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A Monument of Neglect: Quila Mubarak at Chhachhrauli

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Abstract

Though Qila Mubarak is extra ordinary in its existence, yet it is on the verge of collapse and extinction. The wall paintings here are an example of early art which is also almost extinct. The art of mural painting was present in Punjab, as a way of decorating walls, up to the seventeenth century. At several places popular paintings and drawings were seen as murals or in the form of frescos. The remnants of wall embellishments thus are seen all over Punjab. This current paper is being written with the hope of evaluating methodologies for conserving our structures and our tangible heritage before it is lost forever. A sense of belonging and a sense of ownership must be developed for this feeling and work to evolve. While this is crucial for our heritage it is also important for our National pride.

Keywords: restoration, conservation, wall paintings, heritage, fresco, mural,



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Figure 1- Entrance to Qila Mubarak

Chhachhrauli was the capital of Kalsia State founded by Raja Gurbaksh Singh in 1763. It was a gift given by Maharaja Ranjit Singh to Raja Gurbaksh Singh. Before coming under the Indian Union in 1947, Kalsia Rajas ruled this lush green town. Numerous forts and palaces of erstwhile rulers who once ruled the area are now converted into offices or have been abandoned and left to the vagaries of nature and human indifference. The town has an entrance gate named after Raja Ravi Sher Singh. It had two Tehsils outside Chhachhrauli, viz. Dera Bassi and Kalsia, presently located near Chandigarh and Amritsar, respectively. At a distance of 59 Km from Ambala Cantt, The Qila Mubarak (Fort) is in the main Market in Chhachhrauli near Arya Kanya School.



The Qila Mubarak is a fort that has historical significance. The bricks of the fort are similar to the other Quila Mubarak of Bhatinda, which date back to the Kushana period when emperor Kanishka ruled over Northern India. Though this fort is extra ordinary in its existence, yet it is on the verge of collapse and extinction. The wall paintings here are an example of early art which is also almost extinct. The study of literature that documents art making and its application in wall paintings, known generally as 'śilpaśāstra'ⁱ is the start point, though about wall paintings in Punjab

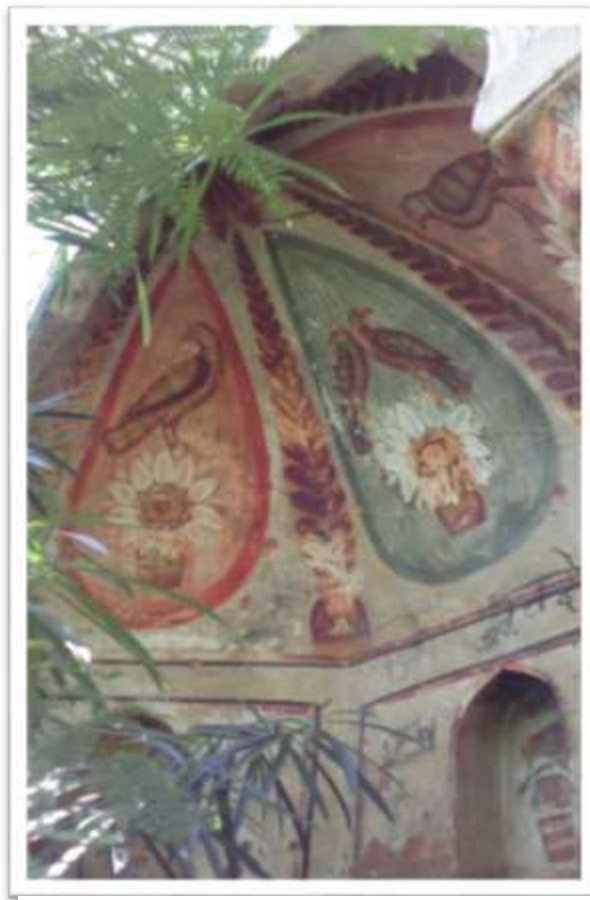


Figure 2- State of Wall Paintings in Qila Mubarak

very little is documented. As art historians have not done justice to the contribution of Punjab wall paintings and murals, not much is written about them, yet whatever little is documented, confirms this. The art of mural painting was present in Punjab, as a way of decorating the walls, up to the seventeenth century. Artists from all over the country were invited by the patrons from this region to decorate their buildings. At several places popular paintings and drawings



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were seen as murals or in the form of frescos. The remnants of wall embellishments thus are seen all over Punjab. Birds and animals, flowers and foliage have been painted in abundance as also the portraits of Sikh royals, nobles and statesmen. There are many panels depicting themes from Hindu and Sikh mythology. The wall murals that have survived depict diverse themes, both religious and secular, warfare and daily lifestyle. Dr B.N. Goswami, on being interviewed by the author, feels that the wall paintings of Punjab are directly influenced by the Pahari paintings as they are more like fixed panels in a narrative style rather than an indefinite canvas. He also felt they were mostly done by local masons rather than by artists. They are almost like miniatures, which have been increased in size according to himⁱⁱ.

In this Quila, along with the elaborately ornamented architectural dilapidated arches, the outer surface of the spaces are adorned with murals representing sectarian themes, while the interior is embellished with mural paintings, depicting floral themes. The square usually consists of a fine setting of flowers, leaves, creepers or within a flowery border with handsomely patterned corners.

The appearance of some typical Mughal motifs like flowerpots and flowering trees are seen on some parts of the ceiling. This may have more patterns, which can determine their antiquity more correctly. *“It may safely be concluded that manuscript illustration which developed as a distinct form of painting in Punjab with the help of the external influences duly*



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*mingled and fused with the local genre and style which flourished in Punjab and its neighbouring states*ⁱⁱⁱ.

The interior had wall painting of Sikh gurus that are no longer seen. Apparently, the glorious Sikh noblemen and generals wished to have their heroic features immortalised. The delicacy of the Kangra line continued to be practiced; most of the portraits are attempts at glorification of the same. The new masters, mechanically contrived to show grandeur, without much sincerity of feeling^{iv}.

The material utilized in mural painting in Punjab was same as the type used in Rajasthan from olden times. A clear outline of the subject matter was made after the wall was prepared. At this stage colouring was started. The colour palate was limited to Indian red, yellow ochre and green, which came from natural pigments. Preparation of colours was also done by the artist themselves. It was done in small clay dishes according to the requirement from the material and pigments, which were available to them locally. Brushes and ‘*qalams*,’ were also made by the artist or their understudy; with the use of hair of camels or squirrel and sometimes even peacock feathers. Different brushes were used for different types of work. They were extremely good and capable of preparing these materials themselves, be it colour or brushes or even the surface for painting. In 1611, when William Finch, trading in indigo and other merchandise for the East



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India Company, came to Lahore, 'one of the greatest cities of the East,' he saw a great deal of painting there and described them in vivid detail^v.

The murals in the Quila are seen on the front facade of the main entrance gate, in the squinches and also in the soffit of the ceilings. The paintings on the facade make a border of vine or trellis around the arches of the walls. 'The gateway, which consists of a tolerably lofty archway with a tower at each side, is covered from its summit to its base with paintings.' Thus Dr Shrivastava believed it was an art linked to Mughal times. Hardly any of them are remaining, but even from the surviving ones, it is possible to make out their subject. They vary as faint traces of colour, but the underlying drawings are still visible. The colour palate is limited to Indian red, yellow ochre and green with blue too seen in places. Unfortunately, many of them have lost their original colours and appear more or less dull and monochromatic. Mr Parihar felt that the wall paintings at Doraha bear some stylistic resemblance to those on some monuments of Rajasthan, namely, the pavilion at Bairat, dated c. 1620, the Chhatri at Mairh (near Bairat), the Chhatri at Bhaopura, Zenana Mahal in Amber Palace, and the so-called Makhdum Shah's cenotaph, also at Amber. The paintings share the same crude and static style. The figures everywhere also are archaic^{vi}. This is of importance as the paintings here are similar in context to the Doraha ones.



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Figure 3 - State of Wall Paintings

Also, major parts of the paintings have been erased or damaged. The roof of the fort has also fallen in places, it is overgrown with foliage and seems to double as a grazing pasture for goats. Human vandalism is rampant with writing on the walls of the Quila. There were faint traces, till not too long ago, of design and colours in the Rang Mahal built in 1630 by Shah Jehan near Jagadhri in district Ambala and that is to be the state of this building unless something is done^{vii}.



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The decay and sad state of the Quila is also a cause of concern. Many factors contribute to this, which are natural as well as man-made. Factors like acid rain, temperature, humidity, biological growth, climate, wind erosion, earthquakes, light, temperature, humidity and environment, along with human degradations add to the deterioration factors. In this Quila Mubarak various forms of deteriorations are seen. These are broadly as under:

- Surface deposits.
- Biological growth.
- Chromatic alterations in the Paint.
- Abrasions/Scratches.
- Wind Erosion.
- Pulverization of the Paint.
- Flaking or Detachment of the paint layer.
- Lacunae (Losses)
- Alteration of colour
- Decomposition of calcium carbonate.



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The over grown foliage and vegetation is a cause of concern and water seepage seems to have loosened and disintegrated the bricks of the fort. The fungus and rodents, along with bird dropping and human excreta further intensify the problem. In some areas there is soot as if to signify that at some stage the fort had seen a fire. Manmade disaster, as well as natural ones together have made the fort a total scene of neglect and the art work on the verge of extinction. Wall painting here are a conservation challenge as well as a nightmare so common to all conservation projects around the world. Here they have additional unique problems due to long isolation, as well as socio-economic conditions.

It is worth the while if a critical analysis of some of the murals and frescos here is done. As present-day scientific advancement in techniques can accurately tell the age of the wall painting on the basis of radio X-ray, carbon-14 dating formula, and analysis. This can be done in a chemical and physical manner by the conservation laboratories in the country without too much expenditure involved. After the detailed test is done to gauge the condition and the dating of the art one can plan on a course of restoration and conservation followed by preservation so as to not lose an important tangible heritage of Punjab. Initially, one can work on three broad categories of damage:



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First - The structure,

Second - the paintings that are hidden under layers of soot and grime and

Third - paintings that are covered by plants and fungus and have faded due to pollution and weathering.

To begin with a detailed study of the wall painting will bring out an Assessment. As type paintings are important, this aspect has to be examined very carefully and systematically though the relevant data is rare and often contradictory^{viii}

This includes the physical history along with its current condition and deterioration risks. This study is essential to design a course of action and is certainly one of the most important aspects of conservation. Preventive Conservation is considered to be more important. Reinforcement and Integration of Losses are also important. Integration of losses should be documented, and be detectable by common examination methods, the fact remains that Punjab did contribute something tangible to the national stream of India painting which can never be denied.



Figure 4 - Decay due to natural vegetation

Documentation of the site and paintings, including their state, is done before any restoration has to be undertaken. An assessment of damage done with time and weathering is noted and documented. Then the approach is decided with a group of experts. This detailed condition assessment once made will help to reveal the extent of the damaged wall

painting, as well as discoloration, loss and surface darkening or dirt coating. The cause of impregnation and darkening can be then categorized as a natural or man-made disaster.

Documentation is done by the following means:-

- Textural
- Photographic
- Graphic
- Instrumental



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The steps of conservation that follow the documentation are:

- Examination
- Cleaning
- Reinforcement
- Reintegration
- Transfer

After documentation and examination is done then some pre-consolidation work is carried out in such structure. Conservation work for wall paintings and murals is a challenge as the building, which is the canvas of the painting, is unstable and crumbling. Reinforcement of the building where work is to be done is to be cleaned of salts, water, rodents, bird dropping and trees and plants. Next is the fungus and dirt, the challenge always is the safety of the structure and its risk to life. The moisture causes damage in many ways by the deterioration of veg. fibres in the plaster, due to humidity – weakens the rendering. Damage to paint as per the sensitivity of the paint is also seen. The paintings that have survived show cleavage, cracking, flaking and detachment of plaster. It is accompanied by falling of plaster along with movement of soluble



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salts. May be too weak to resist the weathering due to bad quality of bricks, such as unbaked brick wall, or poor quality bricks containing salts. Sometimes even heterogeneity of the wall - partly of stone and partly of bricks makes the structure unstable in the long run. There has been no effort towards some kind of waterproofing the walls. The process that used to be followed was of spraying bricks before they are set into mortar, which is not done here. This then reduces the efflorescence for later. Negligence to do this has indeed led to a whitish powder which can be seen on some of the old walls bearing mural panels, the movement of masonry depending upon its nature and location in the building, thus sometimes internal faults in building cause problems.

The consolidation process is twofold, done to fix loose layers of surface and also of the paintings. The main work is to restore the wall art in such a way that the old form remains distinct and intact. The biggest challenge is matching the colour and yet leaving it aesthetically beautiful. It is important that materials thus used are compatible with the original material and also reversible. That means it can be taken out if ever required without damaging the murals, which are the original paintings.

This is followed by the cleansing process of wall painting, which is started but this is only after the whole place has been stabilized. This cleaning is done by dry and wet methods



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that were very mild and safe for the paintings. This can be done by a mechanical process or by use of solvents, physical action or Chemical agents. Water/detergents are avoided as the painting might get damaged. Sometimes weak basic solutions – carbonate or bicarbonate of ammonia can be used. Chelating agent - EDTA (ethylene diamine tetra acetic acid with ammonium Chloride) are also used in some parts if the wall is in a decent shape, this will help clean the areas which are less deteriorated. A Solvent test can also be carried out, and ultimately the use of a 20% solution of IMS in de-ionised water may be the most effective. This can be applied to remove the surface grime and restore the surface. The subjects of the wall paintings will be visible more clearly. The dust particles gradually enter into the paint layer, so cleaning of those may result in abrasion of paint.

Cleaning should always be started on less important areas, leaving more important and delicate areas for the final stage. Avoid carrying out successive test with different solvents on the same area to avoid any risk of creating a cumulative effect – too drastic.

Fixation and Consolidation follows this reinforcement of the adherence of paint to the support (flaking). Reinforcement of the cohesion of the paint (powdering). Re-establishment of a smooth surface to avoid the phenomenon of dispersion of light is very important for an overall



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aesthetic look. Consolidation of rendering of paint in depth can also be done. These must be done keeping in mind the properties of a good consolidant.

- Good chemical stability.
- Sufficient adhesion power.
- Good penetration inside the matrix.
- No damaging interaction with the painting material.
- No alteration in water vapour permeability of the matrix.
- Reasonable setting time.
- Similar mechanical and physical properties (porosity, optical property, etc.)
- Reversibility.

For this particular space one can look at barium hydroxide. Soak the wall with the mixture, must be protected from rain for at least 3 weeks, so that it has time to react. Residual glycerol is then washed off. Fixatives based on synthetic resins like Paraloid B 72 have great porosity and advantage to restore the wall paintings. If detached area is limited in size, PVA emulsion may be introduced followed by Calcium caseinate and PVA emulsion, at first very liquid and then more viscous. Bulged area need to be flushed to remove the trapped pieces, or



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reattached in position by the use of facing. The paintings here depend on the breadth of the wall, which in turn depends on the edifice. Paintings are done on all borders here in a trellis like manner. Usually, not less than two and a half feet in breadth is seen if it is a full panel.

For repairing the paintings a new technique has developed for integration of wall paintings. It is a method that is very different from the traditional forms and reduces the fall outs of the usual retouching such as *tratteggio*. These repetitive strokes have caused effects called "smudge tool". The new type is "camouflage" because retouching is applied to the losses in such a way that the lost area seem to vanish or disappear. This is to showcase the painting in the condition it was found, but without the visually distorted damage. So a dull wall painting will still be dull after aesthetic processing, but without any loss. This thus restores surface to the present - not making it new but keeping it in present condition with ageing and weathering intact. The age of painting is thus kept like a patina on it and avoids any new element to the painting.

Thus for Quila Mubarak a Camouflage retouching is the perfect method. It is a happy mix of discernable and deceptive restoration. The retouching is identifiable as it is new and not original on close inspection, but not from a distance. This is done by strokes that are similar to



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the surface of natural deterioration. This is the retouching being done all over the world so that the original stays as such and yet overall aesthetics is taken care.

Integration of Losses is done in such a manner that they are removable and not detrimental to the object, they should not modify the aesthetic or physical characteristics of the wall paintings of the Quila as that will lead to change in our heritage character. Conservation of art works should be so designed that these are brought to their original appearance, as intended without tempering with its originality. Then the painting must be touched up in this manner, after a study of type of pigment is done. First the type of pigment is seen then the thickness of the layers of pigment varied slightly from one place to another. Paint layers from two places, measured with a micrometre attached to the eyepiece of microscope.

The walls and woodwork too need restoration. Decorative carvings in timber are missing from above the doorways. They can be manufactured replacement for these carvings, as their loss spoils the overall aesthetic impact of the Quila. With community help and an awareness drive this structure can be saved from being lost to the coming generation.



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This current paper is being written with the hope of evaluating methodologies for conserving our structures and our tangible heritage before it is lost forever. These approaches are critical to recording and also to do a correct assessment, which will help to preserve our heritage and reduce the need for conservation. Thus it will lead to improvements in managing risk to our heritage. It will also provide a connection with our past, serving as a physical reminder of times gone by our people and values. Thus it will help preserve our tangible heritage in which intangible forms of culture can be expressed.

The overall objective is to preserve our culture and make each citizen aware of the rich treasures of the wall paintings of Punjab. To that end, restoration efforts can be linked with community development activities. Only if the community participates then slowly and surely our neglected monuments will come back to their original glory. A sense of belonging and a sense of ownership must be developed for this feeling and work to evolve. While this is crucial for our heritage it is also important for our National pride.

Awareness and immediate corrective action at every level with attention given to local bodies and the government is the only way our heritage will not get further lost to apathy and nature.



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Notes

ⁱ Accessed at <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199920105/obo-9780199920105-0068.xml> on 15 Aug 2015.

ⁱⁱ Dr BN Goswami interviewed by the author.

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