



Art as Social Expression: The Role of Painting in Japanese and Indian Societies

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Abstract

This research paper explores the multifaceted role of painting as a medium of social expression in Japanese and Indian societies, tracing its evolution from ancient ritualistic and religious contexts to its continued relevance in modern cultural life. Through a comparative lens, the study examines how visual art has historically functioned not merely as an aesthetic endeavor but as a vital tool for communicating social values, religious beliefs, community identities, and political narratives.

In India, painting traditions such as Madhubani, *Pattachitra*, Rajput and Mughal miniatures, and temple murals have long been intertwined with social rituals, festivals, caste identity, and devotional practices. Similarly, in Japan, forms such as *emakimono* (picture scrolls), *ukiyo-e*, *byōbu* (folding screens), and *nihonga* have served to reflect the concerns of the court, religious institutions, the merchant class, and the evolving urban public.

The paper investigates themes such as the communal versus individual nature of art production, the role of patronage and class structures, and the impact of painting on the formation of cultural memory and national identity. It further explores the gendered aspects of visual expression and the shifting functions of painting in response to modernization and globalization.

By situating painting within its broader social, religious, and cultural contexts, this study reveals how both Japanese and Indian artistic traditions articulate collective experiences and aspirations. It concludes that painting in both societies serves not only as a mirror of the times but also as an active participant in shaping social consciousness, preserving heritage, and mediating between tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Painting, Painting traditions, *Emakimono* Asian art, Japanese painting, Madhubani painting, Bengal School, *Pattachitra*, *Ukiyo-e*, *Nihonga*, Mughal miniature, Rajput painting, Zen ink painting, Buddhist art, Traditional art.

Introduction:

Painting, as one of the earliest forms of human expression, has long transcended its purely aesthetic function to become a powerful medium for conveying cultural values, religious beliefs, social norms, and collective memory. In societies with ancient civilizational roots like India and Japan, painting occupies a deeply embedded position within the social and cultural fabric. It is not merely a decorative or visual craft but a form of social communication—symbolic, narrative, and often sacred. This study explores how painting in these two rich traditions has served as a mirror to society and, in many cases, as a tool to shape and reinforce it.

In India, painting has historically been intertwined with religion, ritual, and caste-based practices. From the stylized murals of Ajanta and Ellora to the vibrant folk traditions of Madhubani and *Pattachitra*, Indian painting reflects the diversity of its people, beliefs, and landscapes. Paintings were used to transmit epics, mythologies, and ethical lessons to largely oral cultures, often embedded in daily life—on temple walls,

marriage rooms, and religious scrolls. The court paintings of Mughal and Rajput ateliers, meanwhile, captured not only political grandeur but also moments of intimacy, cosmopolitanism, and religious syncretism.

In Japan, too, painting evolved as both an art and a language of society. *Emakimono* (narrative picture scrolls) in the Heian and Kamakura periods depicted court life, religious parables, and historical events, while later forms such as *ukiyo-e* portrayed the floating world of merchants, actors, and geisha in Edo-period urban centers. These artworks reflected shifts in class structure, secularization, and the rise of a consumer society. At the same time, religious painting—particularly Buddhist mandalas and iconography—continued to maintain its significance in monastic and devotional contexts.

The goal of this research is to examine how painting in both Indian and Japanese traditions has functioned as a social institution—not just as a product of individual creativity or elite patronage, but as a living force that mediates between the sacred and the secular, the elite and the popular, the traditional and the modern. Through a comparative approach, this study interrogates how different forms of painting engage with themes of identity, community, belief, and transformation across time.

In doing so, the paper seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of art as a social language, one that is contextually embedded and historically significant. It also addresses how these traditional forms of painting have adapted—or resisted—modern forces such as nationalism, globalization, and digitization, and how they continue to speak to the people in the 21st century.

Historical Context and Cultural Foundations:

Painting traditions in both India and Japan are deeply rooted in their respective civilizational histories, shaped by religious cosmologies, courtly aesthetics, and social rituals. Understanding their historical context is essential to grasp how painting evolved from a sacred and elite art form into a broader mode of social expression.

A. India: A Multilayered Visual Heritage

India's painting traditions date back to prehistoric times, as seen in the Bhimbetka rock shelters (c. 30,000 BCE), but they flourished most vividly with the rise of religious and royal patronage. Ancient Indian art was never divorced from life—it was integrally linked with *dharma* (religious duty), *kāma* (aesthetic pleasure), and *nīti* (social order). Painting served ritualistic purposes in temples and homes, visualized mythologies, and depicted divine cosmologies.

The classical period (c. 2nd century BCE–8th century CE) saw the emergence of sophisticated murals in Buddhist caves at Ajanta and Ellora, where painting was used to narrate Jataka tales and illustrate the path to salvation. Later, the Chola and Vijayanagara temples of South India continued this tradition through stylized murals emphasizing divine forms and epic narratives.

In the medieval period, Mughal and Rajput courts transformed painting into a refined, miniature form of expression. Mughal miniatures synthesized Persian, Central Asian, and indigenous elements, often portraying themes of royal life, nature, and allegory. Meanwhile, Rajput and Pahari schools focused on Hindu deities, romantic themes, and seasonal cycles, reflecting local beliefs and poetic traditions.

Alongside courtly traditions, folk and tribal painting—such as *Madhubani*, *Warli*, *Pattachitra*, and *Kalighat*—flourished in rural contexts. These were often created by women, used during festivals, births, and marriages, and functioned as part of the social and ritual fabric rather than isolated aesthetic objects.

B. Japan: Painting as Aesthetic and Ethical Discipline

Japan's painting traditions have their origins in Chinese and Korean influences that were indigenized through religious and court culture, especially from the 6th century CE onwards. The introduction of Buddhism marked a turning point, as temples became centers for visual storytelling through mandalas, sutra illustrations, and scroll paintings.

By the Heian period (794–1185), Japanese art began asserting its own identity. The narrative scroll or *emakimono* combined text and painting to depict court life, morality tales, and historical accounts, as seen in works like the *Tale of Genji Scrolls*. These were not simply decorative but served a didactic and moral purpose in a highly ritualized aristocratic society.

The Muromachi (1336–1573) and Momoyama (1573–1603) periods saw a flourishing of Zen-influenced painting styles, especially *suiboku-ga* (ink wash painting), which emphasized simplicity, spontaneity, and spiritual insight. Painting became a means of self-cultivation for monks and samurai, aligning with Confucian and Zen ethics.

During the Edo period (1603–1868), with the rise of the merchant class and urban culture, painting shifted toward secular themes. The genre of *ukiyo-e* (pictures of the floating world) depicted scenes of entertainment, beauty, and daily life, serving as a visual diary of urban pleasures. Painting thus transitioned from a religious and elite pursuit to a popular, commercial, and widely accessible form.

C. Shared Cultural Foundations

In both India and Japan, painting emerged from a fusion of religious, philosophical, and material contexts. It was deeply intertwined with literature, performance, ritual, and architecture, and it often served as a collective enterprise, supported by patrons and shaped by community traditions.

Crucially, painting in both societies was not merely "art for art's sake" but functional—educating, moralizing, sanctifying, and entertaining. Whether on temple walls or folding screens, paper scrolls or mud walls, painting acted as a visual script that translated the values and aesthetics of its time into tangible, lasting form.

Painting as a Mirror of Society:

Painting has long served as a reflective surface upon which societies project their values, hierarchies, daily rhythms, and internal transformations. In both Japan and India, the content, style, and context of painting not only reveal aesthetic sensibilities but also mirror the lived experiences, cultural norms, and evolving social realities of their time. Through visual representation, painting functions as both documentation and commentary—a narrative of society written in images.

A. India: The Social Dimensions of the Painted Image

Indian painting traditions, particularly during the Mughal and Rajput periods, developed a sophisticated visual language to represent courtly life, social interaction, and idealized order. Mughal miniatures, for instance, depicted emperors engaged in political dialogue, hunting scenes, or receiving foreign envoys. These images served to construct a visual legitimacy for imperial power and cosmopolitanism, reflecting a world of refined hierarchy, intellect, and etiquette.

Rajput paintings, by contrast, often emphasized Bhakti (devotion), romantic longing, and regional pride. However, even in their devotional focus, they offered insights into rural society, kinship, gender roles, and the connection between humans and nature. Paintings from the Kangra and Mewar schools, for example, portrayed court festivities, seasons, and love stories, indirectly reflecting social norms, emotional ideals, and the integration of the natural environment in daily life.

In the folk and tribal art of India, social commentary takes on a more direct and community-oriented form. *Madhubani* paintings of Mithila often depict weddings, seasonal festivals, and local deities, and are created largely by women within domestic spaces. These works, vibrant and symbolic, are both artistic expressions and social documentation—marking rites of passage, ancestral memory, and the social role of women in rural life.

The Kalighat paintings of colonial Calcutta, emerging from a contact zone of modernity, commerce, and critique, famously depicted not only gods but also bourgeois corruption, urban life, and social hypocrisy, offering biting satire through bold brushwork. Thus, Indian painting has continuously reflected the changing contours of society, from divine idealism to street-level realism.

B. Japan: Painting the Floating and the Formal Worlds

Japanese painting traditions also provide a vivid window into the social realities of their time. While earlier works such as *emakimono* (narrative scrolls) of the Heian period depicted aristocratic life and religious tales, they also served to structure and idealize social hierarchy, showing the elegant, courtly existence of the elite and the moral lessons expected of them.

A more democratized and socially revealing genre emerged during the Edo period (1603–1868), with the rise of *ukiyo-e* or "pictures of the floating world." These woodblock prints portrayed kabuki actors, geisha, courtesans, sumo wrestlers, and cityscapes—effectively documenting the urban culture of the merchant and artisan classes. Artists like Utamaro, Hokusai, and Hiroshige immortalized everyday experiences and entertainment venues in Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto.

This visual culture not only mirrored a thriving commercial and urban society but also challenged traditional power structures by centering the lives of non-elite figures. *Ukiyo-e* represented both aspirational fantasy and realistic snapshots of the time—at once celebratory and subtly critical.

In addition, paintings used in festivals (e.g., *ema* plaques at Shinto shrines) captured local wishes, fears, and hopes, offering grassroots-level insight into communal beliefs and rituals. Even seemingly simple genre paintings were laden with social cues—clothing, posture, gesture, and background architecture—conveying messages about class, gender, and morality.

C. Comparative Insights

While Indian and Japanese paintings emerged from different religious and cultural matrices, both developed a capacity to reflect and comment on social life. In both societies, elite patronage initially dictated content—courts and temples sponsored works that idealized power and religion. Over time, however, both cultures saw a flowering of folk and urban visual traditions that depicted common people and social realities. While women were often subjects of painting (as lovers, goddesses, or courtesans), in folk traditions, especially in India, women were also creators—actively shaping the visual vocabulary of community identity (e.g., Madhubani).

In contrast, Japanese painting—particularly ukiyo-e—reflected complex and often voyeuristic portrayals of femininity within a consumer society. Both traditions balance the grand and the mundane. Indian art moved between epic narratives and ritual scenes, while Japanese painting moved from spiritual scrolls to street scenes. This duality makes both traditions historically rich and socially diverse.

Painting in India and Japan has always been more than a visual pleasure—it has been a mirror to society, capturing its spiritual concerns, class tensions, gender roles, urban expansion, and cultural transformations. Whether on silk scrolls or earthen walls, paper prints or temple columns, these works of art are profound historical documents that speak to the rhythms and ruptures of social life across centuries.

Religious and Ritual Functions of Painting:

Throughout history, painting has served not only as an aesthetic pursuit but as a devotional practice and spiritual medium. In both Indian and Japanese societies, religious worldviews have fundamentally shaped the content, function, and reception of painting. Paintings were—and in many traditions still are—imbued with ritual potency, serving as conduits between the material and spiritual realms, between human communities and divine presence. This section examines how painting operated as a sacred language, a ritual object, and a mode of theological storytelling.

A. India: Painting as a Visual Theology

In India, painting has always been deeply intertwined with religion and cosmology. Whether in temples, palaces, homes, or scrolls, visual art was an essential component of *darśana*—the act of seeing and being seen by the divine. Paintings did not merely depict the gods; they invoked them.

Wall paintings in ancient temples like Ajanta (2nd–6th century CE) and Ellora, as well as in South Indian temples such as Chidambaram and Tanjore, served as visual scriptures, illustrating Jataka tales, epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and scenes from the lives of Hindu deities. These murals enabled illiterate devotees to comprehend complex religious narratives through image, gesture, and symbolism.

Jain and Buddhist traditions produced illuminated manuscripts with finely detailed miniature paintings. These scrolls were ritually read aloud while the illustrations guided meditative visualization. In Vaishnava traditions, painted cloth scrolls like *Pattachitra* were used in temple rituals, serving both narrative and liturgical functions.

In rural India, Madhubani, *Pithora*, and *Pattachitra* paintings continue to be produced as part of religious festivals and life-cycle rituals—marriage, childbirth, harvests. These paintings are created on walls, floors,

or cloths as acts of worship. The painters are not merely artisans but ritual participants, often receiving training through oral and spiritual transmission.

In esoteric Hindu and Buddhist traditions, geometric diagrams such as yantras and mandalas are painted as part of complex ritual processes. These are not representational, but symbolic cosmograms, aiding concentration and spiritual elevation.

Thus, in Indian contexts, painting is frequently ritually activated—it is not just observed but worshipped, meditated upon, and inhabited by the sacred.

B. Japan: Painting as Sacred Narrative and Practice

In Japan, the religious significance of painting is deeply rooted in Buddhist and Shinto traditions, often serving to convey spiritual truths, record sacred legends, and provide meditative focus. While Shinto is aniconic (focusing more on nature and ritual than imagery), Buddhism introduced a rich visual language.

Scroll paintings such as the *Shigisan Engi Emaki* or *Genji Monogatari Emaki* not only narrated stories but served didactic and contemplative functions. Buddhist *emakimono* often depicted the lives of monks, miracle tales, or hell-scrolls (*jigoku-zōshi*) to illustrate karmic consequences and inspire moral reform. These scrolls were displayed in temples during festivals or ritual teachings.

Imported from Esoteric Buddhism (Shingon and Tendai schools), mandalas like the *Taizōkai* (Womb World) and *Kongōkai* (Diamond World) served as cosmic diagrams representing the Buddha's realms. These paintings were used in initiation rites, visualization practices, and temple rituals, forming a central component of monastic devotion.

Zen Buddhism emphasized spontaneity, simplicity, and emptiness, often expressed through monochromatic ink paintings. Artists like *Sesshū Tōyō* or *Hakuin Ekaku* produced images of Bodhidharma, tigers, or landscapes as tools for contemplation, meant to trigger sudden insight (*satori*). These were often created by monks themselves as part of meditative discipline. In Shinto shrines, worshippers offer *ema*—small wooden plaques with painted images or personal prayers. These images may depict gods, animals, or symbolic scenes and act as visual petitions. Such practices reflect the continuity of popular devotional painting as a living tradition.

C. Painting as Liturgical and Performative Object

In both India and Japan, paintings were not passive objects but active participants in ritual life. They were installed in sacred space (temples, shrines, altars). Activated through chanting, incense, and procession, conduits for divine presence (e.g., the invocation of gods into paintings during pujas in India) and tools for moral and spiritual instruction (e.g., hell scrolls in Japan or Bhagavata paintings in India). These works of art transcend the binary of “art versus religion”—they are sacred technologies that mediate between human intention and divine response.

D. Comparative Reflections

Both cultures use painting as a sacred language to represent cosmology and doctrine. India emphasizes color, symbolism, and narrative abundance, while Japanese religious painting often stresses minimalism, atmosphere, and meditative abstraction. In both societies, ritual participation in painting (creation, display, or veneration) is essential to its function. Religious painting has proved resilient—adapting to temple modernizations, popular religious movements, and tourism, while still retaining devotional meaning.

In both Indian and Japanese contexts, painting is deeply embedded in religious life—not as ornament but as ritual artifact, didactic medium, and spiritual vehicle. These religious and ritual functions continue to shape how painting is produced, perceived, and preserved. The sacred, far from being confined to temples or monasteries, permeates the painted surfaces of daily life, ensuring that art remains a living, breathing part of both social and spiritual experience.

Folk and Popular Traditions:

While courtly and religious institutions played a crucial role in developing classical painting traditions, it is within folk and popular visual practices that one can witness painting as a living, collective expression of identity, belief, and everyday life. In both India and Japan, folk painting exists not as a marginal art but as a vital channel through which local cosmologies, oral traditions, social norms, and ritual practices are continuously enacted and transformed. This section explores how painting at the grassroots level has shaped cultural life, often created by and for the community itself.

A. India: Ritual, Resistance, and Storytelling on the Walls

India's folk and tribal painting traditions are incredibly diverse and regionally rooted. These are often non-professional, hereditary, or ritualistic practices, passed down through generations, particularly among women and marginalized communities. Painting here is both spiritual duty and social voice. *Madhubani (Mithila) Painting* is originating in Bihar and traditionally practiced by women, Madhubani painting was originally created on mud walls and floors to mark marriage, childbirth, and festivals like Durga Puja or Chhath. These paintings, dense with symbolic motifs (fish, lotus, peacocks, Shiva-Parvati, Krishna-Radha), serve as both devotional offerings and assertions of cultural identity, especially among Maithil Brahmins and Dalit communities. Post-1960s, this tradition moved onto paper and canvas, gaining national and international attention, yet remaining deeply ritualistic and feminine in spirit.

Warli and Gond Paintings are performed by tribal communities using white rice paste on red mud walls in Maharashtra. It depicts farming cycles, hunting, and communal dances—functions not just as decoration but as ritual acts ensuring fertility and social harmony. Gond paintings, from Madhya Pradesh, similarly combine oral storytelling with vibrant, pointillist patterns that express myths, spirits, animals, and local cosmologies.

Kalighat Paintings reflect urban folk sensibilities Emerging in 19th-century Calcutta. Initially religious in theme (depicting gods and goddesses), they evolved to satirize corrupt priests, colonizers, and nouveau riche elites. These works, often sold near the Kalighat temple, represent one of the earliest forms of popular visual journalism in modern India. These traditions show how folk painting blends ritual, resistance, and aesthetics, enabling marginalized voices to narrate their histories, spiritualities, and social critiques.

B. Japan: Visual Folkways in Shrines and Streets

Japanese folk and popular painting traditions—though less studied than elite forms—offer a vibrant and instructive insight into grassroots religiosity, seasonal rituals, and community-based creativity. *Ema* (Votive Paintings) perhaps the most enduring folk-painting tradition in Japan is the *ema*—small wooden plaques on which people paint or write their prayers and hang at Shinto shrines. These often depict horses (traditionally divine messengers), gods, or symbolic animals linked to specific hopes—health, academic success, marriage. The act of painting or selecting an *ema* is both ritualistic and participatory, allowing laypeople to enter a sacred dialogue with the divine.

Ōtsu-e and Talismans are originated from the town of *Ōtsu* near Kyoto in the 17th century, *Ōtsu-e* paintings were sold to travelers and pilgrims. Simple, colorful, and mass-produced, they portrayed folk deities, demons, or humorous moral scenes, often functioning as amulets to ward off evil. These paintings blurred the line between commerce, devotion, and folk satire.

During seasonal festivals like Matsuri, hand-painted banners, lanterns, and floats often depict legendary heroes, ancestral gods, or dragons—serving a temporary but powerful visual presence in communal space. These images are not preserved as museum art but are meant to be ephemeral, immersive, and emotionally charged. As in India, Japan's folk painting is integrated into daily life, ritual calendars, and community memory, focusing less on individual creativity and more on shared visual vocabulary.

C. Common Threads and Cultural Contrasts

Both India and Japan display striking similarities in how folk and popular paintings function socially. Painting is not separate from religion or daily life—it is embedded in weddings, seasonal festivals, and agricultural. These arts are often collective and generational, produced within families or communities rather than by professional artists. Shared symbols (e.g., animals, deities, plants) communicate layered meanings understood by local audiences. Folk painting has shown great adaptive strength, moving onto new media (paper, cloth, digital) without losing its core meaning.

However, the differences are also notable. Indian folk painting tends to be more narrative and mythological, with a stronger focus on epic storytelling and goddess worship. Japanese folk painting often leans toward symbolic minimalism, humor, or protective purposes, and is frequently ephemeral or ritual-disposed (e.g., *ema*, talismans).

Folk and popular painting traditions in India and Japan offer an indispensable view of art as life—not as elite production or static heritage but as dynamic, living, communal practice. These traditions reaffirm painting's ability to connect generations, enact belief, and express identity in ways that are at once spiritual, social, and creative. In contrast to museum-bound art, folk painting lives in courtyards, shrines, festivals, and prayers—infusing society with its rhythm, color, and voice.

India: The Patron's Brush—Court, Temple, and Empire:

In India, systems of patronage have played a crucial role in determining the function, location, and message of paintings. From the early cave temples to Mughal palaces, the relationship between art and power has remained intimate and instrumental.

A.1. Temple Patronage

In ancient and medieval India, rulers and wealthy elites sponsored murals in Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain temples, not only as acts of devotion but also as demonstrations of piety, legitimacy, and cultural superiority. Temples like Ajanta, Ellora, and Chidambaram were artistic megastructures financed by kings and merchants, with murals illustrating religious narratives, dynastic myths, and cosmological visions. These painted environments affirmed the divine sanction of political authority and served as pilgrimage centers reinforcing ruler identity.

2. Mughal and Rajput Court Patronage

Under the Mughals (16th–18th century), painting became a royal enterprise. Emperors like Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan employed court ateliers (*karkhanas*) composed of Indian and Persian artists. Themes ranged from battle scenes and court ceremonies to flora, fauna, and Sufi mysticism. These images performed both imperial control and cultural cosmopolitanism, situating the emperor as both warrior and connoisseur. In Rajput courts, painting expressed regional identities and religious affiliations—kings portrayed as avatars of gods or protectors of dharma.

3. Colonial and Nationalist Shifts, during British rule, patronage systems transformed. Colonial officials and orientalist sponsored "Company paintings"—hybrid styles that served colonial documentation and ethnographic classification. In reaction, nationalist movements fostered the Bengal School, led by Abanindranath Tagore and others, as a revivalist counter to Western realism. Here, patronage shifted to cultural institutions and the state, signaling the arrival of modern ideological art.

B. Japan: Painting Under the Shadow of Power

In Japan, too, painting developed within structured systems of patronage, particularly from the imperial court, samurai clans, religious institutions, and later, the merchant class. Painting in Japan was not merely a record of culture—it was a tool to shape, discipline, and aestheticize power.

1. Imperial and Aristocratic Patronage, During the Heian period (794–1185):

Painting was cultivated in the courtly setting as a refined visual extension of aristocratic poetry and prose. Works like the *Genji Monogatari Emaki* were privately commissioned and reflected nobility, courtly decorum, and the aesthetic of *mono no aware* (the pathos of things).

2. Zen and Warrior Patronage

In the Muromachi (1336–1573) and Momoyama (1573–1603) periods, the Ashikaga shoguns and daimyo lords sponsored monochrome ink paintings influenced by Chinese Song traditions. This served a dual function: promoting Zen discipline and samurai virtue, while also reinforcing the aesthetic taste and cultural dominance of the warrior elite. Artists like *Sesshū Tōyō* were officially sponsored, with their works adorning temples and castles, creating a visual language of martial spirituality.

3. Edo Period and Merchant Patronage

During the relatively peaceful Edo period, political control was centralized, and social mobility restricted—but economic power shifted to the *chōnin* (townspeople). The rise of ukiyo-e reflects this change: no longer

courtly or monastic, these woodblock prints were funded by urban publishers and popular patrons, depicting actors, courtesans, eroticism, and city life. Artists like *Hokusai* and *Utamaro* became celebrities, but also navigated censorship and ideological control under the Tokugawa regime. The content was popular, but its production was tightly monitored.

C. Visual Power: Control, Access, and Censorship

Across both cultures, painting was used to assert class superiority and spiritual legitimacy, to propagate ideology—be it religious, imperial, or nationalist and to regulate who sees what: access to art often mirrored access to power. In India sacred paintings hidden in inner sanctums or private court collections however, In Japan restricted viewing of Zen scrolls or elite *emakimono*.

Moreover, systems of censorship and iconographic control emerged in India's colonial regime often discouraged "dangerous" nationalist symbolism in art and Japan's Tokugawa shogunate censored politically subversive ukiyo-e themes, such as criticism of samurai or erotic excess.

D. Shifts in Modern Patronage

With the advent of modernity and globalization, the locus of power in painting has changed. State, museum, and market patronage now dominate. Both countries witnessed the museumization of traditional art, sometimes detaching it from ritual and social life and contemporary artists engage with patronage critically, often questioning the very systems that once shaped their practice.

Painting in India and Japan has always been a politically and socially charged medium, serving as a canvas for the performance of power. Patronage, while enabling great artistic achievement, also functioned as a system of cultural regulation, dictating whose voices were seen and whose stories were painted. Whether through temples, courts, shrines, or publishers, the brush has often belonged not only to the artist—but to the forces that commissioned, funded, and legitimized it.

Modernity and Transformation:

The advent of modernity—signaled by colonialism, industrialization, Western contact, and the rise of the nation-state—posed both challenges and opportunities for traditional painting in Japan and India. This period marked a turning point in which centuries-old visual practices encountered new artistic paradigms, technologies, and ideologies. Painters and patrons were compelled to reimagine the role of art: from a ritual object or elite possession to a national symbol, personal expression, or market commodity. This section explores how modernity reshaped painting's medium, message, and meaning in both societies.

A. India: Between Revival and Reinvention

1. Colonial Disruption and Hybrid Styles

The British colonial encounter significantly altered India's artistic landscape. Traditional systems of patronage—royal courts, temples, and artisan guilds—declined, while colonial officials and orientalist scholars sponsored new forms of artistic production such as the Company School. These paintings combined

indigenous styles with European realism, perspective, and documentation techniques, turning art into a bureaucratic and ethnographic tool.

2. The Bengal School and Nationalist Aesthetics

In the early 20th century, artists like Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, and Gaganendranath Tagore initiated a revivalist movement known as the Bengal School, which sought to counter colonial influence by returning to Ajanta murals, Mughal miniatures, and Japanese wash techniques. Art became a nationalist project, expressing Indian spiritualism, swadeshi ideals, and cultural unity.

At Santiniketan, under the guidance of Rabindranath Tagore, painting was envisioned as a synthesis of tradition and innovation, drawing on folk art, Asian aesthetics, and modern thought. This laid the foundation for a modern Indian visual identity, distinct yet rooted.

3. Contemporary Adaptations and Global Presence

In the post-independence era, Indian painting diversified further. Artists like M.F. Husain, Jamini Roy, Arpita Singh, and Bhupen Khakhar integrated folk motifs, mythological themes, and urban angst with modernist and postmodernist styles.

Meanwhile, traditional painting forms such as Madhubani, Gond, and *Pattachitra* underwent a transformation—becoming museum objects, gallery commodities, and instruments of cultural diplomacy, often supported by NGOs and government initiatives. This institutionalization preserved the form but sometimes estranged it from its ritual roots.

B. Japan: Continuity Through Innovation

1. Meiji Modernization and the Nihonga Movement

Following the Meiji Restoration (1868), Japan embarked on a rapid program of Westernization and modernization, importing European techniques, oil painting, and academic art instruction. This led to a crisis of cultural identity—should Japanese painting emulate the West or reaffirm its own traditions?

Artists and critics like *Okakura Kakuzō* and *Yokoyama Taikan* responded by establishing *Nihonga*—a movement that retained traditional techniques (ink, mineral pigment, scroll format) while engaging with modern themes and nationalist sentiment. *Nihonga* became a state-sponsored visual ideology, aligning with Japan's ambitions of cultural uniqueness amid imperial expansion.

2. Avant-Garde and Postwar Reconfigurations

The 20th century also witnessed the rise of avant-garde painting, influenced by European modernism, American abstract expressionism, and Zen aesthetics. Artists like *Tōgō Seiji*, *Yoshihara Jirō* (founder of Gutai), and *Hirai Tatsuoki* pushed the boundaries of painting by emphasizing performance, spontaneity, and anti-traditionalism.

At the same time, painters like *Hirayama Ikuo* used traditional modes to comment on nuclear trauma, Buddhism, and global peace, demonstrating how traditional aesthetics could serve modern ethical imperatives.

3. Contemporary Expression and Cultural Export

Today, Japanese painting includes everything from manga-inspired canvases to minimalist Zen expressions. Traditional motifs (cherry blossoms, waves, Mount Fuji) continue to serve as global cultural icons, while painters and designers contribute to a global visual culture shaped by both heritage and innovation.

C. Shared Themes in Transformation

Tension Between Tradition and Modernity: Both cultures grappled with the need to preserve the spiritual and cultural essence of traditional painting while adapting to modern forms, audiences, and ideologies. **Nationalism and Visual Identity:** Painting became a tool for national self-definition, whether through the Bengal School in India or Nihonga in Japan. **Institutionalization and Commodification:** Both traditions witnessed a shift from ritual and communal contexts to museums, galleries, and markets. Folk artists, once creators of ephemeral ritual art, now produce for urban buyers and global collectors. **Modern Technology and Media:** The digital age has introduced new platforms (NFTs, digital exhibitions, anime/fusion art) where traditional aesthetics are remixed for contemporary consumption, often at the cost of context and depth.

The experience of modernity in India and Japan transformed painting into a dynamic arena where the past and present, local and global, sacred and secular continue to collide and converge. Despite challenges, both traditions have demonstrated resilience, reinvention, and cross-cultural creativity, ensuring that painting remains not a relic of the past but a living force shaping cultural imagination in the modern world.

Comparative Insights and Thematic Parallels:

Though arising from distinct cultural, religious, and historical contexts, the painting traditions of India and Japan reveal remarkable convergences and contrasts when viewed through the lens of social function. Both cultures have historically positioned painting as a medium of ritual, power, and communal expression, though their formal vocabularies, patronage systems, and aesthetic values diverged significantly. A comparative study illuminates the universal capacity of painting to serve as social text, while also highlighting the cultural particularities that shaped its trajectory in each region.

A. Shared Functions of Painting in Social Life

1. Religious and Ritual Use

In both India and Japan, painting emerged as an extension of religious devotion and ritual practice: Murals, scrolls, and folk paintings served to narrate epics, honor deities, and consecrate domestic and temple spaces. From Ajanta frescoes to Madhubani walls, the act of painting was often a spiritual offering. Buddhist mandalas, *emakimono* scrolls, and Zen ink paintings were designed for meditative, didactic, or ritual purposes. Painting was also central to shrine offerings, such as ema plaques. In both contexts, painting was seen not merely as an object but as a sacred process, endowed with spiritual potency.

2. Social Documentation and Reflection

Painting functioned as a mirror of social realities. India's Kalighat and Company paintings captured urban transformations and class tensions. Japan's ukiyo-e depicted Edo-period entertainment culture, gender dynamics, and shifting class hierarchies. Visual art, especially in popular forms, thus served as a non-verbal sociology, chronicling everyday life, moral concerns, and public imagination.

3. Community and Folk Expression

Both cultures fostered strong folk-art traditions, often rooted in rural or ritual life: Indian traditions such as Madhubani, Warli, Gond, and *Pattachitra* are practiced collectively, often by women, and embedded in festival cycles and life events. Japanese folk practices like *Otsu-e*, *ema*, and festival banners are tied to regional beliefs, protective functions, and communal celebrations. In both cases, these traditions affirm that painting is not only about aesthetic excellence, but about cultural continuity and collective memory.

B. Points of Contrast and Divergence

1. Aesthetic Philosophy and Form

Indian painting tends to emphasize narrative richness, symbolic density, and vibrant color, often connected to storytelling and mythological elaboration. Japanese painting, particularly influenced by Zen and minimalism, often values simplicity, negative space (*ma*), and the suggestive gesture, creating a sense of quietude and contemplation. These stylistic differences reflect deeper philosophical orientations: India's expressive metaphysics vs. Japan's aesthetic restraint and impermanence (*wabi-sabi*, *mono no aware*).

2. Gender and Artistic Agency

In India, especially in folk art traditions, women have played a central role as both creators and preservers of visual language (e.g., Mithila women in Madhubani). In Japan, painting has historically been a male-dominated practice, particularly in elite and Zen circles. However, recent scholarship has begun recovering women's contributions in *ukiyo-e* and devotional art. This contrast speaks to different gendered relationships with visual culture and domestic spirituality.

3. Patronage and Institutional Structure

Indian art historically relied on court, temple, and later colonial or nationalist patronage, with frequent shifts depending on political changes. Japanese art, while also court- and temple-based, underwent an earlier commercial transition, particularly with *ukiyo-e*, where merchant publishers and consumers played a major role. Thus, while both systems intertwined art and power, Japan's earlier commodification led to a more democratized popular art economy, whereas Indian popular painting retained stronger ritual and devotional dimensions.

C. Adaptation to Modernity and Globalization

Both traditions experienced crises and renewals during modernization:

India responded with the Bengal School, Santiniketan, and a folk-art revival. Japan developed *Nihonga* to preserve tradition, while embracing avant-garde experiments. In contemporary times, traditional art in both cultures has become a site of heritage politics, market commodification, and global diplomacy. Yet, artists continue to rework traditional motifs in digital media, installation, and political art.

The painting traditions of India and Japan, while evolving within unique cultural matrices, share a common core: the use of visual language as a means of social and spiritual communication. Whether carved on temple walls, brushed onto rice paper, or printed for a festival, painting has served as a mirror, mediator, and message-bearer—articulating the values, tensions, and hopes of society.

The comparative study not only enriches our understanding of each tradition but also affirms the universal human impulse to see and be seen through art, to paint our stories onto the surfaces of shared life.

Conclusion:

This study has sought to illuminate the profound and multifaceted role of painting in the social life of India and Japan—two ancient cultures with rich yet distinct artistic trajectories. Far from being merely decorative or contemplative, painting in both societies has historically functioned as a vital social institution, embedded in ritual life, political authority, communal identity, and cultural memory.

From temple murals and mandalas to *ukiyo-e* prints and Madhubani walls, painting has served as a visual language of the sacred, a mirror of societal structures, and a platform for popular expression. In the realm of religion, both Indian and Japanese traditions infused paintings with spiritual power, treating them as objects of veneration, meditation, and moral instruction. Through folk and festival practices, communities transformed painting into a participatory act—not confined to elite spaces but lived and shared in the rhythms of everyday life.

At the same time, the relationship between painting and power was evident across both cultures. Patrons—from kings and priests to merchants and modern states—have shaped what was painted, how it was painted, and who could see it. In doing so, they turned visual art into an instrument of ideological control, but also of cultural negotiation. Artists have long balanced the expectations of patronage with the demands of personal, religious, or social truth.

The onset of modernity introduced both rupture and reinvention. In India, the nationalist response led to a reimagining of painting as a vehicle for spiritual resistance and cultural pride. In Japan, modernization spurred hybridization: the emergence of *Nihonga*, and later, avant-garde experimentation. In both cases, traditional and folk arts were institutionalized, commodified, and globalized—sometimes at the cost of their original ritual or communal context, but also with new possibilities for visibility and influence.

Ultimately, painting in both cultures has been far more than a visual pleasure. It has been a mode of thinking, a form of dialogue, and a tool of world-making—an enduring expression of how societies understand themselves and their place in the cosmos. As we continue to navigate global modernity, these traditions remind us of the deep human need to give form to the invisible, to preserve memory in pigment, and to express the collective spirit on the canvas of culture.

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