

Decorative Plant Motifs in Traditional Art and Craft Practices: Pedagogical Perspectives

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Abstract : This paper explores the decorative uses of plant motifs and symbols in traditional Indian art and craft practices in order to assess their pedagogical significance within the context of plant study in higher education in art and design. It examines existing scholarship on decoration and plants in Indian art and craft practices. The impulse to elaborate upon an existing form or surface is an intrinsic part of many Indian traditional art and craft traditions where a deeply ingrained love for decoration exists. Indian craftsmen use an array of motifs and embellishments to adorn surfaces across a range of practices, and decoration is widely seen in textiles, jewellery, temple sculptures, vehicular art, architecture, and various other art, craft, and design traditions. Ornamentation in Indian cultural traditions has been attributed to religious and spiritual influences in the lives of India's art and craft practitioners. Through adornment, surfaces and objects were ritually transformed to function both spiritually and physically. Decorative formations facilitate spiritual development and attune our minds to concepts that support contemplation. Within practices of ornamentation and adornment, there is extensive use of botanical motifs as Indian art and craft practitioners have historically been drawn towards nature as a source of inspiration. This is due to the centrality of agriculture in the lives of Indian people as well as in religion, where plants play a key role in religious rituals and festivals. Plant representations thus abound in two-dimensional and three-dimensional surface designs and patterns where the motifs range from being realistic, highly stylized, and curvilinear forms to geometric and abstract symbols. Existing scholarship reveals that these botanical embellishments reference a wide range of plants that include native and non-indigenous plants, as well as imaginary and mythical plants. Structural components of plant anatomy, such as leaves, stems, branches and buds, and flowers, are part of the repertoire of design motifs used, as are plant forms indicating different stages of growth, such as flowering buds and flowers in full bloom. Symmetry is a characteristic feature, and within the decorative register of various practices, plants are part of border zones and bands, connecting corners and all-over patterns, used as singular motifs and floral sprays on panels, and as elements within ornamental scenes. The results of the research indicate that decoration as a mode of inquiry into plants can serve as a platform to learn about local and global biodiversity and plant anatomy and develop artistic modes of thinking symbolically, metaphorically, imaginatively, and relationally about the plant world. The conclusion is drawn that engaging with ornamental modes of plant representation in traditional Indian art and craft practices is pedagogically significant for two reasons. Decoration as a mode of engagement cultivates both botanical and artistic understandings of plants. It also links learners with the indigenous art and craft traditions of their own culture.

Keywords : art and design pedagogy, decoration, plant motifs, traditional art and craft

Conference Title : ICDA 2023 : International Conference on Decorative Arts and Aesthetic

Conference Location : London, United Kingdom

Conference Dates : May 15-16, 2023