

# Gold adorned pages: Exploring the distinguished Gold Paint of Assam

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## **Abstract:**

*The beautiful art of gilding manuscript is one of the distinct features of the paintings in Assam. This process is popularly known as 'Kham' amongst the Theravada Buddhists of Assam and in Assamese, it is called Sonar-pani-charowa. Painting tradition of Assam is mostly found in the form of books illustration or manuscript painting. A variety of color palettes were used to make the illustrations lively. Yellow and green were most prominent colors in illustrations, except that Tai-Ahom School of painting used blue, red, black and gold. Use of gold in the color palette is one of the unique features of Tai-Ahom School. Gold was liquidated in a specific process to use as a color. It has also been used rarely, sometimes to indicate the heart of Buddha. In order to make the study accurate, emphasis is laid on both primary and secondary sources. Archival records served the purpose of primary source. Books, journals and articles on this content also helped a lot in framing the current investigation.*

*The Tai-Ahom style of painting cherished the unique process of gold painting. Except for the Tai-Ahom School, nowhere in Assam the use of gold paint and gold leaf folios for writing Manuscripts can be found. The Cultural connection between Upper Burma and Upper Assam facilitates the growth of gold paint in Assam. In Assam, gold in dust form is used in the technique of preparing Kham. Later on, due to lack of extensive practice, propagation of Hinduism amongst the Tai Ahom people of the valley, gilding of manuscript gradually disappeared.*

**Keywords:** *Gold paint, Kham, manuscript, Tai-Ahom School.*

## **I. Introduction:**

Humans have been expressing ideas and emotions with the help of various media since time immemorial. Painting too serves as such a medium of expression of human mind. Painting tradition in Assam is found mostly in the form of book illustration or manuscript painting. Evidences of other forms of painting such as, mural painting was restricted probably because of the humid climate of the region and wood carving tradition of the royal palaces. Paintings were known by the terms 'Pratima', 'Chitra' and 'Chhabi', 'pat' among the Assamese people. Most of time the scribe engaged in the art of calligraphy himself was the painter. Paintings of Assam derived elements from

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different painting schools of India and abroad, for e.g. Mughal, Nepalese, Burmese and Chinese styles. Painting or illustrations were embellished with different colors to make it attractive. Most prominent colors used in the manuscripts were yellow and green. According to Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, the formulas of the colors, which are so fast, have now been practically forgotten (Bhuyan, 1930). Tai Ahom School of painting used the palette of blue, red, black and gold. The oldest specimen of Tai Ahom manuscript, the “*Phung Chin*” is a witness of the use of gold painting in Assam. The distinct art of gold painting was not widely prevalent and only limited specimens have remained even today. Hence it is important to make an overall study on this almost forgotten art. In this study, the historical background and process of making ‘*Kham*’ will be focused on.

## II. Materials and Methods:

This study is conducted on the basis of both primary and secondary data. Primary data are collected through archival records. Secondary data like books, journals, articles by noted writers and scholars have been analyzed through historical method.

## III. Discussion and Results:

The earliest reference to painting in Assam (Pragiyotisha) is to be found in *Harivamsa* and *Dwaraka-lila*, which are ultimately derived from the Mahabharata (Barpujari, 2007). Chitrlekha of Sonitapura was mentioned as a noted painter who prepared a sketch of Aniruddha, the grandson of Srikrishna. The *Harivamsa* praised her as *Vanasuramantrinah Kumbhandasya Kanyama Tasya Ca Citra lekhanadsksata* (Barpujari, 2007). Another notable reference was made in Banabhatta’s ‘*Harsacarita*’ a work composed in 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. King Bhaskara of kamarupa who was a friend of king Harsa of Kanauj, presented the king essentials of painting such as brushes, gourds and panels for painting.

Besides literary evidence inscriptions of early Assam threw light on paintings of that period. The Nidhanpur copper plate inscription of Bhaskaravarmana mentioned portraits hung on the walls of houses. Valabarmana’s Nagaon grant mentioned the existence of ‘*Citrasalas*’ during that period.

Regarding the style and content of painting in medieval Assam, three distinct schools of painting are found. The *Tai-Ahom style* had the impact of the Thai tribes. It is much difficult to find evidence of the *Tai-Ahom School of painting*. *Viharas* of Upper Assam, Assam State Museum and Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies preserved the remaining illustrated manuscripts of this school. The painting was the medium of communication among the Thai tribes of Upper Burma and Assam. Its importance could be felt from the fact that the paintings were given as dowry in marriages. The elements of the Tai Ahom School of painting was enriched by the tribes across the Patkai hills. The earliest examples of paintings in Assam are provided by *Tai-Ahom Style* of painting: ‘*Phung Chin*,’ a work on Ahom conception of heaven and hell and another is ‘*Suktanta Kympong*’. Both the work furnishes examples of gold paint. Illustrations of *Tai-Ahom School* are line drawings in black. Subjects are placed in the blank

folio without adding landscapes. Some portions of the illustrations are filled with black, yellow, red and green color. Gold paint is used to indicate important aspects, the heart of Buddha and scenes of Buddhist holy places where Buddha was present.

The intimate connection between the Thai people of Upper Assam and Upper Burma is one important factor in the development of the gold paint in Assam. Except for the *Tai-Ahom School* use of gold paint is rare among the other painting schools of Assam. The gold paint of Assam shares similarities with Burmese '*Kammavaca*' or manuscripts written in gold lacquered folios. *Kammavacas* were passages from the Tripitaka, manuscripts heavily lacquered with gold paint. They were styled in the square script using black ink. The manuscripts are considered as one of the most sacred religious works. In the earlier time, *Kammavaca* manuscripts were made of palm leaf folios. After the 17<sup>th</sup> century cloth and pearls are also used. The use of ivory was also prevalent on rare occasions. It is associated with the rituals of priesthood. When a boy entered a monastery for education his parents presented a *kammavaca* to the presiding monk. Buddhist scholars of Burma were appointed as abbots in the '*Bapuchang*' or '*Viharas*' of upper Assam and the abbots introduced the art of gold painting to the pupils of *Viharas*. The art of gold paint was flourished in the region which was mostly populated by Thai tribes and their religious belief was Theravada Buddhism.

*Satriya style* inspired by Vaishnava movement and *Garhgaon style* under royal patronization had their own specific elements of paintings. *Satriya style* illustrated mainly the religious texts and the epic subjects. *Garhgaon style* motivated both religious and secular themes. In both of the Schools of painting, lacquering manuscript leaf with gold, gold letters and illustrations seem rare.

Manuscripts were widely done in *sanchipat* or writing sheets made from the bark of agar wood. Another material which was mostly used for painting purpose was known as *tulapat*. As well as *Sanchipat* making, the making of *Tulapat* is also indigenous to Assam. The oldest specimen of the illustrated manuscript '*Phung Chin*' was done on *tulapat*. As for its preparation, *tulapat* was made from the wood pulp of three different kinds of trees. Ahoms of the Valley and the Khamtis were engaged in *Tulapat* making.

The craft of gold washing flourished in medieval Assam. Gold dust was abundantly found in rivers of upper Assam prominently in the *Bharali*, the *Subansiri* and the *Burhidihing*. The *Sonowal paiks*, who were engaged in the work, received an amount of *one tola* (10gram) gold per head every year. Rajatnanda Das Gupta described the process of making *Kham* in *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol-iii*. According to his description- "the gold in dust form facilitated and quickened the process of making *kham*. A piece of paper was smeared with yang or the vegetable gum obtained from the *yang-pow* or *Thot-era* tree. Then it was placed atop a quantity of gold-dust spread on an even and smooth surface and as a result the dust clung to the paper. Then it was left to dry and later cut into convenient sizes. The reverse process was followed to apply *kham* to a selected surface. The surface was smeared with the right quantity of glue made from buffalo hide and the gold leaf was applied to it. The gold now clung to the gummed surface and the paper was left blank. Gold dust was also used when it was mixed with some size or binding material."

The Buddhist people of the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh continues the Shan style of artwork. Themes were taken from Buddhist religious texts and identical to the illustrations of the Tai- Ahom School. *'The importance of this school is that it represents the only surviving school of Assamese painting and maintains the continuity of a pictorial style for six centuries.'* (Barpujari, 2007)

The *Tai-Ahom* style of gold paint or the technique of gilding and lacquering the folios was taught to the pupils in *Viharas* as an important part of education. H. K. Barpujari mentions two such manuscripts, one produced in the *Vihara* at Borpothar, Sivsagar district and another preserved in Assam state Museum. Later, with the rise of *Satriya School of painting* the place was taken by bright yellow in the color palette.

#### **IV. Conclusion:**

The stunning art of *Kham* slowly disappeared from the scenario of Assamese painting with the passage of time. Lack of extensive practices, propagation of Hinduism among the Tai Ahom people of the valley became reasons for the disappearance of the Tai Ahom Style of gold painting or *Kham* in later period. In '*Udogya parva*' of Mahabharata, an illustrated manuscript, the poet Ram Saraswati used gold painting in the ornaments that had been portrayed in the illustrations. A large number of folios of *Hastividyanava* are gold painted. The place of gold paint that had been extensively used was replaced by bright yellow in the color palette of *Satriya* School.

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