Chapter II

Artistic Style And Themes
Of Chughtai Painting
**Artistic Style And Themes Of Chuhtai's Painting**

Mohammad Abdur Rahman Chuhtai had a thorough knowledge of Islamic Art and Culture. So he used liberally ornamental shapes of natural objects such as flowers, buds, leaves, birds or animals as needed in his paintings. Abstract designs as found in Islamic architecture were very well used in his paintings. A spiritual touch is also found in his work.

There is a period in human history when Islamic culture was on its peak. Most of the Muslim kings and rulers were interested in art from every aspect in their own life and patronized it as much as permissible within in Islamic boundaries. This artist, who, although is in the direct line of Mughal and Persian art, puts his vital individuality in all his work. The intricate designs and decorations, enhance the importance of the 'subject'. There are expressive patterns
instead of meaningless and superfluous lines. He achieves a perfect harmony of line and expression, which is one of his greatest asset. The delicate lines of Chughtai's pictures are by no means insipid or shaky but firm and precise with a marvellous neatness and a most careful exactness of material. Chughtai's figures are vividly alive and not merely beautiful designs. There are fleeting emotions in their mobile faces; their attitudes and gestures are full of meaning.

Chughtai's art is full of dramatic action. It's symbolical technique, however, demand a certain restraint in expression. The figures therefore are mostly drawn in an attitude modified with the dignity of repose and tranquility. In his paintings one is conscious of the unique combination of elements, a most prophetic vision, and a revival of the past. The human face should either be a promise or a history.¹
**The Perspective:**

Chughtai who has a great influence of mughal and Persian paintings in his overall work but he respected enough the rule of perspective in his paintings and in this respect we can differentiate his work from Mughal or Persian (e.g. Jahanara and the Taj) Also in some other paintings it seems that he deliberately ignores the rule (e.g. Sukut-e-shab). These two paintings are produce in the book chughtai's paintings.

As we observe his paintings we come to know that he does not care much about the body proportions according to the human anatomy and paints the figure as he likes but gives a charming effect which attracts everyone.

**Female Figures:** The most impressive figures are that of women. The figures are slim, eyebrows are like bows, the fingers are long, smooth and soft. The Indian painters have been very cautious in depicting women, they have tried to maintain the
traditional ideal of Indian women hood as said above, Chughtai also well maintained this ideal in depicting women in his paintings. In chughtai's figures there is a reflection of purdah influence. He painted thousands of pictures at the time when the emphasis on purdah in the society, was in practice both in Hindus and Muslims who followed the same practice. Before the freedom of India the impact of Mughal's and Raja, Maharajas land lords, was very much in the air. So in Hindus, the women used to draw "Chunghat" and muslim women used to wear 'chadar' or 'Abaya'. (See Plate7) Chughtai could only describe himself as largely 'self-taught', in sense that he had to find a new way of applying the visual concept of Islam. He could retain the two essential qualities of Islamic painting, of fine and beautiful undulating outline and of flat colour; the first allied to the great art of calligraphy, the second to the surface

2 Chunghat- A long sheet of a cloth which is used in muslims for cover their head and body for purdah.
3 Chadar- Hindu women cover their head for purdah.
decoration in architecture, through stucco, tile work and inlaid marble and wood; allied also to the tradition of carpet design (see plate 8) the themes he searched for subjects which might be of continuing validity in the literary and folk traditions of the culture in which he was bred, that is to say the tradition of Persian – Islamic poetry, lyrical, mystical and didactic and the folk traditions of the Punjab and the Indian sub-continent, especially as preserved in the art of the Punjab Hill states, The Pahari art. Themes from the Mahabharata and Ramayana were introduced into Mughal art; and such themes are also found frequent in Pahari paintings; and so come to another aspect of Chughtai's development and achievement, his collecting of the art of the past. He felt the need for the inspiration and sympathy to be found in the work of the past masters of the Mughal and Pahari schools, which as I have explained were a necessary base for developing his own art.
His diverse subject matter included heroes and heroines from the Islamic history and heritage, kings and queens from the Hindu mythology and Punjabi legends like 'Heer Ranjha', 'Sassi Panno', and 'Sohni Mahiwal'. By painting these themes in the colonial milieu, Chughtai played a constructive role in establishing the historical and cultural identity of people.⁵

It appears that like every artist Chughtai was also interested in young female figures or in young girls. Though his point of view was different, and he considered them as the manifestation of innocence, purity and beauty. Young girls, painted by him, were sweet, idealised and imaginary, yet at the same instant these reflected the aesthetics of his time and the taste of the painter...⁶ (see plate 9). In reality, A.R. Chughtai did not approach young maidens as a specific theme or a subject outside of his normal pictorial practice, but works with this image, selected by his son Arif Chughtai,
were recently displayed at the chughtai Museum in Lahore, February 2008.

In the exhibition 'young girls' chughtai portraits unfolded a wide range of his influences and interests. Beginning from the Bengal school, along with the Indian features, to the compositions inspired from the European art, A.R. Chughtai demonstrated how an artist can utilize a variety of styles and movements, and formulate his individual visual vocabulary. Dark complexion of female figures, almond shaped eyes, prominent outlines and dark lines reminded of Ajanta fresco paintings, yet he was able to translate the art of the past into a contemporary idiom.⁷

**Different Themes Of The Paintings:**

Chughtai painted a variety of themes produced in Persian as well as in Hindu atmosphere. The subject related to religious and non religious are executed with great care and zeal⁸.
We can divide chughtai's paintings in three different categories such as: Paintings having:-

A. Religious influence

B. Social influence

C. Historical influence

A. Religious Influence:

In religious themes he used to paint women shown with different influence according to the need of the painting.

1. Woman in Hindu Mythological Themes: Chughtai's painting related to Indian aspect of life were reproduced in chughtai's Indian paintings, a book published in 1951. In this book twenty seven coloured prints, three drawings and five etchings were included. Chughtai painted about 200 pictures on Indian motifs.9

Draupadi and Pandavas (See Plate 10): Mahabharata is a great epic of India. It is a famous great battle fought in the Kurukshetra field between the cousins, one hundred Kauravas and the five pandavas
symbolizing good against evil. It has always attracted the imagination of the painters and poets and its various incidents have been reproduced in different ways. Chughtai also painted some incidents of the Mahabharata, one of them is the painting Draupadi and Pandavas. Draupadi was won as a bride in a difficult test of skill and strength in the presence of many princes. Arjun held his bow and with full confidence shot an arrow at the eye of the moving fish. Draupadi stands in a sweet and pious pose, which is the sole attraction of this picture. The picture of the Draupadi in dark mauve colour is skillfully contrasted with and also linked to the departing figures of the pandavas in lighter colour.

Chughtai portrayed numerous paintings on Radha and Krishna in various moods. Like kangra artists, he has beautifully presented the emotional scenes of Radha and Krishna. One of his paintings, entitled gloomy Radha is in the collection of national
gallery of modern arts, New Delhi and was reproduced in Chughtai's Indian paintings. It presents the figure in a graceful posture. The festival of Holi in which men and women sing songs of spring, throw 'gulal', a red vegetable dye mixed with mica in water, at one another heralds the end of spring and beginning of summer. Chughtai painted this festival in his painting Holi, depicting Radha and Krishna in a festive mood. Krishna is throwing colour at Radha. Both represent the very spirit of Holi.¹⁰

**Holi** (see plate 11): The lovely figures, well designed and well poised represent the spirit of holi, in a fit passionate abandon, emotion takes the form of flowing lines and gushing colour, which the artist scatters lavishly, in a rare out burst of creative passion. As Radha and Krishna play Holi, the whole universe is bathed in a new Romance and beauty.
When an artist plays with the colour and lines with great delicacy command changing their emotion form into a picture, then it looks that he has shakti (par excellence). The selection of colours too is the revelation of artists sensibility and mastery, in reality. It is a very difficult task to paint the picture in this combination. The longer we look at the picture, the more we enjoy the artists remarkable balance of movement and feeling\textsuperscript{11}. All these paintings shows love and passion of the artist for Indian methodology.

**The Bond of Love** (See plate 12): This picture is steeped in the spirit of fairy romance. The romantic love of Radha and Krishna, is portrayed with great thought and feeling. With an unerring skill and masterly touch. Chughtai creates enchanting forms, and greacful movement. Clear colour blend, in the back ground, lovely blues look cool and fresh, the snarled tree, like another naga
appears to be over powered by the spell of sri Krishna casts its shadows on the ardent lovers.
This early picture reveals the peculiar charm of chughtai’s style.

**Gloomy Radha** (see plate 13): The first sight of the picture gives delight to the eyes and through the eyes to the soul. The graceful posture of the bending lady is so charming you feel that the artist understands the emotion of a young woman’s heart, when the reality of love first dawns upon her in the youth.

The whole picture is painted in golden harmonious green. The atmosphere has rhythm and sweetness. The effect is intensified by the leaves behind the figure. We feel that the full moon is peeping at the lady who is going to meet her lover (Krishna) in concealment. The picture seems to throb with a sweet lyrical quality which moves the soul like music.
Chughtai gave the message of religious harmony through the medium of his paintings when, during the 1920s and 1930s he painted more than 200 Hindu and Buddhist subjects.

**Charm Of The Valley** (See plate 14): The romance of Radha and Krishna, proves that God, though all powerful, and the creator of the Goddess of beauty, becomes as helpless as man, when falls in love. Krishna sits on terrace, supplicating Radha, who oblivious to his entreaties is lost in the pride of beauty, and in the charm of nature.

In another painting he chooses the subject Chaitanya’s wife in which the history of Buddha is well known, he left his wife and family, adopted sanyas to lead a mystic religious life devoide of worldly comforts and pleasures to achieve Niravan. Just like in the painting:

**Chaitanya’s Wife** (see plate 15): Chaitanya like Budha, has renounced the world. This presents a

---

^c 'Sanyas' To lead a mystic life.
^d 'Niravan' Salvation.
picture of a dejected, helplessness of a woman who makes resignation. Whole atmosphere in the picture is calm and peaceful but full of heaviness and is gloomy.

2. **Woman In Muslim Culture:** Chughtai has presented women in these paintings as a model of Muslim culture.

**Eid Message** (see plate 16): This huge and large painting is one of the artists early ambitious effort. It also depicts the ancient tradition. It is a very impressive study. The seated old graceful lady with youngsters of the family around her looking and watching Eid moon, present a calmful scene. Realism which characterizes the painting of Chugh·tai come near to the feeling of the festival. 

Id, the feast marking the end of the month long fast of Ramadan is observed by Muslim Community, when the new moon is sighted. All are wearing 'chadar' (dupatta like cloth) but this is supposed to be wider and worn by Muslim ladies. This
painting is reproduced in *Amal-e-Chughtai* (Iqbal - The poet of the east).\textsuperscript{14} Chughtai has illustrated the Iqbal's philosophical themes from Muslim thought.

**Sparkling Eyes** (See Plate 17): A muslim young lady sitting in her courtyard contemplating over routine schedule regarding domestic work. The colour scheme of the painting producing required affect of calm and cool atmosphere, necessary for the execution of the work she is responsible for. The gradation of colour of the costume as well as that of the back ground are special to mention.

Chughtai has attained perfection in his art and there is none to compare with him as the artist in his style. He follows his own style and technique but never criticises others. He is the revivalist of the Persian and Mughal art. He won international fame. The characteristics of the chughtai's paintings as is evident in the sparkling eyes depict him as
romantic type of artist, picture further shows the technical mastery of the model achieved.  

B. Social Influence:

Chughtai painted several different social themes, which are produced in his book Muragqa-e-Chugh.tai based on Ghalib’s poetry, Amal-e-Chughtai based on Iqbal’s poetry and Chughtai’s Indian paintings and in several brochures and greeting cards.

Kashmeeri Boat (see plate 19): This painting is reproduced also in the ‘Centenary volume’ ‘The story teller’.

The Book Of Verse (see plate 18): The design quality of this picture would make it an excellent mural, or a fresco, or even a piece of tapestry. A dream world atmosphere is produced by the artist and slender cypress trees dotted about on the landscape in such a charmingly non chalant manner. Here is an arrested motion cleverly depicted by the dramatic flourish of the ‘girls’ arms. This is the sort of picture one would like to look at again and
again, marveling at its decorative perfection, and trying to unravel the mystery which surround it.\textsuperscript{16} This painting is also one of those important works in which the artist has sincerely succeeded in achieving to portray a highly beautiful perfect personality.

Chughtai was an artist whose moral, religious and literary sense is so high that when he paints a woman he gives her such heights and elevations with his imagination, through lines and colours that wants to depict woman so as she achieves an honorable position and reached on the heights of the culture.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Deepak} (see plate 19): The handling of light and shade in this picture is masterly executed. The atmosphere is calm and cheerful. The maiden dedicates with passion her youth and beauty to her lover.
Chughtai is an artist of passion. He imparts strong emotions to every tone and line. He is the creator of new, charming faces and striking compositions.

The Music Lesson (see plate 20): The design at the base of the picture helps to balance the lower part of it with the upper- half which is naturally more detailed in drawing, is well handled.

The music plays an important role in Indian culture. Chughtai also painted many compositions based on musical themes which move the inner self.

This painting is one of the earliest works of chughtai reproduced in a collection of some of his paintings 'Chughtai’s Paintings’. Here ‘nayika’ is playing ‘vina’ a kind of an instrument holding it horizontally with both hands. She is teaching a lesson of music to her pet parrot who is listening it carefully while sitting on the ‘vina’ on the left side of the picture. She is standing amidst the flowers against the background of wall and looks totally absorbed.18
Engagement Ring (see plate 20): In this painting artist painted a newly engaged pair. The lady is shown wearing an engagement ring in her finger.

C. Historical Influence:
Chughtai painted some beautiful paintings of historical themes. Following are a few such paintings being mentioned as an example in which women from history have been painted by the artist, Daughter of the Harem, Mughal Princess.

Jahangir and Noor Jahan (see plate 21): Chughtai, the idealist, always liked to depict his theme with symbolic and characteristic realization. This historical pair is representative of our culture and our will to maintain our distinct identity. Chughtai created dignity and personalities of the superior race in a new form. The painting stands alone for "the case of development and rebirth" the glorious tradition of art and culture. This outlook enables chughtai to find the external evidence and composition with meditative approach.
The colourful past expresses the feelings with all strange lines and harmony of the generation. The composition shows the new form of thinking, it is undoubtedly impressive and lovely.\textsuperscript{21}

In history Noor Jahan was one of the most beautiful and intelligent woman of her time. Historians say that actually she was the person who was looking after the affairs of the Kingdom instead of her husband, Jahangir, the mughal king of that time. She was not an inborn princess but luck made her the queen of the Mughal Empire.

Chughtai painted the couple in a very majestic way. \textbf{Zubeda Khatoon} (see plate 22): The lady in the painting is the wife of Caliph Haroon-al-Rasheed. As a princess and wife of the famous muslim caliph and ruler of a flourishing muslim state that was on its peak of prosperity and fame.\textsuperscript{20}

Zubeda was an intelligent lady, who's many stories regarding her sharp mind and being kind hearted are well known among the learned persons. Her super way
of living a royal life is also famous. By seeing the painting it appears, the artist was very well aware about the character of the subject he painted. The lady is standing in a very dignified manner with a very sober gesture in a penitent mood pondering over some extra ordinary problem. The artist is very successful in depicting the feelings of the lady. The background of the painting is elaborate and decorative enough presenting an oriental royal courts Splendour. Zubeda Khatoon wearing a heavy robe, totally suitable for a royal lady giving the perfect oriental style of her times. This is the beauty of the artists work that he very nicely creates the appropriate atmosphere, he wants to depict. Besides the robe the headgear or turban and beautiful earrings and the yellow Dupatta, all are really majestic and charming in view.
References

1. Sirajuddin, Razia "Chughtai's Indian Paintings" op. cit.,


3. Ibid.,

4. Ibid.,

5. From internet.


7. Ibid.


11. Sirajuddin, Razia, "Chughtai's Indian Paintings", op. cit.,

12. op. cit.,
13. From Internet "Abdur Rahman Chughatai's Paintings".


15. Ibid.,


17. Translation of the notes given in Amal-e-Chughtai.

18. Sirajuddin, Razia, op. cit.,

19. "Iqbal, Poet of the East" commentary op. cit.

20. Syed, Durdana, op. cit.,