

Painting: A Tool of Non-Verbal Communication

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An Ajanta Cave Painting

Abstract

Communication has been associated with all living beings from the very beginning. We are born with the capacity to communicate. There are many complex feelings which cannot be expressed through verbal means so people, all over the world, use arts, particularly fine arts, in order to express their individual experiences and creativity.

Painting is a one form of this art. Through this, much is said without saying anything. The artists symbolize the intended messages and codify them and allow the spectator or viewer to decode and interpret the hidden messages or meanings. Therefore, painting is not only a tool of recording human history, but also a tool of conveying a wide range of the stories, emotions, feelings, inner world symbolically, didactically or in a hidden mode. This paper aims to focus on various ways through which painting remains a tool of non-verbal communication.

Keywords: non-verbal communication, Rasa, functions of painting, six aspects of paintings: rupa bhedah, pramaman, bhava, lavanya yojanam, varnika- bhangah, chitrasutra.

Chief of All Arts

In Vishnudharmottara, it is stated that,

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“As Sumeru is the chief of the mountains, as Garuda is the chief of those born of eggs, as the king is the chief of men, even so in this world is the practice of painting the chief of all arts.” (O.P. Agrawal 61)

Painting – Natural Inclination

We, human beings, dream and can share our dreams with others. If we share it through words, then we are communicating verbally, and if we use colors, brushes, etc. then we are communicating through pictures or paintings. Like dancing, painting is very natural to us, and it has its origin from the early cave paintings when communication used to be either by assigning a symbolic meaning to concrete objects or by means of drawing, engraving or painting pictures or marks. Early humans used to paint in order to maintain the memory of the world in the surrounding area and to give definite shape or form to their abstract sentiments. Whatever the reason be, the important thing to note is that these cave paintings depict the life of early humans, their daily routine, and their way of living and their thinking.

Inspiration for People

Paintings inspire people since their early inception. Later on it became an integral part of human lives and as time passed, with the arrangements of spaces, colors, and shapes, etc., new and specific styles of painting were evolved in different cultures. Painting is considered as one of the most powerful visual art because, firstly, it is by nature a luminous language and an experience of human beings themselves, and secondly; it appeals to our souls through our eyes and is capable of communicating those feelings or emotions which words can never communicate. A painting is the representation of the imagination and experiences of a painter from the world around.

Shyamala Gupta has rightly said,

“The painter does not intend to use the artistic media for his own exhibition and advertisement. He seeks the expression by trying to find an identity between his own soul and the soul of the things and objects that enter into his world...” (74)

There are many basic emotions, which are fundamentally universal and painting is the external manifestation of those emotions that is why it appeals to all beings of any time or place. Therefore, painting is one of the most direct and effective forms of communication.

What Do We Communicate through Paintings?

Now the question is what and how do people manage to communicate through paintings. In order to answer this question, first of all, we have to think of what a picture or a piece of

painting represents. If we look at a piece of painting, then normally we try to guess the story or the message it speaks.

Storytelling

So, the very first function of painting is to tell a story, idea or incident or the event of a particular time in a very special manner. Besides communicating something, paintings also delight us. The careful arrangement of colors, shades, scenes, etc. by a painter in a painting gives us an immediate appeal to our eyes and soul.

Expression of Emotions

Another function of this visual art is to express emotions and feelings and invoke Rasas in the viewers. Although color, form, texture or lines are communicative elements, yet it is the emotions or feelings which are the driving force behind any piece of painting.

Revealing the Rhythm

Next function of painting is to express the rhythm that we feel within us. It is believed that as music is the poetry of sound, so as the painting is the poetry of sight. Whenever we hear any piece of music, we automatically start tapping our feet in the same way a piece of painting stirs our hearts in rhythmic delights. It is not that painters create movement by sound the way a musician does or by changing the position, but they do it by creating an illusion and make us feel or sense a movement in the picture. For this, the painters create a lively pattern of lines, colors or shapes. So when we look at a painting, our emotions generally respond to light, color, shape in a certain direction.

Transportation of Nature

Paintings also work as transportation of nature. A painter portrays objects not only to create an interesting design, but also to communicate a message or emotion.

Expressing Formal Excellence and Depicting Human Civilization

Shyamala Gupta, in her work *The Beautiful in Indian Art*, points out two other functions of painting in this way:

“Painting as an art has a double function. It represents the formal excellence of nature- whether it is witnesses in human figures, animal figures, birds, flowers and landscapes and when it is doing it; it may be guided by the laws of proportion and balance, and more important than that, the rhythm in nature. But it usually does not confine itself to pure nature. It essentially tries to depict the mark of human culture and civilization. And that is why it has a ‘theme’ to present – some aspect of human activity, mind, and makings of this man.” (73)

Spokespersons of Human Thoughts and Feelings

Hence, the above mentioned functions of paintings show that they are an emblem of the most delicate spokespersons of human thoughts and feelings, which is capable of arousing *rasa* among viewers. It also directly communicates the variety of many aspects of human lives, nature and all abstract concepts in the universe. More than that, these functions reveal that paintings are not only the medium of collecting information or a source of entertainment, but a unique force of uniting us with the world of imagination.

A Mythical Interpretation

Indian paintings, which are the amalgamation of the artistic excellence of painters and the perfect balance of religion and spirituality, are the unique example to think on. Ancient Indian treatises give an account of its creation in a mythical form. It is believed that Lord Brahma taught a king how to bring back to life the dead son of a Brahmin by drawing the portrait of the deceased boy which he endowed with life.

The Vishnudharmottara (part three) is a very important source on various aspects of painting. In chapter two, Markandeya tells Vajra that the rules of image making cannot be known, unless the rules of painting are known, and he pointed out that a great care should be taken in executing the picture. He also mentioned some good qualities of painting, such as the sweetness, variety, spaciousness of ground proportionate to the position of the figure similar to what is seen in nature and minute execution, etc.

Communicative Aspects of Visual Art

Bharata Muni in *Natya Shastra* discusses some devices of painting to depict *rasa* or communicate the intended meaning. However, it is Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra*, which deals with the various communicative aspects of this visual art. It mentions six limbs of painting, which work as an important aspect of communication. These limbs are:

“rupa bhedah pramamani bhava lavanya yojanam I sadrishyam varnika- bhangah sadete rangamangi kam.”

The first aspect is *Roopa Bheda* meaning knowledge of form and its impact. This knowledge of appearance can be perceived by eye and soul. As paintings are not always easy to understand, it requires viewers' keen perception to understand them properly. The intended or hidden meaning can be perceived with the help of imagination.

Here it is relevant to talk about Derrida, who in his work *The Truth in Painting* seems closer to Kant's views of cognition of an autonomous aesthetic that is distinct from pure reasoning. So, with our imagination and keen perception the hidden beauty of the art can be realized.

Knowledge of Pramana – Knowledge of Proportion

In order to understand the inherent meaning of a painting, the correct knowledge of *Pramana*, i.e., proportion is also necessary. It not only gives knowledge of nearness and distance but also allows painters to decide how much exposure of a thing will make it beautiful and create rasas. The appropriate proportions of artistic media in paintings help viewers to measure, see and understand the endless beauty of the universe.

Bhava – Actual Expression

The third communicative aspect of painting is *Bhava*, i.e., expression. Bhavas, as has already been mentioned in dance form, are also capable of being transformed and expressed in paintings and are represented through facial expression, postures, scenes or the actions etc.

According to Vachaspati Gairola,

“Three types of Bhavas are expressed through the alteration of human body. First type is produced by seeing and hearing, second type by speaking and doing some work and third is produced by some reaction on feelings and thought.” (I.C. Sharma26)

Paintings in Ajanta

In India, paintings of Ajanta caves are the manifesto of various sentiments or Bhavas. The expression of emotions is the very soul of these paintings. The *ahimsa*, friendship, compassion, repose, worship, request, gaiety and restlessness and many other emotions like love, fear, courage, sorrow, shyness, hate, strain, renunciation, etc. are clearly and beautifully portrayed in these cave paintings. These expressions of emotions are conveyed through various hand gestures, facial expressions and body movements. As these cave paintings are the medium of telling interesting Jataka stories, the characters portrayed are emotionally surcharged with various emotions revealing all the nine rasas in a very dramatic way.

Lavnya Yojna – Manifestation of External Beauty

After Bhava, lavnya yojna is also given significance which helps in adding grace or beauty in this form of visual art. As bhava is the expression of inner beauty so as lavnya yojana is the manifestation of the outer beauty which adds luster to bhavas. In Ujjaval Neelmani its importance is shown in this way,

“...the form of pearl is without glitter if there is no luster of lavnya in it. In the same way Rupa, Pramana and bhava of a painting are without glitter if there is no luster of lavnya in it.” (I.C. Sharma 27)

Sadrashya or Similitude

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Derrida in *The Truth of Painting* merges the inside aesthetic of art with the outside and explains how the fundamental nature or aesthetic inside the art is reflected and modified by the external or outside factors. Here this outside factor can be associated with *lavnya yojna*. These elements or communicative aspects of painting are used perfectly by the painters so that the viewers can decode the hidden meaning in paintings. This perfectness is another limb of painting known as *Sadrashya* or similitude, which can be achieved with the appropriate use of color, texture, lines, shades and the intensity.

Color Scheme – *Varnika Bhanga*

Last but not least ‘*varnika bhanga*’ i.e. color scheme is enlisted as a communicative aspect of paintings. Bharata describes the importance of the color scheme thus:

"All is futile, the recital of *Natya Shastra* formulae, the counting of beads, austerities and devotions unless one has gained the knowledge of the color scheme; the true significance of lettering, the hue and the attribute of image."

(Manomohan Ghosh 93)

Many scholars associate color with the subject matter of the paintings which has the capacity to communicate. Goethe believes that colors have the ability to affect the soul. For Jacobson ‘colors demand response’ (Paul Martin Lester 3)

Function of Color Scheme - Expression as well as Interpretation

So apart from the artistic shaping and expression of ideas or emotions, colors also work as an interpreter of the painting. More than any other artistic media and visual attribute of painting, color has the capacity to influence human perception, behavior and their emotions deeply. So colors are the medium of the message and a message can be forever remembered or lost depending on the use of color. In India, the love of color and patterns are so deeply ingrained in visual arts that each color has been associated with particular *rasa* or emotion. For example, blue and black are associated with erotic and terrible while white color with comic *rasa*. Red color is assigned with furious and yellow with heroic. The colors like blue, gold and jasmine are assigned with odious, wonderful and inactive mood respectively.

Five Principal Colors

The *Chitrasutra* chapter of *Vishnudharmottra* mentions the five *mula-rangas* or principal colors. They are white, yellow, red, and black and blue the combination of those in different proportions produces hundreds of other shades. In the cave paintings of Ajanta the perfect use of a color scheme successfully conveys the intended feeling or emotions. The use of colors also depends on its context and the culture and symbolic interpretation given to colors also varies from one culture or society to another.

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Painting Is Communication

Therefore, it can be said here that painting, as one of the important part of visual arts, is a communication itself and the ingredients of this communication; i.e. color, lighting, size, depth, textual gradients, time, perspective and rhythm speak to us in a very artistic manner. The famous Greek poet Simonides wrote,

“Paintings are silent poetry and poetry painting that speaks.” (Robert Layton 55)

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