well. It is the belief of some, that the artists who produced these wonderful works, whether of the Mughal or Rajasthani school, were only able to do so because of the inspiration provided or directions given by their respective patrons, whether the Mughal emperor Akbar or the Rana Jagat Singh of Mewar. The status of the painter, has been falling down, while that of the patron who controls the purse-strings has been going up which is not surprising for modern times when economic considerations are often granted paramount importance though, as we very well know, this has not always been the case. In extreme formulations of this point of view the painter is thought of as being little more than an alter ego of the patron, his personality so submerged in that of his paymaster that all he does is to reflect it faithfully. Thus the strength and energy of Mughal painting of the Akbar period is attributed to what is conceived to be the

'lion-like' vigour of the patron, the emperor Akbar. This line of thought is not just confined to the Mughal school but is also applied to those of Rajasthan, where pictures were made in a different context and with a different history. Thus a Bikaner painting by the artist Natthu of a princess seated in a chair, who has just been dressed and adorned and is inspecting the results by studying her reflection in a mirror is thought of as posessing a 'haunting, nostalgic mood,' and the cause for this, we are told, is the troubled spirit of the patron Karan Singh, ruler of Bikaner, who was having problems with his overlord the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb at the time the painting was executed. A direct equivalence is sought to be established between the 'troubled spirit' of the patron and the expression of the painting. The feelings of the artist and other possible circumstances, if indeed the painting is haunting and nostalgic, are given scant consideration.

To assess the problems raised by these views, it is necessary to examine the traditional relationship that existed between patron and artist in ancient India (it continues to survive, however precariously, to the present day) which provides the infrastructure for the Rajasthani style and to a lesser extent the Mughal style. The distinction between artists and craftsmen, art and craft simply did not exist at that time architecture, sculpture, dance, drama, music, cooking, carpentry, and painting, being all part of the various arts recognised by the canon. The sculptor or painter, to paraphrase Coomaraswamy, was not a special kind of man but was a person possessed of a special kind of skill. Artists or craftsmen were organised in groups, akin to what we call guilds, each practicing its own specialty. Members of these guilds could enter the

services of a king, a noble, a temple, a monastery, to name a few, or produce works on commission. The artist engaged in these productive activities as a part of his vocation, and in creating works of art he was but discharging his *dharma*. The patron, whether a king, or any other person who maintained an atelier or supported one or more artists, also did so as a part of his station in life. He provided support to the artist by making payments, mostly in kind, and in so doing was performing his own *sva- dharma*, or discharging his own duty. The artist performed his work, not haphazardly, but according to well established canons. This is not to deny that artists possessed varying degrees of ability, ranging from the merely competent and sometimes incompetent, to those possessing superb skills and great creativity, but they were all obliged to work within the parameters of their *śāstra*. Some indeed, took pride in their work, in the sense of being able to execute its dictates to perfection, but not in the sense of an individual perceiving himself as a special kind of genius, essentially different from the others. It may be said, thus, that members of a guild, or a group of artists, thought the same thoughts, but expressed them in their own manner. In a situation such as this the patron, royal or otherwise, lent protection, support and encouragement to the artists but did not exercise a choice over the sort of art he got. There is, thus, not much scope for the patron's interference, nor for the artist's idiosyncratic individuality, the needs and desires of both being confined within clear parameters which none could cross. The patron could thus give his requirements, let us say regarding size, material, subject, and the amount of money that he could afford to spend, but that was about all. Like the sacrificer, and all arts were a kind of sacrifice

(Coomaraswamy), the patron could prescribe the ritual he wanted performed, but not the way it was to be performed. That was left to the *ācārya*, the knowing priest, a master of the *śāstra* of the ritual, and his acolytes. Similarly, the patron of art could state what he wanted to be made, be it a temple, a sculpture, or a painting and the artist produced what was commissioned, under the guidance of the master of the atelier, well versed in the canons of the art. This master was the counterpart of the *ācārya*, an expert in the canon of the ritual. Individual preferences, whether those of patron or artist, were relatively limited, the artistic canon in its social or divine context being paramount. Interference on the part of the patron, idiosyncrasy on the part of the artist, were both out of bounds.

There is not much evidence for royal patronage in ancient India, at least as far as the surviving monuments are concerned. The general impression is to the contrary, partly due to the well entrenched classifications of art and history that use dynastic nomenclature but an actual examination of what has come down to us reveals that there are far more monuments built by persons who were not kings, for example, the Great Stupa at Sanchi, and the great cave temple at Karle both built in the first century B.C. There is hardly a monument that survives, known to have been built by any of the Gupta emperors in the fifth century and it seems, from the epigraphic evidence, that they were more interested in maintaining and supporting temples rather than building them. From the tenth century onwards, during the so called medieval period, there is more evidence for royal patronage, but here too the overwhelming majority of monuments were built by others, and not by royalty.

The very striking overall anonymity of the Indian artist, throughout history, is notable for the work of art is more important than the person who made it. We thus get very few names of artists, and when we do it is in an incidental manner. The names of painters that have been found, with few exceptions, are the result of book-keeping concerns, rather than the proud proclamation of authorship.

The situation, at least in the early years of Mughal painting was somewhat exceptional. There is clear evidence that the markedly different kind of work can be substantially attributed to the influence of the founding patron, in this case the emperor Akbar. The records of Akbar's reign, notably the short account written by Abul Fazl support this conclusion by bearing testimony to his great interest in the arts, including painting, as befits the Timurid tradition to which he was heir. We are further told that he had been himself trained in the art as a boy, and on ascending the throne set about assembling an atelier to which he recruited artists from all parts of the empire working under the supervision of two masters recruited from the Safavi court all entrusted with the task of forging a new style, different from the Persian, as well as those current in India. And all this was possible not only because of the emperor's forceful personality but also because he was outside the system. He had no canon to restrain his fancy and all that he was limited by was the skill of his artists.

Active interest in painting is continued by the emperor Jahangir, and this is made evident by his own memoirs in which there are scattered references to his love for the art. He prides himself on his connoisseurship, the ease with which he was able

to distinguish the work of one painter from another, and speaks admiringly of their accomplishments and the rewards and the titles he bestowed on each of them as a mark of his favour. It is interesting to note that inspite of the high opinion he holds of himself, nowhere does he claim responsibility for the merits of the work. Those are easily and generously given to the painter. During the reign of Shah Jahan, interest seems to have shifted to architecture and the atelier was to develop a fairly fixed tradition of its own, taking on some of the conservative and anonymous character of traditional Indian art.

In recent years there has been a tendency to transfer the close relationship between patron and artist postulated for the Mughal style of the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir to the courts of Rajasthan without much regard for their quite different historical and cultural circumstances. This is done not on the basis of any evidence, either textual or pictorial, as is the case with Mughal painting, but rather on the simplistic assumption that what was true for the Mughal court would also hold true for Rajasthan. It has thus been made out that Rao Bhim Singh of Kota (1707-1720), was the Babur of Kota painting and is also thought of as playing Jahangir to his favourite painter, given the identity of the Kota Master, who is assimiliated to Abul Hasan. Throughout there is an insistence on the work of Kota painters being due in one way or the other to the dictates, desires, moods, of the patron. It was they who discovered, directed, and supported Kota's artists, very much as the Mughal emperors, at least the early ones, found and directed their own painters.

All this seems to fly in the face of pictorial and the almost

non-existent historical evidence, at least to the extent that we know it now. Rajput kings, we must remember, unlike the Mughal who were of foreign origin, were members of old Indian dynasties, with deep roots in the soil over which they exercised sovereignity, and were inheritors of long and continuous religious, cultural and artistic traditions from their ancestors. True these traditions too must have been affected in the course of time by historical circumstances, particularly the renewed invasions from Iran, Central Asia and what is now known as Afghanistan. There is no reason to believe, however, that these artistic traditions disappeared altogether and were replaced by those of the invaders, the relationship between Rajput patrons and artists thus being no different from that which existed between their Mughal overlord and his artists.

Conclusion: In the evolution of Indian painting, taken as a whole, except for a short time, namely the early Mughal period stretching roughly from about the mid sixteenth to the mid seventeenth century, it is the painter who is primarily responsible for the work of art, and styles develop and change as a result of his mode of operation. To assert that this is not the case, and that it was the patron who was the prime mover, is a position that runs counter to our understanding of the general nature of Indian art and is not sustainable by a study of the available evidence.