"THROUGH THE MISTS OF TIME"

In search of the Stylistic origins of the Decorative arts and crafts of Kashmir: Period 1400-1900

INTRODUCTION:

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The growth and development of the arts reflects a cultivation and aesthetic sensitivity: There is a certain quality of timelessness which is amply demonstrated by their persistence over several centuries. Notwithstanding stylistic and cultural diversities the art traditions have displayed a remarkable continuity, the parallels in form and ornamentation demonstrates the durability of design as also the perfect synthesis. It is with this backdrop that we should view the value of the arts, their origins and affinities.

Kashmir's decorative art traditions have been largely determined by its strategic geographical situation and magnificent natural environment. Journeying back through the 'MISTS OF TIME', one can almost faintly visualize merchants, artisans, pilgrims and adventurers traversing the treacherous Karakorams, bringing with them expertise, knowledge and skills that have left a deep imprint on Kashmir's culture.

The Silk Roads played a significant role in the growth and development of the arts. one of the important feeder roads left the southern route at Yarkand, across the inhospitable Karakorams, to enter the 'Gates of Hindustan', Leh and Srinagar, before continuing the easy ride down to the markets of the Bombay Coast. The more frequented route was Kokand-Kashgar-Yarkand-Leh-Srinagar. This was preferred by the traders as the Kabul route was fraught with danger from marauding tribes. Kashmir was thus a very vital staging and refueling post for the caravans, and soon became an equally important trading centre. Into Kashmir came Pashm (wool) from the steppes of Central Asia, Felts from the Kirghiz nomads, Kirmiz (treasured by papier mache painters and rug weavers) from Armenia, gold Tillas from Bukbara and Kokand, Ruscian gold thread Atnuf, white lead from Kashgar, tea, silk, precious stones and much else besides.

The arts and crafts have historically transcended the parochial boundaries of civilizations. The decorative art traditions of Kashmir, in their recognizable form today, have uncommonly complex underlying sources, those which defy systematic classification. To

therefore identify and interpret these elements from affinities and parallels of design and usages is a major uphill task. Nonetheless it evokes interest and the search continues:

The historical backdrop to the arts and crafts

Kashmir has had a momentous history, of people who have since time immemorial struggled under successive invasions and who despite this have preserved a cultural identity.

In addition Kashmir has experienced several religious conversions. Buddhism was introduced in the 3rd century B.C., followed by the Brahmanical doctrines of Hinduism; the encounter with Islam was only in the fourteenth century, introduced by the Sufis (mystic saints) of Hamadan and Subzwar: (Persia).

Along the Buddhist trail there are astonishing cross currents of styles, and design elements. Buddhist Kashmir provided religious, intellectual and cultural inspiration to the adjoining regions of Tibet, Central Asia, and its furthest extension being Mongolia. That Kashmir had fine working traditions in the arts is evidenced from the discovery of a remarkable bronze Buddha ($8^{th}/9^{th}$ century Kashmir). In Tibet, now in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art: Along the Himalayas on the other hand (Ladakh & Sikkim) there are intrusions of styles Tibetan, Chinese and Central Asian, both *in* the sacred arts (Tanka and mural paintings) and ritualistic objects. Interestingly, the design of the "Cho-Kong" or butter lamp used at the altars reveals a strong generic relationship with Christian chalices. According to art historians this theory would not appear improbable as Central Asia had a considerable presence of Nestorian Christians, often referred to as merchant missionaries.

l. SLIDE: CHO-KONG (Butter lamp)

2. SLIDE: CONCH SHELL HAS DISTINCT CHINESE INFLUENCES IN ITS ORNAMENTATION:

Buddhism in Kashmir was replaced by Brahmanical Hinduism, and it was ruled by Hindu kings until A.D 1320. One of the most remarkable rulers was Lalitaditya Muktapida (A.D 724- 761) of the Karkota dynasty. He inducted a Turkish chief minister "Cankuna", and there *is* evidence that Central Asian missionaries and artisans had access to his court. Pursuing an expansionist policy he subdued the "Tukhars" and settled in "Tukharistan", which according to Sir Auriel stein was the region comprising "Badakshan" (now in Afghan territory) and the upper reaches of the Oxus:

That the stone building techniques were highly developed is evidenced from the magnificent sun temple at Martand as also the temple of Avantiswami, of which only the ruins remain, Sir Alexander Cunningham in his "Temples of Kashmir" (1848) remarked that the ruins of the Hindu temples are proof of the artistic excellence and taste of the builders.

The conversion of Kashmir to Islam resulted in an encounter between dissimilar cultures and artistic traditions. Islam had a sharply defined body of religious practice, as spelled out in the strict tenets of the Koran: pre-Islamic art on the other hand presents a corresponding plethora of images and a sensuous representation in stone and bronze.

Islam was introduced by the Sultans (1342-89). The Sufis (mystic saints) of Persia made their appearance with Sayid-Ali Hamadani seeking refuge in Kashmir with an entourage of 600 followers, to escape the ruthlessness of Timur: he settled down at the “Khangah Maula” on the bank of the river Jhelum, Srinagar. The mosque of Shah-i-Hamadan was built by Sultan Sikandar (1398-1413) which has an exquisite interior, executed by the lacquer painters. This startling interior has strong affinities with the architectural embellishment of the Mir Majali Dawla Madarsa at Kanibadam, Uzbekistan.

3. SLIDE Shah-i-Hamadan Mosque
4. SLIDE Interior
5. SLIDE Interior of the Madarsa at Kanibadam, Uzbekistan.

These affinities and cross currents of styles are a major factor in all phases of Kashmir's art traditions, one that corresponds with the borrowing and exchange of cultures along the Silk Roads:

The emergence and flowering of the art traditions came about in the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-abiden (1420- 70). Mirza Haidar Dughlat in his chronicle “Tariq-i-Rashidi” observed that. In Kashmir one meets with all the arts and crafts that are *in* most cities uncommon. In the whole of the “Mavur-u-Nahr” (the country beyond the river Oxus) these are nowhere to be met with while in Kashmir they are abundant". Zain-ul-abiden invited to his court skilled craftsmen and artisans from the ateliers of Samarqand and Bukhara. That these art traditions were introduced from these regions is not surprising as Timur's passion for conquest could only be matched by his patronage of the arts; according to Ruy Gonsalez de Clavijo, who visited Timur's court in 1403 "Samarqand is brimming over with skilled foreign captives. From Persia he carried back painters, calligraphers and architects, silk weavers and glass

blowers from Damascus and silver smiths from Turkey". The Timurids were essentially the most cultivated of nomads:

The high point for the classical art traditions corresponded with the establishment of Moghul rule by Emperor Akbar (1586). (The Moghuls also known as Mongols were the original inhabitants of the vast Central Asian steppes.). There was a discernable change in the arts, from the abstract and calligraphic ornamentation of the Sultans to a more obsessive fascination with botanical realism.

Akbar's particular fascination according to his court chronicler, Abul Fazl extended to the Kashmir shawl. He adopted the shawl as a shoulder mantle and designed the use of a Patka (sash), as also the Jama or double breasted coat worn by the courtiers. He introduced weavers from Andijzhan and Eastern Turkestan to Kashmir. Complex tapestry weaving was unknown in Kashmir at that time, but it was prevalent in Central Asian regions where saddle bags and Kilims were woven. These intrusions possibly explain the preponderance of central Asian styles and techniques in the art traditions of Kashmir.

There is no documentary evidence about the Kashmir Karkhanas (workshops). However from Akbar's Imperial Karkhanas at Delhi, his Tasvir Khana and Kitab Khana there is mention of Kashmiri calligraphers, one that has been singled out was Mohammed Hussayn-al-Kashmiri, whom Akbar honored witt1 the title of Zarin Qalam (golden pen). This reveals that the art of calligraphy was well developed at that time.

Calligraphed copies of the Qoran were bound in exquisite papier-mache covers known as Qalami-Kitabs. These books were treasured by the nobility of Central Asia who acquired them for their personal libraries. The Qalami-Kitabs found their way to Central Asia via Haj pilgrims travelling along the historic caravan trade routes.

The themes of “Gul-Hazara” (a thousand flowers) and 'Gul-e-Bul-Bul'are were popularly used in Kashmir, Persia and its neighboring regions. This homogeneity of design in lacquer is explained by trade and intercourse throughout the region. Interestingly the prevalence of “Qalamdans” (ornamented pen cases) in their style and ornamentation has its parallel sins surviving examples at Bukhara.

6. SLIDE Qalamdan Kashmir-18th century
7. SLIDE Qalamdan Bukhara
8. SLIDE Papier-Mache artists at work

The Silk Road from West Asia to China acted as a conduit for the trade of manufactured goods. Lacquer objects being both durable and light were a favored item of trade. It has not been conclusively established whether papier-mache was introduced to Kashmir from Persia or the Timurid ateliers of Smarqand and Bukhara. It would of great interest to study Kashmir lacquer in a wider context, the historical linkages of Asian lacquer ware.

Jehangir's (1605-25) approach to the arts was that of a connoisseur. He had a far more obsessive love of nature than his father Akbar. Under his patronage floral ornamentation was introduced in all the arts and he directed manuscript illustration away from the narrative representation in Akbar's reign to a more fanciful and aesthetic approach.

In Shah Jehan's reign the emphasis shifted to lavish textiles, carpets and sumptuous clothing. From surviving examples there is evidence of the most luxurious carpets attributed to Kashmir. The most notable achievements of the unknown craftsmen were the "Flowering Plant Rugs' and Prayer rugs (Ja-i-Namaz) of that period. An outstanding example is the rug at the Thyssen Bornemizza Collection (Lugano) and the Flowering Plant rug (Salting Bequest) at the Victoria and Albert Museum London. The flower was regarded a s the Moghul motif "par excellence", used in lavish textiles, architectural embellishment and in the decorative arts.

9. SLIDE Prayer Rug: (Lugano)
10. SLIDE Flowering Plant Rug: (V & A)

Aurangzeb's (1658-1707) reign was riddled with social and political upheavals. The governors of Kashmir changed more than twelve times and his bigoted attitudes brought him short term benefits. Altogether there is evidence of a certain lack of flair in the arts during Aurangzeb's reign.

The assassination of Nadir Shah in 1749 was followed by the rule of the Afghan, Ahmed Shah Abdali. He wrested Kashmir from the decadent Moghul rulers in 1753. The rule of the Afghan (1753-1819) has been described as tyrannical and oppressive. They imposed severe taxes on the peoples of Kashmir including the "Dag Tax" on shawls. In consequence the shawl weavers were reduced to abject poverty. Besides, it also took its toll on the magnificent arts, those that had received generous patronage from the Moghuls.

Afghan rule was displaced by Sikh rule (1819-1846). The influence of the Sikhs was a fascinating transitional period that brought about once again Hindu influences. Maharaja

Ranjit Singh's attitude to the arts is somewhat obscure, but during his reign Kashmir experienced bustling trade, merchants from the Orient and Europe arrived to seek their fortunes. The principal weaving associated with Sikh rule was the 'Tapestry ' shawl. They obliterated most of the artistic souvenirs of the Moghuls. The Dogra rule (1846-1947) is associated with the Jacquard loom and the Kani shawl industry. The magnificent Kashmir woven shawl (using the twill interlocked method) attracted traders in considerable numbers. George Forster, while visiting Kashmir, noticed the presence of merchants from as far off places as Georgia, Turkey, Persia and Tartary. With the advent of the Dogra rule French traders also arrived in large numbers.

The fabled Kashmir shawl was traded in major centers in Central Asia and Europe. On the North West routes, shawls that left Kabul for Bukhara were eventually traded by Khivan merchants by way of Orenburq and Astrakhan.

With the burgeoning demand for fine Kashmir shawls in central Asia and Russia, shawl designs were adapted for their specific Requirements. William Moorcraft left an exhaustive account of the different aspects of Kashmir's shawl industry. Amongst the designs mentioned are '"Tara Armeni" (for Armenia), Tara Rumi for Turkey and Feringhi for Russia. Amongst the other woolen goods for Central Asians were Takhin (cap), Moze-Pashmina (long stockings), Galaband (cravat) Khwan Posh (dish covers) bags and coverlets. It would therefore be of interest to document these from surviving examples in the Central Asian regions.

Amongst the classical embroideries one that deserves special mention is Chain stitching. It is an art skill of great antiquity. Embroidered textile fragments executed in chains stitch have been excavated from the Han tombs (206 B.C.-A.D. 220). Chain stitching has been employed in the depiction of the embroidered Buddha figures of the Tang dynasty craftsmen. Amongst Sir Auriol Stein's haul at Tun Huang there are two relevant chain stitched textiles. Sakyamuni preaching on the Vulture Peak (8th century A.D.) as also the 'Standing Buddha holding an Alms bowl (7th-8th Century). Stan Skoumal asserts that there were silk wall hangings rendered in chain stitching in the Buddhist monasteries in Kashmir (525 A.D.).

On the high cross roads of Asia there appears to be a point and counterpoint of cultural exchange in the decorative art skills; it is therefore somewhat difficult to localize this skill and its interrelationships with Chinese embroideries is demanding of further investigative research.

Language also provides a clue to the movement of goods along the great Trans-Asian highway. How and when the 'Tea urn' came to Kashmir is not quite known, but both in

Kashmir and some Central Asian Republics it is referred to as a Samovar. The ornamentation of Copperwares is essentially a Muslim tradition, as Hindus use only brass vessels. The copper wares of Kashmir share a close relations hip with corresponding metal wares of Central Asia. The Samovar, the Oftaba and Chilamchi (known as Oftaba and Dastshui in Central Asia) the Hammam and much else. The movement of portable objects through trade and pilgrimage, together with the mobility of craftsmen helps explain the wider parallels of style, ornamentation and usages of copper vessels throughout Asia. Differences in style that do exist are possibly a different handling of an identical element.

11. SLIDE Samovar Kashmir
12. SLIDE Aftaba and Chilamchi
13. SLIDE Oftaba (Ewer), Dastshui (Basin) 19th Century Kokand

Within the limited framework of this paper it has been attempted to identify some stylistic affinities and parallels of the decorative arts and crafts of Kashmir, against their historical backdrop. The role of the Silk Roads has been significant in the stylistic development of the arts, along the religious, cultural and political trails. The subject is vast, complex and somewhat puzzling, and it has merely been scratched on the surface. It illustrates that the common language of the arts holds together a common civilization, though the peoples are fragmented by the geographies that divide them.

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