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Tricks the eyes play

THE WAY IT WAS



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The four minarets of the Taj, which should recede inwards towards the dome of the royal mausoleum, remain adamantly perpendicular.

This is achieved by constructing the minarets to lean away from the dome so they appear straight

Once you are through defiles of the Karakoram, car engines have to be revved up to make the final ascent to the top of the Khunjab Pass, which is at an incredible height of about 14000 feet. You don't have mountain peaks of that height in most countries. The famous Matterhorn in the Alps in Europe is around 4478 metres which is about 15000 feet. If you are coming straight from Gilgit, it is advisable not to get out of your vehicle and saunter around surveying the scenery. At that height the rarefied atmosphere is short in oxygen and likely to make you dizzy and cause a severe headache.

After crossing over the Khunjab Pass the road casually starts descending into China and soon approaches the Pamir Mountains. Unlike the narrow gorges and forbidding mountains of the Karakoram Range colliding into each other like mad bulls, the road now passes through a broad valley, flanked by gracious hills and mountains, which have been tamed by blizzards and dust storms. There are long flat tracts, where the road runs straight converging to a point in the far distance. The telephone poles, pacing along the road also successively diminish in size. I have always wondered why distant things look smaller. Why is the eye so easily deceived into believing what is not true?

In early Mughal miniatures all objects are their usual actual size, but a sense of space is suggested by dividing the painting into several horizontal sections. The top section represents the farthest distance, the middle section represents the middle and the bottom section the foreground. This is the method followed by the paintings of Dastan e Amir Hamza and the Akbarnama.

At the end of the fourteenth century, Filippo Brunelleschi laid down the mathematical laws of linear perspective, which made it possible for artists to create a convincing illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface. From a fixed point all lines would converge to a single point, known as the vanishing point on the horizon. The objects were placed one behind the other in depth, proportionate to how they would appear to the viewer if he stood fixed at a point. Elements receded in depth to create an illusion of distance.

The Mughals on the contrary suggested distance by making the eye move from the bottom upwards or the other way round. That is why their paintings were designed in horizontal panels. They cleverly established a sense of distance rather than an illusion of depth. It also enabled the artist to present activities and

incidents simultaneously occurring at different places and sections of the painting.

Later Mughal paintings also assimilated the Brunelleschian method of depicting space. They however did not practice it with the same boring mathematical precision as for instance Antonio Pollaiuolo and others did in Florence. In the Renaissance Brunelleschi's perspective became a toy in the hands of many artists, who loved playing around with it. Some Renaissance architects also employed it to create dramatic illusions.

The Mughal architect also employed the laws of perspective but with a different intention. His object was to correct visual distortions that appeared to the eye while seeing objects in space. The Taj Mahal is a good example. At the red sand stone entrance to the Taj a visitor is ushered in through blue and white calligraphic panels, which frame the tall gateway. Because

of the height of the entrance, the horizontal top panel of the gate should appear smaller in size than the two panels flanking it. Similarly, the two perpendicular panels should progressively narrow in breadth as they proceed upwards. Amazingly the panel does not appear any narrower as it reaches the top. The size of the panel and the calligraphy are exactly the same near the top as they are at eye level.

The Renaissance painter used the linear perspective to create an illusion of depth; the Mughal architect employed it to correct visual distortions of the naked eye seeing objects in space. They proportionately increased the size of elements as they rose above eye level. This method is applied to both the structural design as well as geometric and floral decorations with which the Taj is so sparingly embellished. One never notices unless it is specifically pointed out that the four minarets, which should appear to recede inwards towards the dome of the royal mausoleum, remain adamantly perpendicular. This is achieved by constructing the minarets to lean away from the dome so that they may appear straight to the eye, at a perfect right angle.

In Italy the linear perspective enabled the Renaissance artist to create limitless illusion of depth on a wall or a small canvas. Linear perspective encouraged foreshortening of human limbs and acute angles of vision that dramatised action and lent a sense of urgency to the viewer. The viewer was transformed to a spectator.

In previous paintings an episode was presented to the viewer but now he was made to feel part of the event. In order to depict depth, human limbs were foreshortened that necessitated employment of the chiaroscuro technique, the use of light and shade. Light invaded the picture in order to create shadows and lend roundness to objects.

With the invasion of light a whole new chapter opened up in painting. The element of light is not merely the great giver of life but is perhaps also the greatest instrument for creating a visually convincing illusion of life and nature in a painting. With time, the chiaroscuro of Michael Angelo melted into the vivid colours and chaste hues and tones of Giorgione, Titian, Veronese and other Venetian artists. One can detect early perception of these elements by Leonardo in his rendering of a landscape in the far distance behind the Mona Lisa.

However there is not one but many different ways

of cooking a dish. There are several ways of reaching a viewer's mind and heart and deluding his eye. Colour according to a Chinese master is a matter of the imagination. This had never occurred to me but I find it from my experience pertinent. Rolls of canvases and canisters of red, yellow and orange paint have been squandered over the decades to portray the American autumn and yet rarely has any one succeeded in capturing the colours of autumn. Just because an artist has squeezed flaming pigments on his canvas does not mean that he is on his way to capturing autumn.

It was only after this realisation that I discovered that many Chinese Bamboo and scrolls depicting mountains and cliffs with pines tenaciously growing out of their rocky flanks, peonies and still-life objects ranging from shrimps to persimmons, were not rendered in colour but with grades of black or brown inks. Each grade of ink, ranging from a breath of silver to black velvet, somehow appeared to me as a shade of colour. It seems something had touched my imagination, luring my mind into actually perceiving colours.

Great artists and writers instead of just depending upon their own creative faculties and descriptive power, often rely on the feelings and perceptions of readers and viewers, alluring their imagination to conjure up colour, smells and images. In the context of the theatre this has been termed 'willing suspension of disbelief' by the audience.

Let me end this by narrating a story, leaving you to ponder over which is the better course to take. The famous Greek artist Zeuxis was a great naturalist painter. Once he rendered grapes so realistically that finches flew down from a nearby tree and pecked at his painting. How amazing? What skill and sense of observation he must have possessed?

Many of our children's book illustrators today can't even draw a rabbit. But any way, there was another artist, a Chinese Taoist who painted a crane on a tavern wall, which had been plastered with dung. The picture was done in payment for the wine he had imbibed. The story goes that after he had completed the painting he suddenly jumped on the bird's back and flew off into the blue sky, leaving the wall as blank, they say, as the tavern keeper's face. How is that for a painting? Would you rather sit and eat grapes or take a flight into the unknown with a one-way ticket?

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