

Miniature Painters as Historiographers

Abstract

Artists are an integral part of the society and they have their own way of telling the history through their art works. For present research, five paintings have been selected that represent a unique way of telling the contemporary events of the troubled period of Sikh Rule, which have become a history now. But this has been done in such a subtle manner that it almost goes unnoticed. In current research the paintings will be studied not only from artistic perspective, but it will also deal with the socio political and historical dimensions present in paintings.

Keywords: Historiographers, artistic perspective, integral, contemporary, historical dimensions

Artists are an integral part of the society and they have their own way of telling the stories through their art works. For present research, five paintings have been selected that represent a unique manner of narrating the contemporary events of the troubled period of Sikh Rule, which have become a history now. But this has been done in such a subtle manner that it almost goes unnoticed. In current research the paintings will be studied not only from artistic perspective, but it will also deal with the socio political and historical dimensions present in them.

From 1801 to 1839, Ranjit Singh was the ruler of Lahore. He brought back peace and tranquillity to the city. People were happy and prosperous and he was able to keep a balance among his subjects. After his death on 27th June 1839, his son Kharak Singh inherited the Lahore Darbar but one year and four months later, he passed away. At the day of his funeral, his son Naunehal Singh was killed in an accident. Rani Chand Kaur, Naunehal Singh's mother, took over and ruled Punjab from November 1840 to January 1841. She gave way to Maharaja Sher Singh, who was a brave and intelligent son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Sher Singh proved to be an able ruler and a good general. He was very fond of different games including wrestling and used to take his wrestlers outside the walled city of Lahore at the tomb of Qasim Khan. One of the wrestlers was Sultan Muhammad, famous contractor of the British Government. Near the tomb of Qasim Khan, Jamadar Khushal Singh built a *Haveli* that was later occupied by the British Governor General. Today the same place is the residence of Governor Punjab.²

Sher Singh was a great patron of art and famous painter Auguste Schoefft arrived and worked during his rule.³ Many more were associated to his *Darbar*. He had a keen eye for painting and we see Sikh Style Lahori paintings executed under

his rule. Even after his death, regardless of political turmoil, Sikh rulers patronized fine arts as late as Dalip Singh's era.

First fifty years of the said century celebrated a style that had acquired a distinctive characteristic of its own in the past centuries. This style continued till 1860s before it changed under the British government. The artefacts produced in those days had a true spirit of oriental arts with a special flavour of Lahore in them. British influence was yet to come and we experience pure taste of fine arts of the Subcontinent.

Many types of paintings were executed but the most important were miniature paintings, book illustrations, frescoes and ivories. They can be categorized in following subjects: portraits, court scenes, equestrian figures, religious themes and domestic scenes. Most of the art produced was based on the portraits of Sikh rulers and courtiers because they were the main patrons and liked to have their likenesses painted.

We have references of innumerable painters working. Hukama Singh, Muhammad Bakhsh, Jivan Ram, Abdullah Painter, Muhammad Azeem, Mian Noor Muhammad, Kishen Singh, Bishan Singh, Lal Singh, Hira Singh, Habib Ullah, Qazi Lutfullah and many more. They were all painters of high merit.⁴

A very important name in the list is Keher Singh. He was a man of great talent. K. C. Aryan wrote a very interesting story associated to Keher Singh of how he painted the picture of a dead sparrow and "coaxed a sweeper of Lahore court to place it on the throne of Ranjit Singh. The trick worked and Keher Singh was hired as a court painter."⁵

Darbar Maharaja Sher Singh

'*Darbar Maharaja Sher Singh*' is an important painting of Keher Singh.

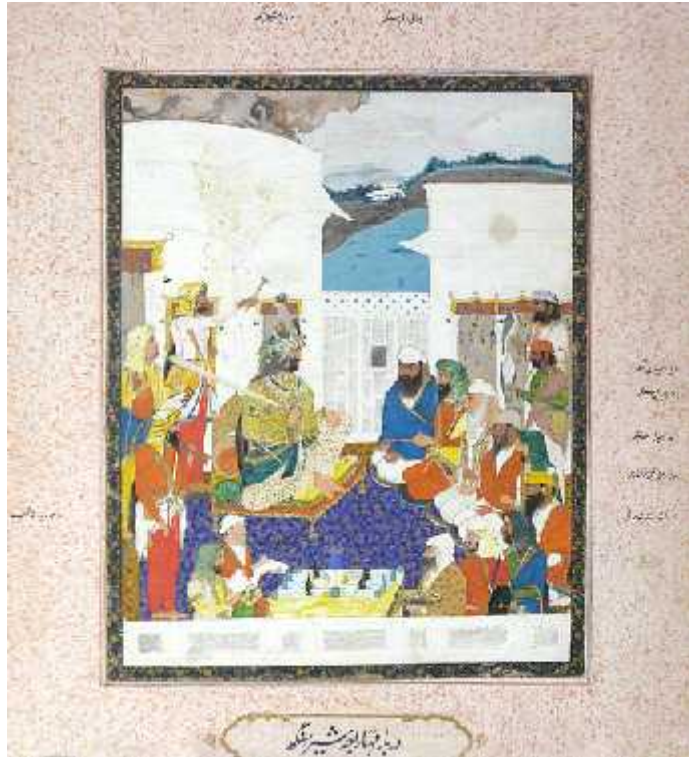


Fig. 1. 'Darbar Maharaja Sher Singh' by Keher Singh, 1842-46, Faqir Khana Museum, Lahore.

(Fig. 1) Sher Singh was born in 1807 but Ranjit Singh refused to acknowledge him as his son. Later, at the insistence of his wife Mehtab Kaur and her mother Sada Kaur, he accepted him.⁶ After the death of Naunehal Singh, Sher Singh was enthroned in 1841, defeating the party of Chand Kaur, wife of Kharak Singh. As Sher Singh came to power he confiscated the property of Sindhianwala Sardars who had helped Chand Kaur. This made Sindhianwala Sardars his mortal enemies. Sher Singh was killed in 1843 by Ajit Singh Sindhianwala.⁷

In the present painting, Maharaja Sher Singh is sitting in the middle and in front of him are the courtiers of the Sikh *Darbar* including Bhai Ram Singh, Raja Dhian Singh, Wah Mian Singh, Sardar Itar Singh Kalianwala, Raja Hira Singh and Sardar Budh Singh Sindhianwala, Lehna Singh Sindhianwala and Ajeet Singh Sindhianwala. Most of the names are written on the margin of the painting. Behind these courtiers are two servants standing, holding falcons in their hands. At the back of the Maharaja are three men who are servants and guards. The Maharaja is heavily jewelled with a decorated crown. There is a sword resting on his shoulder. The courtiers are looking at him with an intent look in their eyes.

The location of the painting is *Naulakha* pavilion inside Shish Mahal, Lahore Fort. River Ravi can be seen outside the fort wall. The arches of Kamran's *Baradari*, minarets of Jahangir's tomb and a faint outline of the dome of Asif Jah's

tomb are visible in the distance. Dark clouds can be seen on the top of *Naulakha* pavilion where Sher Singh is sitting and if we look at the clouds very closely, we can see five tiny angels throwing petals on the Maharaja.

This painting was painted after Sher Singh was murdered and these were the troubled times of Sikh rule and Lahore *Darbar* was full of intrigues and treacheries. The courtiers were divided in many groups and every group was bloodthirsty for the other. Since the artist is a product of society, he cannot detach himself from his surroundings. This rule applies on this painting where we see the cunning faces of some of Sher Singh's courtiers who were plotting his murder at that very moment. Each and every figure has been carefully observed and painted. Study of the faces of the characters painted reveals some interesting facts. Three people sitting in front of Sher Singh, were not involved in the conspiracy of his murder and they were Bhai Ram Singh, Wah Mian Singh and Itar Singh. They are looking at the Maharaja quite innocently but the rest who were involved in Maharaja's murder have a very intense look in their eyes. The artist has not only observed but also recorded this phenomenon very carefully by making the eyes of all the traitors wider than usual and showing the white in them.

At the front is Dina Nath, holding a pen and paper. There are many utensils lying and it looks as if he is making entries of these objects. An interesting character to notice is a painter sitting beside Dina Nath, working on an incomplete painting of an equestrian figure. The face that we see is that of Keher Singh, the painter himself. We can identify him by the features that are the same, which can be seen in his self-portrait published by K. C. Aryan titled 'Keher Singh at Work'.

This painting is also a testimony that it was some special occasion when Sher Singh is receiving gifts and a list of the objects is being prepared. To record the whole event, court painter was asked to paint it, which is evidence to the fact that the artists were allowed to sit in the court to portray the royal personalities and events. An interesting point to notice is a painting on Keher Singh's knee that reveals an incomplete image of Maharaja Sher Singh on a horseback.

Maharaja Sher Singh on a Horseback



Fig. 2. 'Maharaja Sher Singh on a Horseback' by Keher Singh, 1842-46, Faqir Khana Museum, Lahore.

This is the completed version of the painting that could be seen in 'Darbar Sher Sing' (Fig. 2) that shows a majestic and powerful horse with a rider on its back. The Maharaja is wearing a helmet, embellished with jewels and a plume, holding a spear in his hand that is going diagonally across the picture frame. He is wearing a European style tunic that is a direct influence of European officers in his court.

It has been implemented that the artist of the Subcontinent did not sit with the model but painted with the help of memory. But here in this painting, the artist Keher Singh is sitting in front of his model and painting him on the spot.

Bawa Lakh Ram

One museum that has never been associated to Keher Singh is the National Museum Karachi where one of his signed paintings, has been discovered. It is titled 'Bawa Lakh Ram'.



Fig. 3. 'Bawa Lekh Ram' by Keher Singh, 1830-40, Karachi Museum.

(Fig. 3) On the lower side of the painting, inscription says '*Baqalam Banda Keher Singh Musawwir*' i.e. 'From the Pen of Humble Keher Singh Painter'.

The dominating figure in the middle is a *Bawa*, sitting near a burnt tree trunk, with a *Huqqah* (smoking pipe) and smoke is coming out of his lips. He has a dark complexion with long white hair and beard. His head is covered with ash and there is a vermilion *Tilak* on his forehead. His naked body is draped with a wrap that has beautifully colored design. He is a huge tall person as compared to the people around him. Two women are serving him. The features and the dresses of the women are of nomadic origin. Respect and fear are prominent on their naïve faces.

A man in the back is sitting on a tiger skin. His upper body is also covered with tiger skin and a red string is used as loincloth. He is holding some very colourful pieces of clothes and among them one can observe a small grotesque face painted in blue colour. This is a strange element. It seems that the painting has some kind of symbolic value.

Although detailed accounts of a few other ascetics, who belonged to Ranjit Singh's era, are published in different books⁸, but Lakh Ram is not one of them. Initially no reference was found but intense research revealed that a *Mahant* named Lakh Ram lived during Ranjit Singh's time. He was mentioned in the

memoirs written by Faqir Sayyad Qamar ul Din who was the son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's right hand man, Faqir Sayyad Noor ul Din. These memoirs have a very interesting narration about *Bawa Lakh Ram*. Faqir Qamar ul Din narrates, "During the Sikh era, *Mahants* were very well respected and people provided them with the finest food. As a result they would become very fat and extremely lazy. One such example is Lakh Ram who could not travel on anything but an elephant due to his extraordinary weight. One day this *Mahant* came to visit Faqir Sayyad Noor ul Din. He used the high platform of the house to get down from the elephant with the assistance of three or four men and even this small exercise tired him so much that it took a while before he could catch his breath.

When Lakh Ram could talk, Malik Saif ul Din who was teaching the children of Faqir family, asked the *Mahant*, "*Mahant Gi* please tell me how much you eat?" First the *Mahant* complained about the weakness of his stomach. Then he said very sadly, "Early morning I can only eat two big *Koondas* (big containers) of curd with five *Ser* (almost 5 kilos) of *Khand* (sugar). Since I cannot digest *Roti* (bread) so I survive barely by drinking *Yakhni* (stock) of two goats. But in the evening I have some craving for sweets and six *Ser Mithai* (almost 6 kilos sweets) is all I can eat." He felt sorry for himself that he could not drink milk late at night because of lack of appetite. At that time Faqir Sayyad Noor ul Din heard about Lakh Ram's arrival and came to see him. Gave the *Mahant* five hundred rupees as he was leaving and all the men around him had to go through the ordeal of mounting the 'one elephant on the other one'.⁹

The style of this painting is quite different from Keher Singh's other paintings. From some angles it looks like a caricature of the main person, which supports the humorous description of the *Mahant* by Faqir Sayyad Qamar ul Din.

A Man with a *Huqqah* and Dancing Girl

(The Amazons of Ranjit Singh)

An interesting aspect of Sikh *Darbar* was the Amazons of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, which consisted of one hundred and twenty five very young and beautiful dancing girls. The maximum age for these girls was twenty-five and after that they were bestowed to some important courtiers. To maintain their numbers new girls were brought from the cities of Punjab and Kashmir. They are mentioned in many books. W. G. Osborne also encountered these lovely warriors, "In the evening, a detachment of the Amazons arrived with music and fireworks".¹⁰ He gave another detail that they used to appear on horseback, mounted *en cavalier*, for the amusement of the Maharaja.¹¹

The attributes observed in this incomplete painting, are of the same girls, which is one of the rarest depiction of Ranjit Singh's Amazons. (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4. 'A Man with a *Huqqah* (smoking pipe) and Dancing Girl or The Amazons of Ranjit Singh' by an unknown artist, 1840-50, Lahore Museum.

They were trained to dance with shield and sword and here we can see a fragile looking girl trained by a huge man who is teaching her how to dance while carrying such heavy armour.¹² There is a smaller man who has two tambourines tied around his waist. Another musical instrument *Sitar*, is lying in front of them. The painting is devoid of any details and it merely depicts the three characters. Musarrat Hasan described this picture as “an unfinished water colour small picture which must have been the forerunner to the many small water colour finished paintings”.¹³

Faqir Waheed ul Din in his book *The Real Ranjit Sing*, gives details about these girls that at one time the *prima donna* of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Darbar was a singer known as Billo¹⁴ who also commanded the company of Amazons. There is also a description of their dress code by Faqir Waheed ul Din, “Their uniform was as follows: a lemon yellow *Banarsi* turban with a bejewelled crest; a dark green jumper over a blue satin gown, fastened with a gold belt; deep crimson skin tight pyjamas of *Gulbadan*; silk and a pair of golden shoes. As for jewellery, they wore a pair of gold earrings set with stones, a diamond nose stud, a pair of golden bracelets and a ruby ring on the middle finger.”¹⁵ These were colourful creatures of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's *Darbar* and this sketch/painting is a rare depiction of those girls.

Paintings with such details are another dimension of people's history told by the artists. They have their way of communication and these stories are told in such an effective manner that they reach out to the spectator even today

Notes and References

- ¹ Dr. Kanwal Khalid, Associate Professor, College of Art & Design, University of the Punjab, Lahore.
- ² Shuja ul Din, "Siasi Aur Saqafati Tareekh," *Naqoosh, Lahore Nama* (Lahore: Idara-i-Farogh-i-Urdu 1962), 119.
- ³ W. G. Archer, *Paintings of the Sikhs* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office 1966), 45.
- ⁴ Musarrat Hasan, *Painting in the Punjab Plains 1842-1945* (Lahore: Ferozsons Pvt. Limited 1998), 131.
- ⁵ K. C. Aryan, *Punjab Painting* (Patiala: Punjab University, 1975), 20.
- ⁶ F. S. Aijazuddin, *Pahari Paintings & Sikh Portraits in the Lahore Museum* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1977), 80.
- ⁷ Surwarcha Paul, *Sikh Miniatures in Chandigarh Museum* (A Hand List) (Chandigarh: 1985), 61.
- ⁸ W. G. Osborne, *Court and Camp of Ranjeet Singh* (London: 1840), 123-129.
- ⁹ Memoirs of Faqir Qamar ul Din, Faqir Khana Museum Archives.
- ¹⁰ Osborne, *Court And Camp of Ranjit Singh*, 95.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 96.
- ¹² In one of his interviews, Faqir Saif ul Din, curator/director of Faqir Khana Museum confirmed the identity of the dancing girl as one of the Amazon girls of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.
- ¹³ Hasan, *Painting in the Punjab Plains 1842-1945*, 66.
- ¹⁴ Faqir Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, (Karachi: Lion Art Press 1965), 177.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 178.