

Calligraphy in India

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Abstract

The art of calligraphy has had a long association with the ancient land and cultural hub of the world, India. This article takes a look at the origins and influences that molded calligraphy in India. Indian calligraphy and scripts have had a major influence on South Asian calligraphy and the world. The classical and modern styles continue to leave their mark on the culture scene of India. The metamorphosis of calligraphy till the present times is of significant interest.

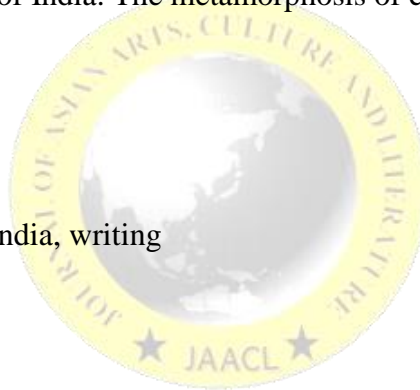
Keywords

Calligraphy, manuscript, India, writing

Introduction

Words, lines, and imagination are the wonders of writing. Writing that has been passed down the ages in the form of human history, classical stories, poetry and songs, ballads. Calligraphy has played an important part in the transmission of knowledge across the centuries. The history of calligraphy can be traced back to the origin of the written word itself, circa 3000 BC.

Calligraphy is the art of fine writing, the jewel of handwriting comes from the word - French calligraphie, from Greek kalligraphiā, beautiful writing: kalli- beautiful (from kallos, beauty) + -graphiā, -graphy.



Calligraphy is the illustrations of these gems of human thought in their finest form, in the shape of decorative letters and beautiful forms inscribed with the help of instruments such as the quill, pen, brushes of various sorts.

Calligraphy is visual art that is associated with writing. It consists of design and the artful execution of lettering with a variety of instruments as mentioned before. It lends beauty to the narrative and is a hallmark of the skills of the craftsman.

The art forms of calligraphy range from inscriptions and art pieces where letters are written in different styles ranging from the early times to the modern versions that have developed over the centuries.

History of Calligraphy in India

Calligraphy can be classified into four broad categories: Western Calligraphy, Eastern Asian Calligraphy, Southern Asian Calligraphy, and Islamic Calligraphy.

The practices of calligraphy that emerged from India, Nepal, and Tibet come under Southern Asian Calligraphy. Buddhist manuscripts, inscriptions in stone and birch bark, copper, palm leaves, and burnt mud are some examples. Calligraphy was called “Akshara-Lalitya” back in ancient India.

Birch bark called the bhojpatra was used as a writing surface in the 2nd century. Early Indian manuscripts consisted of these, and they were stacked on one another and tied together with holes sewn with string. These were commonly used all across South east Asia also.



Image 1: Birch Bark ancient Indian manuscripts

Indian Calligraphy was the most influential and varied in styles, the most ancient lettering practices were developed here. Its evolution continues to this day. Ancient Indians had developed the art of calligraphy around the post Mauryan era. The Gilgit scripts are the earliest calligraphy in India dating back to the 5th, 6th centuries. Earliest painted covers of manuscripts were made between the 7th and 9th centuries, the earliest illustrated manuscript in South Asia was made around the 10th century. Indian Calligraphy took off starting around 500 AD. It was brought to Central Asia from South East Asia by Indian traders, colonists, military adventurers, Buddhist monks and missionaries. The Indic script played a central role in the evolution of calligraphy.

Brahmi script is the earliest writing system developed in India after the Indus script. It is one of the most important writing systems as all modern Indian scripts and several hundred scripts found in Southeast and East Asia are derived from the Brahmi script. The phonetics of several different languages have been adapted from the Brahmi script with many variations. The writing systems of Asia like Gurmukhi, Sinhalese, Telugu, Thai, Tibetan, Javanese and several others can be traced back to the Brahmi script.

The region of South East Asia and its languages have been influenced by the Indic scripts and culture. The rudimentary internal structure, the make of the syllabic letters, and the direction of writing helped in the creation of these different languages. It is interesting to note that before the left to right way of writing was invented, the pothi system was in use, it is a vertical way of writing. It is unique in the history of calligraphy. After the advent of the

Asoka style of Indian writing, two calligraphic types of writing appeared, Kharoṣṭhī and Brahmi. Kharoṣṭhī was used in the north-western regions of India from the 3rd century BC till the 4th century of the Christian Era, and Central Asia till the 8th century.

Let us now look at the major influences on Indian calligraphy. Persian had a major bearing on the way Indian calligraphy developed and has come to its present form. The Guru Granth Sahib has been traditionally written in the handwritten style and stands out as one of the shining examples of Indian calligraphy till this day.

There have been accounts of how calligraphy developed in India. One very interesting account is that of the 16th Century Saint Ramdas from Maharashtra. He described the process in detail and the art of calligraphy like posture, ways of holding the tool, preparation of surfaces, clarity, colors of the ink etc.



Image 2: Devanagari Handwriting of 1797

In India, the earliest signs of calligraphy can be traced to King Asoka's edicts, which were carved out on the stone. In India, there is a rich heritage of calligraphy that has found its documents and monuments, coins, and jewelry. Asoka's edicts (c. 265–238 BC) were written on stone. These inscriptions are deeply set in form. Asoka was the first Indian emperor to carve and announce the facilities he created for his subjects and cities, stone engraved rules of law of his dynasty, still serve as examples of Indian calligraphy.

Indian Calligraphy Today

Calligraphy is used these days in event invitations, font designs and typography, handwritten designs, religious temple art, and made-to-order calligraphic art, stone inscriptions, and graphics. Props and moving images for film and television, testimonials, maps are also written and made in modern calligraphy styles. Modern calligraphy also is digitized with the help of lettering software like Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Photoshop, and Graphic Design Studio among many others. These images then can be used and printed onto various items like T-shirts, pens, ceramicware, etc. This has increased the reach of the art form to the masses.

If you do want to learn calligraphy, Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (New Delhi), Achyut Pallav School of Calligraphy (Mumbai) and Vikrant Karia Institute of Art (Mumbai) are a few institutes in India. Online courses, local classes, or YouTube videos are also a source of learning and knowledge.

Renowned calligraphy artist Achyut Palav has done ground-breaking work with Devanagari and English scripts for a long time and has inspired whole generations of artists. He has won numerous awards and recognitions. He runs his own school that nurtures the calligraphy artists and the art form. Anaroop Kerketta, whose work with various forms of calligraphy has seen him become a torchbearer for a globally renowned calligraphy group, Calligraffiti and Indian calligraphy in modern times.

It is to be noted with great interest that calligraphy has evolved from being a form of communication not only of language but to highlight the interconnection of life, daily objects, of being a means of doing business, trade across countries of the days gone by to be just an art form these days. The revival of this art form lies in the hands of the communities of the world to bring it back to its former glory and relevance in our lives. This can be done hand in hand with tradition and technology.

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About the Author

Komal Gupta is an award-winning Indian poetess and writer. She writes under the pen name of tejaswini. She is an avid reader with a penchant for the extraordinary and mundane aspects of life. A keen observer of life, words to her are an extension of perceptions. Komal continues to push the boundaries of what defines poetry, writing with her unique style of narration and reflections. She believes in the power of words, arts and culture to change the world. She has been awarded the Indian Women Achievers Award 2021 in Literature by Asian Literary Society at the 3rd ALS LIT FEST 2021. Certificate of Excellence awarded to the 'Verses of Time' for the Best Poetry Book in English at the 3rd ALS LIT FEST 2021 by the Asian Literary Society.

