

Gods in Patnakalam: Tradition and Modernity in Colonial Art

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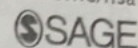
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Abstract

The appearance of Hindu gods was an essential feature of various indigenous Indian art tradition. The rise of hybrid Indo-Western art schools, notably Patnakalam heralded a fundamental shift in the way gods appeared in art and the meaning their iconography carried. This may be understood as one of the ways in which a kind of modernity took shape in nineteenth century Indian art.

Keywords

Company painting, Patnakalam, Indian art history, colonial modernity, Indian art, modernities

Patnakalam was a school of art which developed in nineteenth century Patna from the commingling of traditional artistic styles of Mughal and Rajasthani schools, and European illustration techniques. Some of the popular subjects of this school of painting were scenes of everyday life in a small colonial town, castes and occupations, servants of the typical British household, local flora and fauna, and festivals and *melas*. This article seeks to examine the appearance of gods in Patnakalam and its implications in the context of modernities in the non-western, colonial contexts.

Patnakalam is related to schools of art of a similar hybrid character such as Delhi School, Lucknow School and Tanjore School, which are generally clubbed under the term Company School. While they share many characteristics and a more or less unified British/European commissioning, they are distinct schools with regard to the difference in their individual indigenous artistic heritage. The earliest Patnakalam painters were native artists from Patna whose earlier generations had training in the Mughal style of the royal ateliers of Delhi with some roots in Rajput painting.¹ Barring a few notable exceptions, these artists were first commissioned by British Botanists involved in the cataloguing of

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