

Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur

National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL)

Course Title

Visual Perception and Art: A survey across the cultures.

Lecture – 13

Traditional art: India

by

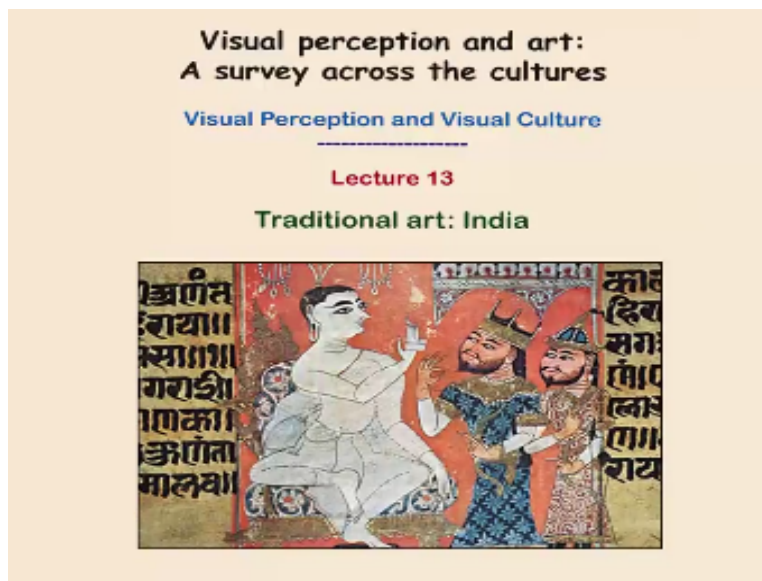
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Visva – Bharati

Hello viewers welcome to MOOKE online course on visual perception and art a survey across the cultures.

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This is the 13th lecture and today we shall be looking at traditional Indian art and basically we will try to make a sense of how traditional Indian art created a visual culture of its own through its artworks.

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Even a cursory look at any random examples of traditional Indian art be its cultural painting, initially evokes a couple of things one, when you look at an example like this for example because of the accuracy of the represented objects or figures for example when you look at these birds they give you an idea that these objects were very faithful to nature very faithful to the living creatures and no doubt about that.

On the other hand when you look at the different stylistic and structural components of these artworks you also have a feeling.

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That everything may not be so realistic as it appears in the first glimpse, thirdly in many cases what is un-mistakably there is a great amount of impaction a great amount of feeling towards the subject or towards the object that has been represented or depicted.

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You also chance upon examples from traditional Indian art examples which are very complex in nature because not only that they tell you stories and the stories are very complex and multi-layered also because for example this painting belongs to the Mughals period and this painting was painted like many other hundreds of paintings during the Mughal period as the Mughal Court, highly under the supervision of the patron and these paintings reflect the court culture which itself was highly grand and complex full of aspirations.

And definitely the paintings were meant to reflect those elements which were there in the general visual culture of the court itself.

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Then from a similar kind of historical context not exactly Mughal but Rajput paintings and also it is a quote painting yet in this painting there is a simplicity in the depiction compared to the earlier one where you saw very complex composition a huge amount of details are rendered whereas in this painting there is less detailing and the compositional structure is very simple so it does not necessarily mean that if it is a court painting it has to be very complex in nature the painting a painting can be very simple despite the fact that it is the product for court culture. So it depends on the, what kind of aspiration and visual culture is in fault and what kind of visual perception is involved in the way one looks at a painting where one looks at the very function and meaning of the existence of painting.

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Then you also have this factor of material materiality particularly in traditional Indian sculpture played a very important role, of course there are factors like subject matters like the content like a particular objective or aim why a purpose why you are doing this particular sculpture having said that, the material quality if it is a stone or a bone whatever it is it does play a very crucial role in conceiving a particular sculpture.

And also in executing now here you are looking at the statue of a king a very bold and powerful King and in order to express the boldness of this character in order to express the uprightness of this character in order to express the royal power of this character the sculptors used the stability of the stone itself, so this is a very interesting kind of visual perception where an artist uses or utilizes the character of the material itself to convey the character of the figure you are representing.

So the strength and power of the king becomes synonymous with the strength and power of the stone as a material.

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Or for that matter this one this is very famously known as the statue of the headless Kanishka or the headless statue of Kanishka the great push on a king even if you do not get to see the head because this is how we found it still looking at the rest of the figure the body the posture the way the figure is standing with two legs slightly apart from each other I mean forget about the source and other weapons simply.

Look at the body the torso the very execution it evokes enormous strength and power which comes not only from a symbolic representation of the body but it also comes from the medium that is used to execute this and here like the previous one once again is stool a very, very reliable medium or material for these sculptors to convey this sense of strength and power.

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Then you have a slightly different medium like terracotta which is basically clay and later kind of fired in furnace now terracotta being a very, very soft and malleable material the sculptor of the artist has enormous scope of lean with the medium because it is very soft because it quickly kind of reflects the impression of your fingers or hands on the clay and clay has this wonderful character of not only responding to the pressure of your hands and fingers.

But also it has a wonderful kind of character of say an ability to hold that response, so the moment you make an impression on the clay the soft wet clay it is going to remain there forever unless you raise it off. So this softness and malleable character of the clay also becomes a part of the visual perception in which these terracotta artists are creating these wonderful expressions of these figures placed on the terracotta temples mainly in Bengal and other places.

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And another important aspect to understand the relationship between the visual perception and the visual culture in the context of Indian art is to pay attention to the narrative aspect of Indian art not all Indian artists narrative there are many examples of Indian art which are iconic in nature of course even in an icon there is a story but in iconic sculpture or the iconic images in painting their stories are not so conspicuous they are not so explicit it is implicit within the iconography of an icon.

But there are many examples of explicit narrative sculptures and paintings like this one this particular relief panel from the baluth, Buddhist sculpture which was a part of a stupa that belong to the Shinto period is actually a storytelling composition though told in a very brief synoptic symbolic manner but the attempt is actually to convey the particular story and in this case it is all about the birth of Buddha.

And you can see the elephant overing above Maya Devi mother of Bhutan and she is lying on the court and then you have a few attendants seated right beneath or beside the cot and rest of the details of the story are not told here in a very detailed or explicit manner but this synoptic narrative this brief narrative composition could immediately provide the clues to the worshiper to the devotee to the visitor who knows a little bit about the Buddhist stories.

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By enlarge throughout Indian art we see a number of examples where narrativity or narrative elements are shaping not only the visual perception that is reflected in their art forms but also in the visual perception that is reflected in the visual culture of a particular period for example this one in this pre Mughal painting you can see once again there is an attempt to tell your story that how this man below is trying to elope with his beloved who is living in a palace upstairs.

And how right next to that bold man the hero you see a sort of a security guard person who is who is supposed to take care of the princess and everybody else but instead he is looking the other way around as if to enable these two people to run away from the palace I mean you can read the story actually provided you know a little bit about the context. But the point is that how this craves to tell you a story is shaping the visual language of the paintings and also the culture.

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Now this famous scene or an event episode from the life of Krishna when Krishna was slaying aghasura is depicted here and the visual perception in the context of a narrative painting is such that the painter does not hesitate to show aghasura twice in the same painting though there were no two aghasura there was just one aghasura who was subjugated and killed by Krishna later on but why the painter has to show her shudder twice.

Just to show slightly two different moments from the same incident so that needs a slightly an alteration of a visual perception because we know in our normal visual perception we see one object just once at one particular moment we cannot see that object appearing twice right in front of our eyes but the painter makes aghasura appear twice right in front of our eyes in the same frame just in order to give some moments of passage from one particular point of the narrative to the next point.

So this is how the visual perception visual is the visual language and style of storytelling is changing in Indian art.

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Similarly when you look at this wonderful relief medallion from Amravati you once again see a similar kind of visual device is being employed here though when you go by the story it is all about one particular elephant who was a mad elephant who was called Nalagiri elephant and he was creating havoc and there were a lot of chaos in the town and ultimately Buddha comes and subjugates him.

But then why the same elephant has to be shown twice in the same circular frame the reason is same the logic is same because you are now employing a different kind of visual perception in order to convey the story through this art form if you have stick if you are sticking to one particular visual perception that know when you see one object at one particular moment you see it only once you cannot show it twice then you cannot do this thing. See in order to recreate technician in your art form be it painting or sculpture.

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Space, in Indian traditional art was always conceived as something flexible and non-specific.

Space has always lent itself to be used as an ever-changing, fluent phenomenon, to suit varying purposes.

That is why, Indian artists have never hesitated to paint or carve on the most unusual spaces and surfaces like Ajanta or Mamallapuram.



You take certain liberties from the usual visual perception or the perceptual experiences so space in other words in Indian traditional art was always conceived of something flexible and nonspecific Indian traditional artists have always played with the notion of space in the most exercising a great amount of freedom and at the same time they have deliberately kept the space very nonspecific which will enable them to play with the space.

So space has always lent itself to be used as an ever-changing fluent phenomenon to suit varying purposes that is why Indian artists have never hesitated to paint or carve on the most unusual spaces and surfaces like Ajanta or Mamallapuram here you see a particular spot in Mamallapuram where even this bare open huge rock surfaces were used happily by the mobile the Poonam sculptors to create their artwork.

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Then in Ajanta you have this strange but perfectly beautiful caves carved inside this monolithic rocks and then you have sculptors and painters working together to adorn the walls to adorn the pillars to adorn even the ceilings.

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So because of this motion of space the space is something that is not fixed that is not specific space is something that you can play with you can make it very, very flexible this very notion and a great fate in this notion help have always helped the Indian traditional painters to use and go for a slightly altered visual perception where space does not dominate but you recreate space at every moment.

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One more photographer magenta what now looks like a perfectly finished and well decorated fasad of one of the caves in Ajanta was at one point of time nothing but a bare monolithic Rock, see in order to even conceive to imagine that this rock surface could be turned into a very well decorated elaborate facade needed a different kind of visual perception where imagination and flexibility of space laid a very crucial role.

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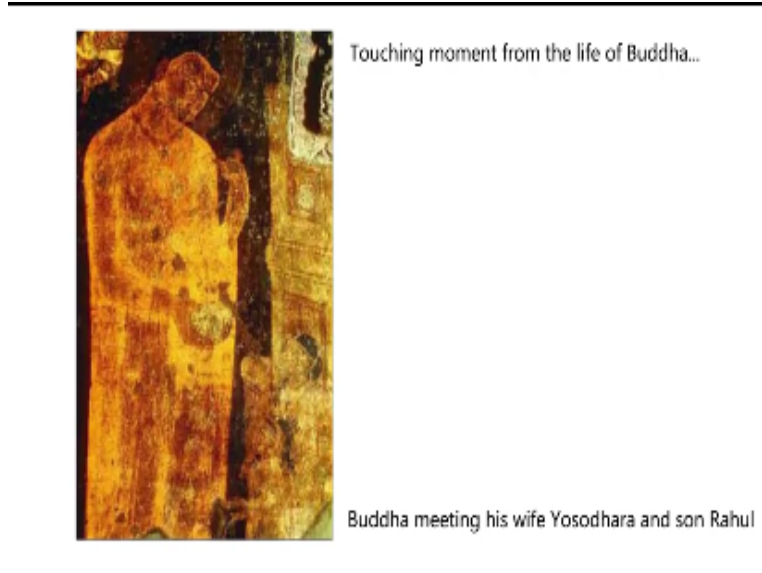


A Sample of Some Ajanta Cap Styles

At the same time when you look at the paintings inside Ajanta you will be taken aback not only by the skills the painterly skills that you see across the walls but also by the observation scale. So if we are always emphasizing on the alternative visual perception if we are always emphasizing on the idea of a different visual perception alternative visual perception nonspecific visual perception imaginative visual perception then how come in this particular painting on this particular example you see depiction of people each having its own characteristic and cultural features.

Which only goes to shame that Ajanta painters were very, very observant artists, so the visual perception in Indian traditional art has a peculiar mixture a combination on the one hand you do have imagination, freedom, nonspecific, notion of space, and color on the other hand you observe the life you observe the people you observe their social and cultural characteristic features very keenly and you arrive at a visual language which enables you to incorporate all these factors.

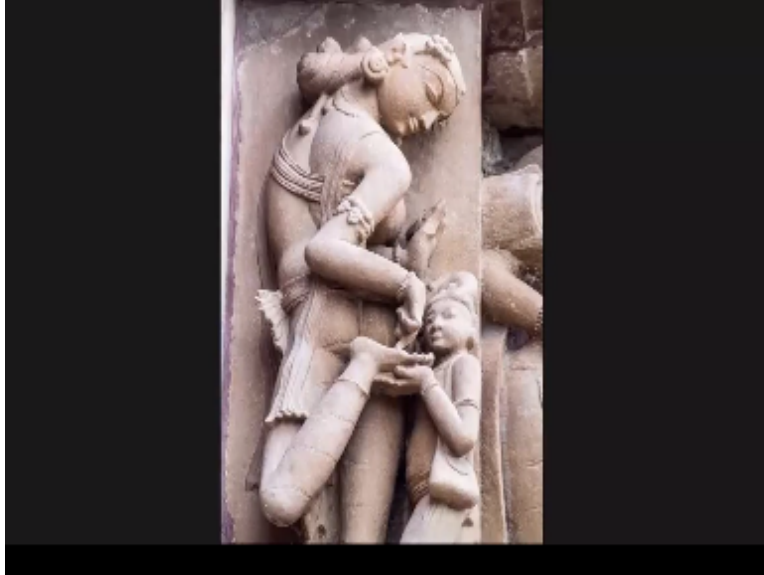
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That is why it is possible for them along with a plethora of symbolic and iconographic elements in Ajanta along with narratives imaginary narratives from Buddhist life and Jathe Kettles you also have very human moments depicted in Ajanta painting like this one when Buddha was meeting his wife Yashodhara and son Rahul after many, many years since he left his palace.

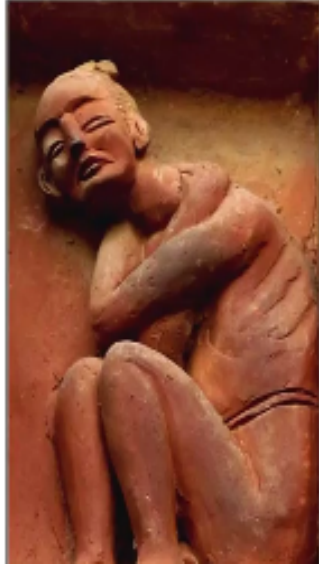
So it is possible then for the traditional Indian artists to move back and to create a space where he can combine the nonspecific imaginary elements of visual perception with something that is very specific something that is anchored in real life and real emotion.

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Then you have very imaginary figures in many examples of Indian art but when you look at these imaginary figures you feel as if these figures have just arrived from the life around at that time. So once again this is also a brilliant example of not only of this affinity between life and art but also when you look at the figure itself the posture this very strange and complex posture is also possible only when the sculptor has observed real-life real human figures real Anatomy very, very keenly very carefully.

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Or for that matter this terracotta figure, the entire expression this very pathetic expression is possible because the artist had observed the person and their emotions very closely.

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Or this one.

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Even when a sculptor has to create an imagery of a woman living through a book you can see that how with one medium that is terracotta the sculptor is trying to address different kinds of materiality it could be the skin that is human body it could be the cloth that she is wearing it could be the pages of a book that she is living through. Now once again in it us following a very realistic mode what the sculptor is doing that is suggesting the material quality of each of these elements without going for a very straightforward realistic depiction.

So when we talk about the visual perception of Indian art the visual culture that provides a support system to this visual perception and visual art we always need to keep in our mind that how the cultures and painters all over India have always been trying to strike that balance between what is very tangible what is really touchable and what is actually very suggestive and not so specific.

So specificity of a visual experience combined with the non specificity of another visual experience it's something that the Indian traditional artists have always been trying to explore.

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So in a place like Mamallapuram you have imaginary mythical beings along with this very real life creatures in this case these animals these monkeys in a position and in a kind of gesture executed so warmly with so much of empathy and tangible kind of feeling that it almost evokes a feeling that these are real monkeys simply replaced with some stone, no mind you stole itself particularly the kind of stone the granite stone used in Mahabalipuram was a very, very hard stone.

So to transform a hard stone like granite into something very tactile tangible and soft itself was a difficult task but at the same time when you go very close to these figures you lose track of that soft sensibility of the monkey figures and you your attention is drawn more and more towards the porous soft surface of the stone.

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The question is how does a painter manage both distance on the one hand there is the strong presence of materiality another other hand there is also this very strong presence of the wall tangible tactile presence of life, for example this one it looks very decorative almost like a pattern from a design but when you look at this creature very closely there is an accurate sense of the presence of the real creature or this one for that matter.

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The turkey a very, very exotic bird or the Mughal emperor and he got it painted and obviously to satisfy the particular objective of the painting the painter had to observe and study that chameleon dis turkey or for that matter this zebra very, very keenly.

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So observation that is real life observation also played a very important role in shaping the visual perception of Indian traditional art along with this element of non objectivity and non specificity. So both these things could be used in one single painting like this one.

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This particular painting of larch hoot school but specifically from Kota, you can see that the composition looks little fabricated and reconstructed but this tremendous force with which this tiger is running a cross through the forest was not possible for the painter to show unless he has really, really observed the real Tigers in real setting very well.

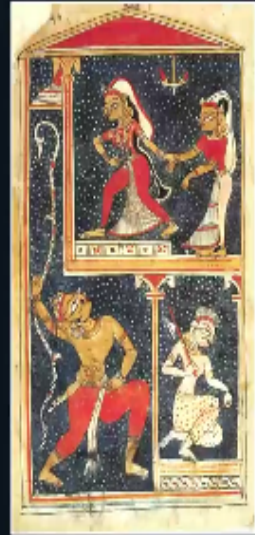
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Or for that matter when the painter is trying to depict a very, very fearsome and a violent fight between the two elephants.

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Real life observations and imagined visuals –
Indian art excelled in both!



So real-life observations and imagined visuals Indian art excelled in both.

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So that is why in a painting like this when the birth of Jahangir is being celebrated you it is possible for the painter to include all kinds of elements in one single painting by opening up the space by not adhering to one-point perspective but by creating multiple perspectives in the same space and this is again another very important feature of many Indian paintings.

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And sculptures where we that instead of a single point perspective artists are using multiple perspectives as if the we were along with the painter is constantly moving observing and depicting the incident of the situation. And that is the reason why what looks like these two figures floating above they are actually not floating they are of also very well fitted but at another level the space though it is the same yellow background space that continues throughout in the background but really speaking it could be the same yellow color but not necessarily the same space.

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How do you understand that it is a sense of belief and a faith that you have to instill in yourself and that is why in this famous panel from Mahabalipuram all mine shall should worth in a you have figures big and small you have figures in bearing skills you have figures in different reactions and different movements different actions and different directions all put together but nothing is clashing with each other.

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Then in examples like this visual perception in Indian art allows the artist to create extremely imaginative visual formation for example it must have been it must have taken awhile for the painter to imagine how he would show Trina versa which is a whirlwind kind of demon a demon which never has any particular shape but which was powerful enough to destroy everything like a storm.

So the painter comes up with a pictorial device it was possible for him to come up with this only because the general visual perception in Indian art allowed the artist always to imagine within the framework of a certain kind of naturalism within the framework of a convention.

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In a painting like this which is completely from mycological it is mount to be recovered then a of Lord Krishna you also say how the painter is trying to include real-life figures as his worshippers.

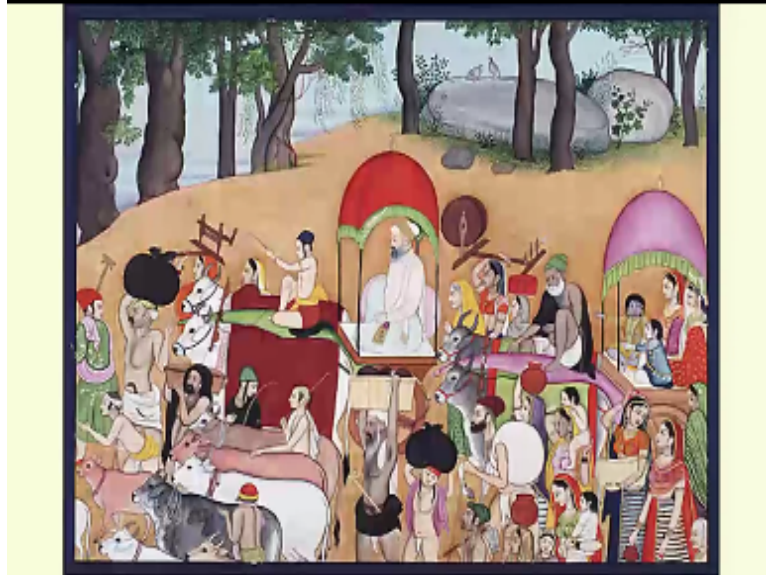
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Or for that matter when the painter is trying to show the famous Queen Rupamati and the king Baz Bahadur hunting at night, the night is very well depicted by applying a very tart almost a black dark color in the background but that may not or should not make the figures particularly Rupamati Baz Bahadur and the two horses and the attendant figure and the dark black or non visible.

So this is very interesting on the one hand it is a dark night scene on the other hand the main figures are already visible, so self illumination that despite being surrounded by a darkness one can illuminate itself by applying bright coolers on that object or figure is also another very interesting aspect of the visual perception in Indian art.

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And then of course we have this very complex narratives where you can see the infant Krishna journey from Gokula to Brindavanam and how the whole lot of the entire paraphernalia everything the entire people the whole community is following this procession which means the painter had to look at the immediate and contemporary visual concern, because that is how one imagines the dress the costume the vehicles and everything else including nature.

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But then there are instances like this when the painter has to show the Palace of the bunt of a brothers set a place it is on fire now how do you show that you must have seen fire especially the painter takes clue from his real life of the vision but at the same time he reconstruct this scene this Infernos in, in a way that pictorially it becomes a very captivating moment.

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And then you have the only mycological incident happening in a purely mythological setting like Varaha and Veronica they are like kind of fighting with each other and they're fighting in a setting that is completely abstract the background is full of abstract patterns and this was required for this particular narration. So visual perception as we observe in these few examples and you can go on and move on from so many other examples you will realize that visual perception in Indian art is not a matter of a very specific norm rather it is a matter of and ever going on going unless explosions in the possibilities of extending the visual language an exploration in the possibilities of extending the visual communication itself thank you.

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