

# **PUNJABI PAINTERS IN NINETEENTH CENTURY LAHORE: ARTISTIC CONCERNS AND PRACTICES**

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In the early nineteenth century Punjab witnessed a return to relatively peaceful times during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the trans-Sutlej area and under other Sikh chiefs in the cis-Sutlej region but by the mid-nineteenth century another upheaval was experienced with the British annexation of the kingdom of Lahore in 1849, a decade after the death of Ranjit Singh. With the growth of British power Punjab experienced far-reaching changes in political, economic, social and cultural spheres. The changes manifested in the general social structure and patterns of behaviour were also reflected in the artistic practices of the region. Both patrons and artists played a role in engendering the shift that becomes visible firstly, in the new preferences and patterns of patronage and secondly, more significantly, in the change in themes, technique and style incorporated by the artists in response to the times. Patronage of the arts followed two parallel streams of which one, was the commissioning of artists by the rajas of the native states of whom the most enlightened patronage was extended by Ranjit Singh and also by the rulers of states such as Patiala and Kapurthala.

The second type of patronage resulted from two sources one being from the 'families of note' in Punjab and the second due to the Europeans and the British in Punjab, particularly in Lahore, who not only collected works of art but also commissioned artists. Some of the earliest of these non-Indian patrons were the Europeans employed at the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh namely Generals Allard, Court, Ventura and Dr. J.M. Honigberger who commissioned murals, as evidenced in the accounts of their private residences at Lahore,<sup>1</sup> illustrated manuscripts, topographical and architectural views, images of tribes, military figures and genre scenes. The artists employed for these commissions were of native persuasion but their interaction with patrons familiar with an academic-realistic idiom resulted in the former introducing a modification in manner in order to achieve a concordance with aesthetic preferences of the latter. Right from the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh an interest in the principles of European art had started to take root in the aesthetic consciousness of the Punjabi patron as well, best exemplified in Sher Singh's interest in sitting for a portrait by Emily Eden and later his patronage of European artists.<sup>2</sup>

The presence of European and British artists, both amateur and professional, such as Baron Hugel, W. Osborne, Emily Eden, G.T. Vigne and August Schoefft to name a few, along with the presence of Indian painters familiar with norms of the academic-realistic approach, such as Jeevan Ram and Azim, had to a large extent whetted the interest of the native patrons in this new stylistic approach. Apart from steering the preference of the Indian patrons the availability of works that exemplified Western stylistic conventions and technical norms became catalysts in initiating the transformation in the approach of the receptive Punjabi painter whose work increasingly became characterised by a more naturalistic rendering of objects with chiaroscuro modelling, the application of the principles of scientific perspective and focus on watercolour in transparent washes, oil paints and sketching. Towards the last quarter of the nineteenth century, with the establishment of the Mayo School of Art at Lahore in 1875, the change in approach, style and technique of the Punjabi painter became decisive with a systematic education in art guided by the principles and norms of an academic style rooted in a watered down neoclassicism.

In Lahore throughout the nineteenth century significant work was executed at many levels categorised mainly by the kind of patronage available that influenced the style and the degree of refinement of the work produced. The work available can be classified broadly into two categories, with further divisions within them as also an overlapping of themes between them. The first category may be termed courtly art that mainly comprised of miniatures and oil paintings, both encompassing a wide thematic range that included individual and group portraits, durbar scenes, pursuits of the aristocracy and architectural views, and of illustrated manuscripts of historical and religious subjects, such as the *Military Manual of Ranjit Singh*, *Gulghash-i-Punjab* and copies of the *Guru Granth Sahib* to name a few. The second category can be termed bourgeois art which includes in its ambit two kinds of work of which the first may be termed *Bazaar* art and the second, work in a folk influenced style both of which often meld into one another. The former primarily includes themes of everyday rural and urban life, sets of trades and professions, portraits of historical personages, architectural views, landscapes and so on. The term *bazaar* art in no way connotes lack of quality but essentially is employed to denote work that was commercially pedalled in the market or *bazaar*. The art influenced by a folk style, displaying a certain naivete in its imagery, is seen in some religious and romance texts, such as folios of a 'Janamsakhi manuscript' in the Chandigarh Museum,<sup>3</sup> in individual leafs on a wide range of themes from genre to religious subjects and also informs the style of prints that were being produced in Punjab in large numbers.<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to note that in the above-mentioned genres, both courtly and bourgeois, none seems to remain immune to the influence of European art. Excluding miniaturists aiming to preserve a large purist traditional approach even this genre does not remain untouched by the new influences impacting the artistic scenario and certain works tend to exhibit a more contemporary manner as seen in the work of Imam Bakhsh Lahori discussed later.

In Lahore the presence of articles of diametrically opposite persuasions drawn from different schools is well documented. *Umdat-ut-Twarikh*, the official chronicle of the reign of Ranjit Singh, accounts of visitors to the region and writings of scholars, such as B.H. Baden-Powell, refer to the work of painters from the region both at the Lahore court and also in more public for a, such as the exhibition of 1864. From the mid-twentieth century onwards scholars like W.G. Archer,<sup>5</sup> B.N. Goswamy,<sup>6</sup> K. Goswamy,<sup>7</sup> J.M. Lafont,<sup>8</sup> R.P. Srivastava, K.C. Aryan and M. Hasan<sup>9</sup> have limned with increasing clarity, till then under acknowledged, vibrant patronage and practice of art in Punjab placing painters from Punjab hills and plains, Delhi, Rajasthan, Kashmir and the West in the Punjab plains. As this paper aims to discuss the artistic concerns, persuasions and practices of Punjabi painters particularly in Lahore the artists Imam Bakhsh, Kehar Singh, Kapur Singh, Sher Muhammad and Lahora Singh have been taken as representative of the patterns of patronage and production of art in the nineteenth century in the city.<sup>10</sup>

Of particular relevance to this paper on Punjabi painters is the continuation of a tradition of painting in the city that drew from its glorious past during the Mughal period and is one example of an almost unbroken tradition of painting in the artists workshops at Lahore. This tradition is exemplified by the copies of illustrated manuscripts such as the *Shahnama*, *Ain-i Akbari* and *Iqbalnama-i-Ranjit Singh*<sup>11</sup> made at Lahore during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in which certain elements continued to be inspired from sixteenth and seventeenth century miniatures. It is at one such workshop in Lahore that work straddling different stylistic approach by the hand of a painter displaying great alacrity in assimilation and inventive genius appears. This is Imam Bakhsh Lahori. He worked in a style that drew upon many traditions, a late Mughal miniature manner, Pahari painting, an European influenced manner and at times also showing some colouristic impact of Kashmiri painting, and successfully melding them into a unique style. He emerges as an example of a painter with a chameleon like ability to adapt to demands of different patrons in the process metamorphosing this traditional training and creative impulse into an original manner. The

largest clearly attributed and dateable works by him are part of the commissions he got from the Europeans at the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh out of which two of the largest were the illustrations for the manuscript *Fables of La Fontaine* dated between 1837-39,<sup>12</sup> a commission initiated by Allard completed under Ventura, and the second was the paintings that formed part of the *Memoires*<sup>13</sup> of General Court dated to about 1838. In the paintings of the *Fables*, a number of which deal with subjects that must have been foreign to him such as the tales associated with Vulcan, Jupiter and Venus, his inventiveness comes to the fore. In the paintings, peopled with nude winged angles amidst curling cloud formations, division of the picture space with use of devices such as qanats, European figures attired in European fashion surrounded by European objects and examples of European architecture, with a colour palette at times employing deep purple, maroon and mauve, his borrowings from the pictorial vocabulary of Mughal miniatures, Pahari, European and Kashmiri painting can be read. Though individual portraits of the members of the Allard family in the hand of Imam Bakhsh date as early as 1827 it is a small painting depicting 'The Allard family', dated 1838, that is a clear example of the artist's adroit ease in synthesising elements of two different styles of painting visible in an emphasis on individual likenesses and the rendering of architecture in correct perspective, that are derived from the family's portrait in oils by an European artist, whereas the setting evokes the aura of a late-Mughal/Pahari miniature as evidenced by the intricate details, rich colours and cypress trees lining the background. Imam Bakhsh also made a large number of portraits of the figures at the Lahore court, some being 'Raja Suchet Singh', 'Akali Phula Singh' and 'Maharaja Dalip Singh' all done between 1827-43, depicted in carefully modelled head and shoulder format, either in profile or three-quarter view, in an oval format and seemingly inspired by portraits on ivory in the miniature format popular among the British in India. His portraits of Punjab nobility acquired such fame that they in turn became the models for the portrait-sects featuring Sikh nobility by artists working in the *bazaar* style and in woodcuts, up until the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

It is in paintings done in lightly brushed watercolour on paper that form part of the Court 'memoires' that a sharper modification of manner is visible. In works depicting panoramic landscapes that are setting for the forts of 'Khyber', 'Jamrud' and 'Attock' there is visible the suggestion of atmospheric rendering, careful observation and naturalistic representation which reflect his pictorial response to the aesthetic preference of his French patron. The works by Imam Bakhsh clearly establish that an active school of painting characterised by a

syncretist approach drawing within it and assimilating influences derived from Indian and European sources, and informed by a local character had evolved at Lahore in the nineteenth century.

Punjabi artists belonging to one family based initially at Lahore find mention in chronicles of the reign of Ranjit Singh and his successors, and in the exhibition catalogues dated to the third quarter of the nineteenth century. These artists namely Kehar Singh, his nephews Kishan Singh and Bishan Singh, and Kishan's son Kapur Singh were to acquire prominence during their lifetime, finding work not just at the durbar of Ranjit Singh but after its downfall also in the other princely states and emerging as emblems of the Punjabi painter's penchant for assimilating various influences into his stylistic oeuvre and displaying facility for work in different media and genres. Referred to as a family of *mussavars* and *naqqashas* they were active in Lahore till at least the middle of the nineteenth century, while simultaneously working at Amritsar, and painted murals, miniatures, glass paintings and also did *mohra-kashi*. Apart from working in a traditional manner it is significant that in the work of this family inklings of the transformation in the act of perception and representation, particularly in the presentation of genre subject-matter, that was to impact the art of the Punjabi painter can be sensed. Kehar Singh the senior member of the family is said to have worked at the court of Ranjit Singh before his migration to Kapurthala some time after the death of his patron.<sup>14</sup> Having worked as a muralist at Harmandir Sahib at Amritsar and at Ranjit Singh's mausoleum at Lahore, Kehar Singh also painted portraits, on paper and glass, seen in a portrait of Ranjit Singh on glass dated 1849, and limned sensitive lightly coloured sketches, on machine made paper, of the ordinary folk of Punjab, traders, ascetics, craftsmen, beggars, figures from different castes and tribes, people he introduces by name – 'Nanaka the potter', 'Ajaib Singh the Nihang', 'Partap Chand the trader' and so on.<sup>15</sup> These are emphatic representations exemplified by the details about the individuals portrayed given in the inscriptions in Gurmukhi/ Persian on them, such as name, profession, age, place of residence etc. It is this interest in his subject that places these works somewhat apart from company paintings at large. It is in these works of the last genre seemingly influence by examples of academic-realistic art, seen in the attempt at chiaroscuro, scientific perspective and a more naturalistic representation, that the future trajectory of Punjab painting can be read. A similar assimilative approach is recorded in the works of both Kishan Singh and Bishan Singh.<sup>16</sup>

But it is Kapur Singh, the third generation of this family, who makes the transition from a traditional to a modern idiom with greater ease. Born in Kapurthala he moved to Lahore to enrol for formal art education at the Mayo School of Art. He worked in watercolours, gouache, made lithographs and is credited with many firsts in Punjab such as work in the medium of oil paints and photography. His work encompasses a wide range of themes – portraits, a series on mendicants of Punjab, flora and fauna, genre scenes and drawings of *bazaar* scenes, architectural views and utensils which were published in the *Journal of Indian Art and Industry (JIAI)*. His works as ‘Jogi Kanphatta’ and a lithograph of a ‘Rhinoceros’ underline his understanding of the norms of naturalistic representation and shading to impart volume to the figure.<sup>17</sup>

Apart from the syncretist stylistic norms he adopted, he was also a pioneer in his effort to cultivate the taste of the public reflected by his participation in art exhibitions in different regions of the country a fact that also is a clear demonstration of the almost complete absence or at best an immense curtailment of royal patronage in the second half of the nineteenth century thus necessitating the artist’s search for new patrons and commissions. This family of Punjabi painters forms a link between the traditional and “modern” approach in Indian art and their move from Lahore to Kapurthala and Amritsar became one of the conduits for the spread of the stylistic norms in the region. Their work, in terms of its stylistic conventions, technical adaptation and flexibility, and thematic expansion may be viewed as setting the foundation that later oil painting in Punjab would grow and thrive on.

Two other Lahori artists who appear at the cusp of the transformation being engendered in the aesthetic persuasion and pictorial vocabulary of the Punjabi painter are Sher Muhammad and Lahora Singh, both of whom were active in the last quarter of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Sher Muhammad studied at the Mayo School of Art where he got grounding in the academic-realistic manner whereas Lahora Singh trained in the old system of apprenticeship to a master artist in Lahore. Despite coming to painting from two very different directions the work of both these painters clearly exemplifies the dominant concern of the Punjabi artists for an art based on a perceptual approach and preference given to the mediums of oil paints, watercolours and printmaking techniques over that of gouache. Sher Muhammad’s oil portrait of ‘J.L. Kipling’<sup>18</sup> is a fine example of the modification that had come about in the pictorial vocabulary of the Punjabi artist. In the best tradition of academic-realism the head and shoulders portrait intricately modelled and exhibiting total mastery over

the medium of oils succeeds in capturing the scholarly demeanour of Kipling.<sup>19</sup> His other works such as 'Ambala Bazaar' and 'Pavilion in Wazir Khan Mosque', which were published in the *JIAI*, though precisely rendered with delicacy of outline and emphasis on architectural detail display an adroit naturalness and picturesque atmosphere. Lahora Singh's oeuvre straddles different stylistic genres that refer to his training under *mussavar* Muhammad Bakhsh and also the impact of academic-realism. The former is exemplified by a series on the 'Life of Guru Nanak', done in watercolours in which the somewhat squat figures displaying a certain stiffness in poses reflects his initial training in a 'semi-traditional' manner even as the atmospheric rendering of landscape backgrounds indicates a turn towards a new approach.

In the portraits executed for the Kapurthala durbar, of 'Raja Randhir Singh', 'Raja Kharak Singh' and 'Diwan Hari Chand',<sup>20</sup> he exhibits an understanding of the conventions of Western academic-realism visible in the facility in the medium of oil paints, modelling of forms in chiaroscuro and depiction of fine silks, brocades and jewels with great tactile quality. The works of both these artists reaffirm that by the end of the nineteenth century the Punjab painter, though at times being rooted in an indigenous tradition, had acquired ease in the stylistic oeuvre influenced by Western artistic norms.

The works of the above mentioned artists encompass the changes being engendered in the art practices of Punjabi with Lahore emerging as the crucible of the transformations occurring in stylistic conventions and technical aspects. The work of these artists in a sense defines the new pathways being forged indicating the gradual edging out of indigenous traditions and the new and varying dimensions being added to academic-realism.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Travellers like Baron Charles von Hugel, Victor Jacquemont and William Barr have left extensive accounts of the residences of the French generals in Lahore and the wall paintings and embellishments adorning them. Charles von Hugel, *Travels into Kashmir and the Punjabi*, London, 1845; Victor Jacquemont, *Letters from India: Describing a journey in the British Dominions of India, Tibet, Lahore and Cashmere*, London, Edward Churton, 1834; William Barr, *Journal of a March from Delhi to Peshawar*, Patiala, 1970 (Reprint).
2. Emily Eden, *Up the country*, London, 1964 (Reprint), p.223; Many artists such as August Schoeff and Alexis Soltykoff were warmly received by Sher Singh and enthusiastically patronised as evidenced by works such as 'Lahore Durbar', 'Maharaja Sher Singh in council' by Schoeff and Soltykoff's 'A cavalcade of Sikh troops' and 'Sikh Chieftains' among others. See, F.S. Ajazuddin, "European Views of the Punjab", *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*, ed. Sisan Stronge, London,

1999; Lafont, in the nineteenth century other princely states in Punjab like Patiala and Kapurthala too extended patronage to European and British artists such as Vereker Hamilton, F. Swynnerton and P. Tennyson Cole to name a few. Jagtej Grewal, *Oil Painting in Punjab: ca. 1840 to 1930 A.D.* (Ph.D. Dissertation), Panjab University, 2003.

3. Suwarcha Paul, *Sikh Miniatures in Chandigarh Museum (A Hand List)*, Chandigarh, Govt. Museum and Art Gallery, 1985, figs. 086-088 (Accession No.2610, 2611, 2612).
4. For a detail account of the development and evolution of printing and popular or *bazaar* prints in Punjab see, W.H. McLeod, *Popular Sikh Art*, Delhi, 1991.
5. W.G. Archer was among the earliest historians to present an extensive analysis of the patronage and production of art in the Lahore durbar. W.G. Archer, *Paintings of the Sikhs*, London, 1966.
6. B.N. Goswamy has traced the move of artists from the Pahari region to Lahore and other states in the plains of Punjab such as Patiala. Basing his study on court documents a firm connection is established between the ~~Raj~~ family of Pahari painters – Nikka, Gokal, Harku and Chhajju - and Deviditta of Basohli, and the court at Lahore before the move of some of them to the other Sikh states after the downfall of the Lahore durbar. B.N. Goswamy, "Pahari painting: the family as the basis of style". *Marg*, vol.21, no.4, Bombay, 1968; B.N. Goswamy, *Painters at the Sikh Court: A Study based on twenty documents*, New Delhi, 1999 (Reprint).
7. K. Goswamy discusses the presence of itinerant Kashmiri artists at Lahore and examines the production of illuminated and illustrated copies of the Adi Granth and other religious and narrative texts such as the 'Qissa-i-Chahar Darvesh'. Karuna Goswamy, *Kashmiri Painting: Assimilation and Diffusion; Production and Patronage*, Shimla, 1998.
8. Lafont has dealt in detail with the court culture of Ranjit Singh, brought into close focus the activities of the French citizens at the court and presented an extensive study and analysis of the work of Imam Baksh. Jean-Marie Lafont, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Lord of the Five Rivers*, New Delhi, 2002.
9. Srivastava, Aryan and Hasan present an in-depth analysis of artists in the Punjab region extending the survey up to the twentieth century bringing to light names of numerous artists that were hitherto hidden. R.P. Srivastava, *Punjab Painting. A Study in Art and Culture*, Delhi, 1983; K.C. Aryan, *Punjab Painting*, Patiala, 1972; Musarrat Hasan, *Painting in the Punjab Plains (1849-1949)*, Lahore, 1998.
10. Among the Punjabi painters of this period instances abound of there being more than one painter with the same name which obviously leads to a difficulty in total certainty in attribution of works and consequently style, though scholars have made an effort to map the stylistic categories that their works fall into thus to an extent helping ascertain attributions of works to specific hands. Srivastava gives genealogies of a number of prominent artist families of Punjab including that of Imam Bakhsh and Kehar Singh, and refers to two artists named Imam-ud-din. R.P. Srivastava, op.cit., pp.48, 50, 51 Table II, III, V.
11. J.M. Lafont, op.cit., p.107.
12. A copy of the *Fables of La Fontaine* was given to Allard when he visited France in 1835 by Feuillet de Conches, Head of protocol in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a member of the Societe Asiatique. *Ibid.*, p.110.
13. The *Memoires* of General Court covering the period between 1818 and 1844 is in five volumes and contains 90 illustrations of which 35, which are part of volume 5, relate to his 16 years in Punjab and are attributed to the artist Imam Bakhsh

Lahori and are part of the collection of the Musee Guimet, Paris. J.M. Lafont, "The Painter Imam Bakhsh of Lahore", *After the Great Mughals, Painting in Delhi and the Regional Courts in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. Barbara Schmitz, Mumbai, 2002, p.79.

14. H.S. Roop, *Sikh te Sikhi*, Lahore, 1947, pp.131-135.
15. The works are part of the collection of the Government Museum, Chandigarh, Accession No.1429, 1701, 1702.
16. Kishan Singh worked at the court of Maharaja Sher Singh before moving to Kapurthala where he painted the illustrated manuscript 'Salhotar', dated to about 1850, and exhibited paintings of flora and fauna at the 1864 Lahore exhibition. Suri, Sohan Lal, *Umdat-ut-Twarikh, Daftari IV* (translated by V.S. Suri), Chandigarh, 1972, p.210; B.H. Baden-Powell, *Handbook of the Manufactures and Arts of the Punjab*, Lahore, 1872; Bishan Singh moved to Amritsar towards the mid-nineteenth century and also shifted to the medium of oils as evidenced by some portraits that are part of the Lahore Museum collection. Musarrat Hasan, op.cit., p.138.
17. Of these two works 'Jogi Kanphatta' is part of the Shimla State Museum collection. 'Rhinoceros' and other lithographs by Kapur Singh are part of the collection of the Government Museum, Chandigarh, Accession No.4306, 4309, 4310.
18. The portrait of J.L. Kipling is part of the collection of the National College of Art, Lahore, Musarrat Hasan, op.cit., p.142, Colour Plate 137.
19. Portraits of Sikh nobility by Sher Muhammad are part of the collection of the Lahore Museum. R.P. Srivastava, op.cit., p.49; His works that were part of the Delhi exhibition of 1903 are described as outstanding examples of portraiture displaying technical mastery of oil paints and intricate modelling of the human face. G.F. Watts, *Indian Art Exhibition*, Delhi, 1903, Calcutta, 1903, p.459.
20. Jagtej Grewal, op.cit., Figs. 17, 19, 20.