

Profiled figure: the modes of representing a face in South Asian painting

Atsushi Ikeda

SOAS, University of London, U.K.

ABSTRACT

It is acknowledged that South Asian paintings are characterized by the facial mode in each period. This paper will argue that physical features of South Asian people such as eye and nose prompted painters to render a figure in profile in the early modern period.

Key words: painting, history, profile, three quarter face,

Introduction

It is acknowledged that South Asian paintings are characterized by the facial mode in each period (Khandalavala and Chandra 1969). The Ajanta cave painting, the richest source in the ancient Indian art, dates from B.C. 1 to A.C. 5 century. It shows the Buddhist ascetics in frontal view, while other figures are depicted in three quarter face in which their eyes are contained in the line showing the outer edge (figure 1). Moving on to in the Ellora cave paintings executed between the 5th and 7th century, the eye in the far side is pushed out of the facial line in some figures (figure 2). These features are more obvious in the Jain manuscript paintings from the 14th to the 15th century (figure 3). In this final stage, even forehead confronts the observer beside the extended eye (Doshi, 1980).



Figure 1: The heavenly beings



Figure 2: The heavenly beings

In the early modern period, a profile is the most prevalent mode of representing the face in painting. Basically, the Early Rajput style, previously called the Chaurapancasika style, represents the figural face in complete profile in around the 16th century (figure 4). Likewise, the manner is identical to Rajput painting in Hindu native states. In contrast, Mughal painting that maintains the Persian influence in the initial stage applies a three quarter face to the profane people. In the 17th century, Mughal painting accepts a profile as a standard mode of the face (figure 5), which transition seems to be similar with that from the Jain style to the Early Rajput/Chaurapancasika style.



Figure 3: Trishala enjoying the dance performance.



Figure 4: Birhana and Chanpavati in the room

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Figure 5: The Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan

Contemporary scholars specializing in art history have aimed to seek why the figure came to be rendered in profile from the ancient to the early modern period. Some appreciate this cliché to evoke the feeling of state and peace from Indian miniature painting, others condemn that it confines the pictorial expression into the formal and repetitive models. It is only certain that this phenomenon is one of the biggest enigmas in South Asian art. Now, we will analyze previous studies on the matter, depending on Khandalavala and Chandra (1969), and Wright (2008).

Discourses by previous scholars

In the initial stage, the issue of profiled figures was described at the edge of each volume. Ghose is the pioneer who discusses the issue of three quarter face. In his article of 1927, he describes that this salient expression originates in the painters' fundamental desire to depict a statue on a plain canvas (Ghose, 1927, p.187, 278). Coomaraswamy (1930, p.7) mentions that the representation of eyebrow results in the extended eyes, as far as the Ellora wall paintings are concerned. In contrast, Brown points out that three quarter face is a reflection of the statue embedded with glass eyes, which was popular among the *svetambara* school in Jainism (Brown, 1933, p.16). He notes that the origin of three quarter face seems to be different in each school. It is remarkable that Brown implies such an expression to be associated with the tradition of Central Asia, where the Sahis king in 'two third' view is represented as a Mongolian (Ibid, p23, 24). Afterwards, Chandra (1949, pp.101-104) comes to such an aesthetic conclusion that the style by itself converted from the medieval to the modern, while he thereafter classified those faces into Indian and Indianized Persian styles (Khandalavala and Chandra, 1969, p48).

In 1980s, art historians began to look at the issue on the basis of positive analysis. Losty (1982, p44) argues that this phenomenon is a technical issue rather than the religious and metaphysical one, for eyes protruded to the air before face shifted around in Jain painting. At the same time, he perceives the similarity with much earlier frescoes at Ajanta and Ellora which show human faces most likely in

three quarter face (Ibid, pp.43-4). Considering the sequent transition from a three quarter face in Jain manuscript illustration to a profile in Hindu book painting, he indicates that all artists involved in those paintings were predominantly Hindus (Ibid, 1982, p.48). He also exemplifies the use of three quarter and side views by the subject of figure with illustrations of the *Hamzanama* (Ibid) and *Mandu Ni`matnama* (Op.cit., 1990, p.11,14) manuscripts, datable to about 1465 and ca. 1500 respectively. In a picture, some Muslims are rendered in three quarter face, other Hindus are portrayed in full profile.

Besides, Doshi (1985, p48) claims that ‘the physiognomy of the Mongol race’ with the ‘farther protruding eye’ was demanded by the subject of the *Kalakacharya-Katha* that monk Kalaka traveled beyond the Indus to ask for the aid of the Sahi kings for the battle against the enemy. She must be seen as an advocate of Brown’s theory.

Doshi infers that the model should have been foreign visitors to the local Muslim dynasties. Otherwise, its peculiar expression was basically an Islamic cliché from either Indo-Sultanate painting by itself or Iranian ceramic plates and bowls imported in Gujarat.

In the following stage, art historians began to tackle the issue of profiled figure straightforward. Losty (1990) raises three presumable reasons in his article entitled as

“From three-quarter to full profile in Indian painting –revolutions in art and taste” in *Das bildnis in der kunst des orientis*. First, he maintains that a surge of realism in the reign of Jahangir (1605-1627) promoted the use of full profile as an appropriate view. It could be due to either Jahangir’s resistant to his father Akbar who is always portrayed in three quarter face or the preference of Hindu painters who were majority of the studio during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan. Second, Losty insists that the painters of Jahangir’s time were keen on the recoding of state scenes. Thus, they were demanded to represent attendants faithfully. Third, he draws attention to the influence of European art. He points out that medallions and coins made during the European Renaissance portray people in full profile. As they were imported to India, Jahangir came to appear in the large gold coins in full profile. This may be a model of the profiled figure in picture. Eventually, Losty argues that the dominancy of Mughal painting incurs the diffusion of full profile in studios of other Muslim courts as the western naturalism penetrates into all Indian painting (Ibid, p.159).

In due course, the dispute on a three quarter face was replaced by that on Mughal portraiture. According to Koch (1997, p.137), the painters at Akbar’s atelier were confined to the small format to depict figures, who could not acquire the ‘personal traits’. At the same time, the group-portrayal in the narrow space demands special attention to the representation of the faces rather than the bodies. Koch (Ibid, p.138) also asserts that the ruling elites in Shah Jahan’s reign were also ‘deliberately’ portrayed in profile to escape from ‘realistic portrayal’, as Plato suggested long time ago. Here, Koch indicates the influence of the latest European techniques to embody a social status of high class (Ibid, p.144). It is remarkable

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that she draws attention to the connection to Egyptian art which wall paintings shows figures in full profile and Timurid painting which contains both three-quarter face and profile (Ibid, p.161). Just Koch attributes Indian free expression to the influence of European art.

In another view, Necipoglu (2000, p.56) alleges that the primary reason for the persistent to profile in Jahangir and his successors is “a codified expression of historical distance between the new Mughal emperors of the 17th century and their royal ancestors, between the present and the past”. It invokes a sense of transcendency of the Mughal rulers, for their gaze does not aim towards real life, or appreciators. Necipoglu compares such profiled figures with the halo to an ‘idol for admiration’ and the ‘semi-divine emperor apart from others’ (Ibid).

However, Stronge (2002, p.32) demonstrates that the use of three quarter face and profile in illustrations of the *Hamzanama* survived from the previous centuries of the late 16th century or came from outside the empire in earlier periods. She also alleges that a single artist conducted two conventions of style; the Western Indian style and Iranian style (Ibid). It is exemplified by the Western Indian style brought by the Iranian masters who preferred “the joined eyebrows and oval face that epitomize the idealized ‘moon-faced’ beauty of Persian poetry” (Ibid, p.34) It is noticeable that she introduces us to Pramod Chandra’s idea that illustrations of the *Hamzanama* reminding us of ancient wall painting witness the lost traditions and schools of art history (Chandra, Pramod. 1976 cited in Stronge, 2002, p.34). In addition, she notes that the process of a single artist completing the final step in execution formalizes the ‘characteristics of particular individuals’. As far as Manohar at Jahangir’s atelier, he portrayed Jahangir in profile in the setting with unrealistic colored background, and then he applied profile to other characters in the picture, “disguising the joins so that the characters seem to inhabit a fantastic landscape” (Stronge, 2002, p.120). It leads to the view that painters borrowed the preexisting images with the identical posture and size, referring to Stchoukine’s research (Stchoukine 1929-30 cited in Stronge, 2002, pp.122-4).

Although the dispute continued throughout 1990s and 2000s, the state of the art study was elaborately conducted by Wright in 2008. After careful evaluation of previous studies, she came to consideration of rendering the details of face (Wright, 2008, pp.165-170). According to her survey of Jahangir portraiture at the Chester Beauty Library, a couple of the portraits in so-called Minto Album show different depictions. She infers that they have a gap by ten years in completion by Bichitr. The later version provides a fuller and rounder face on Jahangir (Ibid, p.168). Intriguingly, the depictions of nose are significantly different between the two portraits; “long with a noticeably downward-turned tip in the earlier work, as opposed to rounder and thicker in the later work.” We can see two examples of the former expression in the CBL’s *Jahangirnama* painting by an anonymous painter. Also, Wright asserts that the same painter was engaged with largely different expression of nose because they referred to an ‘existing model rather than from life’, which was painted in the earlier folio by ‘an artist with firsthand knowledge of the emperor’s features’ (Ibid, p.169). Moreover, it is important for her to note

that, “This focus on the head of the figure.....is typical of Mughal drawing in the time of Jahangir and, especially, Shah Jahan” (Ibid, p.170).

Evaluation and analysis

From my point of view, the disputation on three quarter face has nearly been sorted out. However, all information are fragmented and, therefore, demanded to make sense of. First of all, it is worthy of Losty’s initial idea that attributes the reason to technical and material aspects, largely because it means that the issue is seen in different times and regions. At the same time, he implies that it depends on the subject of figure whether the figure is rendered in three quarter face or profile, as Chandra did. Brown’s analysis is also important in that he indicates the paintings to reflect the milieu of the subcontinent in the late medieval and the early modern periods. Doshi proposes two presumable origins of Mongolian face; Persian ceramic and painting.

Later studies predominantly focus on the phenomenon of Mughal painting, although it initially appeared in Jain manuscript painting. It distances us from the fundamental measures. However, Koch’s reference to Egyptian art retrieves us to the empirical and practical discussion. The major achievements of art historians such as Koch, Stronge, Necipoglu and Wright are to have detected deliberate choices of three quarter and profile by painters on the basis of extant models by masters in charge of the final step of execution. Lastly, Wright’s attention to the depiction of nose and the line drawing are seen as reification and concretion of previous discourse by Losty.

In comparison with the previous literature discussing a rise and decline of a three quarter face, I will point out that a painter cannot help depicting a human face with extended eyes in using lines but shading because of incapability of representing eye sockets. Moreover, a profile facilitates to portrait height of the nose in a realistic way. As Losty and Doshi mentioned, a figure tends to be frontal and its eyes are included inside the outer line of face in Iranian painting and the depiction of Saka. For instance, an Iranian cast holds a Mongolian face in picture at the time (figure 6), partly because Iranian painting surged in the Il-Khaniyan dynasty which style originates in Chinese painting, partly because their dominant group was Mongolian. Furthermore, a book of *Hamza Nama* in the Delhi Sultanate dynasties (figure 7) shows the main casts with a three quarter face explicating Iranian, whereas the dancers, by and large, is presented with a profile illustrating South Asian people rather than Iranian of the time.

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Figure 6: Kalakacharya-Katha



Figure 7: Hamzanama

However, the divine face maintains the traditional front view in the early modern miniatures in comparison with the profane people with a profile, partly because of its suitability to worship. As a result, the painters used a three quarter face in between the frontal and side views to the religious authorities, or siddha and divine entities such as goddess (figure 8) and Siva. It is assumed that a three quarter face enables us to percept the figure as being more consecrated than a profile, which is less consecrated than a frontal view.

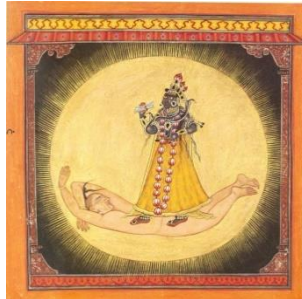


Figure 8: The goddess in generosity and victory

In addition, I can comment on some issues behind the dispute. First, it is assumed that this circumstance can be adjusted in case the painter controls the high standard of shading technique. Therefore, it is apparent that the painting technique deteriorated after the ancient painting, in particular, of the Ajanta caves. Probably, the extended eyes were perceived as a sign before they are not hesitated to be extended from the outer line of the face. Second, it is noticeable that the painters at royal atelier recognized the gap in ethnicity and represented it in painting. There is, however, no answer whether it is derived from an icon in Iranian ceramics or the sketching Mongolian. Third, female faces tend to be a profile in Delhi Sultanate painting. Fourth, the extended eye in Tibetan painting would be under powerful influence of Indian painting, for Tibetans are different from South Asians in physiognomy.

Finally, it is remarkable that some of the minor casts tend to be painted in three quarter face in the narrative painting in order to represent their turning their heads. This expression is the most frequently used by the Seu=Nainsukh workshop

which was active in the Punjab hills in the 18th century (figure 9) (Goswamy, 1990, 1998). They held more efficient organization and higher painting techniques than others in the hills. It is certain that they made use of a three quarter face to expand their expression and distinguish themselves from others.



Figure 9: Bihari worshipping Krishna and Radha

Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed that facial patterns in ancient Indian wall-painting had split into three categories by the early modern era; frontal view, profile and three quarter face. A frontal face remains for the expression of the divinity to be worshipped. A profile is standardized for the use of the profane authorities. A three quarter face is made use for the secondary divinities such as the goddess and ascetic beside the traditional figure in Persian painting. It is remarkable that a three quarter face became the typical facial mode of Guru Nanak, founder of Sikhism, in the 18th and 19th centuries.

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Biographical Note

Atsushi Ikeda is Ph.D. scholar at Department of the History of Art & Archaeology, Doctorial Science, SOAS, University of London, U.K.
