

AESTHETIC ANALYSIS OF RELIEF ART WORK IN *DEV RATH* FROM THE REGION OF THUNAG, MANDI, HIMACHAL PRADESH

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Abstract

Dev rath are miniature movable abodes of deities carried on shoulders. The deities are carried in their *raths* whenever they are taken out of their temple for religious ceremonies. The *rath* are symbolically created as a movable sacred temple structure and are highly ornated with silver and gold work. The relief work of religious images rendered on the base of *Chattar* in folk style is one of the important visual elements seen in *ratha* ornamentation. The paper thus explores the formalistic elements of art such as line, form, color, texture and space arrangement in religious relief images engraved on *rath* of three deities *Dev Tunagsi*, *Devi Mahamaya* and *Devta Chunjwala* from the region of Thunag, in district Mandi, Himachal Pradesh.

Folk artist from the region of Mandi has depicted the relief images in a linear style, enclosed within a continuous contour that makes image readable from near and distance. The picture form due to close enclosure does not appear to be motionless and static but moving within a space. The artist has matured in rendering the interval space which are visually divided by decorative motif so that each image is self-contained. The color in relief work is kept in a single natural color either gold or silver so that it retains the lyrical and narrative style of two dimensional painting.

Keywords: Dev rath, line, form, space, color.

Introduction

Devta rath or *deo rath* in the region of Mandi are regarded as sacred movable miniature temples of deities carried on shoulders. The deities are carried in their *raths* whenever they are taken out of their temple for religious ceremonies. The miniature form of *rath* is compared to temple, as the construction of *rath* displays the features seen in the temple architecture prevalent in the Mandi region. The *rath* in the region of Mandi are distinguished from region to region on basis of their *Chattar*. *Chattar* in Mandi region is addressed to the larger part of *rath* under which the *mohra* of a deity is mounted. *Chattar* thus is the one of the essential parts of the *rath* as temple has its *Shikhara* part. The *Chattar* of the *rath* makes it stand out for their style and design that varies from region to region. The paper thus explores aesthetic analysis of relief work done on the three *rath* belonging to *Devi Mahamaya*, *Devta Tungasi* and *Devta Chungwala* from the region of Thunag, Mandi. The *Chattar* of these three *raths* is stylistically similar to the Dome styled temple architecture canopy. The dome style as the name suggest stylistically has a broad circular base with open space. Due to the presence of open space in dome styled *Chattar*, the space at the base of the *Chattar* is decorated with circular strip of thinly carved relief. Each image engraved for ornamental purpose has the richness of simplified folk aesthetic as well the aesthetic sense described in the Vishnudharmottar Purana and Shadanga theory of Indian art for creating painting and

sculpture. The subject of the relief carving consists of religious images that are represented in a continuous single frame. The religious image that has been represented in these three *ratha* is of *Varaha avatar*, Lord *Ganesha*, *Samudar manthan*, *Garud*, *Hiranayakashyap vadh*. The relief images being engraved in limited space delineates the sensibility of lyrical painting and voluminous of bas relief, and mid relief sculpture. Each represented image and subject are composed within a space that defines two dimensional and three -dimensional volume. Each image is enclosed within a frame which is enclosed with decorative motif such as leaf or flower thus aesthetically giving each frame a narrative character.

METHOD AND TECHNIQUE OF CARVING

The engraving of the images is done on a thin stripe either of silver or gold using repousse technique. Repousse is a technique where the design is raised in a relief by beating with the help of hammer from the back side of metal. Repousse technique allows the artist to display fine skills and aesthetic organization of elements of art in a limited space.

BELIEF AND CUSTOM

The relief decoration on the base of *rath* is an interesting display of regional folk art style and more of an artist individual style. The work is executed by local folk artist from Mandi who are traditional carvers. The art work on *rath* takes place only when deity through *goor* express his wish to get installed in new *rath* and new *rath* is constructed. The wish of deity is taken as an order and the construction of new *rath* begins as per the customs and rituals prescribed in the Indian Vastu Shastar for temple construction. The work for the construction of *rath* and images is done only by the that artist and *sthapati* whose name the deity has revealed. The artist and *sthapati* are then called to the temple to begin the work on *rath*. The artist has to stay in the temple premises till the work of art finishes. During his stay at temple, artist follows a yogic life where he has to eat simple cooked food without onion and garlic, has to bath daily, wear washed clothes and then only can start carving. The engraving drawing that has to be done are neither pre designed nor pre planned. In a field interview conducted by me in the year 2022 the *Pujari* of deity Rajender said that the deity revealed the images to be engraved, only to the artist when he begins to work. The art created by artist on *rath* thus is regarded as created through the expressed wish of deity. The regional artist through their intellect has justified to a greater extend the knowledge of *Rupabheda*, *Pramanam*, *Bhava*, *Lavanya Yojnam*, *Sadrisyam*, *Varnika Bhanga*. *Rupabheda* means that artist should have knowledge about the appearance of an object. *Pramana* means once the object is known and seen the artist should delineate it with correct perception, measure and structure. *Bhava* refers to the quality of filling object with feeling. *Lavanya yojnam* is the fulfilling the image with grace, *Sadrisyam* means the similarity of form with the real object. *Vanika bhanga* is the peculiar quality of an artist to fill the painting with appropriate colors.

LINE

Line in art has ability to express the thoughts and feeling of the image portrayed. Line is visual communication that is of three kinds vertical lines, horizontal lines, curves, diagonal lines and angular lines. In the relief images we see vertical lines that are intellectually and emotionally used and have ability to indicate strength and due to their perpendicular angle have quality of growth, whereas the horizontal lines are defining calmness and rest. Diagonal lines are used to create movement in static object. The role of line is to provide contours to the images that are engraved on flat surface of sheet and through the use of lines in repoussé technique line has ability to create pattern, rhythm and space. The use of flat, sunken, raised outline against plane surface is also frequently seen in design as this allows the artist to keep images close to another image in the picture plane. The artist in engraving has used the thin lines to show the drapery movement as thin line has ability to suggest the movement in space. While creating a composition for a narrow space the artist also has separated each image with repetition of regular rhythmic patterns or design. The ornamental decorative pattern in rhythmic order which are placed at equal distance around the image creates a dynamic moment for the form allowing the negative space to become more active, lively in a relief composition. Decorative rhythmic patterns lines also balance the weight of varying figure size in a composition. The artist in limited space has used straight lines when creating a decorative motif to separate one image from the another. The use of straight lines keeps the direction same throughout the picture plane.

FORM

Form is the image that is created by the lines drawing, it is the total appearance of the artwork which is visually readable and involved in the meaning making. Form is a complete image which has subject and content. When we look at the base of *rath* with images and motifs we are taking part in the reading of visual form. The image becomes meaningful and our eye and mind is able to distinguish between representative form like images of gods and non – representative form like decorative motifs. According to Vishnudharmottar Purana the picture is divided into four kinds namely *Satya*, *Vainika*, *Nagara* and *Misra*. The kind of form or picture that is engraved on the surface of *Chattar* can be said is of *Satya* and *Vainika* type. *Vanika* type of picture is lyrical and is composed within a square frame. The word *Vanika* in the description of Vishnudharmottar Purana also means decorative motif used to separate one image from the another. Decorative motifs had been an integral part of Indian art and is seen extensively on *rath* images. The pattern of *dohri bel* or double meander is recurring motif engraved along with images thus making the images of *rath* to fall under *vainika* type

TEXTURE AND COLOR

Texture color and both are regarded as the essential principal elements of picture. The texture and color in painting is achieved through the use of light and shade. The process of creating light and shade in painting is termed as *Varatana*, which is possible with the help of *rekha* or

line delineation. Texture in art is given to create actual or illusion of tactile value on the surface of an area as created by nature or by man through his observation of the visual element. The role of texture in art function to activate the sensory process. When an observer looks at the image, he recognizes the object through the surface treatment. Hence, through the treatment of surface his sensory vision gets the feeling of touch. The craftsman working on relief work achieve tactile quality through his knowledge of the material, media and finish that has to be given to the surface of the material.

Due to limited space and the thinness of material the relief images on *rath* are thus raised against plane background, whereas the figures are textured with various kinds of lines etched on them. To bring out the detail of the dress of the deities the area had been roughened to bring out the characteristic feature of dress. The smooth texture is applied for ornaments, crown to highlight the high and low parts of image. There are three kinds of texture mentioned in Vishnudharmottar Purana– *Patraja*- cross lines, *Airika*- stumping and *Vinduraja*- dots and these three kinds are very much used while engraving the images.

The texture is of various types actual texture, simulated texture and invented texture. Actual texture is referred to a surface which stimulates a tactile response when actually touched. Simulated texture or also called as illusionism texture which evokes the feeling of reality in picture plane by the use of perspective, light and dark shading. Invented texture is in which two dimensional patterns are created by the repetition of lines or shapes on a small scale over the surface of an area. Texture in relief work has ability to provides rich visual pleasure to the art work. On a closer observation it is seen that the artist has used texture simulated and inverted texture in moderation as too much of texture can destroys the aesthetic beauty of surface as well the unity of images and motif. The use of texture is also important in bringing relation of image and the spatial distance. The fine texture given to denotes nearness whereas the blurred texture suggest distance.

COLOR

The color in sculpture is as important part as it is in painting. The role of color in sculpture is to highlight the modelling and cast shadow in the depth of the object. The color treatment is given on the basis of material nature and surface. In the relief work on *rath* the tradition of keeping single natural color of metal is preserved. The artist of Mandi believes in preserving the natural integrity of the material and its surface. Mostly the, relief work is kept in a single natural color as it also has ability to retained a lyrical style of two – dimensional painting. A gold polish or silver polish is applied towards the end while final finishing as it allows the object to reflect the light, surface and shape. There is advantages and disadvantages associated with color, the artist has to be careful in selection of color. Flat or too light color destroy shape reading and usage of dark color can reduce the significance of depth and shadow.

SPACE

The words like *ksaya* and *vridhhi* are used for the technique of foreshortening which are responsible to establish the relation between the near image and background. Space that is experienced in rath is usually two dimensional. When the engraving is done the images which project more towards outside on a picture plane creates the illusion of depth and distance. To be executed in such a manner that it contributes to unity. There is two kind of space that are experienced after the form is engraved on a picture plane that is positive space and negative space. Positive area depicts the recognizable form and is the occupied space whereas unoccupied space is negative area. For example, if an image of *Narashima avatar* is depicted the image that projects in form of raised relief is positive area and the background which is left plane is negative space. The importance of negative space is to bring into focus the spatial relationship of the foreground figure and background space so that the image and the other decorative motifs does not appear overcrowded, busy and confusing. The negative space in relief sculpture plays a role of imparting a relief work a status of three dimension it a negative space becomes optical background for the projected image.

CONCLUSION

The materiality of the medium and its ground plays an important role for the regional artist of Mandi. In the repousse technique the forms engraved are not arranged but they carve out of the ground in continuous volume. The process involves modelling from inside to outside from the flat surface thus each form engraved in space, each contour of line recedes and advance in all direction. The ornamental decoration on rath is intersection of art, design and communication.



Rath of Devta Tungasi,
Photo clicked by author during Field study (2018).



Rath of Devi Mahamaya.
Photo clicked by author during Field study (2021).



Engraving on the rath of *Devi Mahamaya* depicting Lord Krishna.



Engraving on the rath of *Devta Chunjwala* depicting the Mythological Bird Garuda.



Engraving on the rath of *Devta Chunjwala*, depicting Hiranayakashyap

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