



# Indian Art Based on Hindu Shilpa Texts- Vishnu Dharmottara Purana

## (Academic Script)

Hello Everybody,

Today's episode is aimed at providing information on the topic of Fundamentals of Indian Art Based on Hindu Shilpa Texts-Vishnu Dharmottara Purana.

Most valuable materials on the classifications of paintings, painting materials, merits and demerits in painting as well as practical hints, which are very useful to painters, are dealt with in the Chitra sutra of the Vishnu Dharmottara Purana.

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Chitra sutra in the Vishnu Dharmottara is the earliest and standard text in India, on arts. Ashtadhyayi, Natya Shastra, Meghadut and Raghuvansha, Kama sutra, Kadambari, Daskumar Charit, Tilak Manjari, Katha Saritsagar, and Naishadh Charit are some of the literary works on the art of paintings. Shilpa Ratna by Shri Kumar of Travancore is a 16th Century treatise.

Shilpa Shastra is considered one of the earliest texts that talks about various arts and crafts that were practiced in India. Shilpa in Sanskrit translates as any art or craft that requires skills, and Shastra means science. Collectively, Shilpa Shastra means the science of Art and Craft. In ancient Sanskrit texts male and female artists and craftspersons were named as shilpin and shilpini, while Shilpani refers to works of arts of man.

*"Shilpani, works of art of man,  
imitate the divine forms,  
by employing their rhythms,*



*they metrically reconstitute,  
and interpret the limitless knowledge,  
of the sacred hymns,  
from the limits of being human”.*

— Aitareya Brahmana, Rig Veda, 6.5.27

Famous art historian Stella Kramrisch defines the meaning of Shilpa as complex. The term Shilpa according to her encompasses a numerous elements and process. It includes the skills, crafts, labor, ingenuity, rite and ritual, form and creation. These arts and crafts consist of sculpture, pottery, perfumery, wheel Wright, painting, weaving, architecture, dancing, music and much more. The descriptions about Shilpa can be found in various ancient texts that also include Purana, Agamas, and Vastu Shastra. However number of arts cannot be counted. Thirty two vidyas or knowledge and sixty four kalas or techniques were used in art making in ancient and medieval India.

The text of Vishnu Dharmottara Purana is like an information reservoir that covers an assortment of topics based on Hindu religious practices and artistic skills. This text narrate about the skills, which encompasses topics like cosmology, cosmogony, geography, astronomy, astrology, division of time, pacification of unfavorable planets and stars, genealogies (mostly of kings and sages), manners and customs, penances, duties of Vaishnavas, law and politics, war strategies, treatment of diseases of human beings and animals, cuisine, grammar, metrics, lexicography, metrics, rhetoric, dramaturgy, dance, vocal and instrumental music and arts.

The concept of image making is well treated in Chitra Sutra of Vishnu Dharmottara Purana that is divided into 118 Chapters called Adhyaya in Sanskrit. Vishnu Dharmottara Purana is divided into three parts or khands. The first khand is divided into 269 chapters, the second part consists of 183 chapters, the third chapter is divided into 118 Adhyayas that deals with the above mentioned arts and crafts skills and processes in detail.

Chapter I of the third khand deals with the derivation of image making and the interdependence of arts. Chapters 2-17 deal with grammar, lexicography, metrics and rhetoric. Chapters 18-19 deal with vocal and



instrumental music. Chapters 20-34 deal with dance and dramaturgy. Chapters 35-43 give an account of the various branches, methods and ideals of Indian painting. It deals not only with its religious aspect but also, and to a far greater extent, with its secular employment.

It "proclaims the joy that colors and forms and the representation of things seen and imagined produce".

Chapters 44-85 deal with Pratima lakshana (iconography). Chapters 86-93 deal with temple construction. Chapters 94-108 deal with avahana (induction of deities into images). Chapters 109-118 deal with rites and rituals. The chapters that deals with painting must have been compiled during the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, assumes Stella Kramrisch.

The myth about the origin of the Chitra is as follows:

*It was the sage Narayana who in order to confuse the heavenly damsels (who had come to tempt him) drew a beautiful woman on the ground with the juice of mango. Out of the picture was created the beautiful apsaras. She was Urvasi. (Urvasi is referred to as drawn on ground – urvyam). Looking at her the heavenly damsels were ashamed and went away. Thus was created the perfect Chitra by the great sage.*

Painting was not just an art form in the ancient India it was religion, a mode of worship, it was an ornament of the deity, and a preferred offering to the almighty. Painting is one of the earliest art forms of India, and painter was considered as a yogi who was lost always lost in his art. The Vishnu Dharmottara Purana offers a detailed definition of the presentation of an artist. An artist wore immaculate apparel, salute the holy ones, pronounce auspicious utterances, bow down to the deity, sit facing the east and start painting contemplating on the deity:

*"Hitrayoge viseshena svetavasa yatatmavan, brahmanan pujayitva tu svasti vachya pranamaya cha, pranmukho devatadhyayi citrakarma samacharet"*

### Vishnudharmottara Purana

Chitra sutra also states the instructions of how a painter should work. How he should start what are the rituals that has to be followed before starting a



work of art. We should keep in mind that a work of art was no less than doing a pooja. It was much like a religious activity an act of nobility.

He has to start work in the Chitra Nakshatra. Chitra (23.20 Virgo-6.40 Libra) is represented in the astrological cosmos as a single star. It conveys the idea of universal craftsmanship through its ruling deity Twashtar. The primary objective of Chitra is to surmount illusion and maya.

Known to the Vedic astrologers as the nakshatra of prosperity, Chitra stands for the 'big, bright, shining jewel'. Just as gemstones are created under extreme conditions of intense heat and pressure; the universe too needs to progress from its initial Big Bang which is emblemized by Chitra.

An artist, says Chitrasutra, should practise self discipline before starting his work. He should be wearing a pure white dress, pay respect to the Brahmins and get their blessings. Brahmins were a respected community in India. They administered religious rituals in temples, as intermediaries between temple deities and devotees. They performed rite of passage rituals such as solemnizing a wedding with hymns and prayers.

Then after paying respect to the Brahmins an artist should get the blessings of the teachers who are great masters in the art according to precedence, then facing the east and meditating on the deity, he should start his art i.e. painting.

The methods and norms were fixed and the artist had to abide by the rules and rituals of art making. The artist was a noble and pious human away from the greed and hunger of worldly desires. Art was an act of religious conscience and a dedication for the god. An artist was a learned soul who had to attain knowledge of various other forms of arts such as of vocal and instrumental music and dancing.

In an early verse of the third part, the Vishnu Dharmottara states that canons of painting would be better understood after the successive study of the disciplines of vocal music, instrumental music and dancing. The Chitra sutra in Dharmottara Purana comes, therefore, after the Nrtyasutra, i.e. the cannons of dancing.



Vatsayana in Kama sutra during the 6<sup>th</sup> Century has also described painting among sixty four kinds of arts that he based on scientific principles.

The Vishnu Dharmottara Purana has a section on paintings called Chitra sutra which describes the six organs on paintings named as Shadanga.

1) Rupabheda - Knowledge of appearances.

Rupabheda consists in the knowledge of special characteristics of things – natural or manmade; say, the differences in appearances among many types of men, women or natural objects or other subjects of the painting.

2) Pramanam - Correct perception, measure and structure.

3) Bhava - Action of feeling on forms

4) Lavanya Yoganam - Infusion of grace, artistic representation.

5) Sadrisyam – Similitude

Sadrishya aims to depict, in painting, those distinctions and resemblances.

6) Varnikabhanga - Artistic manner of using the brush and colors.

The Chitra sutra confer about how the persons and objects that we see in our day to day life, as also the nature that surrounds us could be depicted in art. It adopts a two-pronged approach. It instructs; while the representations of the objects and persons, as drawn on the canvas should bear a credible resemblance to their original, the artist, at the same time, should not restrict himself to just faithful reproduction of forms and appearances, but should try to go beyond “the phenomenal world of separated beings and objects that blind the reality beyond”.

It was not about how the world appears to one and all, but how the artist experiences and visualizes it. Its object is to bring out an emotional response, the viewer’s experience, or the rasa. The Chitra sutra educate the semblance should not only be general but should extend to details as well. The objects should contain details.

The illustration of objects as they are seen or observed normally in life, is termed as Drishta, meaning in the way the things appear or as they are visible. In contrast to that, the text speaks of Adrishta, meaning objects as visualized or personified by the artist, though they might not actually



appear as such. The combination of the two concepts of Drishta and Adrishta should be seen together in a composition. Both should together be employed to harmoniously blend the subject and its illustration; the subject and its effect; and the reality and its symbol, in order to provide the painting an expressive language.

The following example best illustrate this Amalgamation of Drishta and Adrishta. In this context, the text, by way of illustrations, specify the following suggestions for showing the subject –the hours of darkness:

*Evening – by the red glow in the sky, cows and calves retuning home raising a small clouds of dust, Brahmins engaged in their prayers;*

*Setting in of darkness – by men hurrying back to their homes, the birds flying back to their nest, lamps just beginning to glow;*

*The first part of the night – by young and eager love struck women walking hurriedly with side glances to meet their lovers;*

*The night – with moon , planets and stars, thieves lurking in the shadows, men fast asleep; couples amorously engaged;*

*Moon shine – by kumuda flowers (the type of lotus that bloom at night) in full bloom while many petals of lotus are closed;*

*Early dawn ending the darkness – by rising sun, street -lamps looking dim and crowing cocks.*

Chitra Sutra describes about the portrayal of human figures, the persons should be painted according to their country; their region, their colour, dress, and general appearances as observed. Artist should be well aware about person's country, region, occupation, age and his status in life; the text says that his other details such as his seat, bed, costume, conveyance, stance, and his gestures should also be drawn.

Chitra sutra also focuses on the characteristics of tribal people and people of different castes, this was presented by the skin color, and physical attributes, costumes and habits.



Vishnu Dharmottara Purana in Chitra Sutra mentions the characteristics of different seasons and makes it mandatory for the artist to depict it in his compositions of nature. The seasons should be shown with all its characteristics, the appearances of trees, the blooming of flowers, the fallout of leaves from trees and plants, the growing of fruits, the birds and animals etc.

The following lines acknowledge the characteristics of different seasons. It is amazing how genuine was the detailed observation; and how close was the author's involvement with nature. The text suggests showing the ways of depicting in the painting the six seasons (ritu) of the year.

Spring season (vasantha ritu) – by merry men and women, vernal trees in bloom, bees swarming about and cuckoos perched on tree branches.

Summer season (grishma ritu) – by dried pools, languid men, deer seeking tree shades and buffaloes burrowing in the mud and wallowing in shallow ponds;

Rainy season (varsha ritu) – by flashes of lightening, heavily laden clouds, lions and tigers sheltered in caves;

Autumn (sharad ritu) – by trees laden with fruits and flowers, earth covered with ripe cornfields, tanks full of water with swans and lotuses;

Dewy season (hemanta ritu) – by frost on horizon and earth covered by dewdrops; and

Winter season (shishira ritu) – by horizon shrouded in hoar-frost, shivering men and delighted crows and elephants.

Vasant (spring) is evoked here by the dancing nobleman playing the role of Krishna in celebration of the coming of spring, witnessed by the flowering plants in the foreground, the flowers in the nobleman's headdress, and the golden vessel with flowers balanced on his raised hand. The allusion to Krishna is secured by the nobleman's skirt of peacock feathers, which are closely associated with the playful god, and the circular grouping created by the female musicians accompanying him; together, they consciously recall Krishna's rāslīlā dance with the gopis.



Chitra sutra defines the types of surfaces where an artist perform his act of art making. From ancient times Indian painter worked on; the walls or called kudya or bhitti in Sanskrit, Panel called oatta or phalaka, Cloth or pata, Strips of cloth or dussa-pata, Well polished panel or suparimattha phalaka including other surfaces.

The preparation of ground was called Bhumi Bandhan. In the process of preparing the ground and then in fastening colors on that ground, the binding medium plays a very significant role in painting. The preparation done on the wall is called bhittisamakara. The preparation of loam clay is applied with the plaster on the wall to make a proper base. To make the loam a mixture of powdered brick, gum resin, bees wax, molasses, oil, burnt lime plaster, in definite proportions, pulp of bilva, bark or pinhchhila, sand and lime all to be soaked for a month in water.

The wall is then coated with this loam, the coat should neither be too thick nor too thin. This application of coat makes the wall surface meticulously even, smooth in its surface and leaves it glossy, it is further smoothened with clay liquid, juice of sarja (flower) and oil and rubbed by repeated sprinkling of milk, so that when it is dry it could last a century.

The painters in India used as main colors, white, black, blue, yellow and red by an admixture of which hundreds of colors were made. The 'Chitra sutra' classifies four types of colors:

- 1) Those which are faithful representations of nature.
- 2) Those which observe the true proportion but largely exaggerated the size.
- 3) Those which are particularly expressive of the plastic qualities and perspectives.
- 4) Those which are an admixture of the three colors.

Colors were created through minerals and vegetables available in nature. This description is mentioned in the following verses.



*“Rangadravyani kanakam rajatam tamram eva cha abhrakam rajavartam  
cha sinduram trapur eva cha, haritalam sudha laksha tatha hingulakam  
nripa, nilam cha manujasreshtha tathanye santyanekasah, dese dese  
mahaaja karyas te stambhanayutah, lohanam patravinyasam bhaved vapi  
rasakriya”*

Vishnudharmottara,

In every country, there are many such substances. They should be manufactured with an astringent (stambhanayutah). The irons or metals should be either thinned into leaves (patravinyasa) or they should be made liquid (rasakriya) (chemical treatment).

Kanakam - gold

Rajata – silver

Tamra – copper

Abgrakam – mica

Rajavarta - ultramarine or lapis lazuli

Sindhuram – red lead

Trapu – lead

Haritala – yellow orpiment

Sudha – lime

Laksa – lac

Hingulakam – vermilion

Nila – indigo

According to Vishnu Dharmottara Purana Primary colors are:

sveta – white

rakta – red

pita – yellow

krsna – black

harita – green

The process of drawing holds a special place in the Chitra sutra, as it describes the technical terms in detail.

A couple of verses of the Samarangana-sutradhara (a text on Vastu Shastra) throw light on the process to be followed while painting. The text refers to



'eight-limbs' (asta-angani) of painting. Coomaraswamy made a careful study of the verses of Samarangana Sutradhara, and according to his studies he asserts the eight stages covered in this text:

1. Vartika
2. Bhumibandha
3. Rekhakarma
4. Laksana
5. Karsakarm
6. Vartanakrama
7. Lekhakarana
8. dvikakarma

When it comes to the rules that are to be applied while creating a compositional drawing, Chitra sutra focuses on significance of personality of a person who is to be drawn. In composition the central figure is given weight and the other figures lead to the heightening of the essential emotions or fuller expression of the central figure for which alone the other figures existed.

Chitra sutra suggests the minimum visibility of lines in a painting. It is suggested that the picture must be graceful, free of crooked lines. The painter, who is proficient in drawing, should use the lines that are steady, constant and smooth. The female figure drawings generally depicted with ornamentation and jewellery.

*"rekham prasamsantyacharya vartanam apare jaguh, striyo bhushanam  
ichichanti varnadyam itare janah,"*

Vishnu Dharmottara Purana

The artist and the art critics appreciated the best effect in a picture captured by the minimum of lines composing the figure.

*"api laghu likhiteyam drisyate purnamurtih"*

The Chitra sutra gives the highest tribute to the painter who can paint with ease the rolling waves, darting flames, smoky streaks, fluttering banners and apasaras floating in the sky indicating the direction and movement of the wind.



*“Tarangagnisikhadhumam vaijayantyapsaradikam, vayugatya likhed yas tu vijneyas sa tu chitravit”.*

Vishnudharmottara

If an artist is capable of drawing a sleeping, dead or unconscious man and that could be well recognized by the viewer then he is considered as a great artist.

*“suptam cha chetanayuktam mritam chitanyavarjitam, nimnonnatavibhagam cha yah karoti sa chitravit”*

Vishnudharmottara

The Vishnu dharmottara lays down that, as in dance so in painting, there is to be a close observation and reproduction of the world around us in as charming a style as possible

*“yatha nritte tatha hitre trailokyanukritis smrita”.*

Vishnu Dharmottara Purana

In the canons of Indian art there are a definite and prescribed proportion of the limbs and their ratio to one another. The Indian artist paid more attention to ratio than to the actual standard of measurement of the different limbs.

The ratio being the same, the figures may be pigmy or colossal. A standard measurement, however, was in vogue. A man should be painted with a Beautiful face, nice waist, a gait like that of a swan and is strong, has arms like the kind of serpents i.e. sesa, moon-white complexion and eyes having the colour of honey.

It has also been stated that a woman be placed near her man so as to reach the shoulder of the man. The waist of the woman has to be made thinner by 2 angulas than that of a man and the hip should be made bigger by 4 angulas.

Characteristics of great men are described as;

The king should possess the physical characteristics of great men. Hands and feet of a chakravartin should be shown with jaala or web. Urn or tuft of



hair should be shown as an auspicious mark between their eyebrows. Three lines should be shown in the hands of kings. They should be charming red like the blood of hare and with a slender curve. The hair should be made thin, wavy, shiny, with natural glossiness and like the dark blue sapphire. Chitra sutra also discusses the forms of hair style, the types of eyes and various postures.

### **BARAHMASA SCHOOL**

Enthused by the vivid word-pictures portrayed in the Chitra sutra, a school of painting known as Barahmasa (meaning, the twelve-months), flourished during the later periods. It focused on the landscapes and moods and emotions of lovers. Its scenery exemplifies the landscape of the imagination, in Indian painting, along with the portrayal of amorous couples, also capturing the delights, the emotions and the enjoyment of the lovers in each of the six seasons. These magnificent paintings gained fame for their representations of the seasons and as metaphors for emotions, have inspired generations of artists, poets and lovers.

Thematically the school of Barahmasa revolves around the depiction of the passionate yearning of lovelorn hearts, the wrench of separation that each change of season stimulates. Each month bringing a special message to the beloved, every season a special reminder of the joys of love and longing. The nature participate and invokes the emotions and mirrors the lovers' or singer's experience of compassion and tenderness of love.

The transformations in nature, such as the gentle unfolding of a bud's petals; or melting of a winter night into dew-drops; or the dark dreadful clouds rending with their roar in the sky and the earth and frightening the lovely nayika into the arms of her beloved Nayaka and bursting forth into torrential rains – all become symbolic expressions of the seasons and the state of love of the ardent lovers. The Barahmasa depictions of poetry, music and painting, bind the two confronting worlds, the worlds of man and of nature into one thread.

These beautiful painting explains the moods and emotions that are linked to the seasons in India.



This is a typical Kangra painting which display the feel of rainy season also known as varsha ritu or bhado in Sanskrit. It shows the characteristics features of rain, it symbolizes monsoon season on Indian landscape. In the foreground two lovers sitting in the balcony of a house that has a beautiful garden. The couple is seen enjoying the company of each other. A flight of cranes looks enchanting against a background of dark clouds that indicates the monsoon season. A peacock dancing and jumps on to a window in the courtyard. To add more sentiments artist adds a sudden thunder and lightning that looks beautiful against a dark background.

To amuse the viewer lady love is seen frightened with thunder lightning, she invokes rasa as she clings to her lover in a delicate embrace at the same time she cannot take her eyes away from the spectacular and amazing drama of thunder and lightning being enacted in the skies.

The month of Chaitra (March-April) , in spring (vasanta ritu) is depicted by clear blue sky, water-filled streams and lakes, the bushes adorned with flowers just sprouting and singing birds perched on tree branches. The lady love, dressed in her best, is exhorting her lover to stay at home and enjoy with her the intoxicating delights of Chaitra.

The month of Agahana or Margashira, in Hemantha Ritu is known as pre-winter time. This painting shows a scene that consists of clear skies, the white swans voyaging from mountains due to cold weather and the lovers standing on the terrace overlooking the river with water-birds floating lazily and relaxing in the water. The days are neither cold nor warm; this weather is pleasant, a relaxing and comfortable weather for the lovers to enjoy the company of each other. The lovers are wrapped in light-warm clothing. Peace and tranquility flourish in nature. The lovers are saying to each other how fortunate we are to be alive and to be together in this lovely evening.

### **RAGAMALA SCHOOL**

The Ragamala school of painting is also based upon the cannons of Chitra Sutra, it applies the description provided in the text, such as the description of nature, men and women, birds and animals, flora and fauna, and all the seasons blended with the moods of Raga and Ragini. All these produced a



series of most enchanting pictures. Those paintings are a delightful combination of art, music, poetry and a studied, controlled sophistication.

The emotions created by ragas are attempted to bring in the paintings of Ragamala School. Ragamala literally means garland of Ragas. We should note that each raga is associated to particular color in Ragamala paintings. Each raga has its own individuality as they are represented with personified mood, the nature, hero and heroine or Nayak and Nayika.

It also elucidated the season and the time of day and night in which a particular raga is to be sung. The colors, substance and the mood of the Ragamala personified the overall Bhava and context of the Raga. It is a delightful amalgam of art, colour, poetry and music.

The painting of Todi Ragini is associated with Raga Malkaus, Todi Ragini is the wife of Raga malkaus (as described in detail in previous episode of theory of Bhava). A nayika is seen playing a Veena (a musical instrument) as she waits desperately for her lover. But he's been so long that she feels bored, distracted and a bit apprehensive. As she stops playing the Veena and paces restlessly, clutching a flower garland, the deer in the park surround her as if expecting her to continue playing the melody. She's growing hopeless, sad, and fears he might not keep his date this evening.

Chitra sutra mentions Unmilana as the final act of the painting. The importance of unmilana is given in the lines:

*"Sajiva iva drisyate, sasvasa iva yachchitram tachchitram subhalakshanam"*

Vishnudharmottara,

'that is an auspicious painting in which the figures appear to be alive and almost breathe and move'

Unmilana is considered the concluding step of an art work, that is achieved by infusing life into a painting. Unmilana is also called the "opening of the eyes" of the figure.

I hope that you liked this episode and found the information useful and helpful in your understanding of Vishnu Dharmottara Purana in relation to Fundamentals of Indian Art.