ORIGINS, CONTEXT AND DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

The history of Deccani painting can be largely constructed from the late sixteenth century until the 1680s, which marks the period when the Mughals conquered the Deccan.

However, the vitality of this tradition did not cease abruptly; it continued to find expression in later centuries, especially under the Asafiya dynasty and in the provincial courts of Rajas and Nawabs ruling various regions under the Nizam of Hyderabad.

For a long time, the Deccani style of painting was subsumed under the broad category of Indo-Persian art. It was often described as Middle Eastern, Safavid, Persian, Turkish, or even Mughal in origin.

Although art historians acknowledged certain distinctive qualities, they hesitated to recognise it as a fully developed and independent school. This perception has since changed.

It is now understood that Deccani painting was sustained by a class of rulers who possessed a peculiar political and cultural vision.

These rulers actively patronised art by hiring and nurturing artists, commissioning works that not only satisfied their aesthetic sensibilities but also aligned with their administrative and ideological needs.

Geographically, this school flourished in the plateau region of southern India, beyond the Vindhya mountain range. Under the patronage of various Deccani Sultans during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a strong and distinct pictorial tradition emerged.

The major centres of this artistic activity were the kingdoms of Bijapur, Golconda, and Ahmadnagar, each of which developed its own refined court style.

The Deccani school is marked by a unique visual language characterised by intense colour, dense composition, and a deeply sensuous appeal.

The colours used are rich and brilliant, distinctly different from those of northern manuscript traditions emerging from the Mughal atelier.

The compositions tend to be compact and layered, creating a visual density that enhances the emotional and aesthetic impact.

There is also a pronounced inclination towards creating an atmosphere of romance, expressed through lyrical and evocative imagery.

While the Deccani style is undoubtedly unique, it is also the result of multiple artistic influences. Persian influence is particularly evident in elements such as the high circular horizon, gold sky, and certain landscape conventions.

At the same time, northern Indian traditions contribute to aspects such as costume and figural types, while southern influences, especially from Lepakshi murals, are visible in hairstyles and drapery styles.

The result is a remarkable synthesis that blends diverse cultural elements into a coherent visual idiom.

Themes in Deccani painting are varied and reflect both courtly and cultural concerns. Portraiture, representation of historical and religious figures, and musical themes such as Ragamala are commonly depicted.

The portrayal of women occupies a central place in this tradition, often rendered with sensuous grace and elaborate ornamentation.

Although portraiture was not exclusive to the Mughals and was also seen in Safavid and Ottoman traditions, the highly documentary nature of portraiture developed significantly in Asian Islamic art, including Mughal painting.

In contrast, Deccani portraiture tends to balance symbolic representation with stylisation, rather than striving for strict realism.

Thus, the Deccani school emerges as a vibrant and independent artistic tradition, deeply rooted in its regional context yet enriched by cross-cultural interactions.

REGIONAL SCHOOLS — AHMADNAGAR AND BIJAPUR

The earliest examples of Deccani painting are associated with the Ahmadnagar school. These are found in a volume of poems celebrating the reign of Hussain Nizam Shah I (1553–1565).

While many of the miniatures depicting battle scenes are of limited artistic interest, those illustrating the queen and courtly life stand out for their use of gorgeous colours and sensuous lines.

A striking feature of the Ahmadnagar paintings is the representation of women, which shows a strong connection to the northern pre-Mughal tradition, particularly that of Malwa and Ahmedabad.

The women are depicted wearing a modified northern costume consisting of a choli and long braided hair ending in a tassel.

At the same time, certain elements, such as the long scarf passing around the body below the hips, reflect southern influences, especially those seen in the Lepakshi frescoes. Hairstyles, often arranged in a bun at the nape of the neck, further reinforce this connection.

The compositional structure of these paintings is equally distinctive. The conventional horizon line often disappears and is replaced by a neutral ground decorated with small stylised plants or symmetrical architectural forms.

The use of gold skies and high horizons indicates Persian influence, while the patterned surfaces and architectural elements suggest connections with both northern and Persian traditions. This blending of influences gives Ahmadnagar painting its unique visual character.

The Bijapur school represents a more mature phase of Deccani painting. It flourished under the patronage of Ali Adil Shah I and his successor Ibrahim Adil Shah II, both of whom were great patrons of art and literature.

Ibrahim II, in particular, was deeply involved in artistic pursuits, being an accomplished musician and the author of the *Nauras-nama*.

One of the most important works associated with this school is the *Nujum al-Ulum* (1570), a richly illustrated encyclopaedia containing 876 miniatures.

These illustrations cover a wide range of subjects, including weapons, utensils, and constellations, reflecting the intellectual and cultural diversity of the Bijapur court.

The astronomical content suggests a connection with Ottoman Turkish manuscript traditions.

Stylistically, the Bijapur paintings are marked by boldness and sophistication. Figures, especially women, are depicted as tall and slender, reminiscent of the Ragamala series.

The compositions are simplified yet vigorous, and the use of colour is daring and highly effective. There is a sense of luxuriant aestheticism that characterises the art of the Adil Shah court.

The Ragamala paintings of Bijapur are particularly significant, as they translate musical modes into visual form.

While the themes are distinctly Indian, the stylistic treatment reflects Deccani sensibilities, with echoes of the Lepakshi style. The emphasis is on emotional expression and rhythmic movement rather than strict narrative.

Another important aspect of Bijapur painting is its use of symbolism. The “Throne of Prosperity” from *Nujum al-Ulum* is a complex visual diagram representing an auspicious throne supported by various beings, from animals to trees.

The structure recalls both Gujarati wooden architecture and temple forms of the Deccan, while the decorative elements show Persian influence. This synthesis of traditions highlights the integrative nature of Deccani art.

The painting of a Yogini further illustrates the uniqueness of the Bijapur school. The vertical composition emphasises the elongated figure, while the

swirling scarves and surrounding flora create a rhythmic visual effect.

The Yogini, engaged in conversation with a bird, embodies both spiritual discipline and aesthetic refinement, reflecting the broader philosophical concerns of the period.

GOLCONDA SCHOOL AND LATER DEVELOPMENTS

The Golconda school of painting developed in a prosperous and cosmopolitan environment. Golconda became an independent state in 1512 and, by the end of the sixteenth century, had emerged as the wealthiest of the Deccan kingdoms.

This prosperity was largely due to flourishing maritime trade and, later, the discovery of diamonds.

The paintings of Golconda reflect this wealth and sophistication. One of their most striking features is the lavish use of gold, particularly in the depiction of jewellery worn by both men and women.

The themes often revolve around courtly life, royal portraits, and scenes of entertainment. The popularity of these paintings extended beyond India, as Dutch merchants carried portraits of Deccani sultans to Europe in the late seventeenth century.

Early Golconda paintings, such as those found in the *Diwan of Hafiz* (1463), depict court scenes with enthroned rulers.

These compositions are characterised by their symmetrical arrangement, elaborate architectural settings, and richly patterned surfaces.

The use of gold and deep azure enhances the visual impact, while the presence of dancing girls and courtly activities adds a dynamic element. Notably, these works show little Mughal influence, instead maintaining a distinct Deccani identity.

As the style evolved, there was a noticeable increase in sophistication, particularly in portraiture. The depiction of Muhammad Qutb Shah, for example, shows greater refinement in composition and detailing while retaining the characteristic symmetry of earlier works.

The treatment of drapery and form becomes more nuanced, indicating a growing mastery of technique.

Certain stylistic features are common across Deccani painting. These include the use of gold and blue in separate bands to depict the sky, richly coloured trees with tinted edges, and silhouetted plants set against dark foliage.

Figures are often outlined with strong, dark lines, emphasising their form and presence. These features contribute to the distinctive decorative quality of the style.

The imaginative scope of Deccani painting is best illustrated by works such as the Composite Horse. This painting presents a surreal image in which human figures are intricately arranged to form the shape of a horse.

The inclusion of elements such as flying cranes, lions, and Chinese clouds enhances the dream-like quality of the composition. The limited colour palette and the juxtaposition of airy forms with solid rocky elements create a striking visual experience.

Similarly, the painting of Sultan Ibrahim Adil Shah II hawking demonstrates the dynamic energy and rich colouring characteristic of the Deccani style.

The galloping horse, vibrant colours, and dense landscape combine to create a powerful visual narrative. While certain elements, such as the treatment of the horse and rocks, show Persian influence, the lush vegetation reflects local inspiration.

The Ragini Pathamsika of Raga Hindola further exemplifies the integration of music and painting. The depiction of female musicians, vibrant colours, and stylised forms highlights the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of the Ragamala tradition.

The inclusion of symbolic elements, such as the elephant, adds to the visual interest.

Portraits such as that of Sultan Abdullah Qutb Shah illustrate the symbolic nature of Deccani art. The sword signifies political authority, while the halo represents divine status. Inscriptions in Persian further reinforce the cultural context.

In the later period, provincial paintings continued to draw on Deccani themes, though with less technical refinement. Works such as the depiction of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya and Amir Khusrau emphasise narrative and devotional aspects, while paintings like Chand Bibi playing polo highlight historical and cultural themes.