Aesthetic aspect of Calligraphy in Indian Context

Dr. Archana Joshi
Lecturer, Drawing & Painting.
Govt College Bundi, Rajasthan
And
Suresh Chandra Jangid,
Research scholar at
University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, Rajasthan.

The term 'Calligraphy' means beautiful writing' or elegant penmanship'. This word derived from the Latin `Calligrphia'; in term derived from the two different Greek words, meaning beautiful and writing. Today, calligraphy generally refers to the art of beautiful writing as a profession or field of study that is the aesthetic considerations of writing.

Although writing serves a primarily utilitarian purpose but the style of other art media have placed their imprints upon the development of its various forms, as in pictographic or iconographic script (ancient Egypt, pre–Columbian America), ideographic or synthetic script (China and Japan), and alphabetic scripts (Kufic, Carolingian, Gothic, Renaissance, etc.). Writing has always been of primary importance as a means of ornamental enhancement of painting, sculpture, and architecture. At its best, calligraphy may equal other forms of aesthetic expression, and at certain times it has been regarded as an art not inferior to painting.

A study of writing as art can, and to some extent must proceed from the history of writing and the alphabet, with consideration of outstanding cases of creative originality and interrelationship with other art forms. In this sense writing may merge with painting (as in pictographs, especially in pre-Columbian America, or in Chinese and Japanese ideograms, as well as in some contemporary art). It interpenetrates symbol and emblem, which are perennial and ubiquitous and monumental decoration (Roman and Humanist dedicatory epigraphs, sacred texts inscribed on the walls of Islamic mosques and, occasionally of Protestant Churches).

In all these cases an unquestioned aesthetic intention exists along with both the mnemonic and phonetic functions of writing. The written form acquires an importance beyond that of merely rendering meaning, whether the meaning could not be fully conveyed by the characters or ideographic idiom of religious, commemorative, and other texts, in which the writing is as a rule closely related to the dominating element of the composition.

All civilizations have left some kind of record of the importance attributed to the aesthetic aspect of writing. From the earliest time the Egyptians and the Indus valley people had the great veneration for writing; their respect reflects from the findings of that time (about 2000 B.C.) in the pyramids and other archeological sites.

Similarly, in Assyria the great king Ashurabanipal (669-626 B.C.) left his thought's impressions in his inscriptions. Accordingly, to Philostratus (3rd Century), there were two scribes in the entourage of Apollonius of Tyana, one for daily needs and the other for ornate writing purpose. This preoccupation with the beauty of writing is amply confirmed by the exceptional quality of many of the written documents that have survived from ancient times in China, Japan, India and the Islamic countries, the profession of calligrapher was and still is held in high esteem; and in Europe and America the design of painting fonts that continue the stylistic evolution of calligraphy is the object of intense study.

A pictograph and a page of alphabetic script, presents different aesthetic problems. Picture writings may be considered as an art either individually (as imitations of nature and dependent on their power of evocation) or in stylized form (as a coordinated series which unfolds a consecutive discourse). Both in the primitive pictographic stage and in the synthetic or ideographic stage we find clear affinities with the prevailing art styles, as in Egypt and presumably in prehistoric times. The need for a comprehensible arrangement of the pictured tale, whether vertical or horizontal, accompanies a

concern with order, balance, and clarity, which in turn looks forward to problems of the ideographic or calligraphic composition. Writing, however, remained in these cases a kind of monumental picture. When the naturalistic image passes to schematic, ideographic, or alphabetic symbol then the mimetic or representational preoccupations disappear, and the quality of writing (as in modern non-objective painting) depends on the independent structural value of harmony, fluency, elegance, and interrelation. This is true not only for Chinese and Japanese ideograms but also for all the alphabetic scripts (Which today are thought to have derive from a single northwestern Semitic prototype; that is from the region of Phoenicia and Palestine, 1800-1700 B.C.) Both the systems derived from the intentional stylization of natural forms, but soon they became divorced semantically from these forms through a process facilitated by a slow and continuous adoption to the tools and materials used in writing. The first was lapidary writing, inscribed or incised with a chisel on stone, thus acquired a geometric quality, without curves or ligatures; another was rapid writing permitted either by the reed pen (a stick of common reed with its end split, for use on papyrus) or by the writing brush, made of elastic hair and used on silk. Thus, two opposing principles developed; on the one hand, a monumental or official style (in the west, generally in classicizing terms) tending toward a rigidly formal organization, a symmetry and proportion of the individual signs and lines of the whole written surface with careful alignment and spacing; and on the other hand, a more flexible cursive and intuitive style, which often served to reveal the personality of the writer (it was the observation of difference in calligraphy that gave birth to the concept of personal style in Renaissance artistic treatise.)

Illumination of manuscripts is the best-known example of embellishment, but other important instances of embellishment also exist. The Egyptian hieroglyphic script, when colored, was admirably suitable for painting on walls, tombstones, sarcophagi, etc., and common in architectural ornamentation, where it was engraved or embossed. We can cite the famous Chinese inscriptions of the Confucian classics on the stone drums and those on pottery vessels and jade; also, the beautiful Mayan steles and alters with their elaborate cartouches containing several picture signs gathered into a single frame. The Arabic lapidary or Kufic style was employed mainly on walls of mosques and on coins. With the development of Arabic calligraphy, Kufic became more consistent in height, thickness, and form of the single characters. In fact, it became such an exceptionally beautiful script that it was often used in the West for purely decorative purposes. The cartouches on medieval frescoes and panels are often also very effective, as are the legends which accompany the paintings, serving not merely as expiations but for the clearly decorative purpose of creating a pleasing frame.

The artist's signature constitutes a special case of insertion of writing into painting and sculpture. Its placement is often skillfully calculated; sometimes the name is changed into a monogram. Especially in more recent works, exercises on the alphabetic themes also pondered over that are fundamentally pictorial, as was done earlier in the surrealist and cubistic paintings, where the introduction of letters serves as a symbolic suggestion or even as a structural base of the entire work. The certain works of Paul Klee are the best examples of this device. In the fields of graphic arts and cinematography the frequent use of a typically calligraphic arrangement of the lettering reflects the current tendency to return to a unity of calligraphic style, probably stimulated by the achievements of non-objective art and neoplasticism.

The Indian graphic system underwent innumerable changes during its course. It spread with great vitality over the central and up to farther eastern parts of Asia and resulted in several diverse calligraphic types. The oldest writings are the inscriptions of King Asoka (3rd Cent. B.C.), distributed from the territory of his ancient kingdom of Magadha (with its capital in modern Patna) in the east to modern Mysore in the south; they were carved with geometric simplicity on rocks and stone columns with two different hands, the Brahmi and the Kharoshthi. The former is lapidary in character, with absolutely rigid and vertical characters. When the latter appears on stone pillars, it was generally composed with less perfection.

Kharoshthi script is a cursive hand, without special attempt at calligraphy, but generally it is fairly regular and uniform without the angularity of the Brahmi. In the manuscripts on parchment and wooden tablets of central Asia the Kharoshthi seems more calligraphic. This refinement is probably due to the use of ink and the infusion of Iranian decorative taste that was so widely spread in Central Asia. In

India true calligraphy was first attempted in the early centauries of our era and had a development parallel to the expansion and the differentiation of scripts which took different forms in the north and south of India.

In the north, writing was more refined. The vertical strokes became equalized and terminated more broadly in a curl, thus describing an upper line, called "mantra" below which, as a result, each character was to be traced. Alignment was more regular and ligatures appeared. The early distinguishable scripts are the Ksatrapa (around 14 A.D.) and Kushan (Late 1st Cent.) types.

In later centauries, the different calligraphic schools became more clearly differentiated: the northern schools preferred linear and angular elements with a harmonious regularity; the southern scripts, on the other hand, leaned toward rounded forms and curving lines, whose decorative effect was greater. This curvilinear quality was the result of the widespread practice of incising on palm leaves as a writing method. Although palm leaves lend themselves to the engraving of globular characters, they do not permit the tracing of the thick strokes with ornamental serifs favored using ink in the north, so that southern calligraphers were forced to get their aesthetic effects only from the inflection of line.

In the north part of the country, during the Gupta period (4th 5th Cent.) various scripts underwent a final differentiation and expansion. In the numerous manuscripts found in Central Asia, Mr. Hoernle has identified two types of writing: the straight Gupta and the slanted Gupta. The Buddhist manuscripts in Sanskrit found at Bamian (Afghanistan) and Gilgit (Kashmir) show two more elaborated calligraphic types, with thick lines and very fine serifs. In type A the characters are rather low and wide, and the mantra above has become larger, but the balance is reestablished by an oblique weighting of the lower part of the characters. Type B has more slanted but straighter letters, with curves inclined slightly to the right and downward. Related scripts were in use in the basin of the Tarim River (Sinkiang) for Sanskrit and the local languages of the mid-7th century to the 10th century. Type B, widespread in the epigraphy of northern India with the name of Kutila, was transported to Japan, China, Korea, and Central Asia and was also used for magical formulas and for Sanskrit texts until after the 10th century. In Kambodia and in Kashmir (where it is called Sarada) it is in use to the present day. In Nepal scripts have followed the evolution of the Gupta alphabet since the 5th century. In Tibet from the 7th century on writing was formed after a post- Gupta model and had an erudite elaboration when used for Sanskrit. From these ornamental types, there is also developed a type known as the "box-head type", in which the mantras are transformed into small squares and the curves are replaced as often as possible by right angles.

After the 10th century the distinction between the common hands and the sophisticated hands became clearer. Many samples of the latter have been preserved in manuscripts, especially in western Bengal and Nepal

The major type which is today more widespread is the Nagri (urban) or Devanagari alphabet, which originally was the local script of Benares. Because of the importance subsequently assumed by that city, Devanagari became increasingly widespread and was used to transcribe, besides the local languages, both Sanskrit and Hindi. In the early 19th century, it was adopted for the printing of Sanskrit and Prakrit (Vernacular Sanskrit) texts in Bengal and in Europe.

Nagari appears to be remotely derived from Brahmi, as it has the same system of transcription and the same direction from left to right. Its most original calligraphic element lies in the horizontal development of mantra so that when the characters are juxtaposed, they appear to have been written below a horizontal line. The effect of these linear elements is geometrizing; calligraphic embellishment and accentuated curves have been omitted.

The Jain Nagari, used in books on Jain doctrine and therefore most widely distributed in the west, differs somewhat from the ordinary Nagari. The Nepalese writings tended toward a form like Nagari but were markedly calligraphic and varied. The two principal types are the Ranja (elegant) and the Vartul (round).

The Bengal scripts and those from near Mithila were similar in the Middle Ages to the Nepalese, but later they became more undulant, with bends and acute angles, curly bars, and slightly curved and straight mantras which do not generally link one character with the other. In Orrisa, north of the Bengal

Gulf, Oriya script is characterized by rounded forms. Often the mantra, developed in a convex curve, is larger than the rest of the character.

The Gurumukhi, used to transcribe the Punjabi tongue, is like the Nagari but is more cursive and rounded. The vernacular Gujarati alphabet is also cursive and simplified and is without mantras. In the north and northwest various cursive hands exist.

In the south, the two groups of inscriptions which have given birth to the two great groups of modern southern scripts are those of the Pallava (6th 7th Cent.) and Chalukya dynasties (7th 8th Cent.). The inscriptions of the Pallava (who dominated the eastern coast, with Kanchipuram as their capital), from the lower basin of the Krishna River in the 4th to the 9th Century, are ornamental by comparison with contemporary northern forms. Letters are slanted, strongly bent to the left and rising again toward the top of the foot, which becomes smaller and rounder. The Pallava forms for writing Sanskrit prepare the literary alphabet later called Grantha ("free"). Another hand for inscriptions developed into Tamil after the 7th century. This was the first Indian script to be printed (by the Portuguese mission in Malabar, 1577), although wood engravings of Sanskrit were being printed in Central Asia and China as early as the 10th century. The Tamil hand, at first in straight lines, became after the 19th century progressively more slanted. In the Tamil area, the Grantha alphabet was also used for printing Sanskrit texts from the 19th century onwards. Both Grantha and Tamil are elegant in themselves and are calligraphic in their regularity and the purity of their curves. They are accompanied by various cursives. The Tamil is also in use in northern Ceylon.

The calligraphic writing of Ceylon was in use not only for its own language (Singhalese) but also for Pali (the canonical language of Buddhism) and Sanskrit (the language of poetry and science).

The scripts of Chalukya dynasty (both eastern and western), who ruled over the valleys of the Krishna and the Godavari, are less slanted than the pallava script .They gave rise to the Dravidian writings of the Telugu and Kannada regions in the north and west of the Tamil areas.

The Telugu or Telinga script (east of Deccan) and the Kannada script (west of Deccan) are different, as to calligraphic qualities especially. Both are typified by letters forms of circles and arcs and topped by a mantra forming in V-shape; but this assumes a quite different form in each of the two structures. Besides, in the earliest Kannada, forms tended to curl and curving verticals, which turned progressively upward where the circle first lengthened and then closed into circles. This ornamental hand inherited the calligraphic peculiarities of the Hoysala inscriptions (12th century); it appeared in temple architecture with a particularly lively and complex ornamentation that suggests work in ivory. Kannada epigraphs have survived from the Katumba, Chalukya, Rastrakuta, and other reigns. Thus, it can be said that India has a great history in scripts, and these have been enriched the calligraphic tradition from the time immemorial.

The distinction between mimetic writing (pictograms) and totally schematic writing (alphabetical letters) seems to diminish in certain periods. There are noteworthy examples of illuminated schematic writing in which individual alphabetical letters are formed from pictorial representations, or the pictorial decoration of individual letters emphasizes the meaning of the written material; however, the intent of such alphabets is generally decorative rather than explanatory. In the process of formalization of writing, the abandonment of colors as a determinant of meaning for the symbol is typical. But even when formalized and abstract, the written symbol or phrase does not lose its decorative function.

References:

1. Archer, W.G., India and Modern Art, Ruskin House, George Allin & unwin Itd., London, 1959.
2. Basham, A. L., The Wonder that was India, Evergreen Encyclopedia, Volume 1, Grove Press Inc., New York, 1954.
3. Ghose, D.C., Bibliography of Modern Indian Art, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1978.
4. Goetz, Hermann, Art of the World, Halle and Co., Germany, 1959.

5. Kramrisch, Stella, The Art of India through Ages, The Phaidon Press, London, 1954.
6. Oslay, A.S., Scribes and Sources, Faber and Faber, London, 1980.
7. Sankalier, H.P., Prehistoric Art in India, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1978.