

Illumination of the *AdiGranth*: A Stylistic & Aesthetic Analysis

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Abstract

AdiGranth can be defined as a manuscript that comprises of the primal text of the sacred *Guru Granth Sahib*. Numerous illuminated copies of the divine text came into existence with the growing popularity of Sikh faith and patronage. This research is intended towards identifying popular design motifs that have defined the style of Sikh visual vocabulary and establish their textual context with reference to the *AdiGranth*. Visual analyses of some of the illuminated folios reveal that the design disposition and inspiration correlates with the compositions of the holy text. The article includes necessary transliterations and translations where required. The scope of this study is to provide the printed versions with the design vocabulary that are distinctly Sikh.

Keywords: *AdiGranth*, Design motifs, Design inspiration, Design disposition, Sikh aesthetics

Introduction

The foundation of the sacred book of the Sikhs, *AdiGranthis* composed of consummate words uttered by the Sikh Gurus as well as Hindu and Muslim saint poets. Patronage for *AdiGranth* existed on a royal as well as sub royal level for handwritten sacred copies of the text, which would simultaneously be illustrated and illuminated by artists who were no different from the scribes. A few extant copies in various collections give an insight into the lost exuberance of the Sikh courts. Illustrations found in these extant manuscripts have been extensively published, though less research is done in the field of illumination.

A popular trend of adorning it with illumination may be traced from a few rare examples of seventeenth century Kashmir, where a distinct design vocabulary has evolved over the years and remains ubiquitous to various mediums of creative expression. An assortment of patterns belonging to arabesque and geometric order, were stylistically vestiges of the waning glory of the Mughal aesthetic that spilled into the Sikh manuscript tradition. Though, illumination in Kashmiri manuscripts lacked the delicate lyricism of the Mughal *hashiyas*, a distinct style emerged where quick lines complimented by vivacious colours and a profuse use of gold defined its magnificence. The new patrons wanted not just to retain or revive a popularly practiced painting tradition but also to further beautify this huge mass of divine order.

Goswamy (1998) who has comprehensively analyzed Kashmiri painting mentions the idea of Sikh manuscript illumination and that there was a coexistence of elite and bazaar styles in painting traditions. According to him, elite style was characterized by profuse use of gold colour and finesse of design, while the bazaar style was a cursory rendition of the design motifs under the benefaction of common people. Deol (2003) had introduced the popularly practiced convention of using a *nisan*, consisting of a moolmantar or an invocatory prayer, written in personal handwriting of the Guru; which was illumination in the real sense. He also elaborated on the notion of motif such as *belbuta*, *minakari*, *ambietc.* as the basic design vocabulary adopted by the Sikh artists. The current research however, investigates into design motifs that define the Sikh aesthetics with reference to the composition of the *Granth*, deciphered on a dual level.

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Firstly, it has aimed to comprehend the design motifs with reference to their disposition in the holy text and secondly the study correlates the hymns of the sacred text to the inspiration of a motif.

1 Design disposition

1.1 Literary composition of the holy book:

It is imperative to understand the composition of the *AdiGranth* since the disposition of the design motifs has been done to facilitate the same. The bulk of compositions existing in various copies of the *AdiGranth* are arranged in 39 chapters. These chapters are comprehended in three sections, all written in a poetic form except the first, which consists of an invocation or a *moolmantar* written in prose. New chapters, titles and subtitles start with a *mangal* (*UkkOankarSatgurParsaad*) The *moolmantar* complete precedes the first section which contains the three widely read daily prayers: The *Japji Sabib*, The *Rebras Sabib* and The *KirtanSobila*. These prayers extracted from different parts of the second section of the *AdiGranth*, exuberate the essence of entire text.

The second *Raga* section forms the main body of the virtuous text, rendered by gurus and select Hindu and Muslim saint poets. The compositions in this section are organized into 30 musical modes, which are enumerated in a paginated index of *ragas*. The list is followed by a detailed account of compositions included in each of the *ragas*. The details consist of *Dopade*, *Chaupade*, *Ashtapadis*, *Chbhants* and longer compositions or *Vars*, arranged in titled compositions such as *Sukhmani*(Song of peace), *Bawan Akhri* (52 letters of the alphabet), *Barah Maah* (12 months of Indian lunar calendar) etc. These are meant to be sung in consonance with *ragas* of classical North Indian tradition of music. Thus, out of the total 39 chapters only 31 are arranged in *ragas*. The third and last section of the *AdiGranth* includes miscellaneous hymns and couplets, sans the musical modes but the section ends with a *Ragamala*, re-establishing the eminence of music.

This brief shall enable us to comprehend the disposition of the design motifs. For instance, the beginning of each section was generally marked by a sophisticatedly illuminated *moolmantar*, in comparison to the cursorily painted *mangal* that highlighted the subsections. Apart from these major illuminations, certain words such as ‘*rabaao*’, meaning a pause that occurs after a hymn or the chronological number of the Guru known as *mehla* are enlivened with colour or a petite motif. The artist also occasionally highlights the name of a raga or *ragini* and words such as *dobra*, *shabad*, *salok*etc.

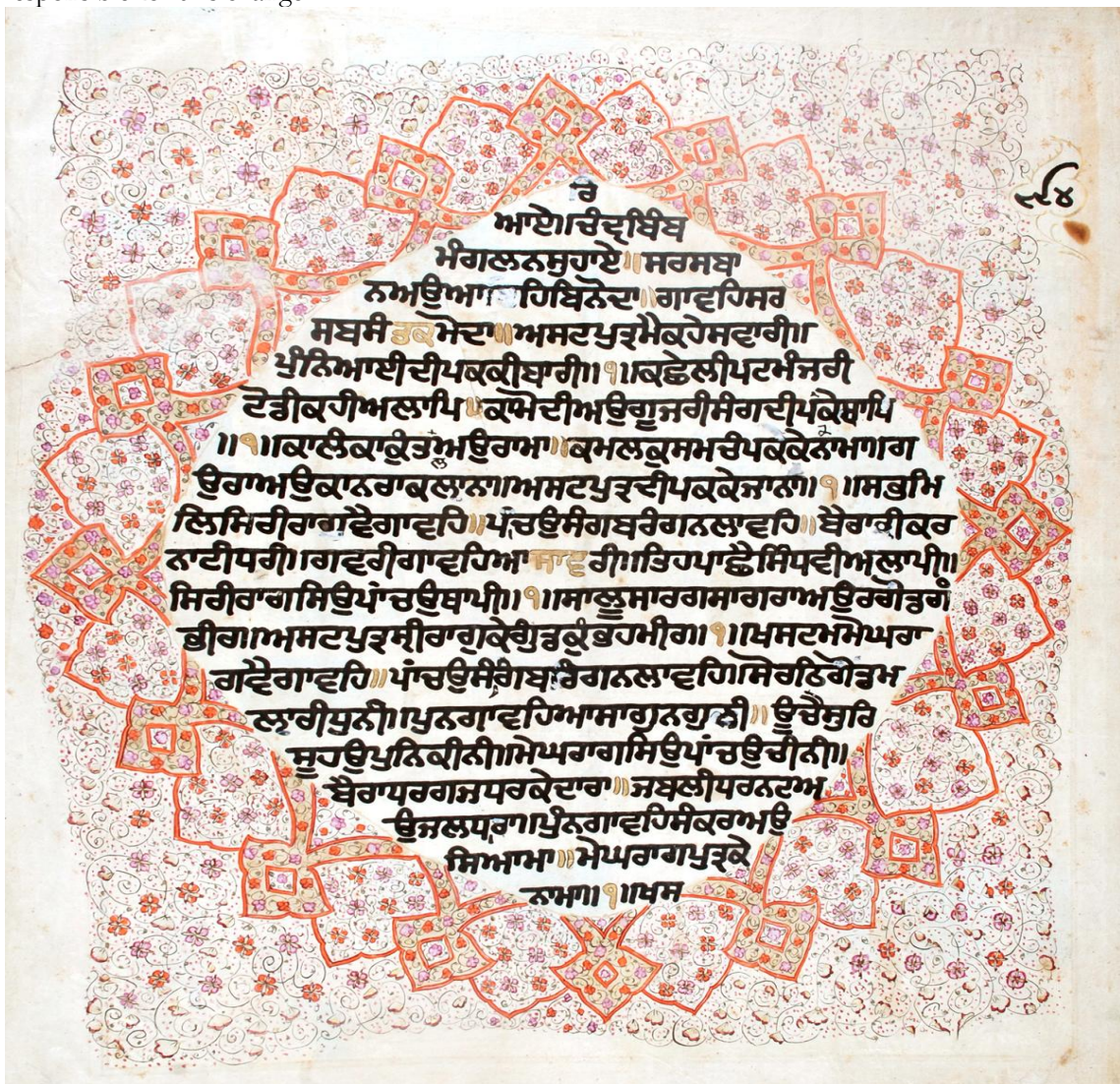
1.2 Propaganda of illumination for sections:



Pl.1.Illuminated Ragamala folio from AdiGranth, Collection of National Museum, Delhi

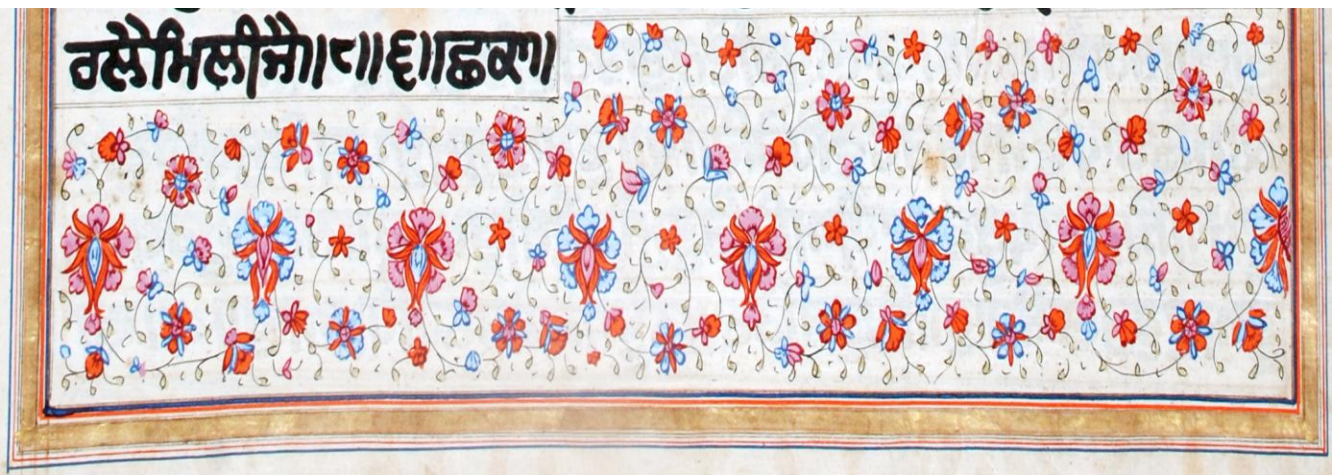
We may consider two profusely illuminated folios of the composition of *Ragamala* of the *AdiGranth*, from the National Museum collection, to further comprehend the design dispositions and stylistic variation. The first folio depicts the script contained within a roughly drawn circle that is outlined in orange colour (pl. 1).

The caption of *Ragamala* along with a *mangal* is scribed in gold occupying the upper part of the circle; while the lower part contains the script in black. The area surrounding this header is demarcated by a similar orange string and is beautified with a sinuous leafy scroll. Boldly shaded flowers in orange and crimson that appear entwining the scroll are novel to the illuminating style of *AdiGranth*. They are replicated to fill up an intertwining pattern of graceful blue paisleys that envelops this central circle. Here, the background is lavishly dotted with a *belbuta* of gold and orange blooms; while the orange string binds the entire pattern by boldly outlining it. The composition of *Ragamala* continues onto the next folio (pl. 2) which is embellished unlike the first one. The central shape which contains the script is a circle that has been stretched from the cardinal directions. An arched pattern outlined in orange surrounds this circle which alternates with the *chinar* leaf motif filled with gold. It is decorated by a spread of *belbuta* of tiny orange, mauve and gold flowers on a background of stippled dots that together form an irregular square. In the first folio, the overall effect is that of a vibrantly coloured and delicately executed design, which exhibits a mastery of skill and sophistication in taste. In the second folio, though the execution seems hurried with a casual quality of line, lacking the finesse and impact of the first; it nevertheless tends to impress us with its intricate lacework. This stylistic variation leads us to believe that the composition was illuminated by two different artists and it is the placement of the script in two folios which is responsible for this change.



Pl.2. Illuminated Ragamala folio from *AdiGranth*, Collection of National Museum, Delhi

In certain manuscripts, since a new section commenced from fresh page with heavy illumination, certain blank areas were deserted by the scribe on preceding folios. This seems to have delighted the artist, who utilized it as an opportunity to creatively paint these empty spaces, disposed at the bottom of the folios. They may or may not be rendered with a background colour but consistently display designs which are visually light and exhibit a sense of artistic freedom. Rendition of a cluster of stylized flowers, mostly arranged systematically like a *jaal*, was a popular technique among the Kashmiri artists. What is truly amazing about these patterns is the artists' refined sense of colour balance coupled with an inimitable arrangement. Folio 728, which belongs to the manuscript from the collection of the National Museum (New Delhi), depicts large stylized onion pink and sky blue flowers in the space below and smaller flowers in the same colour scheme in their interspaces and as well above them (pl. 3). Though the overall colour palette remains sombre, it is the vividness of orange that enlivens the entire pattern, which is bound by a delicate and lucidly drawn leafy scroll. It is the one of the most finely rendered illuminating pattern, adorning an unscripted area in this *AdiGranth*, that displays a sense of freedom and feeling of delight which reverberates in most of these *jaal* patterns.



Pl.3. Illuminated space from folio from *AdiGranth*, Collection of National Museum, Delhi

Another exclusive setting for illuminating motifs is to indicate an impressive style of pagination. Generally, a count scribed in *Gurmukhi* appears on the top most corner of the page, disposed between the line borders. Despite being casually written, the number is creatively embellished with varying motifs that satisfy an artist's urge of perfecting a page. Thus, the *belbuta* motifs not only added a riot of colour and variety to the rigorously handwritten script, but also served an important dispositional purpose in most Sikh manuscripts. Illumination of page number 612 from a rare *AdiGranth* manuscript in the collection of the National Museum displays the numerals contained within a stylized *chinar* shape (pl. 4). It is outlined with edges of serrated leaves that also appear at the bottom; while a triple headed bloom forms a small bush that sprouts atop it to complete its decorative look. There is a great variety in pagination designs in this manuscript, wherein the motifs are sensibly contained within the double line borders of the folio.



Pl.4.Illuminated pagination from folio from AdiGranth, Collection of National Museum, Delhi

As the demand for illuminated copies of *AdiGranth* grew, traditionally the script came to be illuminated heavily. The script was bound by a thick border of a continuous pattern formed by permutations and combinations of interlocking shapes painted against a vibrant background of a flat colour. In an illuminated folio of *AdiGranth* from the collection of Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar, that may stylistically be attributed to early years of the twentiethcentury, a square format of the manuscript displays a *mangal* scribed in the horizontal center followed by the prayer of *jaap sahib* in *Gurmukhi* script (pl. 5). The topmost part of the scribed area has an adorned blue arch. The border consists of a yellow band with a *belbuta* of blue stylized flowers, arranged spaciouly. Stylistically, in terms of the cursory rendition of motifs as well as crude choice of colours, it suggests a definite decadence in the art of Sikh manuscripts. Gradually, the art of illumination succumbed to the lack of patronage and availability of standardized printed copies; which were mechanically adorned with lines and thin floral borders in limited colours.



Pl.5.Illuminated folio from AdiGranth, Collection of Guru Nanak Dev university, Amritsar

2 Design inspiration

The inspiration of adopting floral motifs was innate to a pious mind and it is no wonder that they embellished the word of the Lord. The visual monotony of these pages, scripted one after another, in severe black ink, urged a creative mind to introduce certain elements of interest. Thus, illumination in the form of what is known as *belbuta* or *minakari* in Punjabi was introduced into the *AdiGranth* manuscripts. The term *belbuta* connoted a continuous curling stem (*bel*) dotted with flowers (*buta*); while a *minakari* motif, inspired by the ancient metal craft of the Mughals, meant an exquisitely rendered border or *buti* of different colours that gave the appearance of enamel (Deol (2003)). These motifs were disposed to pleasantly interrupt the script and serve a dual purpose of embellishing and highlighting compositions of the sacred text.

2.1 Floral motifs:

The rendition of the *belbuta* motif, in most Sikh manuscripts is remarkable for a reason that despite being painted in a cursory manner, its inspiration may be traced to certain species of flowers. Improvisation or stylization based on observation from nature is an age old tradition followed by the Indian artists. Flowers such as Dianthus, Dahlia, Heliconia, Nargis, Tulip, Zinnia etc. have captured the imagination of artists and have cajoled a convincing depiction as a design motif.

However, it is interesting to note that certain hymns from the *AdiGranth* specifically include the nomenclature of flowers such as lotus, poppy, safflower, lily etc. For instance, the first Guru Nanak Dev ji, lucidly articulated his contemplation on flowers in an excerpt from Page 23 of the Guru Granth Sahib in *Sri Raga*, second house. Translation: “You are the lotus flower of the day and you are the water-lily of the night. You yourself behold them, and blossom forth in bliss.”



Pl.6. Illuminated space from folio from *AdiGranth*, Collection of National Museum, Delhi

The adoption of *dvadasbkamala* or the twelve petal lotus as a compositional design for illumination may find its roots in hymns such as these. A detached folio of the *AdiGranth*, displayed in the painting gallery of the National Museum depicts the ten revered Gurus within the compositional design of the *dvadasbkamala* (pl. 6). The *dvadasbkamala* is contained in an illuminated square consisting of a bold arabesque and arch design in gold, rendered on a blue background which is speckled with a *jaal* of gold flowers. It is further surrounded by a narrow band with casually rendered *belbuta* motif. The outermost border consists of two gold bands with the tree motif in between. The gurus have been depicted unconventionally, by rendering them in the company of their families. Similarly, page 35 contains a hymn uttered by the third Guru Amar Das ji,

Translation: “O self-willed *manmukh*, devoid of the *naam*, do not be misled upon beholding the color of the safflower. Its color lasts for only a few days—it is worthless!” Another hymn which mentions the Safflower from the holy text is referred in a *shalok* on page 251, Translation: “Man remains engrossed in women and playful pleasures; the tumult of his passion is like the dye of the safflower, which fades away all too soon.

An illuminator’s creativity coupled with an untiring zeal can also be glimpsed from the permutation and combinations of other popular motifs. For instance, they enhanced their design repertoire with a *chinar* leaf, which was inspired by a characteristic *Platanusorientalis* tree that frequents the Kashmiri landscape.

2.2 Stylized motifs:

The motif of the ‘paisley’ is ubiquitous to the arts of Kashmir and is widely referred to as ‘*ambi*’ in Punjabi, derived from the word *amb* which means a mango. Small sized *ambis*, generally rendered in maroon and gold are interspersed within the script, for marking the beginning of a new hymn and enlivening the severity of the black ink. It seems that the artists decided to restrict the use of *butas* within the script and favoured the stylized *ambi* motif, creating a sense of consistency in most of the folios. Since the loveliness of *ambi* found a favoured use by the illuminators; we find numerous variations of this motif in pagination as well. A refined example may be found on folio 654 of the *AdiGranth* at the National Museum (pl. 7). The numeral is scribed in a sophisticated rendered serrated leaf which has a curving tip that forms a paisley. The refinement in execution is evident in terms of disposition, drawing as well as colouring; creating a marked stylistic difference from the cursory rendered motifs. Apart from these, patterns with shapes such as the ogee and betel or *paan* leaf also add to Kashmiri artists’ visual expression.



Pl.7. Illuminated pagination from folio from *AdiGranth*, Collection of National Museum, Delhi

3 Conclusions

Instances of variation of elite and bazaar style visible in a single manuscript make it imperative for us to encompass methodologies of manuscript painting for a kaleidoscopic understanding. This deviation leads us to believe that either for such ambitious projects an assembly line system of painting was pursued; or it indicates a change of artist in the painting process. Aesthetic analysis of the illuminated folios on the basis of disposition of designs establishes the fact that the artist was no other than the scribe or a devout who was conversant with the meaning of the holy text. Thus the logical placement of design motifs not just enhances the overall visual appeal of the manuscript but serves a function to help the reader comprehend the basic structure of this huge mass of text. This aesthetic is visibly missing in the contemporary printed versions of *Guru Granth Sahib* and needs to be revived, to re-establish the notion of intelligibility of a pious Sikh artist.

A stylistic and aesthetic analysis of these illuminated copies of *Adi Granth* thus reveals two facts. Firstly, with an intention to continue the popular Mughal tradition of manuscript painting, the Sikh rule in India contributed to an amalgamation of a painting style which was distinct in its design vocabulary. Secondly, the illuminating motifs served a dual purpose of defining the Sikh aesthetics and supplement a dispositional understanding of this massive composition, which was a novel phenomenon.

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