

# Between Stroke and Shape: Procedural Understanding of Painting

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to establish the formal theory of painting. We are looking into two fundamental elements which are crucial to build a theory of painting, and those are strokes and Shapes, the central claim of this research is that the 'Painting Exists between Stroke and Shape', and the space of the painting is dynamic in nature, it exists not entirely in the matter (canvas/paper) nor in the mind (Imagination), it is in-between, it is like a hologram which is more than 2D less than 3D. We are using Indian Folk Paintings as a case to demonstrate our theory because of their uniqueness

**Keywords:** Imagination, Memory, Shape, Stroke.

## INTRODUCTION

The painting exists in between stroke and shape, space of the painting is very dynamic in nature, it exists not entirely in the matter (canvas/paper) nor in the mind (Imagination), it is in-between, it is like a hologram which is more than 2D less than 3D. Line/stroke belongs to real space, whereas shape belongs to the imaginary realm; between these two exist dynamic space, which is the space of the painting. Artist as a creator of the painting puts or deposit only strokes and patches on the surface, and viewer joins, arranges these strokes in his imagination with the help of memory to create shapes (meaning). Line/strokes are in real space as a deposition on canvas as a hard matter. In contrast, shapes are not real, if they are real as a hard matter then reshaping or dynamics which we experience while seeing and understanding the painting cannot be possible, so the shape is like an illusion without hard contour, which begins in the deep receding horizon of the painting, and ends in the imagination (meaning). In painting, line/strokes are incomplete things they are keys or reminders of hidden imaginary space, where shapes are conceived. This paper aims to demonstrate, and build a theory and grammar of this 'space of the painting', for this, it is essential to pay attention to both nature of line/stroke (types of strokes and patches), and the nature of our memory and imagination.

Let us start with understanding the nature of a line/stroke. In the painting line/stroke is a very fundamental element among other visual elements; also, as we stated earlier, it is the source of shapes (meaning). Many great artists and theorists like Paul Klee, Kandinsky, and Michael Leyton have written a lot about the role of a line in painting and treated it as an essential element of the painting. The present study and theories had helped us in understanding the nature of line/stroke, but, still, we find there is a gap in understanding or misunderstanding about space of painting, in these theories. For example, both Paul Klee and Kandinsky in their book titled 'Notebooks Volume 1 The thinking eye', (1) and "Punkt und Linie zu Fläche" (point and line to plane) says: "line is produced by a point on which a living force has been applied in a given direction" (2). They also explained about the relationship between force and line. For example, a straight line which results from a unique force applied in a single direction. An angular line which results from the alternation of two forces with different directions, or a curved line produced by the effect of a field of forces. They say the 'essence of the line resides in the force that determines the movement'. Paul Klee and Kandinsky both have written extensively about formal elements of the painting (visual elements), like how point gives birth to the line, with the help of force and direction, and how the walk of the line creates another element called area, and the internal tension between the area brings forth the 3Dimensional element which is solid or plane. The image which they construct about line/stroke in their theory gives a sense that they see the line as a flat entity. Whereas we are making a claim in this

paper that in painting line/stroke is not flat or 2d, it hides a volume, the line/stroke in Painting is a voluminous entity, to unfold this volume form line, we need to put another line/stroke in relation to the previous. With these line/strokes, the artist creates enfoldments in painting some of them are: Foreground/Background, Inside/Outside, Twist/Fusion, Roving/highlight, Light/ Pigment.

**STROKE/LINE**

Any painting in the world will have a finite number of line/strokes, and the procedural understanding of the painting can be done to construct the grammar of painting. As we know, paintings are a visual art form and a two dimensional. This means that it is necessarily an iconic art form and does not have an event structure in the hard form of its enclosure. Visual sensations are what are externalized in paintings, and even within that, compression to nearly planar arrangements is done so that depth information can only be implied in the imagination. Thus, the painted surface involute through line/strokes of paint or other forms of pigment arrives at the visual sensations via the specific arrangement created in it and which is precisely what the spectacle is. It is undoubtedly not a landscape or human being or a table or chair or any such, or even more abstract signifiers such as sorrow or joy or some such. It is paint or any other pigmentation on a surface first of all. What can be seen or read even, in this is the arrangement of choices that have been made by the creating hand, line/stroke by line /stroke. These are what form this enclosure in the public realm that contains the intuitive choices meant for disclosure. The depths created are only semantic ones and do not allude to any illusionist representational depth, unless that is the mental environment that the artist created from. In any painting, strokes are neither two-dimensional nor three-dimensional (Fig 1). They are more than 2D and less than 3D (2+3), because of the way things iterate in between a painting and a viewer. Some strokes are put together, and the shapes we make out of it is the way the imaginations we form after looking at that. To put it differently, strokes rubs on memory to create a meaning/imagination in the viewer. In painting, the artist arranges the strokes in such a way that there is an unfolding of meaning happening in the mind of the viewer. This unfolding happens in between the horizon and the spectator where each stroke can be the horizon. Painting (canvas) is a two-dimensional enclosure, and to bring out the shapes; the only thing we use is lines and strokes. The material could be anything; also, the size of the lines and strokes could be anything (Fig 2). It could be a thick stroke or a thin stroke; we put that patch on the canvas, now what is happens is with these patches the whole two-dimensional canvas space gets activated. From the flat empty surface, where one as a viewer looks at it, and they infer the content, it becomes a point of departure. However, it departs to the depth of the painting. Great paintings are those which have maximum controlled strokes in them, which also control and carve the viewers' imaginations.

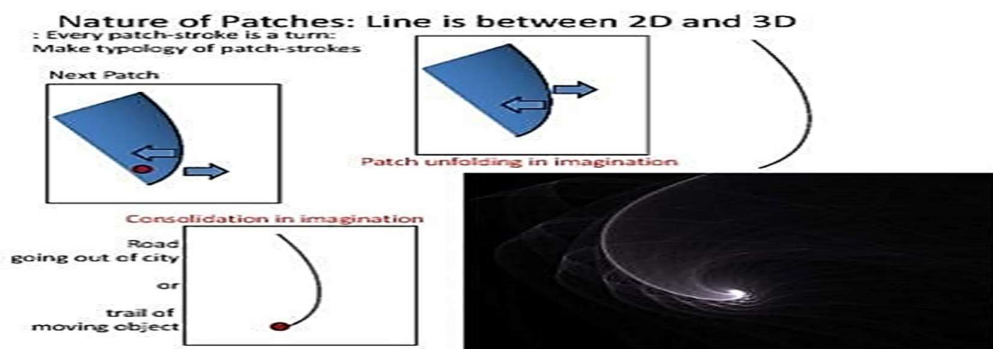


Figure 1: Nature of Patch



Figure 2: Brush

Lines and strokes are the physical aspects of the painting, but then from there as a viewer, one keeps unfolding those shapes and also tries to trace the construction of the painting. In this sense, the viewer is reading the synchronic painting in a diachronic way and keeps going back to an artist. When an artist as a creator starts putting one stroke after another, at the next moment artist switch his role and become a viewer, and he forms a relationship between those strokes and reveals and conforms shapes (meaning) in his imagination. We can see shapes (meaning) in the painting only when strokes disappear completely.

**INTERPRETING ALGORITHM OF MAKING PAINTING**

One can read and analyse the algorithm of a painting by following the hand of an artist (Fig.3), one can see how the artist's hand move to render the figure (drawing), what exactly happening here is an artist is making lots of formal choices to adjust both space material and mental we can also see here the shifts of imagination. The moving hand itself shows there is a dialogue between two surfaces and the constant readjusting between the two surfaces (material and mental) before it registers a stroke, while it registers a stroke and while it waits, hesitates and reconfigures the placement etc. of the next stroke.

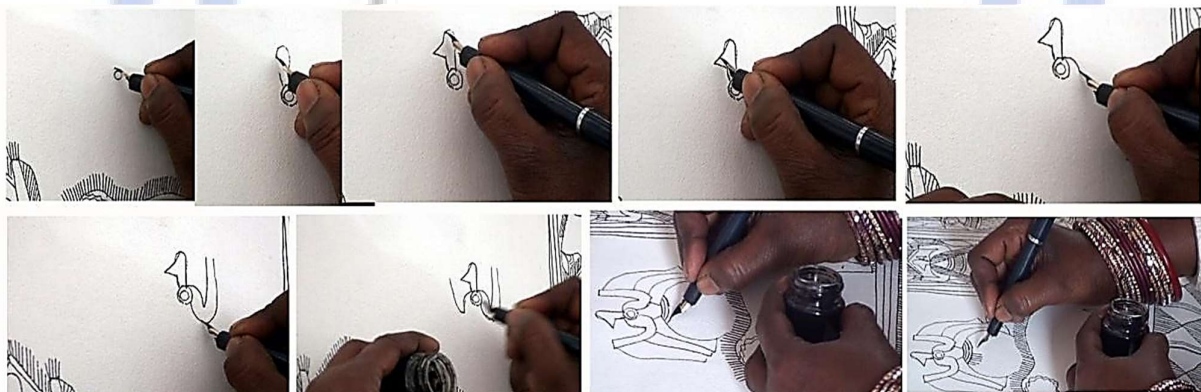


Figure 3: Screen shorts from video of madhubani painting process

Each patch/stroke carves in two directions. One, it carves a semantic depth into the surface of the painting, pushing the horizon/depth further or bringing it ahead, and two, it dents the probability of formation which re-figures internally, and the following patch/stroke will have to adjust to this re-adjustment of the topos of imagination on the topos of the physical 2D surface. Each stroke makes or breaks the way for the next patch. This constant back and forth forms and re-forms the shapes in imagination. Strokes and shapes do not exist together, one among them has to die to give birth to other for example when we see only strokes in painting there is an absence of shapes, it may also look incomplete, because strokes in the painting show shape partially, the shape gets birth when strokes disappear entirely, which also the moment when painting also come to existence.



**LINE/STROKES AND SHAPES IN INDIAN FOLK PAINTING**

Painting is in-between stroke and shape; the artist as a creator only put strokes on canvas, viewer constructs shapes (meaning) by joining these strokes in imagination with the help of memory. In order to illustrate this fact, we make a study of two folk painting styles which are, Madhubani, Cherial paintings. Let us start with wall art from Madhubani, Bihar that is locally known as Kohber. They are drawn on the walls as the widespread ritualistic practice of the region. In this painting, we see lots of curvy lines; artists have used these lines to create organic shapes. For example (Fig 2), the human face shape, we will analyze the construction of Madhubani painting style human face, stroke by stroke, to demonstrate how the arrangement of lines is made in the painting to create a shape of a face. In the first frame, there is one small curvy line, and this expressive line's volume can be potentially opened from any side but, the artist takes a decision here to open it inside (concave) and this she has done by putting the small line which you can see in the 2nd frame this opens the concave side of space, and the third stroke goes out and in, fourth fifth and sixth frame the strokes give Expression to the shape. 7th eighth and ninth strokes complete the shape of a portrait, and 10th 11th and 12th strokes add ornaments and life to it. This painting gives us a sense of harmony; this artist has brought out by using similar strokes in a tree and human figure.



**Figure 4: Steps and strokes in Madhubani portrait**

We can Imagine and understand the shape of the face because of the volume between these expressive strokes. We all can identify the human face depicted in the painting as a human because this particular human face has a universal quality. However, this Madhubani's human face also has a unique quality which in time have become the identity of this style (Madhubani), characteristic like, very big eyes, sharp nose and lips, round chin, vase-like neck. One of the main features of Madhubani is the outline which is double and filled by small lines to enhance the volume. Madhubani painters do not see the act of image-making as art, and images as a permutation combination of lines, in their context painting as an image does not exist, for them, an act of making a painting on the wall is an act by which they are communicating to 'God', now the question is, where is this 'God'? It nether on the wall nor in them (mind), because painting/image as the matter has a short life and also can vanish, folk people are not emotional about them. This shows that they have a clear understanding that, their 'God' is not only in that matter, and these paintings are a reflection of the sprits. The meaning of the word 'Icon' in Indian language is 'Pratima' and 'Bimba' (reflection). 'God' is also not just an imaginary entity which exists only in the mind of these folk people, they experience the Godliness in nature, and their paintings are a celebration of the same. Paintings are like a window, through which we can see the trans realm, in other words, it is playing a role of a mediator or a role of dummy object, these Indian folk paintings are about disembodied beings, and these beings exist only in the Paraloka (transworld or in the world of memory), they cannot act on their own they wait for a dummy body. The act of painting is a re-embodiment or re-formation of Forms that are stripped bare in the mind of all content down to their invisible state.



**Figure 5:** Madhubani wall painting 1949 published in the art journal Marg

These paintings evoke an imagination of unreal/surreal world in us, this sense we are getting because of the composition, types of strokes and space between each form, all these together evoke a sense of transworld, for example, the above image of wall painting from northern Bihar, India. (Fig. 5) traditionally these were painted inside the inner rooms of Maithila households, and have a sense of sacredness attached to them, and hence not publically displayed. In this particular painting, we can see how both visual perspectives, as well as gravitational understanding, are violated.

There is no shade or shadow. Nor there is any overlap of one icon over another. Every icon in the painting is given ample space, size etc. marking its own significance. As you see subjects in these paintings are floating in the air, they are weightless but still give a sense of mass/volume; they do not follow human scientific laws like gravitation or light and shade etc. because, for the artist, the objects depicted here are not human or in the first place.

They are divine beings or some mythical beings which exist in a different space and time altogether. It is to indicate this that they depict them in a surrealistic way and also the pattern on the margin of the painting indicates that now we are entering a different world altogether (paraloka) that is their world of memory and imagination which is quite different from this world, our world (ihaloka).





**Figure 6:** A small part of cheriyal scroll painting

The next example (Fig. 6) is of narrative painting, known as Cheriyala scroll paintings of Telangana, India. They are a stylized version of Nakashi art which is an art form practised in Cheriyal district of Warangal India. They are used for storytelling, and their themes are drawn from folklore and mythology like the Puranas and Epics. These paintings can be used as the best example of compelling visual storytelling to mass; this, the artist has made possible because of the great understanding of a formal aspect of painting. These paintings in which multiple timelines are merging in one frame, it is an epitome of paintings where diachronicity is seamlessly brought into the synchronic framework of a painting. It depicts jati Purana, and hence inevitably is narrated over time. The sizes in the painting indicate not only the significance of each of the characters but also their distance from the main character in the painting. It indicates an entire history in a given space.

Here an important thing to notice is that the painting as a matter is just an indicator and history or story is not entirely in the painting nor in the audience mind it is in-between. Interestingly, they have a kathakaar (narrator) while narrating story he drives the audience to different parts of the painting so that they can create a painting/image which is neither on the surface nor in the audience mind.

The narrator knows that he has a story which needs to be communicated effectively, and he has been doing it effectively because he has used visual and sonic mediums/ modes together, for visual they used painting like thing, by which they were able to evoke mythic characters. If painting born only on the surface of the painting or if it is born in only in mind, then above thing are not possible. Paintings like cheriyal are not possible because Katha(story) cannot be said if it is only in painting or in the mind of audience it should be in-between, then only Katha(story) can be said, but we know visually Katha(story) can be an oven in the painting with the help of visual elements, kathakaar (narrator) used these narrative paintings as a prop while narrating a Katha(story), here we need to ask how is it helping the kathakaar (narrator) to tell the story effectively? What is the affordance of the painting? The affordance of painting is, it is neither, neither in matter nor in mental.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper is to give a formal theory of paintings in general, and of Indian folk narrative paintings in particular. The central claim of this paper is that the 'painting exists between stroke and shape'; the artist as a creator only put strokes on canvas, viewer constructs shapes (meaning) by joining these strokes in his or her imagination. Painting space is dynamic; it is more than 2D, and less than 3D it is a fate content which exists between canvas and the viewer. To prove the soundness of our formal theory of painting, we have reviewed and found some gaps in the existing formal theories of painting, which are proposed by some of the most prominent formal theorists like Paul Klee (Klee, 1961, 1968), Wassily Kandinsky (1979). We then used Indian folk painting as a case to demonstrate our formal theory.

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