

Book Review

***Deccani Scroll Paintings in the Jagdish and Kamla Mittal Museum of Indian Art.* Jagdish Mittal. Hyderabad: Jagdish and Kamla Mittal Museum of Indian Art, 2014. Pp. 218.**

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Jagdish Mittal's latest publication on the *Deccani Scroll Paintings in the Jagdish and Kamla Mittal Museum of Indian Art* presents unpublished material on the scroll paintings tradition of the Telangana region. The book offers an art historical introduction to the scrolls, a summary of the main legends narrated on these scrolls and a large set of illustrations from the author's personal collection.

Mittal is a well-known collector of Indian art and owns the most important private collection of scrolls from the Telangana region. He showcased these paintings to academic audiences in 1998, through an important article that was published in Jyotindra Jain's *Picture Showmen*. His most recent work offers a deeper insight from his personal collection, showing how these scrolls narrate the local caste's mythological stories. Although the book does not advance any particular argument, it does offer a more general overview of the subject. This enables the general reader to know more about this region's art practice and allows the scholar access to pictorial developments that have only recently been brought to light.

Jyotindra Jain, an expert in the field of Indian visual culture and especially folk paintings, writes the foreword and outlines the premise for the book. He situates this study within the contemporary academic discourse on visual folklore. He praises Mittal's ability to combine anthropological and art historical observations in his study, as well as his capacity to locate the scroll within a broader tradition of folk and classical paintings.

The book is divided into twelve sections. The first section explains the particularity of these scrolls. The two following ones relate to the performance practice and the protagonists concerned by the tradition, whereas the following seven focus on the paintings themselves: the organisation of the pictorial space, the techniques and formats, the artists, the iconography and style, and the importance of the earliest scroll. Finally, two sections trace the history of the practice based on the material presented in the book *i. e.* Mittal's own collection.

In his previous articles about the subject, the author tends to assimilate the Telangana scrolls to the Nayaka style of paintings, which itself would be a continuity of the Vijayanagara style. However, he never fully demonstrated the reasons for this assumption. This time, he goes further

and mentions pictorial similarities between both styles - such as the depiction of the eyes, the towering jewelled crown and the costume. In the footnotes, he also refers to Rama Raju's research on minstrels that may have been accompanying militias during the war in the medieval times. They would remain after the war and pass on their caste's stories. The section on performance brings original information about the practice that could not be found in previous writing. The author explains the process in which a scroll is commissioned. He specifies which Gods were worshipped, the time of the year for performance, the preparation and duration, the performers' attire and organisation, the payment, and the relationships between performers and painters. Perhaps he could have elaborated further on the interplay between the pictorial and oral narratives. He also mentions several details about the performer's life like the possibility of renting a scroll instead of commissioning a new one. The scroll holds a special position in the life of both painters and performers. The former produces it on demand of the performers and becomes a means of income without wider investment concentrated on the material. However for the performers, it is a visual reminder of the oral narrative they will deliver and hence a necessary tool for their profession as storytellers. It becomes both their major expense and income. These particularities open up movements of the scrolls amongst the performers. Another important feature of the book is the presence of three scrolls of the Markendeya Purana out of nine stories presented. Mittal explains that cotton weaving is associated with the Telangana region and it is conceivable that the wealth of this community in comparison to others made it possible to commission more scrolls over time.

In spite of its many merits, the book also contains some problems. The reader is not informed about the author's sources, whether it is the primary material that he owns or the interviews he conducted with the painters to reconstitute the stories. An explanatory note accompanies the images but this is too rarely done in sequence, which makes the identification of various episodes difficult. The writing itself contains a few mistakes, as well as some confusion and areas of uncertainty. For instance, the author talks about differences between the Telangana scrolls and "other Deccani types of painted scrolls" (Mittal 2014, 9), which implies the existence of other scrolls that he does not feature in the book. So far, no other scroll tradition has been observed in the region and the author may simply be referring to other types of paintings in general. The last and smallest section of the book is dedicated to *The Scrolls from 1840 to the Present i. e.* the contemporary practice of scroll paintings. His penchant for the paintings of the artist Venkatramaiah is clear and he mentions that from 1840 the "overall quality of work declined, retaining the traditionally fixed iconography" (19). Further mistakes in naming the current painter's family members emphasise his lack of interest in contemporary Telangana scroll paintings.

As rightly mentioned by Jyotindra Jain in the foreword, this book is the first work published on this subject alone and should “serve as the only reliable reference source for some time to come” (1). Overall, this book gathers together images of the scrolls and is useful for anyone interested in the Telangana scroll paintings. The structure is clear and divided into short sections that apparently cover the entire practice. Unfortunately, his overview on the tradition is too condensed and ends where the author’s collection ends. No material is presented after 1900 and only passing mentions are made of the last craftsmen still actively painting in the region. The involvement of the academic reader may be triggered by original visual material but left out of a critical discourse around it. The book clearly presents the specificity of these scrolls, which is to narrate local caste’s stories. For a broader understanding of the artistic and craft developments of the Telangana region, it is necessary to investigate further on this specificity. It also brings out cultural and political implications that question its survival and evolution in contemporary Indian society.