



Rhyming with tradition: Tracing the Place of Design in Indian Art and Architecture

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Abstract:

The role of design and its place in Indian art and architecture is a vast topic that covers a wide spectrum of the visual culture, both past and present. The present paper is an attempt to investigate the visual manifestation of design as a vital component in traditional art and how it has lent itself to new scopes and challenges in design spread across time and regional cultures, with specific references cited by the author. Considering them as field studies, the author critically analyses the scopes and challenges of design and design motifs encountered in real space and creates room for future development and expansions following the evolution of the cultural ideas. The present paper tries to argue that the role of design is not only part of parcel in our cultural life but functions as a major communicative language throughout the history of Indian art and architecture. By extension, the author also focusses on how design plays an important role in indigenous folk art, contextual modern and contemporary art.

Key words: *Design, art, visual, architecture, traditional, contextual, modern, contemporary.*

Design is an integral part of art but not necessarily as a part of decoration or mere ornamental richness. Design is the basic structure for any visual communication, be it a simple motif or a complex visual configuration. Design plays a very important or main role in the formation of any work of art in terms of composition, arrangement of elements & even in conceiving the art work as a whole including the choice of materials, medium & techniques of execution. Design has manifested itself in various aspects and multiple features in the field of visual art – from traditional art to modern art, from functional art to objects of daily use.

Design in normal sense is usually associated with ornamentation & decoration as far as the conventional notion of *fine arts* is concerned. But in many works of art, particularly in non-traditional modern art design appears with a different view and from an entirely different perspective. In that sense it is no more a decoration but implies a certain meaningful unity of forms, shapes, ideas and the relevant visual elements. Hence, whereas in pre-modern art – in any part of the world – design has customarily followed a certain norm according to the respective cultures, in modern art design never follows any given norm but creates its own norm depending on the individual requirements.



Fig.1 Zaha Hadid's Heydar Aliyev Centre, 2012, Baku, Azerbaijan. Christopher Lee Getty

Consequently in modern art the concept of design has become more individualistic and idea-specific rather than collective or tradition oriented. However, there are instances in modern art (both in India and West) where artists are evoking or referring to the tradition by employing certain design elements from the past, by reviving a few obvious decorative motifs from the heritage. Works by Matisse, Picasso, Jamini Roy, Abanindranath Tagore and K.G. Subramanyan for example may be referred to in this context. In other words, modern art has not completely rejected the traditional design repertoire but has revisited them to make contemporary visual statements when needed. Though in early 20th century modern Western art, we do come across examples like Bauhaus and Minimalist artists who introduced completely novel and radical design ideas with no nostalgic association with their past.



Fig.2 2. Bauhaus Style

Within the larger domain of Indian tradition, any architecture conceptually is an embodiment of the idea of *design* in a very comprehensive and nuanced ways. Philosophically, theologically, structurally and aesthetically – every conceptual / religious element has been transformed into a design entity within the architectural plan – both in elevation and ground plan. Two such major examples from Indian traditional architecture are Konark (Orissa, 13th century AD) & Khajuraho (Madhya Pradesh, 10th- 12th century AD) temples, where the decorative bands, ornamental panels, small narrative figures are all integral part of the architectural design and its concept. Beside these kinds of structural temples, cave architectures too entail pre-conceived designs which take every element into consideration. Design in terms of motifs, symbols and essential iconography do not remain outside or peripheral to the main architectural design but intrinsically woven into it. This integrity between art and design is remarkable in most of the Indian traditional architecture. In fact they echo each other and born or conceived from the same artistic engagement; any separation that we might have witness between art and design was a later, Western post-industrialized phenomenon, an art-craft divide which has again been overcome in recent times.



Fig.3 | Khajuraho architectural design in exterior

In India there are number of temples which are decorated or designed by either murals on the walls, or by carved or painted pillars or intricate doorways and with highly bedecked



functional-symbolic motifs like *Makara* and *Kirtimukha*. Many such visualizations seem to be a surface adornment or an after-thought but when analyzed carefully they reveal an integrated conceptual framework. But there are different and varied ways of integration with different aesthetic techniques and ideas for bringing design and art within one visual body with innumerable design-units be it floral, abstract, or figurative. In Khajuraho and Konark, for example, the whole architecture is designed and conceived mainly by figurative sculptures. Figurative units undoubtedly dominate the design structures of these two temple sites. Large or small, almost three-dimensional or shallow relief-works, placed high on the wall or located in long continuous bands (*nara-bandhana*) on the plinth of the temples, both human and animal figurative sculptures overflow these temples, inside and outside.

Although dedicated to religious icons within a specific belief-system, these temples clearly celebrate human life in the most profound and frank way. These temples are well-known and highly appraised for the erotic carvings, although these carvings also represent the unique ornamental features loaded with religious symbolism, precise iconography and layered cultural signs of the given period. There have been considerable discussions over the motivations for their construction and their splendid decorations. Actually many Hindu temples have similar conventional symbolic representations, but not many emphasize so strongly on the human celebration of physical enjoyment and sexual experience. There are themes drawn from tantric-cult and from the *Kama Sutra* that perhaps served as a visual manual for pleasure, both physical and divine leading to wonderful visual expressions. According to the belief-system, the eroticism on the temple wall was needed also to ward off the threats of the amorous rain god Indra and other evil intrusions. Thus the erotic motifs get legitimized as an essential part of design. The temples in Khajuraho like the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple additionally commemorate the marriage of Shiva and Parvati, whose union formed the basis of cosmic energy and are replicated in the human sexual act. The temples commemorate and honor women. They commemorate also the joy of life, as there are also numerous scenes of everyday life. Design, in every sense of the term touch upon all these details while conceiving the whole pattern more as a conceptual experience rather than a mere superficial visual treat.

One of the compelling presence and deployment of design in diverse dimensions and expressions is found in Ajanta caves – perhaps the greatest example of architecture-sculpture-painting unison in the world art. Completed in two distinct phases – 1st century BC and 5th century AD – Ajanta is a magnificent example where *design* is not only a significant element in the overall conception but the most vital driving force to unite the assorted aspects of Ajanta into an indissoluble harmony. Right from the technical stage of scooping, carving, chiseling, coating, painting, finishing upto the finest brush works of immaculate detailing *design* pervades every aspect of Ajanta. The dark interiors made glittering with colorful figures and motifs and thus providing the space with a moment of divine revelation is also an outcome of a designer's mind. If you look up from the beautiful narrative wall paintings you see the geometric designs and motifs from the life around adorning the ceiling. The pillars next to you also have well-conceived

and masterly executed designs all over it. There are also images of peacocks, subtly decorated in blue paint made from lapis lazuli. One of the panels shows a decorative vegetable motif that looks similar to our modern day green bell pepper. In addition to this, there is a creature with a bull's head whose body transforms into swirling curvaceous lines that blend into the floral decoration of the next panel. Not only that there are free blend of the real and the mythical in the designs and decorations, there are new norms of designs hitherto unseen in Indian art. For example, often there are unexpected variations and asymmetry in designs as opposed to the general norm of repetitions. Moreover, Ajanta is a unique site where most mundane features and moments from daily life have found their place in the decorative scheme without any specific narrative context. The fact that design is often cultural having its root deep into the socio-historical observations can be found abundantly manifest at Ajanta.



Fig.4 Ajanta design on the wall

In the traditional paintings like manuscript and miniature painting design creates a special aesthetic support and value. Sometimes as part of format like the border of the painting or *Hasia* in Mughal painting, sometime evident as the patterns on the textile or jewelry design represented within the painting as the part of the composition, design is found playing a key role almost determining its visual language. In Jain Manuscript painting too the format of the composition itself has a strong design value. Beside the presence of the beautiful *Hasia*, Mughal painting is

well-known for its design flourishes which are carefully and meticulously integrated within the composition. The narrative contents of the composition merge delightfully with the decorative applications in the paintings. The vibrant colors, gorgeous floral and geometrical patterns both on the represented architecture and the costumes and jewelry befit the glory and pride of the royal life. For that matter, even gory and violent scenes of battles and hunting also assume a dazzling design quality due to this irresistible penchant for design on part of the artists and the rich convention. Similarly, Rajput paintings of Rajasthan and Pahari region also incorporate design as a part of their idiom. In certain examples, whereas in Rajput paintings a given schema seems to be dominating, in Mughal painting the design seems to have derived from life and the vision of a great empire. However, the paintings of Basholi, Chamba, Guler, Kangra, Marwar, Kotah do show a subtle relation between their design sense and the immediate environment, both geographical and cultural.



Fig.5 Manuscript Painting

In the realm of the traditional decorative arts and functional crafts, India's legacy had few challengers. The Mughals were especially great patrons of the decorative arts, and although initially it appears they may have favored imports from Persia and China, Indian manufacturers rapidly perfected and enhanced the imported styles and techniques. Indian textiles had always been known for their rich colors and variety of design, and Indian metal and ceramic products commanded worldwide respect. But very rapidly India also emerged as a preeminent center for a variety of fine arts and crafts, excelling in the manufacture of all manner of objects sought by the royalty including luxuriant carpets, decorated metal-ware, fine jewelry, glass and jade-ware. The impetus for some of these crafts may have come from China, Central Asia or Persia initially but soon they became Indian product, Indian craft and Indian creativity in true sense of the term.

But the Mughals were not alone in their encouragement of fine arts and crafts. The Rajput courts were more than equal to the Mughals, and far more amenable to the employment of traditional and folk elements in their furniture, jewelry and other decorative crafts. They also displayed a greater fondness for bold and saturated colors whereas the Mughals (like Shahjahan) showed a distinct preference for formal graces. When the Mughal Empire collapsed, it was the

Rajput courts that became the models for the regional Sikh kingdoms, the hill kingdoms, the kingdoms of Bundelkhand and Benares, and also the Nawabs of Bengal and Awadh to an extent. The Deccan courts also played a significant part in encouraging the decorative arts and crafts, and they too exerted a strong influence on the courts in Cuttack, as on Lucknow.



Fig:6 Mughal Miniature Painting



Fig:7 Rajput Miniature Painting

Unlike the static grids used in Western designs, Indian grids are more fluid, responsible for everything from the layout of temples to sari design, from cave embellishments to pottery of

daily use, from royal court paintings to floor designs in rural households. This fluidity of design evident in the handiwork of professionals as well as non-professional artists across the country has a strong potential for continuity with vital changes according to the changing demands of the time. In fact, change and variations have always been the life force of traditional Indian design as much as its organic relation with nature, life and social environment. Despite several ruptures in the traditions of a country which is pluralistic in nature, one can also see certain connections in terms of the way the designers/artists/craftsperson/artisans have associated their creative mind with the environment. Something essential about Indian design-art interface is certainly there though it may be difficult to perceive immediately.



Fig.8 The Mughal Jali

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