

**TRADITIONAL MATERIALS  
USED BY THE MINIATURE ARTISTS  
AN INTRODUCTORY STUDY**

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**Abstract**

Previous generations of the artists evolved special methods of producing materials for their art works meant to last for centuries. Their success can be appreciated by the existence to day of centuries old paintings in private collections hanging in different museums of the world, whose papers are intact and colours are as fresh as new. Unfortunately not much has ever been documented because this was the kind of knowledge that traveled orally from generation to generation. Some meager documents that are available, does give the basic idea but much of that documentation need further research and verification because many of the materials and methods explained are not very authentic. The paper is an effort to investigate and research some materials used by the past artists on scientific basis.

**Keywords:** Paper, Akbar, Lahori, Kashmiri, Sialkoti, Sirki, Wasli, Srivastava.

Every art form has a medium through which the artist expresses himself. It could be paint, clay, marble, stone or anything that catches the artist's fancy. All the mediums have unique qualities and limitations but it is the will and expertise of the creator to mould it according to his idea and get the desired results.

Miniature painting has its own requirements and old artists evolved special methods of producing materials. These methods are fascinating. They are also an evidence of artist's intelligence and keen observation. Painters prepared special paper, pigments, pens and brushes, all by themselves. There was no concept of buying readymade materials. In this process, miniaturists were able to discover new methods and techniques, which were suitable for their artistic expression. Their success can be appreciated by the existence to day of centuries old paintings in private collections hanging in different museums of the world, whose papers are intact and colours are as fresh as new.

Miniature painting is different in style and technique from all the other types of paintings. Its material is also quite unlike the other painting materials. Its significance was immense because the rulers and nobles of the society were great patrons of arts. The kings initiated very ambitious artistic projects and then took personal and keen interest in their completion. They were also conscious about the materials used and we come across references in which the highest sovereign of the Subcontinent used to decide the prices of artistic materials. In late 16<sup>th</sup> century this is what Abul' Fazal (a courtier and historian) writes about Akbar's routine, "The works of all painters are weekly laid before his majesty by *Daroghas* and the clerks; he then confers reward according to excellence of workmanship, or increases the monthly salaries." (1) Akbar's atelier was huge and it housed almost hundred masters and the rest were recruits who had no formal artistic background but were trained under the supervision of masters. They were Indians and many of them belonged to the city of Lahore. Abul' Fazal writes, "More than a hundred painters have become masters of the art, whilst the number of those who are middling, is very large. This is very true of especially Hindus; their pictures surpass our conception of things. Few, indeed, in the whole world are found equal to them." (2) Akbar was the one who used to decide about the material available for the artists and correct prices of the articles were carefully asserted. (3) But unfortunately there is no proper record available about the actual materials and techniques used. The artists of

that time never believed in writing them down. Mostly they relied on their memories and transferred them orally to coming generations.

In later year, especially during the British Raj, the discouraging attitude of the ruling class towards local wisdom led to the loss of many knowledge forms but the worst damage was done to arts that were considered of no value at all. The native arts were criticized and the artists were discouraged for their skills. The artistic tradition of miniature painting was totally rejected and disliked. This is how the local arts are explained in the official report prepared by B. H. Baden Powell after the 1864 exhibition held at Tollington Market Lahore, “The actual work of drawing, the perspective, the method of delineation, and the style of producing ‘effects’ are as rule inferior; and this will surely be admitted when we have once reflected that the mere minuteness and delicacy of handling which many native works exhibit, and which occur in rendering the separate hairs of a beard, or the pearls on a tiny necklace, are a species of mechanical power intrinsically of a low order.”(4) At another place he writes, “No native artist has any idea of using eyes.”(5)

It was due to this attitude; the artists quit their professions that were practiced by their families since centuries. As a result to that the oral connection broke down and we lost precious information about the preparation of papers, pigments, brushes and other materials used.(6)

For the present paper an intense research was carried out, focusing on retrieving the lost methods by using the investigative tools of historical research such as archival documents, books, interviews etc. Then the acquired information was implied in practical form also, to test the authenticity. In this process it was found that although most of the traditions that has been handed down to us, do have authenticity but some are just make beliefs and when used in practice, they did not respond the way they were supposed to be.

Some methods of material making are searched in this paper while exploring historical context also. This will enable us to understand and appreciate the tedious procedure adopted by the artists of the past to create such great masterpieces.

## **Paper**

First and foremost in miniature painting was its paper and many types of papers were used. A few important ones were Kashmiri paper, Sialkoti paper, Lahori paper and Iranian paper. They were available in many qualities and used for different purposes.

About the paper industry Srivastava, a renowned scholar of local arts, writes, “By the 16<sup>th</sup> century many centres of paper manufacturing came to be established. The chief of these centres were Daulatabad, Nizamabad, Kalpi, Patna, Sangner, Kashmir and Sialkot. The chief raw material used for the manufacture of paper were bamboo, jute, flax, cotton, silk cocoons, old discarded fishing net etc. It is said that paper manufactured from old discarded fishing nets was very white because the flax obtained from it was perfectly bleached.”(7)

Since Lahore was an important trade centre so the artists practicing here, had access to almost every kind of paper produced in India. There is even evidence of the use of imported paper and most appreciable was the paper that came from Iran. Detail of some commonly used papers by the artists is written below.

### **Sialkoti Paper**

Sialkot was one of the oldest places where the paper industry flourished. Sialkoti paper was used extensively all over India and it was famous for its quality and variety. It was used for almost every purpose. Some papers produced in Sialkot were very fine and the others were hand made and quite thick and rough. These thick papers were mostly used for *Bahi Khatas* (Record keeping registers). No one could erase the text written on it because the ink would penetrate in the layers of the paper so it was very good for financial records since no changes were possible.

Good Sialkoti paper was white and it had a consistency in quality. Its use for miniature painting was highly favoured by the artists.

### **Kashmiri Paper**

It also had the quality that the colours applied on it used to penetrate in its surface layers so the pigments became a permanent part of the paper but it was finer in texture. It gave advantage to the artists because if some surface colour was lost, the pigment underneath would cover it. Many miniatures were painted on it.

### **Sirki**

In Urdu English dictionary the word *Sirki* is used for a screen made of reeds or bamboo sticks(8) but it was also name of a paper that was very special. It has thin lines on it that were like watermarks. These lines appeared during the making of the paper because its pulp was placed on thin, fine bamboo sticks. It was due to these sticks, lines appeared on the finished paper. This type of paper was extensively used during Shahjahan’s period.(9) Although it was

mainly used for documents but some artists painted on it also. Sirki was manufactured till the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its origin can be traced back to Bengal.

### **Lahori Paper**

Lahore was not a main paper-manufacturing city but in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, Faqir Ghulam Mohy ul Din Nausha Sani, opened a publishing house in Bazaar Hakeeman, inside Bhati Gate. He needed paper for the publishing of books, so he brought paper makers from all over India. A new *Mohallah* was founded in the same locality that was later on named *Mohallah Kaghazian* (the residential area of paper makers). Most of the inhabitants of this *Muhallah* were from Sialkot. This was a great boost for publishers of Lahore because from now on the books produced in the city used local paper that was good in quality. Although it was never better than Sialkoti Paper but it was quite close to it.

During the manufacturing of Lahori paper *Dab* was used in the pulp. *Dab* was a special grass that grew on the banks of river Ravi.(10)

Every kind of paper was produced here. One type was thinner than the others and it had a glossy surface. It was good for detail work but in book illustrations, the ink of one side would appear at the other side also. Some artists declared it inferior in quality because of its shine and thinness. We come across many manuscripts of Lahore that used the same paper with shiny surface. Some specimen can be found in the painting collection of Lahore Museum.

The paper produced under the supervision of Faqir family was very fine and it had a light calliper. This was ideal for manuscripts that were produced in abundance from now on because Lahori publishers did not have to wait for imported paper. Most of the manuscripts produced during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's period were made on Lahori *Kaghaz* (paper).

### **Iranian and European Paper**

According to the eminent and senior miniature painter Salah ul Din,(11) this was one of the finest papers used for miniature painting in India. There is no conformation that either this paper was actually imported from Iran or it was produced at some city in India and was given the name of Iranian paper due to its fine quality and smooth surface. Some people say that it was actually brought from Iran and artists used to ask people coming from Iran to bring it for them. This paper was good for miniature paintings because every kind of detail work was possible on it.

Subcontinent was in touch with European traders since centuries and many products were imported and exported through them. Sometimes European paper was also imported and used in manuscripts.

Usually there were illustrators for ordinary books that were painted by the local artists of different calibre. For special manuscripts the patron would hire the great artists of the era who would do it as a special job and they were paid lavishly. The worth of these manuscripts increased tremendously and only the special ones like *Shahnama Firdousi*, *Sikandar Nama*, *Kalila wa Damna*, *Siraj Munir* etc. were done by the great painters of the time. "Rai Bahadur Kenhya Lal has mentioned artists and scribes of excellent style and technique who executed a large number of illustrated manuscripts showing unique genre of painting and style which are marvellously preserved even today." (12) One such manuscript produced by the Faqirs in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is at Khalsa College, Amritsar. Some great master whose name is not confirmed illustrated it but his work is excellent. It was made in Lahore. (13)

R. P. Srivastava mentioned another publishing house in Lahore that produced books of high quality, "We should not forget that what was best in technique and style of paintings of Punjab was executed in Lahore, Amritsar, Patiala and Kapurthala. At Lahore Muhammad Bakhsh *Sahaf* maintained a workshop employing writers, scribes, artists and bookbinders that were jointly producing hand-written books of quality for the intelligentsia. Before that books were imported from Bombay, Delhi and Lucknow. But due to keen interest of Muhammad Bakhsh *Sahaf*, high standard, illustrated books were prepared in Lahore. They were also exported to Iran and Khurasan." (14) Muhammad Baksh Sahaf was a prominent person in Lahore and he was bookbinder of extraordinary level. His expertise were so much appreciated that the word *Sahaf*, which means 'book binder' became an integral part of his name because book binding was treated as an artistic form in its own right.

In manuscripts every type of paper was used. At times if the publisher could not find the same kind paper for one book, he would not hesitate to use paper from some other region to finish the job. There are examples of books in which half of the papers are Lahori and the other half are Sialkoti because they were very close to each other in style and quality.

Sometimes the artists would buy ready-made paper and start painting directly on it but most of them preferred to make special paper of their own for miniature painting that was called *Wasli*.

### ***Wasli***

For traditional miniature painting of the Subcontinent, a special paper is prepared that is called *Wasli*. Basically it consists of four or eight layers of paper (depending on the size of the miniature) that are bound together with some good glue. *Wasli* has smooth surface and provides strong base as compared to ordinary paper, which is the requirement of this style of painting. It is ideal for the detailed, minute work, which was the need of the artist.

These days' readymade glues are available in the market but a few artists still prepare their own glue using the traditional techniques. Many methods were used to prepare it. One of them is very simple in which fine flour (*maida*) is soaked in the water for some time and then it is boiled. Blue vitriol (*Neela Thotha*) is also added to the glue because it helps to prevent the paper being destroyed by different insects specially termite. This glue has better binding force that forces the paper to stick together permanently so that it may last for centuries. Painters used different methods to prepare their glue and added whatever material suited their particular needs.

After drying of these layers of paper, this thick cardboard was burnished either with a smooth stone preferably cornelian (*Aqeeq*) or with a large seashell. The main purpose for this long and tedious exercise was to give smooth surface to the paper that was useful for applying the base colours.

Once the *Wasli* is dried and properly burnished, a trace was put on it. This trace was called *Khaka*. Sometimes a fine layer of deerskin was used to make tracing because this skin can last for centuries and it was passed from one generation to the other to produce many paintings from a single tracing. This deerskin trace was called *Charba*. In some families of the miniature painters these tracings (*Charbas*) were guarded as family treasures.

*Khaka* was pierced with an extra thin pin to get a very refined outline of the desired image. The trace was put on the *Wasli* and dusted with fine black colour that was usually obtained from the coal dust. This dust was gathered up in a small piece of cloth and this pouch was lightly applied on the *Wasli*. The fine coal dust will leave minute dots as trace for the final drawing. An outline of the painting was thus transferred to the *Wasli*. Miniature painting is developed in layers and initially the base colours were applied. Afterwards the

*Wasli* was burnished one more time to smooth all the grains of the pigments applied. The miniature was then ready for detail work that included the painting of features, folds and design of dress, leaves and trees of the landscape, buildings etc. For detail work (*Pradakht*) mostly a single hairbrush was used and ideally it was made of squirrel's tail hair. Because of burnishing, the lack of grain helped the smooth application of the final colours. There were artists who burnished the painting after the application of every layer of colour to get the lustre that was the hallmark of a miniature.

Golden colour was applied at the last stage. Again the painting was burnished because only then the gold would shine. If the artist had to put some design or other detail on the gold, they added water of soap-nut (*Reethay ka Pani*) to avoid the colour slipping away from the gold. After the completion of the painting, *Wasli* was burnished for the last time to get the gem like glow that is associated with a true miniature.

It was a long and tedious job that was taken up by the artists of the Subcontinent. They were keen to prove their skill and expertise so that they could create art that was to last centuries.

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## References

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- (2) *Ibid.*, 37.
- (3) *Ibid.*, 46.
- (4) B. H. Baden Powell, *Hand-Book of the Manufacturers and Arts of the Punjab*, Vol. II (Lahore: Punjab Printing Company, 1872), 341.
- (5) *Ibid.*, 344.
- (6) To get the information about the materials and techniques used by the artists, I had to rely upon the interviews of the old painters and art historians who are involved in this art form for many years. One of the interviewees was Mr. Salah ul Din who is a senior miniature painter of Lahore. He was also employed by Lahore Museum where he worked on the damaged paintings of the museum. He is very familiar with the material used for paintings.  
The other person who was of tremendous help is Faqir Saif ul Din, the curator/director of Faqir Khana Museum Lahore. He was a resource to show the papers and materials used in books and paintings that belonged to this area.  
Khalid Saeed Butt was also of immense help. He is a professor of miniature painting at College of Art & Design, Punjab University Lahore. He is also an accomplished painter and has been painting miniatures for the last thirty-five years. He still makes his own paper (*Wasli*) for miniature painting. He told me in



detail about the pigments and their reaction on paper because he had first hand experience in this regard.

For technical expertise Prof. Dr. Abdul Qayyum Mirza was consulted. He is a PhD in chemistry and confirmed the chemical reactions of the materials used by the artists.

All these persons are experts in their field and have the first hand knowledge about the materials used to make new paints. As Mr. Salah ul Din and Khalid Saeed Butt said that even today they prepare their own papers and painting material. I am really thankful for their help and guidance.

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- (9) Interview Faqir Saif ul Din.
- (10) Interview Faqir Saif ul Din.
- (11) Interview Mr. Salah ul Din.
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