



A Critical Review on the Role of Plein Air Paintings in Art Practice

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ABSTRACT:

In this review article, plein air painting is analyzed on the basis of historical evidences. Plein air practice and color theory are closely related to each other since depiction of sunlight is the key part of these studies. This evaluative review comprises the elaboration on early and contemporary plein air practices.

The prominent studies by the previous scholars are analytically explored in this article. The facts are articulated from the collected primary and secondary literature review sources. The prime objective of this analysis is to compare the plein air practice on global and Indian context as well as to highlight the role of plein air paintings in the development of artistic abilities. The history, concepts, meanings, methods, techniques, importance and challenges of plein air paintings are critically discussed here. The article is concluded with potential findings as well as elaborating the scope for future researches.

KEY WORDS: En plein air, colors theory, landscape, outdoor, art education, light and shade, impressionism, sunlight, color perception, Bombay school, perspective,

I. INTRODUCTION:

Plein-air painting is the practice of painting landscapes out from the four walls of the studio. (Britannica, T. 2017) It describes the process of painting more loosely. Plein air means in the open air. (<https://www.artistsnetwork.com/art-subjects/plein-air/plein-air-art/>, Retrieved on 29 December 2021) Depicting the impression of atmosphere in the painting is the prime motto of this style. Plein air painting comprises the creation of the paintings directly from the natural light. It enabled the artist to capture the altering details of weather and light. (Shokorovaa, L. V.,

& Grechnevaa, N. V., 2016) The entire world is one of the most important interpretations in art. The plenty of light, a variety of nature, different spaces & illumination enable the artist to understand the complex reality. Outdoor Sketches differ significantly from classroom practice. (Stephen A., 1997)

Plein air painting is a style of outdoor painting promoted by the Impressionists in the late 1800s who aimed to bring changes in academic realism taught in traditional ateliers. (Gurney J., 2011)

II. WHAT IS PLEIN AIR PAINTING? :

• Concept and meanings

Technically, plein air painting is the act of painting from out of the studio. The term for this kind of paintings came from the French expression "en plein air, means open air". The theory of 'plein air' painting is credited to Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes. (1750–1819) He firstly expounded in an essay entitled 'Reflections and Advice to a Student on Painting, Particularly on Landscape (1800)' where he developed the concept of landscape painting by which the artist paints directly onto canvas within the nature. (Taylor J., 1989) The term 'plein air painting' is also used to refer the absolute depiction of the colorful nature, all palette changes in various natural conditions, with the active role of light and air. (Shokorovaa, L. V., & Grechnevaa, N. V., 2016) This practice endorsed to the accurate representation of the changing appearance of light as weather conditions changes. (Auricchio, L., 2004).

• Difference between landscape and plein air painting :

Plein air is the method of painting the artworks out from the traditional studio. Plein air paintings are



not just landscapes. Many times artists used to take the reference from the nature, they used to create thumbnails or color sketches from outdoor practice and then they used to develop it into the final painting in their studios. These paintings are not plein airs. Plein air paintings are the artworks those are painted completely outside from start to end.

Initially it was the belief that landscape does not require the skills as much as it requires for anatomical drawings, portraiture and studio practice. Hence this type of art was considered as the lowest kind of art practice. Landscape or merely depiction of nature had been used as a subordinate element in the paintings which contribute for denoting the story more powerfully. But as soon as artists came to know the benefits of painting out from their studios, this style of painting gained sound reorganization. And subsequently plein air painting has started to be considered as an individual genre of art which is different from typical landscape paintings. Plein air painting comprises the process of working on the spot for the exploration of sunlight and atmosphere. (Gurney J., 2010)

With the rise of plein air paintings, gradually the elements or incidences presented in the landscapes became dominant however the ever changing light and creation of atmosphere became the prominent aspect in the paintings. (Singh S., 2006)

III. HISTORY OF PLEIN AIR PAINTING :

• Western Art

The history of art world shows that people used to represent nature since ancient times. There are evidences from Egyptian civilizations and early phase (XXI - the beginning of the XVIII century BC) (<https://www.britannica.com/art/plein-air-painting>. Retrieved on 26 December 2021) the prehistoric Greek Artist Apelles (IV century BC) presented the source of light – lightning glow on the face and human body. A picture of one more Greek painter Antifil (300-340 years BC) in his painting “Boy blowing the fire” represented the light source and light effect is spread out. The Ancient frescoes and Byzantine mosaic have attempts to pass light and air environment and colored shadows. The ancient artists studied the appearances of the lightning and used their observations of nature in outdoor practice. (Rostovtsev, N. N. 2000) Though it was not the direct plein air painting, there was the urge to capture the natural light through the work of arts.

The effect of natural light on objects located at the first time in Western European painting. Giotto di Bondone (1276-1337) was the pioneer of implementing the light effects in paintings. (Bartlett, K. R. 1992) High Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci analyzed the natural world, and turned its appropriateness in art, he advised other artists to follow it. (Gabrichevsky A. G., 1934)

Rome had been the art hub since Renaissance. Many artists studied in Rome (<https://www.artfinder.com/blog/post/plein-air/#/> Retrieved on 31 December 2021)

During that time artists, John Constable arrived at Forest of Fontainebleau to paint. This instance gave the birth to the rise of Barbizon School at the beginning of the XIX century. English artist John Constable contributed a lion's share in the development of plein air paintings. (Leslie, C. R. 1964). He developed Art schools for plein air studies. Artistic techniques of Constable became a reference for many art learners from several European schools.

In the 1830s, a group of painters established in Barbizon, became the first generation of French artists who rejected idealized Italian senses of art creation. (Auricchio, L. 2004) Painters including Charles-François Daubigny and Théodore Rousseau left their studios for sketching directly from nature. (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437514> Retrieved on 30 December 2021) In the 1850s, Daubigny constructed a floating studio on a small boat to capture unrivaled views of their banks. Another hub of plein-air painting emerged in Normandy, along the English Channel, in the 1850s. There, Eugène Boudin painted scenes of well-heeled vacationers enjoying the beaches at Deauville and Trouville. (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/438551>. Retrieved on 27 December 2021)

Until the rise of Barbizon School, in mid-19th-century France, it was common to draw rough sketches in the open air and produce final paintings in the studio. This was for the convenience. Before the invention of the collapsible tin paint tubes, painters purchased their colours in the form of ground pigment and mixed them fresh with an appropriate medium. The new tubes filled with ready to use colours, as well as the discovery of a lightweight, portable easel, made it much easier to work at outdoors. The tubes of oil paint made the revolutionary transformation in the painting practices. (Auricchio, L. 2004) Despite these developments, many of the Barbizon painters



continued to create most of their work in the studio. But in late 1860s, Claude Monet, Pissarro and Renoir made plein air practice more popular. This transformation came about from 1881 when Monet started capturing the true effects of light. (<https://www.britannica.com/art/plein-air-painting>. Retrieved on 26 December 2021) “These artists discovered that they could paint in sunlight directly from nature and making use of the vivid synthetic pigments that were available they began to develop a lighter and brighter manner of painting that extended further the Realism of Gustave Courbet and the Barbizon school.” (Malafronte, A., 2009) The term “plein air” became well known right in the moment when Claude painted a series of artworks “Poplars” on the bank of River Epte. He painted on several easels at the same time trying to catch the range of color and light, constantly changing with the time of day and weather. (Forge, Andrew, 1989)

Courtney Jordan stated that “Today plein air painting is a blooming trend in the world of Art. Artists come together for “paint out” activities, many workshops are devoted for plein air practice and painters are finding that outdoor painting is as rewarding and enriching experience.

• History of Landscapes in India

In Indian art, nature is seen in the various forms and in the various styles. The landscape scene in India is one of the most vibrant in the world. Indian paintings share many characteristics with the painting scene. (Ram K., 1996).

Landscapes in Jain manuscripts

Landscape painting appears in the most basic form in the early Gujarati Jain manuscript illustrations. (Singh S., 2006) Most of the times landscape comprised stylized trees, wavy patterns of clouds and stylized hillocks. Initially the manuscript illustrations were on narrow palm leaves and there was no scope for landscape effects but from the fourteenth century onwards when the use of paper introduced into India, these Gujarati-Jain manuscripts were written on the broader paper. Thus there was some scope for landscape illustrations.

In about A.D. 1475 a famous Kalpastura and Kilakacharyakatha came to be painted at the port of Gandhar, on the west coast of Gujarat. Here for the first time we find efforts to indicate a more realistic landscape setting than had ever existed before. (Singh S., 2006) We notice birds flying in the air against the blue and red sky and a water tank below with lives growing in the water. We also see a ship on the waters of ocean with fish swimming. But

by and large landscape settings were of a very limited and formal character in these Gujarati-Jain manuscript illustrations. (Guy, J. 2012).

Lodi School

The next stage of Indian painting was the growth of the Lodi school under the Lodi Sultans in northern India. The Lodis ruled from A.D. 1451 to A.D. 1526. Both in the Lodi school and in the 'Continuation of the Lodi Style' we find landscape effects but still in a formal manner trees are stylized and so also are skies and mountains as they had been in the Gujarati Jain manuscripts. But there is a little more elaboration now such as a forest depicted by three trees and a couple of deer thereon or even more elaborate settings such as Radha shown seated amidst a grove of trees, creepers, flowering plants underneath a black sky with wavy clouds above and four white cranes flying against the dark sky indicating more feeling for landscape than had existed before. (Ghosh, A., 1990)

Mughal Paintings

With the advent of the Mughal School we find more realistic landscapes of forests, mountains, rivers, trees often peopled with birds and animals. Though the artists tried to catch the naturalistic approach in their works, the sense of perspective which can be seen in the European paintings was hardly seen here. The Mughal artists did not paint pure landscapes. There landscapes painted on a variety of themes. Hunting scenes, animals, forest ambience can be seen in the delightful stories. Here the trees became more naturalistic as also various kinds of flora. The highly stylized, decorative trees of earlier periods no longer appeared. (Mika N., 2018)

In many landscapes, during Mughal period, beauty in the nature was depicted. Seascapes, aquatic creatures, cloud forms flashes of lightning, flying birds etc. elements from the nature were illustrated in the paintings. The unique viewing point of the contemporary artists, ‘bird’s eye view’ can be seen in few of the paintings. (Singh S., 2006) Bird’s eye view is to say, as if the artist was positioned high up in the sky and could, like a bird, see an entire landscape though, if the artist had been on the ground he could only have seen what was immediately in front of him. So, for instance, even events taking place in a building or palace or a fortress were depicted in the same picture space as the scenery far beyond the building. (Singh S., 2006)

Rajsthani Miniature painting:



The landscapes in the Rajsthani miniature paintings were not so realistic as they had been in the Mughal school, however they were not that stylized and decorative as in Gujarati and Lodi paintings. About 1680 in Mewar occasionally the pure landscape can be seen.

In the Hadoti area of Rajasthan are depicted in hilly forest settings. Baramasa Painting is the special feature of Rajsthani Miniature Paintings. (Dr. Agarwal R., 2017) It is a depiction of 12 seasons in 12 months of the year. The season and weather can be seen here but it is by arranging the motifs and symbols rather than representing light and colors as we find it in impressionism.

Pahari Paintings

The painters from Himachal Pradesh and Garhwal influenced by pre Mughal Style of paintings. This influence led Pahari painters to depict the scenery of the particular Pahari State to which the artist belonged. Few famous Pahari painters migrated to the palace of the great Sansar Chand of Kangra to paint the landscapes for the art patrons. This indicates that they had not a formal attitude to landscape but sought to depict the hills and river and trees of the very areas in which they were executing their commissions for their royal patrons. (Singh S., 2006)

Colonial and post-Colonial period

Some European painters such as Tilly Kettle, T. Daniell and others came to India and did landscape paintings with romanticized style, this encouraged Company style painting. Whatever was done in British period was for the documentation of Indian Culture rather than painting itself. This depiction was in western representational techniques. (Avchat Shirke M. 2019)

To summarize it can be considered that before British influence, landscape painting was not treated as a formal practice which contains the formal study of colors, sunlight and atmosphere featuring in the paintings. In many of the paintings we find that the artists created the landscapes in a realistic manner through the symbolism and motifs. The scenery, kinds of trees and flowers, summer-monsoon etc. seasons are clearly recognizable. Thus the style of landscapes in Indian miniature painting was not merely photographic and even formalistic, but it is interpretative.

The British contribution is prominent for imparting the formal training to the Indian artists. British opened the art schools in the main cities of our country. According to British approach, Indian artists had lack of scientific knowledge of art and

they were unable to paint natural landscapes in classical way.

The painters who adopted the formal approach of British education of art, painted the pure landscapes and at some extent they became successful in capturing the ambience in plein air paintings. Abal Rehman, A. X. Trinidad, J. P. Ganguli, M. K. Parandekar these are few of the notable artists in this tradition.

The pure plein air painting method came in India through European artists. Before that the role of landscapes or the elements from the nature was merely limited as a backdrop to narrate the occasion in the paintings. (dagworld.com/exhibitions/indian-landscapes-the-changing-horizon/ Retrieved on 28 December 2021)

IV. METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

Plein air practice is depending on the principle 'Paint what you see'. This approach pushed so many painters in Europe in 19th century to depict the impression of nature and light more closely. The use of pure colors, speedy brushstrokes, and loose painterly applications these are the specialties of this style. (Chaudhary, R. K., 2019)

Depicting the same spots again and again at different times of day and under changing weather conditions, artists emphasized how optical effects improved their perception of the world. (Auricchio, L., 2000) For catching up the impression of nature artists applied many innovative techniques. The famous artist Monet captured the real feel of light. He used to carry many canvases at a time into the out-of-doors. He used to paint the same subject at a different time of day; on next days, he continued to work on each canvas in sequence as the proper light appeared. (<https://www.britannica.com/art/plein-air-painting>, 2017) Artists used portable canvases for this. Light weight easels allowed the artists to work comfortably in outdoors. (Stephen A., 1997)

Impressionism and Hudson River School focused on the prominent features of plein air i.e. Tonal qualities, color, loose brushwork, and softness of form. (Bernard D., 1990)

The impressionist created informal compositions with loose strokes of color. They abandoned traditional techniques of perspective, chiaroscuro, and modeling in order to record their experiences as directly as possible. The spontaneous painting approach was the key aspect of this style. (Auricchio, L., 2000)

The invention of pre-made paint tube improved the speed of painting at outdoors. It allowed the flexibility of location. So that artists



could take their artworks outside so easily. In that way, the invention of paint tubes became revolutionary. (<https://www.artfinder.com/blog/post/plein-air/#/> Retrieved on 30 December 2021)

V. IMPORTANCE OF PLEIN AIR PAINTINGS

Working from out from the studio has its own benefits and it plays vital role in achieving professional superiority. (Shokorovaa, L. V., & Grechnevaa, N. V., 2016) In Indian literature Vatsayan enumerates the Shadanga or Six Limbs of Indian Painting in his Kamasutra. 1- Rupabhedha, 2-Pramanani 3- Bhava 4- Lavanya-yojanam 5- Sadrisyam 6- Varnika-bhanga these are the six limbs. The sixth element, Varnika-bhanga elaborates the importance of tools and appropriate colors. It is mentioned that, color is the soul of artwork. The beauty of colour is not only in the colour but it depends on how the artist applies it. A skillful painter magnifies the glory of different tints on the surface with the strength of powerful brush strokes. In the hands of a master artist even ordinary colors appear lively. (Chaudhary, R. K., 2019). According to the scholars, the above stated skill of color application offered through plein air practice. Plein air enriches color perception of the real world, air perspective, and mutual relationship of landscape with manmade objects and space determines knowledge of proportion and artistic ability.

The skills and knowledge gained by plein-air studies improve the properties of painting and composition. This study offers the creative individuality, because in this process the nature itself becomes the mentor for the artist improving visual mastery into the natural environment contributes to the formation to painters of the necessity to create outside the workshop, which is a necessary condition for the development of individuality and professional skills of the painter. (Iarîna S. B., 2017) Freedom in the creative expression is required for effective execution and development of creative skills. Outdoor study imparts the required fineness in art practice. (Vygotsky, L. S. 1956) Drawing from plein air is considered to be a powerful form of art for active perception and it is one of the best ways to implement the theories of color. Outdoor practice has definitely a positive effect on the creative potential of the artist. (Shokorovaa, L. V., & Grechnevaa, N. V., 2016)

VI. THE ROLE OF PLEIN AIR STUDIES IN CURRENT ART EDUCATION

The plein-air work develops skills of quick color applications which is very essential for any artist. It connects with nature develops aesthetic understanding in students. The act of outdoor painting develops the observation skills hence it has become the popular pedagogical tool in the 21st century. Educational purpose in plein-air is to study the nature, color palette according to light and air environment, as well as the finding the appropriate material for future creative work. (Shokorovaa, L. V., & Grechnevaa, N. V., 2016)

Initially drawing from antiques, study from draped figures was the ways to impart the art education. Later on, Bauhaus also had a major impact on art education of India. From its influence, the subjects colour theory and basic fundamentals of design were added in the curriculum of art schools. (Avchat-Shirke M, 2019) Plein air painting is merely the application of color theory. Principles of possession of the landscape painting, applied by the great artist and the scientists in the field of chromatics, psychology and pedagogy of arts, had become imperative components in improving art training methods. They added their inputs in art education. (Iarîna S. B., 2017) The plein air paintings became an example for several students of European schools of art in the 19th century. (Leslie, C. R., 1964)

VII. LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF THE SUBJECT:

The most challenging factor of plein air painting is the environment. Plein air painters have to face the deadline. The artist requires rapid painting ability to catch the ever changing light. Constantly changing illumination creates certain difficulties for painters-newcomers

When painting outside, you have to carry as lightly as possible. An easel is not easy to travel with. Also wind or rain can be the disturbances. When painting from a photo or a rough drawing, you have a limited frame to work with. However, when working in plein air, it's not easy to select the viewpoint, as you get confused with a 360-degree scene of a landscape. Therefore it becomes a difficult task.

When you paint from observation, you'll come across several different light sources, including direct sunlight, Morning light, overcast sky, eveningsky and many more. These types of light- you have to understand for painting realistically. (<https://www.artistsnetwork.com/art-subjects/plein-air/plein-air-art/>, Retrieved on 29 December 2021)



When painters set up easels outside, they put themselves in direct contact with nature., plein air painting creates the different from the studio like choosing a location, rationing the number of supplies to bring, working within a time limit, adjusting to sudden changes in weather, and possibly even testing physical endurance when transporting equipment to a painting site. (M. Stephen, D., 2017)

VIII. CONCLUSION

Artists have been experimenting innovative ideas and expressions constantly. The new experiments contributed in the art field for changing the approaches of painting. Mostly this contribution is not in the form of theory but in the form of practically application. The beginning of plein air painting gave a new dimension to the traditional painting process. Plein air practice was radical practice at its beginning but by the later decades of the 19th-century the theory had been converted into normal artistic practice. Many artists acquire deeper insights from the plein air process even today also.

In Europe, the Barbizon School used plein air painting to create a exclusive French method of landscape painting, whereas the Impressionists used it to explore their interest in painting the changes of day light. Artists like Claude Monet, started working simultaneously on several easels and depicted the variation of color and light constantly changing with the time of day and weather. (Malafronte, A., 2009). Plein air art arrived in India through the travelling of European artists who visited India during the initial period of British arrivals. Before this, landscape was never considered as a painterly depiction of constantly changing atmosphere. In Indian art, landscapes are used as a supporting element in the narration of the event, where as in western art, landscape painting was considered as an individual genre. In Indian miniatures, landscape appears as decorative backdrop. (Singh S., 2006) The story of landscapes in Indian miniature painting is a progression from formalism to realistic rendering; however it is not merely photographic but interpretative. (Avchat-Shirke M., 2019)

Except the artists from Bombay & Bengal School, in India the plein air painting was treated as a formalistic practice. Though it was said to be over pragmatic, its role in the art education cannot be avoided.

The Plein air painting process is like problem solving for artists. It deals with different approaches, imagination and perception. Therefore it helps in improving the skills of study,

analysis, sensitive observation, experimentation, visualization, decision making and actual manifestation. Even though the plein air painting is widely studied subject, the pedagogical qualities of this subject are not much explored. Plein air practice is the key factor of artistic development hence it can contribute largely in art education. This dimension of plein air painting can be focused in further researches.

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