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Sikh Miniatures- An Era Of Portraitists

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***Abstract*:** Miniature painting in India originated from the Buddhist manuscript Illustrations in the Pala period of Nepal and the Eastern side of India in the 8th to 11th century. Miniature art thrived from the early 16th century until the mid-19th century. The notion of portraiture, or the accurate representation of humans, originated in Western art. Its application in Mughal painting started in the late 16th century. However, the Mughal Empire in India added a level of elegance, refinement, and grace to this style of painting. With the fall of Mughal patronage, a significant number of artists relocated to the Punjab Hills. The Sikh School, which prospered under the guidance of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, had many different sites, and most of the paintings featured the life of Guru Nanak Dev and other Sikh Gurus.

Keyword:- Sikh Miniature, Portraits, Spiritual, Simplicity, Janamsakhi.

INTRODUCTION

The origins of Indian miniature paintings may be found in our ancient history. The term "miniature" comes from the Latin word "minium," which means "small." The word "minium" was originally used to refer to small pigment in manuscripts, thus its name.[1] The earliest examples of miniature painting in India may be found in Buddhist manuscript illustrations from the Pala era, which took place in Nepal and eastern India during the eighth and eleventh centuries. The first miniatures created by Pala Kings and their subjects interacting with Buddhism and Jainism have been found painted on palm leaves. As early as the eleventh century, Jain manuscripts from Gujarat and Rajasthan also suggest that comparable representations were common. However, miniature painting started gaining ground from the early 16th century to the middle of the 19th century. It is well known that art historians are becoming increasingly interested in portraiture. In

1939, Coomaraswamy conducted one of the first academic assessments, dividing South Asian portraiture into two groups: realistic and idealistic.[2]

Western art is the source of the idea of portraiture, or the realistic portrayal of people. In the late 16th century, it was first used in Mughal paintings. Nonetheless, this art style gained a certain level of elegance, refinement, and grace during the Mughal era in India. The skill of miniature painting peaked during the succeeding Mughal rulers. Despite the fact that Babur and Humayun, who were avid admirers of literature and the arts, were unable to establish adequate ateliers during their reigns because of their frequent wars and battles, they were in charge of introducing two talented artists from the Safavid Persian Court—Abdus Samad and Mir Sayed Ali—to India. Their creations would have a profound influence on the miniature painting tradition in the Mughal Courts. Under the rule of Humayun's successors Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan, some of the most important ateliers were constructed, and renowned miniature artists such as Basavan, Manohar, Bichitar, Ustad Mansur, Balchand, and Murad prospered.[3] According to Buddhist scriptures and Jain literature, the ancient Indian art form began on palm leaves by the Pala Kings in the 10th century and was followed by paper by the Chalukya Kings in the fourteenth century. Later, it was painted on paper or cloth.[4] The Rajput Dynasty in Rajasthan and the Northern Indian Hill States became the new site for miniature painting after the fall of the Mughal Empire. Under their separate monarchs, a number of significant painting schools began to thrive, including the Kangra, Basholi, Jaipur, Garhwal, Mewar, Marwar, Basholi, and Hadoti the region schools, to mention a few. Even though the Mughal influence persisted, every school had unique traits and characteristics. Religious literature, court scenes, royal processions, nature and wildlife, textiles, jewelery, and intricate equestrian and hunting scenes were among the topics included in these paintings and manuscripts. Intricate and dazzling portraits of the monarchs, courtiers, and their nobles, however, were the most intriguing and enthralling images. These paintings not only shed light on their spectacular reigns but also provide a window into the customs, culture, and traditions of the era.

Many artists relocated to the Punjab Hills as a result of the fall in Mughal patronage. The courts of the numerous local rulers, which were predominately Rajput, were supposed to be beneficial to them. These courts were to see some very fine craftsmanship in both the 17th and 18th centuries. The smooth and accurate lines of Mughal painting had a big effect on the work of art in the Hill Schools. The Hill Paintings left a lasting artistic impression when they were combined with inspiration from traditional scriptures and the surrounding scenery and vegetation. Jasrota, Chamba, Basholi, Jammu, Mankot, Kangra, Guler, Mandi, Garhwal , Kulu, and Nurpur were the locations of the principal miniature painting schools. A significant number of the Hill painters switched to the Sikh court after Ranjit Singh overthrew the Kangra ruler at the start of the 19th century.[5] A form of art that had developed a unique quality during the previous centuries was honored in the first half of the aforementioned century. Before changing under the British rule, this

style persisted until the 1860's. The artifacts created during that time period have a distinct Lahore character and a genuine spirit of eastern arts. British influence had not yet arrived, and we were treated to the Subcontinent's exquisite arts. Under Maharaja Ranjit Singh's affiliations, the Sikh School flourished and had locations in Lahore, Amritsar, and Patiala. Although many other kinds of artwork were created during this period, miniature paintings, book illustrations, frescoes, and ivory pieces were the most significant. Court scenes, Portraits, religious themes, equestrian figures, and domiciles are some of the genres that they fall under. Since Sikh kings and courtiers were the primary supporters and preferred having their likenesses painted, the majority of the artwork created was based on their images.[6] The life of the Guru Nanak Dev and the other Sikh Gurus were the subject of the majority of the artworks. Figure 1:

Figure 1
Sitting Portrait of Guru Teg Bahadur
Late 19th Cent., Sikh School, Source: Academy of Fine Arts and Literature.

Regarding the visual depiction of the Sikh Gurus, the religion's founders and spiritual mentors, the Sikh tradition has a rather nuanced stance.7. The first 2 Sikh Gurus, Guru Nanak (1469–1539) & Guru Angad (1504–1552), have the oldest portraits of the Sikh Gurus having a definite date, although they weren't made public until 1658, more than a century after each Guru's passing (McLeod, 1991).[8] This is noteworthy that the following Gurus were mostly shown in portraits, which might indicate their authoritative lineage in opposition to other modern successors. The Sikh Gurus' portraits have a more religious meaning than those of the Mughals and Rajputs. This is due to the fact that the word "Mughal" or "Rajput" is dependent upon the patron and painter of the artwork. On the other hand, the word "Sikh," or more precisely, "the Sikh Gurus," denotes the subject matter of artwork.[9] This gave the painters the freedom to use their imagination to portray the Sikh Gurus. It's essential to remember that, with maybe one or two limitations, all portraits of Sikh Gurus were painted after their life.

A master's touch is evident in the exquisite detail and delicate realism, which are characterized by the face's gentle shading, the lines' graceful curving, and the muted color scheme. William Archer in his seminal study

said “I know of no other series of Sikh miniature paintings where you feel as if you can smell and walk amongst the flowers that envelop the Guru”.

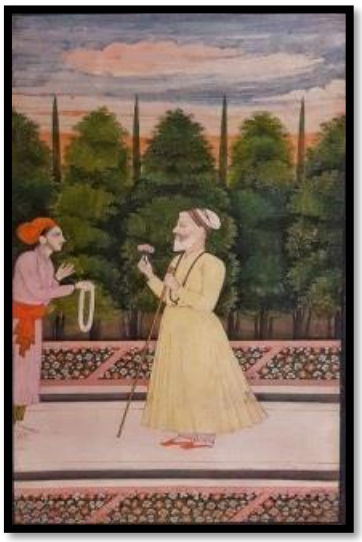

Figure 2

The well-known artist Nainsukh created this masterpiece when he was thriving in Guler, one of the smaller state in the Punjab Hills, around the middle of the 18th century. It follows that this series would have served as a direct source of inspiration for later the 19th century artists who created their own imitations. Oddly enough, they felt compelled to adorn the Gurus with a nimbus, or halo, symbolising their heavenly power. However, it is evident that the artist here disregarded such distinctive elements, which are present in religious art throughout.[10] They were so skilled that they were able to give the Guru a tranquil, placid elegance that makes him stand out as a celestial messenger.

With a certain amount of sophistication, the portraits of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and other prominent Sikh monarchs were clearly influenced by European and Hill School art. Sufi representations of the Gurus in extended flowing robes with a halo around their faces and simple backgrounds took the place of the ornate borders and lush scenery.[11] Guru Tegh Bahadur's picture (Fig. 3) is the oldest in this collection and dates to around 1670. Its composition and backdrop simplicity are exceptional. Except for the falcon and the halo (or nimbus), there are no attendants and minimal decorations. Both Mughal miniatures and Sikh portraits from the same era frequently use these symbols of ownership, temporal and sacred, respectively. Although the simplicity of the turban and clothing style of Guru Tegh Bahadur sets the spiritual leader apart, they also match the portrayal of Mughal rulers. This portrait's style is probably a result of the artist's training in or inspiration from the artists of the Mughal court or vassal regions, as was frequently the case.[12]

Figure 3
Guru Tegh Bahadur, The Ninth Sikh Guru, Northern India or Pakistan, Ca. 1670,
Opaque watercolor on paper, 22.2 × 16.5 cm, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Kapany Collection, 1998

The five gurus shown in the pictures are Guru Nanak (Figure 4), Guru Amar Das (Figure 5), Guru Ram Das (Figure 6), Guru Hargobind (Figure 7), and Guru Tegh Bahadur (Figure 8). The portraits belong to the first decade of the 19th century. Although not exceptional, the portrayal of Guru Nanak as a young man is unusual outside of Janamsakhi. In keeping with the oldest Sikh customs, Bala, who was included later in janamsakhi stories, is not seen in this image; instead, his sole companion is the Muslim minstrel Mardana. The representations of the other four Gurus' ages, statuses, and symbols are all quite understood. Guru Tegh Bahadur's falcon is similar to the one seen in Figure 3, but it also has an attendant and attire that are more suggestive of a sovereign's position. Similar to the last portrait, the Guru is depicted standing, however in a more dynamic position than the seventeenth-century artwork in Figure 3 this collection stands separated from the other four images.

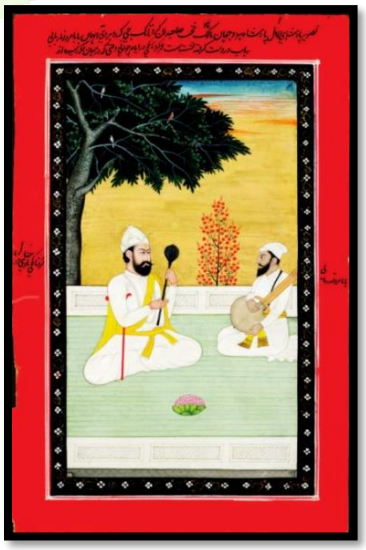

Figure 4
Nanak the First Teacher, 1800–1810, Northern India or Pakistan, Ca. 1800–1810, Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 15.4 × 23.6 cm, Kapany Collection

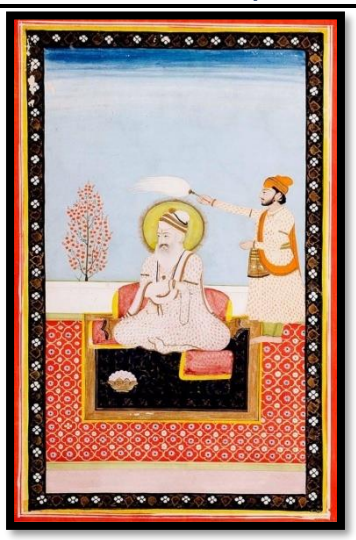

Figure 5
Guru Amar Das, Northern India or Pakistan, Ca. 1800–1810, Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 17.6 × 25.8 cm, Kapany Collection

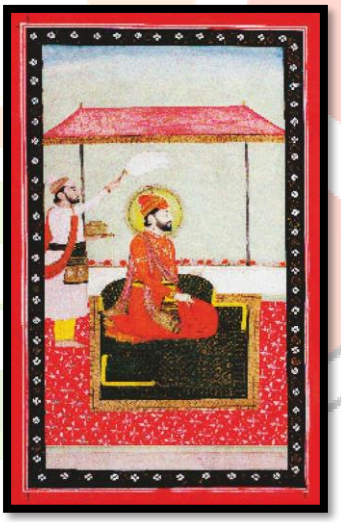

Figure 6
Guru Ram Das, Northern India or Pakistan, Ca. 1800–1810, Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 17.4 × 25.6 cm, Kapany Collection

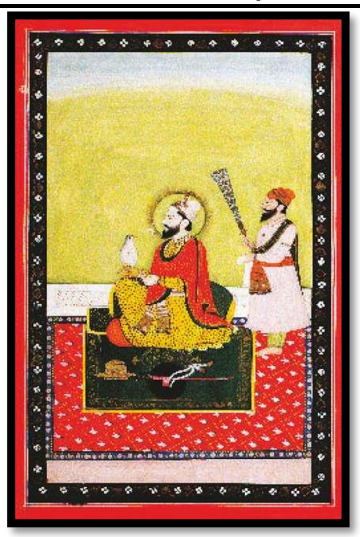

Figure 7
Guru Hargobind, Northern India or Pakistan, Ca. 1800–1810, Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 17.5 × 25.9 cm, Kapany Collection

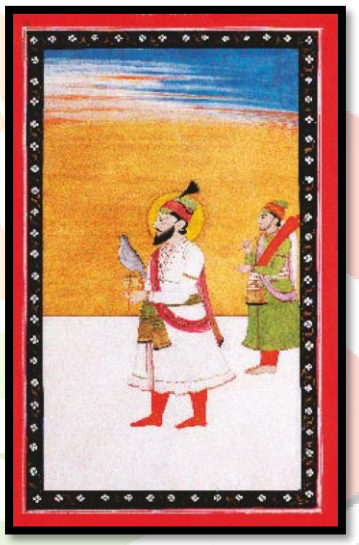

Figure 8
Guru Tegh Bahadur, Northern India or Pakistan, Ca. 1800–1810, Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 17.4 × 25.6 cm, Kapany Collection

From the crimson and black borders to the red and dark green rugs in three of the paintings to the deliberate color contrasts of the Gurus' robes, this set stands out for its striking use of color. Although this set's color scheme is remarkable, it doesn't appear to provide any further precise deductions on place or customs.

There is no denying that portraiture was the most popular topic in Sikh art, and many fine renditions were neglected. Not to mention the highly successful and widely distributed series of portraits of the aristocrats and administrators at the Lahore court by the artist Chhajju, which are unfortunately now scattered. It is the notably large quantity of informal coloured drawings. Chhaju's hands created some pictures of officials in the Himachal Pradesh State Museum in Shimla, with floral designs in square boxes and white dots, as well as red carpet. There are other portraits of Gokal that bear striking artistic similarities, including those of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, his son and successors, Maharaja Kharak Singh, and Sardar Attar

Singh Sandhanwalia, brother of Sardar Wasava Singh, who had patronised Gokal in 1837 (Figure. 9).[13] These paintings frequently feature a carpet with a reddish-green flower design. However, Harkhu is credited with using the same painting technique with background greenery.

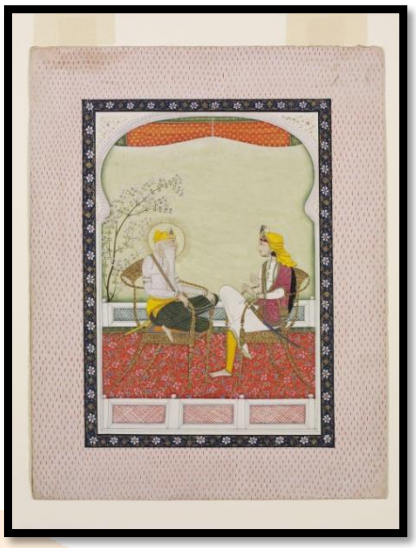

Figure 9

Ranjit Singh and Hira Singh, 201 x 139 mm, with border 283 x 222 mm. Victoria and Albert Museum, acc. no. 15.114-1953

The most apparent subject for portraiture, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, was not fond of being painted and was always hesitant to let even Western painters draw him. However, Bentinck, the governor general, asked him to have a picture done by Jivan Ram, an artist from Delhi, when he was there.[14] Ranjit Singh suffered from smallpox as a youngster, which left him with a scarred face and one eye. "He is a thin little man with an attractive face, though he has lost an eye from smallpox which has otherwise disfigured him little," the French botanist Jacque-ment noted when touring through the Punjab in 1829–32. There is dignity of thinking, shrewdness, and intelligence in his countenance.

Under Sikh domination, portraits underwent constant change as a consequence of the blending of diverse styles, the inventiveness of different artists, the sociopolitical and spiritual representation of Punjab, and the diversity of Punjab's plains and hills.

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