UNIT 14 : ART AND SCULPTURE

UNIT STRUCTURE

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14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will able to-

- discuss the growth of painting and sculpture in early Assam up to 12th century C.E.,
- trace the development of early painting in early Assam; Tai Ahom School, Sattriya School
- assess the different School of sculpture and their growth in early Assam.

14.2 INTRODUCTION

The traditional paintings of Assam serve as a source of inspiration to thousands of art lovers across the globe. Known for their unmatched quality and outstanding strokes of mastery, they have become an integral part of the rich Assamese culture and heritage. Tracing their origin to seventh century C.E., Assamese paintings and manuscripts are said to have been derived from the mythological tales, the most prominent among which are Chitra Bhagavata and Hastividyaranya. Most of these manuscripts have

been collected from different parts of the state and published in the form of books, along with the reproduction in the form of paintings. However, the illustrations in these manuscripts are a bit too refined to be categorized as folk paintings. In Assam, the art of painting developed around the culture of manuscript illustration in line and colour. There is historical reference to the art of painting in Assam in the Harsha Charita, with mention of gifts in the form of panels for painting on Agaru bark (Aquilaria Agalocha) along with brushes and colour pots, from the Assamese king Bhaskaravarman (seventh century CE) to Emperor Harsha. On the other hand, the earliest extant example of manuscript illustration in Assam is from the Phung Chin manuscript, dated 1473 CE and Suktanta Kyempong in Ahom language and script. These illustrations have been drawn in the Burmese style and have their origin in South East Asia and not in Assam.

Assam was prominent place for the sculptural activities in ancient time. Sculpture is closely related with the architecture where sculpture is used for decoration as well as religious significance. Temple plays a major role in the growth of the sculptural work. Three rulers namely Varman dynasty, Salastambha dynasty and Pala dynasty took responsibility to build temple architectures in ancient Assam in the period between 4th century C.E. - 12th century C.E.. But most of the temples are in ruin condition now. Numerous ancient temple sites display the Buddhistic sculptures along with the Brahmanical images. Ancient sculptures of Assam were usually influenced by Hinduism, but the sculptures reflect sometimes the influence of Buddhism, though Buddhism was not practiced as a major religion in ancient Assam. Buddha images are found in the depictions as single and sometimes found attaching with some other figures. Many references can be found from the historical sources that Buddhism connected with ancient Assam. The Mauryan emperor Ashoka was considered as first major patron of Buddhist art in India. In Buddhist art, different phases of art development can be noticed. During Hinayana Buddhism of before 1st century C.E., Buddha was never represented in human form. The presence of Buddha was shown symbolically like a throne, an umbrella, a riderless horse, footprint, Bodhi tree, wheel, stupa etc. During the second phase of Buddhism

which was Mahayana Buddhism, Buddha was represented in human form. Archaeological evidences indicate that Buddhist art of Assam was started from Hinayana phase. Besides these two main forms, there was other form called Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism which also influenced the ancient sculptures of Assam.

14.3 PAINTING IN EARLY ASSAM

Sachipat Manuscript



SOURCE: GOOGLE

The earliest evidence of paintings can be found in the gifts of colours and otherpainting tools given by Kamarupa King Bhaskaravarman to his ally Harshavardhana,as mentioned in the Harsacarita. 'Carved boxes of panels for painting with brushes andgourds' and gold-painted cages were among the gifts. Aside from these, there were afew tinted manuscripts and volumes of aloe bark-based fine writing leaves in pink hues. The kings' portraits adorn the palace walls of his tributary rulers, according toBhaskaravarman's Niddhanpur grant. Similarly, as mentioned in the king's Uttarbilcopperplate, Balavarman's palace is said to contain pictures. The elephant motifs onthe copperplate grants of the Varman dynasty and the Da-Parbatiya sculptures shedlight on the nature of painting in Assam in the distant past. With the spread of the Neo-Vaishnava movement in mediaeval times, the art of painting reached its apogee. Sri Sankardeva is also said to have painted seven vaikunthas (heaven) on tulapat (localpaper).It's worth

noting that there was a professional class of painters known as “patuas” whohad their own distinct style of painting. In Assam’s old literature, the terms citrakara(painter), pata or citrapata (painting), and citra putala or putali (a figure in painting)reveal the common people’s familiarity with the art of painting. The Kamrupi dialectalso mentions the connection between paintings and the professional community ofsingers and dancers.In mediaeval Assam, manuscript writing popularised the art of painting. The paintingis heavily influenced by Assamese culture, but it also incorporates elements fromother Indian cultures. In these paintings, the local folk characteristics can be seen. TheHastirvidyarnava manuscripts incorporate Hindu and Mughal painting styles, aswell as native folk elements. Certain elements from terracotta and pith toys are alsothought to have been used in the manuscript paintings Assamese manuscripts are made of aloe-bark (sachipat) or hand-made paper from theregion (tulapat). Manuscripts on palm leaves (kona) are available. The manuscriptsinclude illustrations in a variety of categories that correspond to the text’s subjectmatter. Assamese manuscript paintings are examples of this “”Elite art,” “bourgeoisart,” and “court art” are all terms used to describe different types of art. Because oftheir sophistication, it is often difficult to classify the paintings as folk. The Citra Bhagavata (1539 C.E.), the Lava Kusara Yuddha, the Gita Govinda, Ananda-Lahari,and other manuscripts heavily influenced by the Buddhist Pala, Rajasthani, and Mughal School of painting include the Citra Bhagavata (1539 C.E.), the Lava KusaraYuddha, the Gita Govinda, Ananda-Lahari, and others. A few Assamese works, suchas Tirtha Kaumuda and Anadi- Patana, have a “non-elite” or “folk” feel to them makean impression.

According to Rajatananda Dasgupta, there are five different schools of manuscriptpainting. The Tai-Ahom School, Satriya School, Darrang School, Garhgaon School,and School akin to Garhgaon are among them.

14.4 TAI-AHOM SCHOOL

In terms of style and technique, the Tai-Ahom School of Painting has ties to Burmesetradition. As a result, the votive pedestal (guru asana),

the lion, and the peacock motifsof the Assamese Vaishnava decorative sculptures bear a resemblance to the Burmesetradition. The majority of the Tai manuscripts with illustrations and pictures are fromBuddhist Tai groups. The plight of the souls is depicted in these paintings. TheSuktanta Kyampong, the Phung Chin, and other important Tai-Ahom School paintingsinclude the Suktanta Kyampong, the Phung Chin, and others. Geometric or floraldesigns are frequently used along the borders or in the centre of a manuscript's folio,but they are rarely repeated. Such designs have been referred to as lata-kata.The paintings were prized dowry items. Shan painting was primarily a religious artform, so it was conservative. The earliest examples of manuscript illustrationbelonging to the Tai Ahom School of painting are the Phung Chin manuscript from1437 C.E. and the Suktanta Kyempong manuscripts. The Suktanta Kyempong is atreatise on The ravada Buddhism's Lokadharma. Tai Phake and Ahom are thelanguages and scripts, respectively. The manuscript illustrations, on the other hand, are hardly paintings, but rather finedrawings outlined in black and occasionally filled with colour. In the case of Mahaparinirvana, where the heart of Buddha is indicated by using kham, or, for thatmatter, Bodh Gaya in a traditional mandala showing the holy sites in Buddhism, themajority of the illustrations are of human or semi-divine beings, gold paint (kham) hasbeen used sparingly. The illustrations are not set against a backdrop of landscapes. Thepre-Shan Pagan style is reflected in the Ahom style of painting. This was most likelydue to the Shan kingdom's cultural exchange with Assam, during which the Shanswere influenced by Pagan elements and other forms of superior culture.The Khampti Buddhist priests continue the Shan style of painting. ThisSchool is significant because it is the only surviving Assamese painting school thathas continued the trend for six centuries.

In the Assam State Museum, a painted version of the Tai Ahom style of painting was discovered. It's a 1762 C.E. Bhagavat, Book III, on sacipat. Even though it absorbedsome characteristics from the Darrang School, it retains the majority of the Tai Ahom painting's characteristics. The Burmese style of manuscript writing and illustration was copied as a

result of the close ties between the Buddhists of Upper Assam and Upper Burma. The manuscripts were made from the sacipat bark of the agaru tree. Tulapat, a cotton sheet made by felting, was another material used for writing and painting. The peopleof Assam invented the process of making tulapat. Palm leaves were also used to write manuscripts, despite the fact that they were not grown in Assam. A pad was created bystitching manuscripts and scrolls on silk (pat and muga) cloth.

14.5 SATTRIYA STYLE

A page of manuscript painting from Assam. Sattriya style of Painting.



SOURCE: GOOGLE

With the influence of Bhakti movement of Sankardev starting onwards from 16th century another style was came into front as Satriya style. Sattriya style of painting has been developed and flourished in the Vaisnava monasteries in Assam. Satras or Vaishnavite monasteries of medieval Assam play a vital role in the shaping of society, religion and culture in the state. The Paintings were done by the Vaishnava monks in the Satras. Though the art of painting was initially advent by the Sankardeva with his scroll painting for the drama Chinayatra, where he illustrated seven Vaikuntha in 1468 A.D. at Bordowa. The art of painting practiced in the satra's with a distinct style, known as the Sattriya style of painting by scholars. The colors used in this style of painting are called Hengul and haital.The style introduces the local architectural design and clothing of the satra culture.

'Chitra Bhagwata' or 'The Bhagawata Book x is the earliest example of illustrated manuscripts of Sattriya style from Bali Satra of Nogoan. One of the earliest dated manuscript illustrations is Bhagavata-Purana, Book 6 dated 1678. It is a transcript of the book written by Sankaradeva.

14.6 SCULPTURE

Stone sculptures were discovered in large numbers in Pre-Ahom Assam. In early Assamese sculpture, we can see the influence of the Gupta classical idiom. A temple door frame in Da Parvatiya, Tezpur, is reminiscent of the Gupta style of art, which canal so be found in Bhumara, Deogarh, and Nachna Kuthara. The use of plastic activity in stone is revealed in this work.However, since the 7th century, the Gupta classical idiom has been fading, and nosculptures from this period have been found. The classical idiom, however, persistedin Eastern India, as evidenced by three images: a metal image of Buddha, a stoneimage of Chakrapurusha discovered in Aphsad (Bihar), and a metal image of Sarbani discovered in Chauddagram (Bangladesh). Tendencies for the development of regional religious schools of art, regional language, and literature began to emerge in the second half of the eighth century.

Due to its emergence during the Pala rule, the Eastern School of Art, also known asthe Pala School of Art, developed. In Assam, two sculpture trends emerged: one that was a hybrid of the Gupta classical idiom and the autochthonous, and the other that was entirely reliant on the autochthonous. The Eastern School had developed a distinct identity by the first half of the ninth century. This period could be attributed toVishnu's Dudhnai image. The rock-cut images of Vishnu and Siva at Suryapahar, aswell as two rock-cut images of Tirthankaras in a cave at Suryapahar, display this sophisticated 9th-century idiom. However, as a result of the various ethnic affiliations, Assamese plastic art revealed a certain amount of uniqueness. By the end of the 12thcentury, Assamese plastic art had reached its peak.

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14.7 SCHOOL OF PALA

Vishnu (10th–12th century CE) Ambari Site Museum



SOURCE: GOOGLE

The fusion of indigenous and Gupta idioms, which gave rise to a new idiom namedafter Kamarupa, can be seen in the earliest sculptures available in Assam. The PalaSchool of art was followed in the sculptures found between the 9th and 12th centuries.It's possible that some of the sculptures came from Bengal or Bihar (the main seat ofpower of the Palas and the Senas). The locally available stones, on the other hand,support the theory that the sculptures were created in Kamarupa by local artists trained in Pala styles. Kamarupa was familiar with the Pala-Sena style before the beginning of the 3th century, and the sculptures were a mix of the Pala-Sena style and localinfluences.Brahmanical culture flourished in Assam by the 17th century, creating a favourableenvironment for the production of sculptures with Brahmanical themes. Stone, metal,terracotta, and wood were used to create sculptures during the mediaeval period. Thearea is home to

a number of different types of sculpting stones. Ambari's sculpturesare made of granite and gneiss. The findings at Ambari suggest that sculptured objects were made well beyond the so-called "7th to 12th century" period.The Vishnu icon in Ambari hints at the unconventional art form that flourished inAssam after the 12th century. The icon stands erect in the samaspadasthanaka pose,his two lower hands holding lotus stalks and his one upper hand holding a disc (chakra) and a long mace (gada). The deity's posture is unrhythmic. The two smaller female figures flanking the male deity are depicted in tribhanga posture. The figures are placed on a plain pedestal, with the figure of Garuda carved in the middle of thefront portion of the pedestal. Behind the pedestal, a stela can be seen rising. All of thefigures, including Garuda's, are angular and rigid in appearance.The sculpture was originally from the Pala-Sena School, but it had been ruined and had deviated from the original Pala style, as evidenced by the lack of precision in the ornaments and the stela's lack of decoration. This type of deviated Pala idiom persisted from antiquity to the middle Ages. Mariani and Singari's two female figures,as well as Tezpur and Silbari's structured panels, are examples of this deviated form of art. The discovery of icons of Indra and Karttika dating from the 13th to 14th centuries C.E. in Malinithan (Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh) suggests that the deviatedidiom spread beyond the region's borders.

14.8 SCHOOL OF KAMARUPA



Sculpture of Kamakhya Temple

SOURCE: GOOGLE

The Gupta and the “deviated Pala” idioms were brought together in the Kamarupa style. The Gupta idiom influenced the ancient Kamarupa School; while the Pala idiom influenced the “deviated style” The nymph on the architectural sections of Numaligarh combines elements of both styles (Gupta and Pala). The figures, for example, have an oval face with open eyes and thick lips, with the lower portion of the face turned out,resulting in an odd smile. The oval face is a hallmark of the Kamarupa style, while theway the lotus stalk is held reveals the influence of the “deviated” idiom. The emergence of a new phase, known as the early Medieval Kamarupa style, was marked by the amalgamation of these two Schools of art (Gupta and Pala).A few inscriptions, sculptures, and sculptured panels discovered in Numaligarh (nearKamargaon) have a distinct feature marked by its rigid appearance. The sculptures inthe Kamakhya shrine, as well as those at Pingalesvara, Khamtighat, and Sukresvara,share similar characteristics. These figures’ bodies are characterized by broad shoulders and stump-like legs. Female figures in the sculptures found at the Kamakhya shrine, however, appear to be more agile.

The Ahoms were ardent supporters of architectural and sculptural endeavours, so the sculptures’ styles evolved. The rock cut figures discovered near the river Dihing are among the first stone sculptures from this period. The human figures have broad shoulders and a squarish face, with eyes that are half open at times and open at other times. It has a flat nose and thick lips, and the majority of the figures are dressed in regional garb. However, the Mughal influence can be seen in the clothing of the figures in the Phulabari sculptures. The figures’ facial details indicate a visual impact of the local population and, on occasion, outsiders. There are differences in sculptures from different areas and themes (secular or religious), and even sculptures from the same age and place can differ significantly. We can see the differences between two panels of sculpture, one depicting Parvatiseated on Shiva’s bull (Nandi) and the other depicting a seated Vishnu. The icons of Parvati, who is seen seated under a foiled arch on the back of a walking Nandi in theprofile, lack angularity. The figure is bounded by almost gliding lines and captures theclassical

quality of Indian art. The angularity of Vishnu seated in padmasana pose, on the other hand, receives more attention. Mahisamardini from Sivasagar and Kali from Gaurisagar are both depicted in an angular style. Differences in artistic standards can also be seen in the sculptures of various shrines and locations. New artists were commissioned due to a scarcity of skilled artisans, resulting in the production of low-quality works. Quality products were produced, however, and it would be unfair to judge them by comparing them to works of art created by low-calibre artists. The figures of Rama, Sita, and Laksmana in Jai-daul, the icon of Parasurama from Tezpur, and the figure of a female deity from Gaurisagar, for example, were all of high quality.

Animal figures are also depicted in a variety of artistic styles. While bovine animalsnares of natural standard, animals such as lions appear monstrous due to the sculptors'familiarity. A horse, on the other hand, has a more dynamic and natural figure. TheAhom ruler, Rudra Singha, is depicted as an equestrian at the Jai Daul. The geese in asculptured panel at Phulbari appear to be alive. The mythical figures are also givenstrange appearances. Makara, a Varuna icon in Rangpur, for example, resembles an elephant-headed winged lion or a Chinese dragon. Floral works, like the geometricpatterns skillfully drawn on pillars and walls of buildings, appear stylized and soothing to the eyes (secular and religious).Aside from stone sculptures, the Tabaqat-i-Nasiri mentions that ancient Kamarupa had a strong tradition of bronze sculptures. It is a reference to a temple in Kamarud (Kamarupa) where gold and silver idols were deposited. Several metallic icons can be traced back to the mediaeval Kamarupa period. A bronze icon of Mahisamardini discovered in Hahara, Kamrup district, is one example. Standing in the alidha positionwith one foot on the severed buffalo and the other on the back of a lion, the figure isdepicted (or on the pedestal). In contrast to late mediaeval art, the lion has an unusual appearance. The Goddess, who has ten arms and three eyes, is wielding traditional weapons and piercing the demon with her trident. She wears a long garment,ornaments, and a turreted crown topped by a crescent, flanked on both sides by Ganesa on a rat (musika) and Karttikeya on a peacock

(mayura). The deity's body iswell-shaped, with broad shoulders, a slender waist, thick lips, and open eyes, andangular bends in the body. The characteristics of this image place it in Kamarupa sculpture's early mediaeval phase. Some stone icons have a folk element to them, and their treatment can be coarse and angular at times. The Hahara icon of Gaja-Laksmiand Surya is a good example. Surya is depicted in a bronze sculpture holding stalks of lotuses in two hands and sitting on a lotus with a long stem that emerges from the back of a horse standing in the middle of a row of seven horses. The seven horses are said to be the seven horses of Arjuna's chariot, which carries the Sun. A semi-circular rim with a pitcher appears behind the deity and his two attendants.Many metallic icons were instal late mediaeval period. Brassicons of Madanamohana (Goalpara and Kamrup districts), Vasudeva (Tezpur), and Visvanatha(Tezpur) are notable in this regard. On the orders of the king, a few of these iconswere installed. Rudra Singha had a gold statue of his mother erected in Rangpur, aswell as a silver image of Umananda in the Umananda temple (Guwahati).The icons of Mahisamardini (Tinsukia) and Vishnu are two metal sculptures from thelate mediaeval period worth noting (Dibrugarh). The Goddess Mahisamardini image,which dates from the 17th to 18th centuries, is made of brass and has ten arms. She is seen wearing a turreted crown and diaphanous drapery in the name of ornamentation. She is pictured standing in the pratyalidha pose, with one foot on the demon and theother on the lion. The figures are all placed on the same pedestal. The demon's agony and terror are well conveyed, and the lion's depiction is fairly standard. The demon'scrap and attire appear to be similar to costumes popular in areas known to have beeninfluenced by the Mughals.

Clay was yet another medium for expressing one's creativity. Pottery, bricks, andterracotta plaques were all made with clay. The latter was made to adorn shrines,monasteries, and other structures. The Ghanashyam daul in Jaisagar and Na-Math nearthe Kamakhya temple in Guwahati are two examples. In mediaeval Assam, terracottaplaques were used to replace carved wooden panels and pillars. The terracottaplaques depicted not only icons, but also scenes from life and

nature, such as theBaghapara terracotta plaques, which depict a row of geese or a group of dancers. Thefigures have broad chests, bulging eyes, and unattractive faces carved in low relief. The postures and actions are also lifeless. They could be Assamese art with folkelements, or they could be the result of an age-old practice. According to the data,royal patronage was granted for the creation of clay items. Pratap Singha is said tohave dispatched someone to Koch Behar to learn the intricacies of earthen imagemaking. Human figures made of clay were used in rituals, plays, and toys made ofclay, and they catered to the needs of people from all walks of life.The terracotta figures are particularly noteworthy among the sculptures found in Assam. The oldest specimen has been discovered at the Da-Parbatiya site. Pre-Ahomterracotta sculptures, including divinity figures, can also be found at Goalpara. The terracotta plaques can also be found on the walls of several mediaeval Sibsagar temples and structures. The Ambari Urvasi (female figure) in Ambari, Guwahati, is anexcellent example of terracotta sculpture.The two most popular and widely available art mediums are wood and bamboo. It was used to make architectural pieces (doors and pillars) as well as utilitarian objects(utensils, furniture etc.).Wood was known to have been used for sculptural art in both ancient and mediaeval Assam. In this regard, Bhaskaravarman of Kamarupa (first half of the 7th century) sent Harshavardhana numerous gifts, including “carved boxes with panels”Vanamala’s Tezpur plate instruction mentions boats “embellished with differentornaments” which most likely refers to the beautiful carvings on the wooden vessels.As the Harihara image from Deopani shows, images were also prepared in wood (9thcentur



14.9 LET US SUM UP

The Ahoms when coming from Upper Burma to Upper Assam, bring with them their cultural heritage and skill. Phung Chin manuscript illustrated in Ahom language dated to 1473 A.D, it is considered among the earliest extant manuscript illustrations of Assam now preserved at, DHAS

(Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati). Suktanta Kympong is another illustrated manuscript in Ahom script dated to around 1523 A.D. Both manuscripts were made on handmade paper (Tula-pat). In both manuscripts the depiction of the Buddha image is common. Some other Tai-Ahom manuscripts are: Phe-Ban (Omen & Divination), Kukura-Theng (Chicken bone Divination), Phura-long (Jataka Story), etc. These individual manuscripts contain some figurative line drawings and sketches which are may not truly be considered under the category of painting.The Sattriya style of Assamese scroll painting finds its origins within the Vaishnavite monasteries of Assam. This distinctive style was developed and nurtured in these monasteries, strongly influenced by the Bhakti movement initiated by Sankardev from the 16th century onwards. These monastic institutions, known as Satras, played a pivotal role in shaping the societal, religious, and cultural landscape of medieval Assam.

In general, the history of sculpture in Assam can be divided into two phases. The first phase is the pre-Ahom period and the second is the Ahom period. The sculptures of the pre-Ahom era were mainly created during the reign of the Varman, Salastambha and Pala dynasties. The examples of the Ahom sculpture era can be found at Kamalabari Satra (copper door). The mark of difference is distinct among the images of ten incarnations or the Dasha Avatar curved on the door. Terracotta, as well as metallic art forms, was also developed during the Ahom era.

The art and sculpture of Assam followed its own path of development with a distinctive style till the nineteenth century. Gradually, the western influence touched all the corners of Assamese society and civilization.



14.10 FURTHER READING

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14.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very short Questions (Answer each question in about 50 words)

Q 1: What is manuscript painting?

Q 2: Name the dynasty of ancient Assam who patronized the temple architecture?

Q 3: What are the names of the two Manuscript painting in Assam?

Q 4: Define the Tai Ahom style of Paintings.

Q 5: Name the two schools of sculptures that were developed in Assam.

B) Long Questions(Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q 1: Discuss different schools of sculptures of early Assam.

Q 2: Write a note on the development of painting culture during the Tai-Ahom period.

Q 3: What do you understand by the term Sattriya style of painting? Discuss.

Q 4: Which is the oldest sculpture of Assam? Explain.

Q 5: Write a short note on Sculptures of Assam.

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