

A brush with pigments of the past

THE exhibition, 'modern 20th century Indian art,' that just opened at the Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad, is special for three reasons: to begin with, the exhibition is being held at Hyderabad's fascinating and renowned museum, a must see by itself. Then, there is the content of the exhibition, which includes a number of lesser known works of some of the biggest names in India's 20th century art scene such as MF Husain, FN Souza, SH Raza, KH Ara, Akbar Padamsee, Krishen Khanna, KK Hebbar, Jami-ni Roy, Ramkinkar Baij and others. Thirdly, the exhibition also features the launch of a book on the life of Jagdish Mittal, a passionate collector of art.

It was my good fortune to have met Mittal and his highly supportive wife, more than 15 years ago. At the time I had interviewed him for one of Kolkata's dailies and was privileged to see his rather large collection of miniature paintings, mainly of the Pahari School, and also some very interesting artifacts. At the time Mittal had mentioned that he was in the process of planning a mini museum to house and display his collection.

During the interview I recollect discussing the various types of miniature paintings and their techniques. I was very impressed by Mittal's knowledge, which had included details of the paper (or cloth) used for miniatures and the making of colours from natural substances, which are able to retain their

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MINIATURE MAGIC: A painting from Mittal's collection titled *A courtier with a flywhisk* (first half of 17th century)

bright colours through the ages. Mughal miniatures were usually painted on paper using brushes made of squirrel hair, thick for flat background colouring and the finest for painting faces, hands and even the designs on the garments.

Among the more interesting pigments used in Mughal miniatures was a shade of yellow referred to as 'peori' made of the urine of cows that had been fed only on mango leaves. Made in Bihar (Monghyr district), the urine was heated on a charcoal fire and then left out in the sun to dry. The shade of bright yellow thus achieved was more luminous than other shades of yellow, and a binding agent, usually 'gum arabic', was added to it, which lent body to the water based paint and gave it an opaque quality.

Other colours used in Mughal and Rajput miniatures include various shades of blue. This includes shades of indigo in place of 'azurite' and the rather expensive lapis lazuli, imported from Persia. The latter being a brighter blue adds a special lustre to the paintings particularly after being embellished with gold. It has been said that lapis lazuli was also used in creating the Ajanta frescoes.

Besides views of court activities and battle scenes, the portraits and animal and bird studies are the art works that demonstrate the skill of the painters. In these, we can see the finest strokes of the brush and every little detail. In portraits one can see every hair on the eyebrows and beards, while the garments capture the subtlety of fine muslin through which a faint glimpse of skin can be seen.

The exhibition is on till October 30.

(The writer is an author and a former art gallery owner)