

Celebrated Master Artists of the Bikaner School

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DOI: 10.52984/ijomrc1107

Abstract:

In this article I have tried to incorporate details about Shah Muhammed, the first celebrated artist of the Bikaner School. During the last decades of the 16th Century, he was trying to achieve a new style by mixing various school styles and techniques. He started to paint in Bikaner and paintings attributed to him were found up to the beginning of the 17th Century. Nur Muhammed learned the fundamentals of "Siyah Kalam on Warqa", painting, and various school styles from his uncle Shah Muhammed. A review of Shah Muhammed's "Siyah Kalam on Warqa" shows his focus was more on the practice and application of various influences and fusions of styles.

KeyWords : Siyah Kalam, Warqa, school styles, Bikaner School and fusions of styles.

The "genealogy table of the Bikaner Usta Artisans" published in "The Bikaner School - Usta Artisans and Their Heritage", Shanane Davis 2008, shows that Shah Muhammed was the first celebrated artist of the Bikaner School. Sometime during the last decades of the 16th Century, he started to paint in Bikaner and paintings attributed to him were found up to the beginning of the 17th Century. Shah Muhammed exhibited no particular style of painting. A review of Shah Muhammed's "Siyah Kalam on Warqa" (Siyah Kalam is lampblack paint applied with a brush and Warqa is a single sheet of fine handmade paper which was made in the Persianate and Indian worlds up to the 19th Century) shows his focus was more on the practice and application of various influences and fusions of styles. Paintings and "Siyah Kalam on Warqa" of a specific style however are evident in some of his completed works but generally it can be seen that he was trying to achieve a new style by mixing various school styles and techniques.

Shah Muhammed had no children of his own so he trained his nephew, Nur Muhammed, whose father was Umar Ali ji. No reference was made to Umar Ali ji painting in Bikaner, and it seems he was not an artist and that Nur Muhammed learned the fundamentals of "Siyah Kalam on Warqa", painting, and various school styles from his uncle Shah Muhammed. Nur Muhammed took this training and became the first Bikaner painter to develop a new style of painting which successfully fused Persian, Chinese, European, Rajput, and Chaurapanchasika School painting styles. As previously noted, Nur Muhammed excelled in the "Siyah Kalam" of flora, fauna, and female figures and it appears that he painted up until the early 1640's.

Nur Muhammed had no children and so it was his elder brothers (Mehar Ali) children who became the first real group of master painters in Bikaner. Three of his four sons became celebrated painters. The most celebrated master painter being Nathu ji (2nd oldest son), then Gul Muhammed (youngest son) and finally Muhammed ji (3rd eldest son). In the Bikaner Usta family, the fundamentals of art and painting were taught from generation to generation by Usta master painters. Nathu ji would have been trained by his uncle, Nur Muhammed, and Nur Muhammed and Nathu ji would have trained Nathu ji's younger brothers (Muhammed ji and Gul Muhammed). Nathu ji started to paint professionally during the mid-17th Century and by the latter part of the 17th Century became one of the most celebrated master painters at the Bikaner court. Because his expertise was highly regarded, Nathu ji was given a gift of 2,000 bighas (800 acres or 323.75 hectares) of land by Sarup Singh ji when his father Maharaja Anup Singh ji was ruling the Bikaner State (this is recorded in a royal bahi document). Maharaja Sarup Singh ji was still a boy when he became Maharaja and this document bears his name along with his father's name. It was signed in the Deccan (large South India Plateau) sometime before Maharaja Anup Singh ji died in Adoni, Deccan, in 1698. Many scholars previously believed the influence of Deccan art on the Bikaner School arrived in Bikaner via paintings brought back by Bikaner Maharaj and Maharajas during their military campaigns in the Deccan during the 17th and early 18th Centuries. This document proves Nathu ji accompanied Maharaja Anup Singh ji on this Adoni, Deccan, campaign. Furthermore, the author believes this document proves the Deccan arts influence introduced into Bikaner art came directly from the Usta painters from Delhi and Bikaner who accompanied Bikaner Maharajas on military exhibitions to the Deccan. There is a "Siyah Kalam on Warqa" attributed to Nathu ji in a private collection that shows Padam Singh ji (brother of Maharaja Anup Singh ji) in battle in the Deccan. The sword that Padam Singh ji is wielding in this "Siyah Kalam on Warqa" is presently in the Padam Singh's Khanda section of the Armoury at Junagarh Fort, Bikaner. Padam Singh ji was killed during this battle on the bank of the Tapi river in March 1683. Nathu ji started the trend of painting slender and elongated human figures, elongated turban styles with egret feathers, elongated trees, and linear architecture. These influences of Nathu ji on Bikaner School painting continued well into the 18th Century. Nathu ji was the court painter who accompanied Maharaja Anup Singh ji, Maharaj Padam Singh ji, and Maharaja Sarup Singh ji on their expeditions outside the Bikaner State.

In Nathu ji's absence, another famous Bikaner artist named Hamid Rukn-ud-din was in charge of the royal kharkanas in the city of Bikaner. Rukn-ud-din was from the "Umrani" Usta clan where most of Bikaner Usta painters belonged to the "Lalani" Usta clan. During the reign of Rao Karan Singh ji, who ruled Bikaner from 1631 to 1669, a group of Usta artisans from Delhi were brought to the Bikaner court. The leader of these painters was Ustad Ali Raza. Ustad Ali Raza produced some spectacular works in Bikaner during the mid-17th Century. The most celebrated painting was produced for Rao Karan Singh ji in 1650 and was, "Laxmi Narayan enthroned in the Vaikuntha heaven" (present location unknown). The idea for this painting came to Rao Karan Singh ji in a dream and Ustad Ali Raza was instructed to paint this dream. For an unknown reason, Rao Karan Singh ji became displeased with Ustad Ali Raza sometime in the 1660's, and his royal patronage ceased. Rukn-ud-din had begun to be appreciated sometime during the early 1660's. During this period, other painters at court were from the "Lalani" Usta clans, Jamal and Hasan (sons of Ustad Ali Raza), and Muslim painters who settled in Bikaner from Delhi such as Luft, Hisham-ud-din, and Balmukund. Rukn-ud-din had adapted Rajputana styles from the style already in vogue in Bikaner as well as other styles, including Mughal, that he learned from Ustad Ali Raza. This newly developed mixed style made Rukn-ud-din one of the most celebrated artists of Bikaner during the latter part of 17th Century. Rukn-ud-din preferred to produce a master "Siyah Kalam on Warqa" that he kept for other artists of his atelier to study and reproduce for commissioned paintings. Rukn-ud-din would instruct his disciples to do the preliminary work on the commissioned paintings by studying or reproducing from a master "Siyah Kalam on Warqa" or "Khaqa" (a perforated design on warqa to be pounced using charcoal onto another paper to create an outline). Rukn-ud-din would then finish the details of each painting himself. If a commissioned work was considered to be important to Rukn-ud-din, he would finish the painting completely himself. This tradition of master Usta painters of Bikaner to keep their "Siyah Kalam on Warqa" and their "Khaqas" in their atelier for present and future Usta artists to study and reproduce started in the early-17th Century and continued into the late-19th Century.

Usta artisans believed a painter was only truly talented if he could produce a "Siyah Kalam" freehand without mistakes or corrections. Rukn-ud-din preferred to paint various "Raga and Ragini" and poetic paintings of Radha and Krishna "Hindu gods". The influence of Rukn-ud-din's style lasted into the early 18th Century with some aspects of his style, such as the use of curtains near or around a subject, finely painted jewellery, and cushion styles continued into the 19th Century.

Rukn-ud-din either died or stopped painting in 1697. Rukn-ud-din's son, Abraham, was not as talented an artist as his father, inherited the Bikaner workshop for a period between 1697 until the end of Maharaja Anup Singh ji's reign in 1698. His son, Maharaja Sarup Singh ji, appointed Nathu ji head of the Bikaner royal kharkanas for a short period, from 1698 to 1700.

Nine other Usta Bikaner master artists became prominent in the last three decades of the 17th Century. They were Ahmad ji, Qasim ji, Murad ji, Abdul Qadir ji (sons of Nathu ji), Hasamdi (son of Shah Ali ji), Muhammed ji (brother of Nathu ji) and his son Gullu ji, Gul Muhammed (brother of Nathu ji), and Gul Muhammed's grandson Noor Muhammed (Nure). Rashid, a celebrated Mughal artist who was not a member of the Bikaner Usta family, settled in Bikaner in the latter part of the 17th Century and adopted the Bikaner School style for his paintings and became prominent as well in the last decades of the 17th Century. Rashid and Ahmad ji excelled in execution of paintings in a combined media of "Siyah Kalam" with translucent and opaque watercolours on "Warqa and Wasli" (Wasli is made up of many layers of warqa and was/is the main base used in opaque Indian watercolours). These paintings look similar to a water colour drawing and both artists produced exceptionally fine paintings. The Bikaner royal family and aristocracy acquired many fine paintings by Abdul Qadir, Hasamdi, Muhammed ji, and Gul Muhammed in the last twenty-five years of the 17th Century. The majority of the paintings that Qasim ji executed were for urban and garden planning. It seems very few paintings were executed by Gullu ji. Nur Muhammed (Nure) took over the royal kharkanas from 1700 to 1715 during the first half of the reign of Maharaja Sujan Singh ji. Nur Muhammed was a leading artist previously in the workshops of Rukn-ud-din, Ibrahim, and Nathu ji. Nur Muhammed produced some of the only known erotic paintings done in the Bikaner School. Rukn-ud-din painted a few erotic paintings but like Nur Muhammed none of these paintings were signed but they were probably presented at court for the private collection of the Maharaja. Maharaja Sujan Singh ji spent his early years in the court "zenana" as his father was away on Deccan military campaigns. The constant female companionship and presence in the court "zenana" seems to be the influence over his acquisition of erotic paintings. Being conservative Muslim artists, it is unlikely these paintings were shown outside of the Bikaner School Kharkanas before being presented to the Maharaja. Nur Muhammed also painted delicate oval faces, which became his trademark. Many Bikaner artists in the 18th Century combined the styles of Nathu ji and Nur Muhammed in their paintings.

By the end of the second decade of the 18th Century Murad (son of Luft) had become the leading painter at the Bikaner court. Murad's father was an immigrant painter from Delhi and his family was not part of the Bikaner Usta family. Murad and Murad ji's (son of Nathu ji) paintings have been continually misidentified by scholars as being works of the same artist because their paintings were both signed Murad. Other notable painters of this period were Gulab ji (son of Inayat ji) and Qasim ji (son of Gullu ji). By the mid-18th Century, Qayam ji (son of Murad ji), Ahmed ji (son of Qasim ji), Rahim ji (son of Qayam ji), Umar ji (son of Rahim ji) became the most prominent painters at court. Rahim ji (son of Qayam ji) was in charge of the royal kharkanas under Maharaja Zorawar Singh ji from the early 1740's. Rahim ji created larger elongated master "siyah kalam on warqa" paintings and fine opaque watercolours on "wasli". Qayam ji (son of Murad ji) became the first documented Bikaner "Lalani" Usta artist to be appointed by Maharaja Shiromani Gaj Singh ji in 1760, to be in charge of both paintings and stone carving for the royal kharkanas. Ahmed ji was known for painting mainly religious subjects. Umar ji created opaque watercolours on "Wasli" and "Siyah Kalam on Warqa" paintings.

From the 1760's until the late-18th Century, eight other master Bikaner School painters became popular at court. They were Isa (Iss ji son of Ahmed ji), Hasan (son of Ahmed), Sahab-ud-din (son of Isa [Iso ji]), Sahoo (son of Abu ji), and his son Mahmood, Qasim (grandson of Rukn-ud-din), his son Abu, and Hashim (son of Muhammed). Isa (Iss ji) took over the royal kharkanas some time during the 1770's. His paintings, opaque watercolours on "Wasli", were some of the finest examples of the Bikaner School during the third and early fourth quarter of the 18th Century. His subjects were mainly palace scenes and royal portraits of Bikaner and Jaisalmer rulers. Hasan, Sahab-ud-din, Mahmood, and Hashim, also produced master paintings of the Bikaner royal family in opaque watercolours on "Wasli". Qasim followed the painting style popular at this time in Bikaner but added his grandfather's love of finely painted jewellery on his subjects. Qasim mainly produced portraits of Bikaner's rulers both past and present. After Isa (Iss ji), Abu took charge of the royal kharkanas until 1804 under Maharaja Shiromani Surat Singh ji. His son Ahmed, another accomplished painter worked alongside his father. Other notable Usta painters at the end of the 18th Century and beginning of the 19th Century were Ramazan and Ahmed Bakhsh (son of Sahoo).

By the first decades of the 19th Century, an Usta painter named Rahim ji (son of Ali Muhammed) became famous for his paintings and is known as the top celebrated master painter of the Bikaner School during the first half of the 19th Century. Rahim ji took charge of the royal kharkanas, after Abu, in the first decades of the 19th Century. Rahim ji combined various Bikaner School style influences from the 17th and early-18th Century with his unique style. Rahim ji preferred painting "Siyah Kalam" on thick "Warqa" but he also produced opaque water-coloured paintings on "Wasli". It is of importance to note that Rahim ji changed his painting style between his "Siyah Kalam on Warqa" and his opaque watercoloured paintings on "Warqa" and "Wasli" depending if the painting was for royal family or for a private commission. Only one royal portrait in the style of Rahim ji's private commissions has surfaced. Rahim ji also looked at the medium of photography and what was popular in colonial period painting and created many extra fine "Siyah Kalam on Warqa" combining these styles. Rahim ji painted until approximately until the mid-19th Century. The last formally trained artists of the Bikaner School were Shah Muhammed (son of Ali Muhammed), Rahim ji's three children (Qayam ji, Maula Bakhsh, and Gulam [Chotu]), and Murad ji (aka Murad Bakhsh), (son of Mahmood ji). All five were accomplished artists with Gulam (Chotu) being in charge of the royal kharkanas until 1872 under Maharaja Sardar Singh ji. After 1872 there is no documentation showing any Usta artist being royal patroned and the Bikaner School tradition seems to have officially ended in this year.

The above article is a synopsis of the celebrated master artists of the Bikaner School. For further details and references see my book "The Bikaner School - Usta Artisans and Their Heritage" which is available in hardback and will be in digital form in October, 2020.

Reference:

Devis, Sannane, "The Bikaner School - Usta Artisans and Their Heritage", UK.