

ILLUMINATING THE PAST

Delve into the enchanting world of illuminated manuscripts as the Museum of Art & Photography displays the Book of Gold: Kanchana Chitra Ramayana of Banaras

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Illuminated manuscripts hold profound historical significance as they served as handwritten books adorned with corresponding illustrations, intricate details, ornate borders, and vivid colours, primarily flourishing during the medieval period.

The Concept

Illuminated manuscripts were largely chronicles of a reign, biographies, folklores, and religious texts. Their creation was a meticulous and labour-intensive process carried out by skilled scribes and artists. Beyond their practical use for conveying information, illuminated manuscripts were regarded as works of art, reflecting the cultural, religious, and artistic sentiments of their time. The Book of Gold: Kanchana Chitra Ramayana of Banaras currently on display at The Museum of Art & Photography showcases a unique rendition of the Ramayana.

This involves reconstructing the illustrated manuscript of Tulsidas' Ramcharitmanas with nearly 80 folios. "Many of the artists, who remain unacknowledged, supply the art with their adulation for the text, characters, and sacred landscapes in this case. Apart from the stylistic detailing, the use of illuminating watercolour and gold pigment emphasise on the details of the miniatures that the artist wanted to highlight or make the audiences closely pay attention to. The scale of illumination and the placement of the gold pigment also shed light on the influence and motivation of these paintings," says a MAP spokesperson.

Myriad Stories

These manuscripts were created not only to record these stories but also to serve as a visual medium of education in addition to oral teaching. But in the present times, these manuscripts provide one with a lot of additional information, which were not in minds of the artist or writer, at the time of writing or paintings. It helps people to understand the religious, social, and economic even the political condition of that particular phase. It enlightens one about the various techniques of making ink, colour, or paper and most significantly, the education. "Several manuscripts are still in the personal possessions of many private collectors or the people who have inherited these types of manuscripts from their ancestors and are not aware of their significance and eventual deterioration. New art projects should identify such people and make them aware,



encourage them to share their collection with the public so that the modern world knows better about the glorious past. Not only professionals but also students and research scholars may join hands for such projects. That is a crucial task but not impossible. It is also possible that they may apply to grants for documenting, preserving, and conserving these works and the owner of the collection would also ideally be happy to get their collection preserved and shared with others," says Dr. Hansmukh Seth, Associate Curator, The City Palace Museum, Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation, Udaipur.

Art Impetus

Beyond revival, the focus of these manuscripts is all about ensuring an informed understanding of the same and its artistic traditions. MAP employs educational

initiatives, like workshops and exhibitions and concerted efforts into conservation practices, to explore and retain the manuscripts' techniques, history, and cultural context, engaging audiences and fostering appreciation. Collaborative projects involving artists, historians, and communities stimulate interest and build a sense of shared cultural heritage. Exhibitions and events featuring illuminated manuscripts attract attention, enriched by lectures and live demonstrations. "The original folios, previously dismembered, are now reunited for the first time by museum

of miniature painting through a multifaceted approach. They draw inspiration from the tradition by incorporating its stylistic techniques, establishing a tangible link to the historical roots of this art form. Contemporary creators explore diverse subject matter, weaving secular, political, and personal narratives into their works. Artist Sanjay Bhattacharyya says, "the arrangement of text along with images is an area of interest for many artists, and a lot can be learnt by observing the canons established by our predecessors. It is interesting to see the concept of illuminated manuscripts being reinterpreted by AI tools. Although the algorithms can churn out illustrations that look convincing, creating illuminations by hand is a dying art, and should be preserved through publications and interactions with experts." Museums can play an important role in the revival of these ancient traditions by presenting the primary resources to arouse interest and imparting the necessary skills through workshops with those qualified in the methods and materials.

Recording Events

The Jain manuscripts are mentioned as one of the oldest manuscripts of India which was continued till 19th-20th century. Even in present times, some Jain monks still try to write or record their ancient texts in the same manuscript form because they know of its significance. "As the Rajasthani traditional Phad artists have started making Phad (long cloth painting) on current topics or events, other contemporary artists must restart this extinct tradition, not only to revive it but also to educate the new generation about it. There is no doubt that the manuscript form would give their artwork greater value than other mediums but also because these manuscripts survive longer than the other mediums. Very soon this practice may become part of university curriculum in the field of art, history, or the history of Indian science and technology, also anthropology and ethnography. It will also record the current script for the future generation," avers Dr. Seth.

There is an urgent need to identify the traditional art community in a pan-Indian scenario, who still have knowledge about this tradition. They can be traced among the public or may be among the monks or saints. Their work, thoughts, perspectives, everything is pivotal to understand the old manuscripts. It will also help in understanding the traditional age-old methods that have been used to create manuscripts.

professionals and scholars to offer fresh insights. Through the publication based on our current exhibition Book of Gold: The Kanchana Chitra Ramayana of Banaras we have focused upon the folios, its display and brought further scholarship in understanding the traditions and practices of the time. Such an educational lean towards understanding and preserving cultural heritage would be the ideal support system that could help preserve these traditional skills for future generations," says a MAP spokesperson.

Reinterpreting Art

Illuminated manuscripts also help contemporary artists who are reimagining the techniques