

The Unique Aesthetic of South East Asia

By

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Abstract

Centuries after centuries, the world witness the birth and evolution of cultures and civilizations at the banks of a river. And South East Asia is not an exception. The Mekong Valley has been witness to the ebb and flow of art and culture of indigenous people. Some art and craft disappear as if making their way to new ones like the leaves of an autumn tree. Some are on the verge of extinction.

While embracing the present, it is our collective responsibility to preserve our glorious past, for our future generations.

Keywords

Unique, Dong Ho paintings, Khuli flute, Frescoes, winds of change, folk art, and excavations.

Introduction

The Mekong River flows almost all through the countries of South East Asia comprising Laos, Brunei, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei.

South East Asia is home to more than three fifty ethnic communities living in mountains, forests, and hills. Since time immemorial, there are a lot of theories floating regarding their art and culture. Many scholars believed that their culture is highly influenced by outside forces. That they are overshadowed by the great empires of India and China. They have been colonized and suppressed by a variety of different nations, all different cultures and

languages. This gives South East Asia on one hand a background of shared influence, and on another, entirely different influences which is unique.

Another set of scholars believed that their art and cultures are very versatile and range from silk, paper paintings, ink paintings, woodblock prints, frescoes, murals, and sculptures.

Using classic tools and centuries-old methods, artisans are now trying to safeguard traditional crafts which are now gradually vanishing in the face of modernity.

Fading Art and Craft

One such dying craft is the Thai Khuli Flute made of bamboo. It lost its sheen as factory cheap versions flooded the market.



Image 1: Thai Khuli Flute

Indigenous Thai paintings consist of book illustrations and painted ornamentation of buildings such as palaces and temples. The most popular subjects of paintings during those days were Jataka tales.

The Laotians have a variety of regional and rural art forms, including weaving, wood and ivory carving, and silver and gold work. Many artisans are now trying to revive and preserve

the fabric weaving traditions of Laos which had been largely forgotten due to the war and so-called modernization.

Vietnam's Dong Ho paintings also known as Tet paintings are also slowly fading away. Sea-Shell is the very essence of Dong Ho paintings.



Image 2: Dong Ho Painting – Wedding of the Mouse

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One of the vanishing crafts of South East Asia is the Keri daggers of Indonesia. It was both a weapon and a sacred ritual object loaded with spirituality and is commonly displayed during Balinese weddings.

Once Cambodian artists had uniquely made colorful kites that were flown during monsoons and had attached bows that make a musical sound when it blows in the wind. Now few villagers make these unique kites as most of them are heading towards cosmopolitan cultures.

Winds of Change

In South East Asia, the wind of changes often came as storms as the region is the crossroad for many countries. As a result, their culture assimilated into the region due to which indigenous art and culture merged or disappear. As has been mentioned above, there is a notion that the art and culture of the region are influenced by foreign forces especially, India and China. Indian trade made its first entry into the region in the early centuries and despite its peaceful entry, it caused a stir, a revolutionary in the life and culture of the people of the region.

The Indians brought new ideas and art forms, and the natives readily accepted them.

The Hindu and Buddhist cultures of the Indians made a tremendous impact and came to form the second layer of culture in South East Asia, but the first layers of native ideas and traditions have remained strong to the present day.

The people of South East Asia were thought to have shared a lack of inventiveness since pre-historic times and to have been receptive rather than creative in their contacts with foreign civilizations. Later excavations and discoveries in Myanmar and Thailand, however, inspired some scholars to argue against the accepted theory.

As South East Asia has always been thickly populated, it was natural that the first material to be used for artistic purposes should have been wood. They retained the wood carving tradition, beginning in ancient times, even when they learned to work with metals and stones.

Another interesting trait of the traditional art of South-East Asia is its cave painting. The first proto-Neolithic paintings were discovered in a cave near the Salween River in Myanmar. In Myanmar, once people painted on posts of their houses.

The cave paintings like pair of hands with open palms, one holding the Sun and the other holding a human head are reflected in the late aesthetic tradition of South East Asia. The Sun symbol is found as an art motif all over the region, as a symbol of awe, triumph, and joy.

The cave painting testifies to the continuity of the magico- religious traditions, connected with all the arts of the area.

Initially, the Bronze drum of Dong Son near, Hanoi was thought to have come from China. But recent excavations proved that bronze drums are native to mainland South East Asia.



Image 3: Sculpture

The mountains of mainland South East Asia, are rich in gold, silver, and other metals. The art of metal-working must have developed quite early.

Silver, buttons, belts, and ornaments which are now made and worn by the hill peoples in South East Asia prove that there is a very ancient tradition of workmanship behind these ornamental works.

The same artistic tradition is found in textile design and also in almost all the regions of South East Asia.

And all these arts flourished under the Royal patronage.

Popular Paintings and Folk Art

One of the most popular paintings of the region is Vietnam's silk painting, for its mystical effects and vibrant colors. Vietnamese silks always remain unique in the genre of their bright color with smooth finishing. Most of the art glorifies God, as the theme is always religious, preaching moral virtues and ethics to the people.

Folk art, a traditional art, reflects native and cultural aesthetics and expresses the feelings and lives of ordinary people through textiles, especially through Batik and Ikat. South East Asian art also used elaborate masks in dramas and other rituals. Cane work and spiritual imagery are utilized on fabrics, carving tools, and wooden sculptures.

Basically South East Asian arts and crafts are composed of wood carvings, ceremonial ritual masks, textiles and sculptures, basketry, wood carvings, metal works, lacquerware, and weaponry.

A variety of techniques are used to make decorated textiles, which include, Ikat, warp and weft patterning, batik, and embroidery.

The predominant theme of South East Asia arts has been religion and national history and the life and personality of the Buddha and stories of Hindu God.

Elements and principles in art of South East Asia: The seven most common elements include line, shape, texture, form, space, color, and value. The eight principles of art are balance, proportion, unity, harmony, variety, emphasis, rhythm and movement.

South East Asian Art Top Works

- Garudas : Wat Phra, Kaew Bangkok
- Phra Achane - Wat Si Chum
- Phra Say
- Temples of Angkor
- Please Let There Be Peace
- Chhim Sothy
- Planet Singapore

Art forms of South East Asia

- Sukhothai period - Buddhist sculpture.
- Dong Son drums - South East Asian art.
- Stone Carving in Cambodia: Balinese paintings in Indonesia.

The Unique Aesthetic of the Region

The world depicted in South East Asia art are a mixture of realism and fantasy, and the all-pervading atmosphere was a joyous acceptance of life.

The art and culture are unique because aesthetic traditions and cultural values vary across South East Asia.

Conclusion

Despite so many outside invasions and influences, they retain their uniqueness and distinctive features in their art and craft.

Reference

South-East Asia Britannica, South-East Asia Art & Culture (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Photo credit- Pixabay

About the Author

Ms. Mousumee Baruah is a freelancer by profession at Gurgaon. She is a Master's in English Literature from the University of Pune/ Ferguson College Pune She is a bi-lingual writer and poet. She is the author of the poetry collection "The Castaway". Many of her poems and short stories are published in various National & International literary platforms, anthologies, blogazines, etc. She has also won a few awards for her literary endeavor.

