

Lesson at a Glance

- A lot of changes came in the world of **visual arts** during the British period in India.
- Colonial rule introduced many new art forms, styles, materials and techniques which were creatively adapted by Indian artists for local patrons and markets, in both elite and popular circles.
- A stream of European artists, who came to India from the 18th century, brought with them new styles and new conventions of painting. The pictures that they produced shaped Western perceptions of India.
- These artists introduced the idea of realising. This was based on careful observation and faithful depiction of scenes which they saw with their own eyes.
- The technique of oil painting, which was a new thing for the Indian artists, was also introduced. This type of painting enabled artists to produce images that looked real.
- The European artists chose varied subjects for their paintings but they never missed to emphasise the superiority of Britain—its culture and its people, its power.
- **Picturesque landscape painting** was a popular **imperial tradition**. This style of painting depicted India as a quaint land, to be explored by travelling British artists, its landscape was rugged and wild, seemingly untamed by human hands. Thomas Daniell and his nephew William Daniell painted within this tradition. They produced of the most evocative picturesque landscape of Britain's newly conquered regions in India.
- **Portrait painting** was another tradition of art in colonial India. The portraits were life size images that looked lifelike and real. The size of the paintings itself projected the importance of the patrons who commissioned these portraits.
- Portrait painting became famous. As a result many European portrait painters came to India in search of profitable commissions. The name of **Johann Zoffany** is worth-mentioning in this connection.

- The third category of imperial art is known as **history painting**. This tradition sought to dramatise and recreate various episodes of British imperial history.
- British victories in India provided a rich material for history painters in Britain. These paintings once again celebrated the British, their power, their victories, their supremacy.
- Imperial history paintings sought to create a public memory of imperial triumphs.
- Different courts had different trends. In Mysore, Tipu Sultan not only fought the British on the battlefield but also resisted the cultural traditions associated with them. He continued to encourage local traditions and had the walls of his palace at Seringapatam covered with rural paintings done by local artists.
- The court of Murshidabad had a different trend. Here, after defeating Sirajuddaulah the British had successfully installed their puppet Nawabs (Mir Zafar and Mir Qasim) on the throne. The court at Murshidabad encouraged local miniature artists to absorb the tastes and artistic styles of the British.
- As the British established their power in India, several local courts lost their influence and wealth. They could no longer support painters and pay them to paint for the court. As a result, many painters turned to the British, who welcomed them.
- British officials wanted images through which they could understand India, remember their life in India and depict India to the Western world. Local painters got work. They began producing a vast number of images of local plants and animals, historical buildings and monuments, festivals and processions, trades and crafts, castes and communities. As these pictures were collected by the East India Company officials, they became famous as Company paintings.
- There were also painters who were not associated with any court. These painters developed a new world of popular art in many of the cities of India during the 19th century.
- In Bengal, around the pilgrimage centre of the temple of Kalighat, local village scroll painters and potters began developing a new style of art. They moved from the surrounding villages into Calcutta in the early 19th century in the life of new patrons and new buyers of their art.
- Before the 19th century, the village *patuas* and potters had painted on **mythological themes** and produced images of gods and goddesses. But the images were not realistic and lifelike.

- After the 1840s, they began producing paintings on social and political themes.
- Many of these Kalighat pictures were printed in large numbers and sold in the market. In the beginning, the images were engraved in wooden blocks. The carved block was inked, pressed against paper, and then the woodcut prints that were produced were coloured by hand. In this way many copies could be produced from the same block.
- By the late 19th century, **mechanical printing presses** were established which allowed prints to be produced in even larger numbers. As a result, these prints became accessible for the poor too.
- Middle-class Indian artists also set up printing presses and produced prints for a wide market.
- With the spread of nationalism, popular prints of the early 20th century began carrying nationalist messages. In many of them one can see Bharat Mata appearing as a goddess carrying the national flag, or nationalist heroes sacrificing their head to the Mata, and gods and goddesses slaughtering the British.
- The images of India were produced by photographers too.
- European photographers travelled to India and took pictures. They set up studios and established photographic societies to promote the art of photography.
- Towards the end of the 19th century, the painters began to develop a style that could be considered both modern and Indian.
- **Raja Ravi Verma** was one of the first artists who created such a style. He mastered the **Western art of oil painting** and **realistic life study** but painted themes from Indian mythology. His mythological paintings became popular among Indian princes and art collectors.
- However, the nationalist artists in Bengal did not approve the art of Ravi Verma because it was imitative and westernised. They declared that such a style was unsuitable for depicting the nation's ancient myths and legends. They felt that a true Indian style of painting had to draw inspiration from non-western art traditions and try to capture the spiritual essence of the East.
- They broke away from the convention of oil painting and the realistic style and turned to for inspiration to medieval Indian traditions of **miniature painting** and the ancient art of **mural painting** in the Ajanta caves.

TEXTBOOK QUESTIONS SOLVED

Let's Recall

Q. 1. Fill in the blanks:

- The art form which observed carefully and tried to capture exactly what the eye saw is called
- The style of painting which showed Indian landscape as a quaint, unexplored land is called
- Paintings which showed the social lives of Europeans in India are called
- Paintings which depicted scenes from British imperial history and their victories are called

Ans. (a) portrait (b) picturesque
(c) engravings (d) history paintings

Q. 2. Point out which of the following were brought in with British art:

- oil painting
- miniature
- life-size portrait painting
- use of perspective
- mural art

Ans. (a) oil painting (c) life-size portrait painting

Q. 3. Describe in your words one painting from this chapter which suggests that British were more powerful than Indians. How does the artist depict this?

Ans. The painting given below is painted by Rober Kerr Porter. In this painting the painter has shown the storming of Seringapatam, the capital of Tipu Sultan by the British troops.



Tipu Sultan of Mysore was one of the most powerful enemies of the British. He was finally defeated in 1799 at the famous battle of Seringapatam. In the picture

the British troops are shown storming the fort from all sides, cutting Tipu's soldiers to pieces, climbing the walls, raising the British flag aloft the ramparts of Tipu's fort. The painting dramatises the event and at the same time glorifies the British victory.

Thus, imperial history paintings always tried to depict British more powerful than Indians.

Q. 4. Why did the scroll painters and potters come to Kalighat? Why did they begin to paint new themes?

Ans. The scroll painters and potters came to Kalighat and settled there because this was a time when the city was expanding as a commercial and administrative centre. Colonial offices were coming up, new buildings and roads were being constructed, markets were being set up. The city appeared as a place of opportunity where people could come to make a new living.

They began to paint new themes because values, tastes, social norms and customs were undergoing fast changes after the 1840s. They responded quickly to the world around and produced paintings on social and political themes.

Q. 5. Why can we think of Raja Ravi Varma's paintings as national?

Ans. We can think of Raja Ravi Varma's paintings as national because he has depicted Indian mythology. Scenes from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and other mythological stories are prominent in his paintings.

Let's Discuss

Q. 6. In what way did the British history paintings in India reflect the attitudes of imperial conquerors?

Ans. The British history paintings celebrated the British and their power and victories. Francis Hayman, in 1762, produced a history painting and placed on public display in the Vauxhall Gardens in London. The British defeated Sirajuddaulah in the famous Battle of Plassey and installed Mir Jafar as the Nawab of Murshidabad. This event was painted by Hayman in a way that made it clear that the British were more powerful than the Indians.



Q. 7. Why do you think some artists wanted to develop national style of art?

Ans. Some artists wanted to develop a national style of art because in their views the art of Ravi Varma was imitative and westernised. It was unsuitable for depicting the nation's ancient myths and legends. Therefore, they felt the need for a genuine Indian style of painting to draw inspiration from non-western art tradition. In this way they made an attempt to capture the real spiritual essence of the East.

Q. 8. Why did some artists produce cheap popular prints? What influence would such prints have had on the minds of people who looked at them?

Ans. Some artists produced cheap popular prints so that even the poor could buy them. Such prints made mixed influences on the minds of those who saw them. For some, these prints were sentimental while for the others, spiritualism could not be seen as the central feature of the Indian culture. They felt that artists had to explore real life instead of illustrating ancient books. They must look for inspiration for living folk art and tribal designs rather than ancient art forms. In the midst of such debates, new movements of art grew and styles of art changed subsequently.

Let's Do

Q. 9. Look at any tradition of art in your locality. Find out how it has changed in the last 50 years. You may check who supports the artists and who looks at their art. Remember to examine the changes in styles and themes.

Ans. Students are suggested to do this task themselves.

