

# Paintings of Kutch – A New Documentation

(A Study on the Stylistic Development of Paintings in Kutch  
during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century)

## Synopsis

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## **BRIEF RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The present study titled, 'New Documentation of Paintings from Kutch', brings to light relevant and more recently discovered paintings of Kutch that are unpublished among the concerned readers. In my belief, the lack of proper attention given to such provincial style is the reason why paintings done in such region are still overshadowed by the prolific research otherwise carried out in the prominent schools of Indian miniature paintings. Certainly, these paintings do not have a very long historical base like the popular Rajput traditions, but they are not a negligible quantity either, that we could completely overlook. Be it the Kamangari frescos or the ones done on paper the surviving evidence proves that the tradition lasted for a brief period of a hundred and fifty years, roughly from the downfall of the Mughal Empire to the establishment of the British Raj in India. Nevertheless, to narrow down to these conclusions it was important to trace the whys and where force of this artistic impulse in the western most district of India.

As the study is a qualitative research the methodology implied to approach this subject was three-fold. 1) Documentation- to bring to light the lesser-known paintings specific to Kutch regions. 2) Define its stylistic affiliation, and 3) to attempt to remove the ambiguity in the area such as understanding its Patron and Artist. Alongside critical cataloguing in the above mentioned areas, the research also emphasizes on raising some of the relevant issues pertaining to the study- such as: Weather Kutch paintings were a minor off-shoot of a prominent 'Rajput styles' or a continuation of the 'Gujarati' style? What inspired this tradition and how did it sustain for a hundred and fifty years? What led to the decline of this tradition? Why and how these lesser-known collections moved out of Kutch? Are the reasons similar to the other popular schools across India? or does Kutch have a different story to narrate? Today what is the significance of these paintings in the pan-Indian context?

## **THE KEY FINDINGS**

The research emphasized on establishing that Kutch was a Provincial school in Western India. And as a substitute to this argument, it was important to consider two factors: 1) that this school had a sizable range of works commissioned in this region to address it as a provincial school, and 2) the range should also have an indigenous painterly style affiliated with this school. The research hence also proves that this provenance was a promising centre for painting activity in Gujarat during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Hence the research collates, relevant and unpublished documentation of Kutch paintings over a hundred and fifty years, starting from the early 1740s to the end of the 1900s. It is observed that there has been a continuous patronage of paintings in the provenance of Kutch, supported by the Raos of Kutch. But when one stylistically define the school, there are a lot of ambiguity in the styles. But interestingly these multi-lingual stylistic idiom is what makes Kutch school unique from the other provincial schools.

### **CLASSIFICATION OF VISUALS AND STYLES:**

Based on the range to visuals selected for study, we could broadly classify the stylistic affiliations of this school into three broad groups as listed below and they were further sub-classified into varied styles ranging from Style-A to E.

- 1) Paintings at the onset of this tradition – Most sophisticated Durbar paintings (1740-1760)
- 2) Development of Indigenous styles - (1760-1820)
- 3) Stylistic Departures- Impact of Academic understanding- (1825- late 1800s)

### **Paintings at the onset of this tradition – Most sophisticated Durbar paintings (1740-1800)**

Style A: We see from Rao Desal I's reign there is a sudden acquaintance with court paintings tradition, and the works produced at the onset of this traditional impulse were some of the most sophisticated works. Large size durbar paintings and portraiture that we would even doubt if it must have been by a local artist. At the same time they are indeed unique

compositions to this regions' cultural documentation. All qualities of a good portrait- flawless elegant lines, the delicacy of touch are seen in these paintings.

#### Development of Indigenous styles: from 1760-1820:

From 1760 a large number of stylistic overlaps are seen in the works produced at Kutch owing to the number of artist who must have joined to work at the court. Some may be seen as works by a trained artist while many other an autodidactic attempt, when the artist are learning by observing. Briefed below are the stylistic idioms that developed during this phase strictly based on the range of material available to study.

Style B- Darbar paintings: From the reign of Rao Godh-II, that is 1760's we start observing a variation in the compositional quality of the Darbar paintings. They are unique composition but with simpler modelling skills.

Style C- is the autodidactic phase, when native artist learned the art of painting by copying a large number of European prints and slowly acquired the requisite knowledge to drawing perspectives and shades. In no time these artist started documenting their surroundings and nearby landscapes which are works addressed in the publication 'A Place Apart'.

Style D- This style is still very ambiguous as the current study could incorporate only a part of the large tradition which is still being searched. Although on the basis of available material we are certain that the artist were continuously improving on their understanding of painting through experimentation. In this phase the artist are stylistically 'liberal' in technique, but not yet 'folkish'.

#### Impact of Academic Understanding- (1825- late 1800s)

Style E- The second quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially from the reign of Rao Desal II is a modern phase in the history of Kutch paintings when a large number of local artist were engaged in Company style paintings.

### THE ARTIST:

Based on the quality of the draftsmanship of an artist we could narrow down to the following observation. The large size highly sophisticated quality of paintings that we see in the early phase at the court are works of a Master painter who were invited to paint portraiture of Rao Desal I and Rao Lakhpat. The selection of themes, the uniqueness in the composition and the quality of draftsmanship suggest that the works could be of none other than the Mughal trained portraiture Dalchand, who worked at the Rajput court from c.1724-1760, initially for Jodhpur court and later Kishangarh. This is being stated not on the bases of an inscriptional reference or any other written record but strictly on the basis of reading the draftsmanship quality of the painting. Further factors that supported this assumption is, 1) Rao Desal I had extended a matrimonial alliance with Ramsingh, son of Maharaja Abhai Singh of Jodhpur who was appointed as a Subahdar of Gujarat from 1730 to 1738, and 2) Raj kavi Hamirdan Ratnau of Jodhpur was young Lakhpat's Master and friend who introduced Shri Kanaka Kaushalji of Kishangarh to Lakhpat. Who then head the institute of Braj Bhasha Institute at Bhuj. So here there is a possibility of acquaintance that the Master artist could have trained the native artist the art of miniature painting. With regard to Kamangar community as painters of Kutch, we still have no clear evidences to negate otherwise. Infact every observation further point to the fact that the Kamangars must have contribution largely to the painting tradition. Moreover they are addressed as finely skilled craftsmen who has the readiness to adapt to an alternated art practice. However the illustration that we see in the religious manuscripts with Vaishnav theme has a strong sense of Bhakti bhava which only a Hindu artist could have produce.

### THE PATRON:

We may broadly assume that the potential class of people who could support the art of painting in Kutch were the Royals, Merchants & British. This section in the research further clarifies the role of Connoisseurs in the development and sustenance of this art in the province of Kutch. Mirza Maharao Lakhpat struck by the flamboyant lifestyles of the Rajputs traditions was anxious he changed the cultural history of Kutch itself. As an amateur patron, he was not very rigid with his clients' innovative ideas but rather embraced every form of art as a creative production. He hired Ramsingh Malam- the navigator, architect, and craftsman, to supervise the school of enamel work, watch and clock making, glass and delftware tile factory, gun casting,

iron foundry, and cannon making factories. While Raj Bhattnarak Shri Kanaka Kaushal was largely involved in literary activity. The city grew to become one of the greatest centres of art in Gujarat, and Rao its greatest patron. This sudden upsurge in the patronage of art and culture in the region opened new prospects to islanders that artisans and craftsmen from nearby provenance who started immigrating to this land. 1880 Gazetteers recorded that more than 20,000 artisans reside in Bhuj whose ancestors are said to have migrated during Rao Lakhpatjis reign. Such a great patron of kutch reigned for 25 years and with his demise begins the matter of sustenance of these industrial set up. However, the art of enamelling, and the Braj Bhasha institute continue to survive for the next hundred and fifty years. And under the larger umbrella of Braj Bhasha Institute even the art of paintings survive because of the involvement of Raj Bhattnarak, Jain yati Shri Kanaka Kaushal. Stylistically also it is around this period that most of the indigenous styles develop at the court. Concurrently, the Merchants and wealthy businessmen rose to become the next affluent to support this art practice in Kutch. But they were predominantly inspired by the tradition of frescos making. And as a large range of painting were on Vaishnava theme we may for certain state that their inspiration came from pilgrim centres of Nathdwara. Based on facts put together in the current research we are certain that after the Treaty of Alliance was signed between East India Company and Kutch Raos, early in the nineteenth century, a great impact was put on the painting tradition of Kutch. The coming and going of English men gave fresh hopes to the native artist that they continued to survive in their profession by making paintings for the Englishmen. The cities' most enthusiasts British patrons were agents: Captain Mac Murdo and Stanley Napier Rakies and few others were the English Guests Mr. and Mrs. Postans, Dr. Hendry Pittman, Mr. and Mrs Thomas Chase Parr.

#### *SOCIAL IMPACT WHICH LED TO THE DECLINE OF THE TRADITION:*

This section in the research defines Kutch as a periphery in relation to its cultural centres. It has been observed that Kutch remained distant from the rest of Gujarat for a very long time. It not only remained at the extreme west of the country but also remained aloof from the mainland due to its unique topographical feature- of salt-encrusted wasteland- the Rann. Its history reveals that from early civilization to the recent past, the people of Kutch always looked for substances in the sea than the land for its sustenance. For this reason the land remotely operated without having to engage with the mainland, and for century's together Kutchi pilots

and merchants celebrated their partnership with the outside land especially Zanzibar, Arabia, the Gulf, and the peninsulas across India. Nevertheless from the 1500's inland interpolation between Kutch court and the imperial courts increased, and the Raos realized the need to establish a close affiliation with the inlanders. By mid-eighteenth century with the frequent visits of Maharaos from the Rajput courts as Mughal appointed Subahdar, the Raos of Kutch realized the need for his land to improve as a cultural centre. To Mirza Rao Lakhpat's good fortune, the great treasury of his father helped him become one of the greatest patrons of art known in the history of Kutch. He setup unique factories and instituted Pathashalas to encourage creative productions. This sudden momentum and progress poured in a large number of people to look for a promising future under the Raos. Alongside Rao, even the affluent merchant class by now was making a statement in society by commissioning paintings in their residences. But unfortunately, patronage and investment could not survive beyond a hundred and fifty years. Many artist moved out for better prospects, and to make situation worse the land was hit by a severe earthquake in 1819, followed by famine in the year 1823, 1825, and 1832 causing severe damage to peoples property.

Another factor that largely effected the population of Kutch was the rapid growth of Mumbai as the new center in the second half of the nineteenth century. The city of Bombay was proving to be a promising land to look for a good living. A weaving and spinning company was established in the year 1854. Large textile industries grew up in and around the city of Bombay. The Bombay shipping and Iron shipping companies started in 1863 to make Indian merchants free from the British. It had many additional facilities which a modern city could offer like higher education, rail connectivity, water, and electricity facility. It is obvious that the adventurous businessmen of this land now moved to bigger cities or abroad for better opulence changing the socio-economic structure of the people residing in this area. The next major shift happened another fifty years later, with the impact of the Indo-Pakistan conflict, which resulted in the migration of a large number of Muslim population. Of our familiarity, the Kamangar communities also move out during this period. As capitalism and culture cannot escape each other, along with the out-migration of its people in large numbers, the city lost its cultural charms. A relational impact of all of these factors has directly affected the painting tradition in Kutch.



## **CONCLUSIONS**

Through this research, we could affirmatively state that the art of painting penetrated into the court of Kutch during Rao Desal's period, and it grew into a provincial school because of Rao Lakhpat's patronage. Certainly, the highly sophisticated style that we see during Rao Lakhpat's reign are works of a master painter probably invited from Jodhpur, and the indigenous styles affiliated to this regions painting tradition begins only during Rao Godh's reign. Infact the fifty years starting from 1760 to 1820, is marked in the political history of Kutch when the administration goes from bad to worse, but interestingly this is also the time when a large number of religious texts (many illustrated) are being documented at the court, under the supervision of Raja Bhatnarak (Jain Yati) Shri Kanaka Kaushal and his disciple Kuvar Kaushal. And it does not come as a surprise to note that a Jain yati was involved in manuscript documentation in Kutch as Jain Acharyas of Gujarat and western India were involved in Sanskrit learning, manuscript writing, and commissioning of paintings illustrating a diverse range of thematic texts. And to execute this literary contribution they took financial support from ministers, intellectuals, and businessmen. A similar attempt is seen here by a connoisseurs of Kutch in the development and sustenance of this art in the province of Kutch. When the Englishmen visited this area around 1830's more men explored their skill with the art of drawing resulting the large range of Company styled drawings.

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