

# PAINTING & TERRACOTTA ART IN ANCIENT KASHMIR

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## ABSTRACT

One can easily notice a free exchange of ideas in art between Gandhara and Kashmir in the masterpieces that have survived in the valley. The terracotta images from the land are well known and have attracted the attention of art-historians and the scholars in the allied disciplines from time to time and have always been praised for their fine workmanship and iconographic features. In the softer medium in plastic art, the terracotta art of the region also made a mark in history as the carved tiles from Harwan and terracotta figurines from Akhnoor occupy a distinguished place by themselves in the annals of Kashmir art. Painting too was well developed though not many early examples have survived to this day. However, the tradition of Kashmiri painting can be glimpsed in the illustrated manuscripts from the valley and other painted miniatures so beautifully done though belonging to somewhat later period outside the scope of this study. Through this research paper I will highlight the painting and terracotta art in Ancient Kashmir.

**Keywords:** stucco figures, *Citrasutra*

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history Kashmir has experienced an art life very much its own. There was a time early in the first millennium when it came into contact with the wide spread eastern conquests of the Sassanid empire with its neo Persian culture, to be followed not long afterwards by a period in which its own territories extended far beyond their natural geographical limits. Of all the arts practiced by the people of the valley in the pre-Islamic period, the greater part of which corresponds to what is ordinarily termed as the early medieval period, painting and terracotta were notably proficient, as the remains of it on their large monuments in stone are a standing proof. The art and architectural remains can be divided in three phases of which only the first two fall under the purview of the present study. The first was an early or primitive form which developed about CE 200, the records of which are merely foundational remains. The second one is an epoch of building on such a grand scale that it may be defined as the classical period of their building art, and lasted from about 700 CE to the beginning of the fourteenth century, after which date the country came under the influence of Islam. This long period is itself resolved into two phases, during the earlier of which the buildings were mainly of Buddhist attribution, while later they were entirely Brahmanical. Along with the architecture the sculptural art also occupies a special place in the history of Kashmir and is known for its distinct features

and style that it gave to its neighbouring area of the present day Himachal Pradesh and also to the western region in the present day Pakistan.

The story of art in Kashmir opens with a pre-historic rock drawing discovered at the Neolithic site of Burzahom depicting a hunting scene. A subsequent stage of development is represented by master-pieces of art in the shape of Harwan tiles and Ushkar stucco figures. The *Nilamatapurana* makes clear reference to the existence of painting in ancient Kashmir. It refers to paintings made on cloth, the wall and the floor in connection with the festival to celebrate the Buddha's birthday. The *Viṣṇudharmottarapurana*, which is generally accepted to be a product of Kashmir and is assigned to c. 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, provides details of the prevalence of the art of painting. It contains a full section devoted to painting called *Citrasutra* wherein various aspects of painting have been discussed. The very existence of such a work shows that the art of painting was well established in Kashmir in ancient times. Kalhana gives just one passing reference to painting on cloth with gold when he describes the sacking of the royal palace during the rule of Harsha and the flight of Bhoja. Here he tells how the low-caste people burnt the precious cloth painted with gold in order to obtain gold from the ashes. Though specific references in the *Rajatarangini* to this art, except the one mentioned above, are wanting, perhaps because Kalhana had no occasion to refer to them, but ample testimony from other sources clearly establishes its prevalence. In the *Kuṭṭanimata*, Damodaragupta says that the art of painting was practiced by courtezans. Somadeva, the author of the *Kathasaritasagara*, also refers to portrait painters during the period of our study.

Although there is no direct example of Kashmir painting of this period survived, the characteristic features of the Kashmir style can be clearly seen in the Gilgit manuscript paintings assigned to the 6th-7th century. The murals of the Buddhist monasteries of Alchi in Ladakh, Mang Nang in Western Tibet and Spiti in Himachal Pradesh present a successive stage of the development of the tradition of painting in Kashmir. These mural paintings appear to be a pictorial translation of the exquisite Kashmir bronzes dated to 9th to 11th century. Kalhana himself has said that people of Kashmir loved art. King Harsha had special liking for art and art people. It seems that we don't have any sample of this period's painting style because the early artists used to make their paintings on cloth. We have, for instance, a remarkable set of twenty four large paintings on cotton, preserved in the Indian Section of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, which though painted in the middle of the 16th century, yet shows the material that the early painters had at their disposal. The colours were all vegetable and mineral, which lasted longer and also produced a better effect. Kashmir appears to have been adepts at painting designs on dress material also, which looked so real that when king Harsha's palace was looted after his defeat at the hands of rebel forces, "some low-caste people eager to get gold, burned clothes which were painted with gold, and then anxiously searched the ashes".

Kalhana makes no reference to the terracotta art in his celebrated work probably because it did not fit in his scheme of narrative. However, the archaeological evidence through the finds of some exquisite

specimens of terracotta tiles and figurines indicate their prevalence from an early period. Though very little has survived of this Kashmir art, we have from the excavated ruins at Harwan, beautifully carved terracotta tiles belonging to the 4th century CE. Harwan brick tiles are unique in their pattern and style because that they do not deal with religious, but with secular themes. We find life and nature as the artist found around him. The pictures, apparently taken from realities of daily life and they represent the entire flora and fauna of the reality. The motifs consist of leaves of aquatic plants which grow in abundance in the lakes of Kashmir, leaves of lotus flower and other flowers of the locality in full-bloom forms, geese flying or running in rows holding stalks of half bloomed lotuses in their bills, cock fighting, rams fighting, cow suckling the calves, elephants, deer looking at the moon with head turned back-wards, archers on horseback chasing deer and shooting arrows at them etc. There are figures of men wearing Central Asian costumes and curiously enough the relief figures of Parthian horse men and women side by side with early Gupta motifs. The mouldings on Harwan terracotta tiles cannot, however, be the work of folk-artists. The art seems to have attained a high degree of sophistication and the moulded tiles depict life of the upper class, in as much as we find figures of hunting horsemen, men and women sitting on a balcony and enjoying perhaps the beautiful landscape and listening to music from female musicians and recitals of dancers. The physiognomy of the persons depicted on these tiles leaves no doubt of their Central Asian origin - their prominent cheek bones, small eyes, receding forehead and heavy features, all point to the same conclusion. From some letters in the Kharoshti script which went into disuse before the 4th century CE, and also from a small passage on Buddhist creed written in the Brahmi characters, it seems the tiles belong to the 3rd-4th century CE.

Whereas the Harwan tiles are flat, hardly rising out of the background, and are made from a mould and therefore repetitive, the terracotta heads and relieves found at Ushkur are each a single masterpiece produced from moulds carved by hand. These "later Gandhara" terracotta have been variously put from the 4th to the 8th centuries CE. The figurines depict true Hellenistic influence. Hellenistic art was the dominant cultural force for about a thousand years from circa 3rd century BCE to 700 CE in what is now called Afghanistan, and its final echoes lasted in Kashmir until the 10th century CE.

Relics similar to Ushkar have recently been unearthed at Akhnur. Situated on the right bank of the Chenab, where the river first enters the plains of the Punjab. Akhnur lay in ancient times on the route between Jammu and Srinagar via the Budil Pass, as well as on the road to Rajauri (ancient Rajapuri). It was thus an important centre of trade and commerce and the headquarters of a flourishing timber industry. Both in treatment and the material used in the lovely terracotta beads with their somber lines and the serene and peaceful poses, we notice a close affinity to the "Later Gandhara School" on the one hand and to the Gupta art on the other. The fragments collected both at Ushkar and Akhnur consist of pieces of bodies, covered with drapery or partly covered, or even nude; broken bodies of princes, princesses, attendants, holy men, Buddhist mendicants in their draped robes; elaborate decorations that once might have been personal ornaments, such as crowns, necklaces, armlets, bracelets, ear-rings and the like; architectural fragments of a highly ornamental style, including pillar capitals with vine ornaments, volutes, etc. Stylistically they seem to inherit two

different aesthetics: the mongrel Indo-Roman school of Gandhara as testified by the treatment of the hair, head-dresses and jewellery, as well as the diminutive sizes, while a prominent nose (and the heavy fleshy cheeks with almond-eyes seem to indicate the influence of the Kushana and Gupta art of Mathura.

It is not difficult to trace the origin of the terracotta figurine art. With the decline of the Gandhara School, when there was a shift of artistic activity to areas where schist was not available, a school of sculpture took to working in stucco. Here, gradually, they developed a sensitive or romantic style, but later they found that burnt clay (terracotta) lasted longer and was not destroyed like stucco by rain and sun. Patronage of these artists fell low in Taxila and adjoining areas when Buddhism was dying out, and they crossed the Pir Panjal range into Kashmir where, from towards the end of the 5th century CE, the building trade was very brisk and flourishing. Kashmir became under the Karkota dynasty the leading power in north-western India. The empire of

Lalitaditya reached from Mysore to Mongolia, from Bengal and Orissa to Afghanistan. At the end of the eighth century Jayapida perished as a result of a fruitless effort to keep at least northern India. Later, under the Utpala dynasty (855-939 CE), Kashmir had a period of peace and consolidation, but thereafter, weakened by internal strife; it became an unimportant kingdom in the Himalayan region of India. The terracotta art during the Karkota rule was thus affected by two waves of art-from Central Asia and from Mathura. This art seems to have continued in the centuries following the period under discussion without royal patronage and dwindled gradually.

## CONCLUSION

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