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Drawing and Painting: Reinterpretation of Far Eastern Miniatures

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DRAWING AND PAINTING:
REINTERPRETATION OF FAR EASTERN MINIATURES

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Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to draw from the technical, philosophical, and aesthetic principles of Persian and Indian Miniatures in developing a style of painting using unmodeled, two dimensional shapes. The specific areas drawn from shall be revealed and the reason for these particular choices shall be expounded. The text shall be accompanied by work resulting from this study.
Because of a concern with the element of design as applied to painting ....
Because of a concern with the element of design as applied to painting, I have chosen to make a study of Far Eastern Miniatures in hopes of discovering how this so necessary element has been effectively handled in the past. In studying the techniques of the ancients, it is hoped that the principles employed by them might be reinterpreted and applied to a method of painting appropriate to contemporary trends.

The miniature paintings of India, Turkey and Iran were originally conceived to serve in a supportive capacity. Much like their counterparts in Medieval Europe, their principal purpose was to illustrate some text, often of a mythological, historical or religious nature. It is because of this that calligraphy so often appeared as an integral part of the composition. How these small paintings were made to relate to the printed page has determined the direction of their development. In later years, artists realized that the Miniature might be a beautiful object in itself, without benefit of a text. Yet, that high regard for design and continuity of form which has characterized its appeal was never altered.

1.
Basic to their effectiveness as paintings is the fact that all subject matter is subordinated to the design of the whole. The element of depth, in three dimensional form as well as linear and aerial perspective has been distorted and often completely reversed in the interest of establishing an order, a harmonious composition of lines, planes, and shapes, which move across the surface rather than back into the painting. In the case of the Persians especially, naturalism is foregone in the interest of good design. Figures, animal forms, natural objects and such, are represented with an eye not to how they necessarily appear in nature, but how they might best be placed to suit the overall design.

Because a feeling for design is universal and spans all periods and cultures, I feel that an exploration of its principles might be particularly timely, as this is an area which has been somewhat neglected in painting during the past decade or so.

Keeping this consideration in mind of the design taking precedence, I have commenced by selecting an abstract form, itself of well considered proportions. By placing this one shape on the canvas, two elements of design are thus created: the shape itself, and the area against which it has been placed. Unlike conventional two dimensional design which is conceived by many to be
The element of depth ... has been distorted, and often completely reversed ....
not to how they necessarily appear in nature but how they might best be placed to suit the overall design.
the placing of flat shapes on a given surface, I believe that the background does not exist as such, but becomes a form in itself. Therefore, the first problem is not where to place the first shape, but rather, how to break up the area of the canvas into two parts, each having aesthetic value. Since these areas border one another, a change of one constitutes a change of the other. So the problem immediately becomes twofold. What is achieved then, is not a pattern consisting of one shape on a background, but a design of two forms, each being of independent aesthetic appeal yet so integrated as to be inseparable. The problem gains in complexity when one realizes that the addition of each new form constitutes a taking away from an area which already exists, as opposed to merely placing a new shape in relation to the others. Each new element then, is not just added to the existing pattern but in a sense, is woven into it.

Depth of form and of space, so important to western artists, was by the Oriental, sacrificed in the interest of clarity. The sensitivity of arrangement which is so admired in the Miniature could only be arrived at by reducing volumes to flat two dimensional shapes. I, too, feel that flatness is essential to the enjoyment of forms for the sake of forms. Highlight and shadow, as used to define volume is not only
... the background does not exist as such, but becomes a form in itself.
... the addition of each new form constitutes a taking away from an area which already exists.
... flatness is essential to the enjoyment of forms for the sake of forms.
unnecessary but indeed a hindrance, as it may act as an unnecessary distraction. Rather than by modeling edges, the blending of one shape into another can be achieved by continuity of, and subtle variation in form. In this way, the eye is led freely and easily. To further insure this flow of movement, any feeling of space beyond the picture plane is obliterated completely. All action then, takes place across the surface of the canvas.

Employed also, is the method favored by the Persians of cutting the painting off at arbitrary margins, giving the viewer the feeling that he is almost looking through a window. The painting, that is, seems to be executed without any outer limitations but that an expandable frame has been placed over it and moved back and forth until it encompasses that area with the best possible balance, harmony and composition. The feeling one gets is that the unwanted area has been cropped off, much like photograph editing. This, of course, was not done by the Persian artists. But it illustrates the point that the action in many of these Miniatures seems to continue on far beyond the margins of the page, and that what is pictured is but a part of some larger whole.

I have adopted this convention because I feel it is valid and worthy of reinterpretation. A painting, I
... the blending of one shape into another can be achieved by continuity of, and subtle variation in, form.
... the action seems to continue on, far beyond the margins ....
believe, is in a certain sense artificial. The physical object of a colored canvas is but a small representation of that order which does, or at least is able to, exist in space. Yet space exists irrespective of a mere painting. What a painting does is to cut out a small segment of this omnipresent space and by lines and forms et cetera, presents tangible evidence that order can exist there. Whether these humanly devised concepts are the true essence of that order, I would not venture to say. But, being devised by man, they are understood by man; and for this reason the order becomes a reality. What the artist does by means of a painting or drawing is to isolate a specific area of this space and says, "Concentrate on the order here, as I see it. Don't overwhelm yourself by trying to perceive nature's order all at once." I, by leaving loose ends free, so to speak, have tried to show that space and the order therein is infinite; but I have captured a portion of it, however small, to be observed, admired and appreciated.

There were then, technical problems to be dealt with. The main difficulty lied with finding a permanent medium that dried quickly and yet maintained a smooth, flat, opaque surface so as to avoid any texture or blending of edges. I finally had to settle on a few mediums, each possessing a few of the desired qualities.
... by lines and forms et cetera, presents tangible evidence that order can exist there.
I, by leaving loose ends free, ... have tried to show that space and the order therein is infinite ....
Gouache proved to be quite superior in flatness of finish and evenness of tone. But the resultant paintings must be glassed to protect their water-soluble surface. The problem of eliminating the need for glass was solved by using Casein paint; but this medium offered a somewhat limited palette and a less desirable grade of pigment. Still highly satisfying results were obtained with black acrylic paint which is permanent, fast drying and opaque. However, this permitted the use of black on white only, as the colored acrylics tend to be too transparent and, therefore, show brushstrokes. After a small amount of experimentation, it was found that the best ground for all of these media was a gessoed Masonite panel, sanded to a satiny smoothness with extra fine sandpaper.

In drawing, Wolff's Carbon Pencil and charcoal pencil proved to be the most desirable. The two were as flexible as graphite but did not produce graphite's characteristic gloss; and, though not as precise as pen and ink, offered a greater flexibility in tone.

In concluding, it should be pointed out that the style of manuscript illumination which has been treated here evolved not merely as the culmination of cultural conventions which originated obscurely and were handed down to succeeding generations; but was the result of a deliberate and painstaking effort on the part of the
Indian and Persian artist to break away from naturalism in favor of the conceptual,\(^7\) which allowed them a greater freedom and individuality of creation. There were, to be sure, traditional methods of representing rocks, water, trees, etc.,\(^8\) but what stands above all in the paintings of these ancient cultures is their carefully considered order and sensitive harmony of formal arrangement. It is this order and harmony which raises the Persian and Indian Miniature above mere pictorial illustration.

It is hoped that by reinstituting some of these principles, a style of drawing and painting might be developed which takes in the best of what the Persians have to offer. The rearrangement of natural form for artistic purposes; the studied composition; the meticulous attention to detail, are but a few of the qualities which might still be effectively applied to contemporary painting.
The rearrangement of natural forms for artistic purposes....
FOOTNOTES


5 Persian Painting, Treasures of Asia Series: Albert Skira Text by Basil Grey, Cleveland, Ohio, 1961.


7 Persian Painting, Treasures of Asia Series: Albert Skira Text by Basil Grey, Cleveland, Ohio, 1961.

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