



Research Paper

“Gharanas” (Schoolings) Of Bengal Painting From 9th Century To 19th Century On The Context Of Visual Language, Style & Technique

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ABSTRACT: Bengal is a rich cultural heritage of the Eastern part of India from many centuries ago. The art tradition of Bengal was enriched from time immemorial through various kinds of art tradition, “Gharana” (schooling) and great artists. As per the evidence painting tradition started in Bengal from 9th Century AD from Pala dynasty. It was an illustrative painting tradition on Buddhist manuscript. It’s known as Pala Manuscript Painting. After that lot of traditional school-based art culturally enrich this region. This research paper focused on different schoolings of Bengal painting from 9th to 19th century on the context of visual language. This study also critically analyzes the technical and stylistic approaches of most prominent *Gharanas* of Bengal painting.

KEYWORDS: Bengal Painting, Schooling, Traditional art, Socio-political, Visual language, Style.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Bengal is the cultural hub of India and it proves his creativity from long back. As per the painting is concern Pala miniature is the first evidence of Bengal painting. Almost every civilizations or country have a strong traditional art form all over the world. India is such a country that has lots of strong traditional art forms. Traditional Art form means the art form which continues generation after generation with the same style, technique and visual language. If a group of art practitioner followed the same style, technique and medium from their previous generation then we can call them traditional artists. Normally those artist belongs to this kind of tradition are very tough to recognize through their style, technique or visual language. Most of the traditional artists are never implemented some new concept, technique or style in their artwork. Though skill-wise these artists are a little bit different from each other’s but overall linguistic approaches are same. This kind of art forms provides a shared experience for the community. Collaborative work culture, values and belief systems are the intense part of these art forms and passed down through generations. Each Traditional art form creates particular schooling or *Gharana*. The *Gharana* is a Hindi word which means “family” or “lineage”. The term ‘*Gharana*’ use in Indian Classical Music. “*Gharana*” word is derived from "Ghar In our Society" The meaning of *Gharana* is specific *Guru Parmpara* (Mastertraditional). Considering the context of music, the word *Gharana* is referred to the family who is having the same importance and the skill of music. In the field of music, the expert musician creates impression through constant rehears by getting an education from his guru. In this way, he develops the music style and dedicates novelty in it and gives education to *Shishya* - disciple music. Subsequently his *shishya* (disciples) teach their own disciples. This tradition of '*guru shishya parmpara*' (master disciple tradition) is called as *Gharana*.”[1] In this study ‘*Gharana*’ word use in the visual art field. For the visual artists, those are following the same style and technique of an art form and also passed down the same culture through next-generation are recognized as *Gharana* artists. Those art forms or artists are having a similar kind of style, technique and visual language we can identify them in the same *Gharana*.

On the other hand, those artists are not following the same style, technique or language of an existing art form and create or innovate or implement some new concept, technique and style we can identify them as an individualistic artist. This kind of artists is always trying to create something new in their artwork through style, technique, visual language and concept.

II. GHARANAS OF BENGAL PAINTING

Bengal painting having a strong tradition of *Gharana* culture in the field of visual arts from the Pala Dynasty to Pre-independent era. So many traditional art forms belong to this era. But the most prominent Gharanas are Pala Manuscript painting, Miniature Painting, Company Painting, Bengal Pata Chitra and Kalighat Pata Painting. These five *Gharanas* are enhancing the aesthetical quality of Bengal painting through their visual language.

III. PALA MANUSCRIPT PAINTING

Bengal painting is an important part of the Indian art scenario. “Pala Painting The earliest examples of Bengal painting are the twelve extant miniatures delineated on the palm leaves of a manuscript of the Buddhist text, *Astasahasrika-prajnaparamita*, dated in the sixth regnal year of the Pala king Mahipala I (c 983 AD). There is, however, a story in the *Vitashokavadana* section of the Buddhist text, *Divyavadana*, indicating that painting was practised in Bengal as early as the third century BC.” [2] So this region has a long historical background of art. These paintings are very small in size because it’s painted on the palm leaf surface. Approximate dimension of the paintings is 6cm by 7cm. The condition of the palm leaves still pretty well, because artisans processed those leaves before using for the manuscript. Selected leaves kept underwater for one month and then dried up. After dried those leaves made smooth by abrading a conch on them, and cut into size. After prepared the leaves process of writing and painting going on simultaneously. Usually five to seven lines of the text following the length of the leaves on each page, but left out space for painting was necessary.

Though these kinds of paintings are an illustration of the Buddhist manuscript but it has a strong aesthetical quality. Linear quality, contrast colour application, ornamentation and figurative balance are commendable. In the small painting area, artists were executed an aesthetical and skillful artwork. Application of contrast colour, rhythmic lines, classical balance, and three-dimensional approach are the unique quality of Pala manuscript painting. Using different tones of colour artists created the three dimensional elution on two-dimensional surfaces of palm leaf. It was very tough to executed mass and volume in this kind of miniature format. The excellent use of curve lines created a lyrical rhythm in the compositions of this painting tradition. This kind of lines and colour applications are very similar to Ajanta mural painting. Figurative balance of this painting tradition also influences from classical Indian sculpture from the Gupta period.



Img 1. *Astasahasrika Prjnparamita Sutra*, India. Pala era, late 11th century. Illuminated manuscript on Palm leaves



Img 2. Pala period, early 12th century Opaque water colour on palm leaf

“Coming from different centers of the Pala Empire and belonging to different centuries, they reveal more than one trend in pictorial composition and representation of forms.” [3] Though this tradition has multiple styles in terms of composition and form but the overall presentation is very close to each other like linear quality, colour application, ornamentation. So that linguistically this form of painting tradition followed a singular path. This is a traditional art form because so many artists follow the same style and technique from generation after generation. Thus the Pala manuscript paintings were the earliest Gharana of Eastern India.

IV. MINIATURE PAINTING

After the existence of Pala manuscripts, we have found miniature painting all over the Mughal and Sultanate period. This tradition was very powerful in the northern part of India, but the eastern part was also following the similar kind of miniature tradition. Mid of 16th Century Murshidabad and Dhaka (Now in Bangladesh) was the center of miniature tradition. As per the evidence miniature painting of Bengal region is not so prominent. Very lase numbers of evidence are available but still this tradition enrich the visual culture in Bengal. “Murshidabad School was established under the direct patronage of its governors when dispersed court artists of the crumbling Mughal Empire took refuge at the court of Murshidabad in search of their livelihood. During 18th century Murshidabad emerged into a new era of prosperity as a result of European trade and settled government.”[4] “The real Murshidabad style of painting came into vogue under the next ruler Alivardi Khan (1740-1756). A contemporary historian Ghulam Hussein Salim is of opinion that Alivardi Khan was an avid patron of art and culture. Some of the paintings of his court, entitled ‘Nawab Alivardi Khan hunting Roe Buck’ (c 1750-1755), ‘Alivardi Khan seated on a Garden Terrace in conversation with his nephews’, are now preserved in the India Office Library.”[5]



Img. 3 [Alivardi's Darbar c 1750-1755]



Img. 4 [Alivardi hunting deer c 1750-1755]

This painting tradition was highly influenced by the Mughal miniature painting stylistically and compositionally. Uses of multiple perspectives, minute detailing, ornamentation, exaggeration of the main characters are like Mughal miniature paintings. Exaggeration of main characters is most common feature for all Indian miniature traditions. Artist's individualistic approaches are not so prominent and they follow the same kind of style and technique of an existing art tradition. So that this art tradition is the extended part of the Mughal miniature painting Gharana.

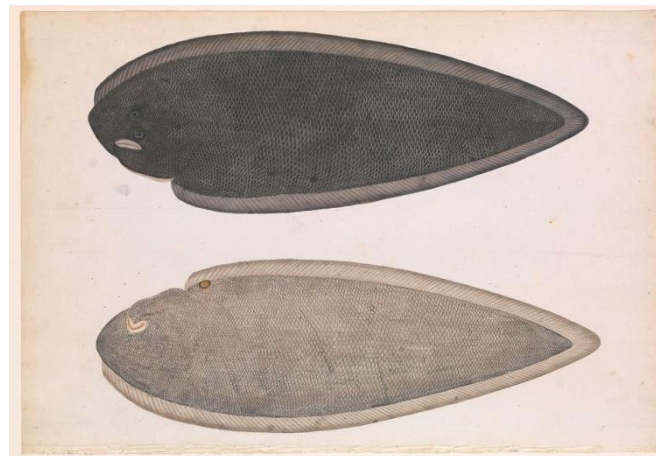
V. COMPANY PAINTING

After this tradition most prominent tradition of this region is Company Painting. In 16th & 17th centuries traditional Indian artists were patronage by Mughals. The downfall of the Mughal Empire and the raising of British rule was an important phase for Indian socio-economic changes. This changing phase traditional artist was suffered because they lost their patronage. The company painters, or the traditional Indian painters who took to hawking their work in the markets when they lost their traditional patronage, adopted western realism in an even less programmatic manner than their academic counterparts. [6] In India during the eighteenth century and during the nineteenth centuries, Europeans increasingly would commission and buy pictures by Indian artists. Many of these Europeans were British East India Company officials, and for that reason, these pictures are generally described as ‘Company School’ art. [7]

British employed Indian artists to illustrate the unique part of the colonial culture which they never saw before like Indian festivals, deities, monuments, occupations, caste system etc. They were very much fascinated to document their visual experience through drawing and painting. Many of these paintings were created by Indian traditional artist families in the area of British influence such as Delhi, Oudh, Tanjore, Trichinopoly,

Ayodhya, Patna, Banares, Lucknow, Calcutta (now Kolkata), Murshidabad etc. Gradually these areas became the important centers for Company painting. “Classification of ‘Company School’ art has traditionally been done according to the style in which the artist worked. The geographical region where the artists were trained is reflected in the painting and drawing styles they used, and often (but not always) mirrors a pre-colonial artistic tradition. Works created by north Indian artists are easily differentiated by those produced in the south, and East localized variations of style can often be further discerned.”[8] The work of each region was different from each other in terms of style. There was no common style followed by each center of company painting because the style of the painting heavily influenced by earlier local traditions. Western transparent water technique and realistic presentation mixed with the local art tradition became a new art form which we can call Company painting. This painting tradition is an amalgamation of Indo-western style.

Murshidabad and Calcutta (now Kolkata) were very prominent centers for Company school of art practice in Bengal. “Calcutta was among the important early production centers, as the site of one of the oldest British trade houses. The city’s most enthusiastic patrons were Lord Impey, chief justice of the High Court from 1777 to 1783, and the Marquess Wellesley, who served as governor-general from 1798 to 1805. Both had collected large menageries and hired artists to paint each of the birds and animals in them.” [9] “Other common subjects from this time were the residences, servants, carriages, horses, and other possessions that Company employees had amassed; Lady Impey was the patron of a number of such scenes.” [10] Mary, Lady Impey, wife of the Chief Justice Sir Elijah Impey was a great admirer and patron of Company painting. She collected huge numbers of company painting and gave the commission to Calcutta based Company painters. “As William Dalrymple points out in the catalogue, ‘Impey and his wife began to collect a menagerie of rare Indian animals, and at some stage in the mid 1770s, the Impeys decided to bring a group of Indian artists – Shaikh Zain ud-Din, Bhawani Das and Ram Das – to paint their private zoo. Using English watercolours on English Whatman watercolour paper, and taking English botanical still lifes as their models, they created an extraordinary fusion of English and Mughal artistic impulses, similar but subtly different from the paintings produced around the same time by Claude Martin’s atelier in Lucknow’. [11]



IMG. 5 [TWO SIDES OF A BENGAL RIVER FISH 1804]

“This painting most likely illustrates a Bengal tongue sole fish (*Cynoglossus cynoglossus*), so-called for its unusual flat shape. The artist who created this work has illustrated two views—top and bottom—of the same creature, executed on paper in pencil and watercolour with traces of gilding. The mottled, scaly surface of the fish’s body is carefully rendered with a subtle metallic sheen, as are its mouth and eyes and the dark spots along the body. The work is from the collection of Marquis Wellesley, governor-general of India between 1798 and 1805.” [12]



IMG. 6 [GREAT INDIAN FRUIT BAT 1777–82]

“This dramatic image is of the great Indian fruit bat (*Pteropus giganteus*) frontally displayed with one wing out-stretched. The body is shown in considerable detail, with the bat’s fur, eyes, curling claws, and wing veins naturalistically articulated. This work is closely related to another image of a bat painted by the well-known artist Bhawani Das, who was trained in Mughal miniature painting and commissioned by Sir Elijah Impey, Chief Justice of Bengal (1774–1782), and his wife, Lady Mary, to make extensive natural history studies at their estate in Calcutta. It was perhaps made by a follower of Bhawani Das who worked in a slightly more naturalistic mode.” [13]

These two images (Img 3 & 4) are quality examples of Company painting from the Bengal region. Detail study, keen observation, realistic presentation, minute detailing are the characteristic features of this painting tradition. Most of these Company painters belong to Mughal miniature Gharana. They adopted the western school of realistic watercolour because of the demands of the Patron. Indian artists learn the western technique and skills only by observation. This kind of paintings has both Indian and western characters. The western influences are light and shade, realistic study, one-point perspective, transparent watercolour medium and Indian influences are linear quality, ornamentation, minute brushwork etc. Though these artists were different from each other in terms of subject matter and skill but the overall tendency of these artists was to achieve western realism. That means the linguistic approaches of these artists are the same.

VI. BENGAL PATA PAINTING

‘The word “Pata” is derived from the Sanskrit word patta which means “a piece of cloth”. Pata or “pot” as pronounced in Bengali means a woven surface, a paper or wooden panel on which painting is done. The artists who do this kind of works are popularly known as patuas; but they are also known as *chitrakars*, which literary means picture makers. It is interesting to note that the term has been adopted as a surname or a cast title. The term “patua” and “chitrakar” are used interchangeably, though the artists generally use the “chitrakar” as their surname’. [14]

Pata chitra is a folk art tradition of Bengal. Traditional caste community of artist called *patua* in Bengal. The patuas come from Midnapur, 24 Parganas, Purulia, Howrah, Hoogly and Bankura districts of West Bengal. Bengal Patachitra is referred to in the *Buddhist literature* in 1st century A.D., in *Haribansha* in 2nd century, in *Abhigyanashakuntalam* and *Malavikagnimitra* in 4th century, *Harshacharita* and *Uttararamacharita* in 6th and 7th-8th centuries respectively. [15] This *patuas* were done their painting mainly on scroll format. These scroll paintings are not for the selling purpose because the culture of artwork collection no existed in villages. They actually use this scroll for audio-visual performance. *Patuas* have gone village to village with their scrolls or *pata* and singing stories with showing those colourful scrolls painting. They want to create an audio-visual experience among the villagers. If the village audiences are satisfied then they contribute little money or crops for their performance. ‘Pata chitra tradition of Bengal can also be seen as a highly effective means of mass communication sourcing its themes from shared myths, religious tales, topical subjects, local happenings and contemporary events’. [16]

The *patas* or scrolls are made of sheets of paper of equal or different sizes which are sown together. Originally they would have been painter on cloth and used to tell the religious stories such as the medieval *Mangal* poem. Today they may be used to comment on social and political issues such as the evils of cinema or promotion literary. Their *pata* painters used natural colours which is available as plants and minerals to them to make pigments for the paintings. The gum of the *Bel* (Wood-apple) fruit and the seeds of tamarind fruit acts as a

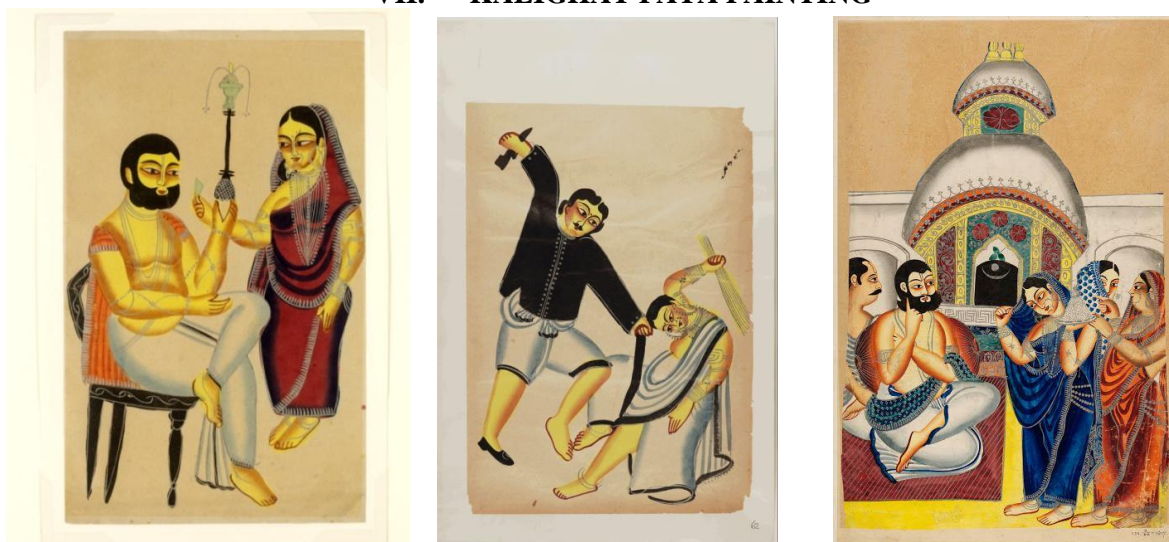
fixative and as a binder. Some of the colours and their sources are; lime powder for white, turmeric for yellow, lamp black or crushed burnt rice for black, pomegranate juice or vermilion paste for red, indigo for blue, broad bean leaves for green. Some artists purchase commercial paints to use in their artworks. Similarly, many artist uses brushes that they make out of goat and squirrel hair while other purchase readymade brushes. Usually the dark outlines are added at the end of the painting process. Cloths are adhered to the back to strengthen the seams. Often old cotton sarees are used as the backing and the patterns of the fabric add visual depth to the patuas presentation. [17]



Img. 7 Pata Chitro by Meena Chitrakar

Compact composition, Colourful presentation, simplified form, flawless lines and strong narrative content are the important characteristic features of Bengal *pata chitro*. This is a folk tradition so that it has followed the same style, technique, format from generation after generation.

VII. KALIGHAT PATA PAINTING



Img. 8, 9, 10- Series of Mahanto & Elokeshi scandal story

Kalighat painting is an extended part of Bengal *pata chitro*. The early nineteenth century in Bengal, self-independent economy system was totally brocked down because of British government policies, like indigo harvesting, different kind of tax etc. For the result of those policies villagers were very badly suffered to harvest their necessary crops and vegetables. The major part of the fertile lands transferred to non-fertile lands because of indigo harvesting. The village *patuas* were indirectly suffered for this issue. In that situation, villagers were not able to contribute money or crops for their performance. A large number of *patuas* moved to Kolkata from the rural Bengal especially from 24 Paraganas and Midnapore and set up stalls outside the Temple for the sake of their livelihood.

They choose Kalighat temple area because from the early 19th century that area was a popular destination for local people, pilgrims and certain foreign visitors as well. With the rise of popularity and fame of the goddess Kali, many of the artisans and craftsmen flocked to Kalighat area to capitalise the new market by selling cheap religious souvenirs to the visitors. In the villages they had painted long narrative stories on scrolls

of handmade paper often stretched to over 20 feet in length and were known as *patachitra*. The *patuas* would travel from village to village, unrolling the scroll a section at a time and singing the stories to their audiences. However, the visitors to Kalighat did not want to buy long scrolls which would take a lot of time to paint. The *patuas* therefore started painting single pictures involving just one or two figures that could be painted quickly with simple forms leaving the background plain and eliminating non-essential details. Kalighat Paintings refer to the class of paintings and drawings on hand-made or more usually on machine-made paper produced by a group of artists called ‘*Patuas*’ in the neighbourhood of the famous Kali temple at Kalighat in between 19th and earlier 20th Century.

According to Mukul Dey [18] the method of drawing was very simple and a family affair. He described “One artist would in the beginning, copy in pencil the outline from an original model sketch, and another would do the modeling, depicting the flesh and muscles in lighter and darker shades. Then a third member of the family would put in the proper colours in different parts of the body and the background, and last of all the outlines and finish would be done in lamp black. They would generally mix these colours with water and gum and mould them on a round stone with a granite muller. Thus a living picture would be drawn in the most simple and apparently easy way as a sort of conjoint family work”. Even the brushes that had been used were made of simple Goat’s tail or squirrel’s hair.

The themes in Kalighat paintings had a wide variety. From the pantheon of Hindu Gods and Goddess to the religious and contemporary social events –nothing left behind as the theme of Kalighat paintings. Contemporary happenings (Like Img. 8, 9, 10- Series of Mahanto & Elokeshi scandal story) were the most interesting subject in Kalighat *pata* painting. These kinds of subjects make a clear demarcation between Bengal *pata* painting and Kalighat *pata* painting.

When German traders found that these pictures had a very great sale throughout the country—for they were sold in thousands all over India—they imitated them and sent back glazed and coloured lithographed copies which flooded the country and drowned the original hand-painted pictures. The old art has gone forever; the pictures are now finding their homes in museums and in the collections of a few art lovers.”[19] W G Archer finally concluded that the final phase of Kalighat paintings ceased to exist after about 1930. [20] Suhashini Sinha has chronologically categorised the Kalighat painting collections of V&A into three broad phases⁵ which can be expanded to the entire genre of Kalighat paintings.

1. Phase I: Dated between 1800 and 1850, which attributes the origins of the genre, and the formation of essential Kalighat Characteristics
2. Phase II: Dated between 1850 and 1890, this set depicts many variations between style, composition and colour and has attained its peak in its class.
3. Phase III: Dates from 1900 to 1930, which shows the end of the tradition with the infiltration of cheap lithographs.

“The Kalighat School of painting is perhaps the first school of painting in India that is truly modern as well as popular. With their bold simplifications, strong lines, vibrant colours and visual rhythm, these paintings have a surprising affinity to modern art”. [21] It is truly a modernistic approach as because contemporary subjects and popular culture was associated.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The era of thousand-year of Bengal painting from the 9th century to the 19th century is a verge area and very difficult to analysis artwork. In this study only concenter the *gharana*, school-based or traditional based painting cultures which are very prominent. As per the evidence, most prominent Gharanas of Bengals are Pala Manuscript painting, Miniature Painting, Company Painting, Bengal Pata Chitra and Kalighat Pata Painting. These five *gharanas* are most prominent and impactful painting traditions in the spectrum of Bengal painting. Pala painting tradition is an illustration of the Buddhist manuscript from the 9th to 12th century. Rhythmic lines, contrast colour application, ornamentation and classical figurative balance enhance the aesthetical quality of this painting *gharana*. In the 16th century after a long gap, Bengal painting found a new *gharana* of painting called miniature painting. Though this *gharana* is not so prominent for Bengal region but this tradition was so powerful in the northern part of India. This *gharana* is an extended part of Mughal miniature painting tradition. Uses of multiple perspectives, exaggeration of the main characters, minute detailing, ornamentation, are the characteristic features of this *gharana*. End of the miniature painting *gharana* at 16th & 17th century Bengal painting turn a new direction with the influence on colonial culture. It’s called Company painting. This painting tradition is an amalgamation of Indian and western style of painting. *Pata* painting tradition is always going parallel with other tradition. *Pata* painting of Bengal is a timeless tradition of folk culture. Compact composition, Colourful presentation, simplified form, flawless lines and strong narrative content are the important characteristic features of Bengal *pata chitro*. The visual language of this art form is totally different from other art traditional of Bengal. The Raw and earthy quality of the *pata* painting creates a clear demarcation from other art forms of Bengal. Early nineteen century Kalighat *pata* painting evolve from Bengal *pata chitro*

because of some strong socio-political reason. Linguistically these paintings are very close to the Bengal *pata chitra* but technique and medium wise its influences from the western school of water colour. So that Company painting and Kalighat *pata* painting both are having indo-western influence.

Bengal painting is always changing their path in terms of visual language, style, medium and technique with the influence of rulers, patrons, socio-political changes and contemporary happenings.

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Img.1 <https://www.ganoksin.com/article/tibet-monasteries-opening-treasure-chambers/>

Img.2 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2008/early-buddhist-manuscript-painting/photo-gallery>

Img.3 Murshidabad Painting, Banglapedia (National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh) Internet: <http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=File:MurshidabadPainting1.jpg#filelinks>

Img. 4 Murshidabad Painting, Banglapedia (National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh) Internet: <http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=File:MurshidabadPainting2.jpg#filehistory>

Img. 5 "Company Painting in Nineteenth-Century India." New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Internet: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/454718>

Img. 6 "Company Painting in Nineteenth-Century India." New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Internet: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/456949>

Img. 7 V&A's collections <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O71297/elokeshi-painting-unknown/>

Img. 8 Prasun Chatterjee, Pinterest <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/530580399823550536/>

IMG. 9 MOHAMMED NASIR, PINTEREST [HTTPS://WWW.PINTEREST.COM/PIN/280700989250147643/](https://WWW.PINTEREST.COM/PIN/280700989250147643/)

Img.10 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patachitra#/media/File:Extrait_de_Chandi_Mangal_de_Meena_Chitrakar_\(Naya_Bengale\)_\(1439706046\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patachitra#/media/File:Extrait_de_Chandi_Mangal_de_Meena_Chitrakar_(Naya_Bengale)_(1439706046).jpg)