

**SUB THEME 07**

**Digital Humanities and Computational Approaches on  
Harnessing the Performing and Visual Arts**

## ***Pietra dura*: A Distinguished Art of Mughal Empire**

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### **Abstract**

*Pietra dura* art is a distinguished and outstanding feature of Mughal architecture in India. It was just like an instrument of dynamic and vibrant expression in the great age of the Mughal Empire. Some monuments of the Subcontinent provide numerous phases of the development of Mughal's *pietra dura* art in a progressive order during sixteenth to seventeenth century as practised under Akbar (1556-1605), Jahangir (1605-1627) and Shahjahan (1628-1658). The extensive use of marble as a material and inlay as a decorative motif were to become the distinguishing features of the greatest period of Mughal architecture. This research paper will portray apparent features related to the origin and development of *pietra dura* art on the cenotaph of Jahangir's tomb which was constructed by his son Shahjahan highlighting the formal and contextual analysis with the other monuments constructed by the Mughal emperors. Other term used for *pietra dura* art is inlay art or *pacchikari*, which is one of the most gorgeous, stunning and famous forms of Mughal art developed indigenously in India.

*Pietra dura* is marble inlaid with motifs in precious or semi-precious stones. The present paper will attempt to find out the possible link and development of *pietra dura* work, on the cenotaph of Jahangir's tomb, which is made of white marble elaborately inlaid with *pietra dura* with floral, geometrical as well as epigraphical carvings. Jahangir's tomb is one of the attractive monuments of Shahjahan's period, each and every corner depicts the high quality and finesse of the emperor's personal interest but the most appreciable and fascinating feature is the *pietra dura* work on the cenotaph. This research paper will also explore the application and practice

of this enchanting, distinguished and glorious art after the reign of Great Mughals, and the contribution of the artisans to keep this art alive. The findings will be made through some resources such as reference books, survey methodology, interviews and other written materials.

### **Introduction to the Study**

*Pietra dura* is considered the most expensive, delicate and significant stone work. *Pietra dura* is derived from the Italian language; *pietra* means stone and *dura* means durable and hard. *Pietra dura* is a technical term, which is applied to any of the hard stones used in commesso or mosaic work and the technique of engraving artistic designs in marble embedded with finely cut of brightly coloured precious or semi-precious. It is the knowledge which has been passed on by master craftsmen to their ablest of descendants since 500 BCE (Nath 1994).

This art possess the history prevailing on many centuries. Romans were the first who created this art. Since then, it travelled from Rome to Persia and then to India. It is also believed that this art developed in Florence, Italy in the late sixteenth century CE. There are many theories and ideologies about the origin of this art. According to some historians, the idea of *pietra-dura* work was taken from Mandu (Indian State, a very well-known art centre) by Jahangir who witnessed there the art and was extremely fascinated, and further it was practised and developed in various styles during sixteenth to seventeenth century under the supervision of Mughal emperors (Beveridge 2006). The cenotaph of the Emperor Jahangir is one of the remarkable and awesome specimens of this art, which is carved from a single slab of white marble and ornamented with *pietra dura* with precious and semi-precious stone-work such as, onyx, jasper, camelian etc., which is cut into thin and delicate slices and very neatly embedded in sockets prepared in the marble (Khan 2003).

## **Literature Review**

Some books were gone through to conduct the study. To understand the methods, material and technique of *pietra dura* art, Ahmed Nazir's book, *Crafts of Lahore* was studied. How Mughal emperors started to practice *pietra dura*, the record was present in *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*, by Wheeler M. Thackston when Jahangir travelled to Mandu. The magnificent monuments of Malwa King drew his admiration. From the time onwards, most probably, the fascinating inlay work of Mandu spellbound him and the continuous refinement of inlay work could be seen in the Jahangir buildings i.e. from Akbar's tomb to Salim Chisti's tomb, and ultimately a remarkable change in the tomb of Itmad-ud Daulah. It is commonly believed that the *pietra dura* art was originated in Florence, Italy from where it was brought to the Subcontinent by some Italian craftsmen. Some scholars are of the view that this mode of ornamentation was created and developed in India. John Terry is one of them who in his book, *The Charm of Indo-Islamic Architecture* mentions the same by arguing that *pietra dura* was certainly practiced in Florence, and Italian craftsmen definitely worked for Shahjahan in the construction of the tomb of Jahangir where *pietra dura* of very fine quality had been used on a small scale only on the cenotaph of the tomb. It might be possible that the technique developed independently in India was brought to its zenith by Italian craftsmen. This is also a fact that *pietra dura* was excessively used in the monuments during Mughals' reign in the architecture of the Subcontinent, and in majority of the cases, the motifs adopted for the purpose were always so indigenous that supported to formulate the opinion that there could hardly be detected any foreign hand in their accomplishment.

Percy Brown, a well-known author has mentioned that the inlay work ultimately acquired the form of *pietra dura*. He focused on the development of *pietra dura* in his book. In *pietra dura* art, very minute and

delicate designs are created in a fine manner, in which hard and rare stones such as agate, granite, onyx, jasper, topaz and carnelian are embedded in marble in an elegant and graceful foliation.

### **Methods and Methodology**

Philosophical paradigm of the study helps out the researcher to plan the methods to conduct this research. As it has also been suggested important by an American academician, Cresswell. He considers it significant to design a guideline and directions to conduct the study. This research is a process of critical inquiry into past events, in order to explore an accurate description about the historical topic including identification of its origin, formulation of systematic collection and evaluation of data. The methodology for the study is based upon the qualitative and theoretical research, because the data for the research has been collected, analyzed and interpreted by observing what people do and say. For the sake of purpose, the study portrays apparent features of *pietra dura* used for embellishment in numerous monuments related to the development of the art making the formal and contextual analysis especially focusing on the *pietra dura* art accomplished on the cenotaph of Emperor Jahangir's tomb. The present research is an attempt to go through the various features and motifs for ornamentation.

### **Results and Discussion**

Mughal rulers are considered as the originators of a strongly personalized *pietra dura* art at the junction of various stylistic traditions. During the rule of Jahangir (1605-1627), he gave a lighter touch to Mughal architectural style. Marble replaced sandstone and *pietra dura* or inlay work of gems inclined to replace sculpted motifs. Shahjahan (1628-58), an enthusiastic builder took the Mughal architecture to its climax. White marble was used almost in every monument at that time, and *pietra dura* art became widespread. Numerous monuments were studied to explore the

application and development of *pietra dura* art especially the cenotaph of Jahangir's tomb was focused to analyze *pietra dura* art.

The renowned stone carvers of Lahore today for *pietra dura* are Nannhey Khan (Pride of Performance) and Riazuddin Alias Raju (Son of Nannhey Khan). His father Nannhey Khan was *pietra dura* artisan who taught him the skill but the archaeology department was not paying attention to the need for stone-fixing work.

Since 1983s till 2000, no *pietra dura* work has been done on any of the monuments despite the fact that they require restoration. Still, they retain much of the grandeur which speaks of the *pietra dura* art.

Artisan Riazuddin, whose forefathers had attained mastery over *pietra dura* and worked on Red Fort in India and Taj Mahal before Partition, regretted that for the last over two decades nothing had been done to restore these extremely delightful and enchanting constructions. In 2004-2005, Unesco organized a workshop on *pietra dura* during which some plaques were created but they did not find place in any of the monuments and the event proved an exercise in futility (Alias Raju 2019).

Gone are the hundreds of years, but unfortunately after Mughals any renovation and conservation was not made in the monuments in order to preserve Mughals' grandeur treasured legacy except at some places. During Sikh period, many cultural heritages were spoiled and suffered hard due to the tyranny of uncivilized Sikhs. Like other losses and damages, precious and semi-precious stones were uprooted which were embedded on the numerous monuments severely damaging the magnificence and glory.

### **Conclusion and Remarks**

It is crystal clear that *pietra dura* is an expensive craft, also labour-intensive and time consuming that describes for its going out of favour with the decline of Mughal Empire. Some rulers of Indian states copied this art in their palaces after Mughals. But the patronage was enough to keep the art alive. In Pakistan, efforts are also made to keep it alive and flourishing by

energizing the art to carry out limited repair on such monuments in Lahore where this was once used and later on spoiled by Sikh vandalism.

Going through the research and the study on *pietra dura*, it has been dared to say that *pietra dura* art practised in Mughal era was entirely developed and flourished in the Subcontinent, because all the technique, method and variegated kind of designs and pattern were purely indigenous. The thought becomes stronger when the three major points about the visit of Jahangir at Mandu that have bearings on the origin and development of the Mughal *pietra dura* art.

*Pietra dura* is an incomparable art, the radiant colours and lyrical movements of flora as dominant theme magnify its grandeur with over refinement, sense of delicacy and elegance in decorative details. The choice of flora for a definite part enhances its splendor, fragrance and grace. The prominence of *pietra dura* art on surface decoration in Mughal buildings stands unique in the whole world. It was adapted according to the climatic conditions without any external influence. Patronization and encouragement of Mughal rulers motivated architects and artisans to create balance in modification and stylization of floral decoration at varying degrees.

Unfortunately, it is not very much under practised because it requires lots of effort, hard work, time and patience. But it does not mean that it should be ignored. We, as nation not only make positive struggle to preserve this astonishing and worthless legacy but try to use it as surface decoration on newly built construction so that we may able to maintain and flourish our treasured asset.

Riazzuddin Alias Raju, who is one and only expert and artisan in *pietra dura* renovated *pietra dura* on the base of the columns of Shish Mahal between 1981 and 1983, which was damaged in Sikh period. He has also made some pieces of *pietra dura* art for the Lok Virsa, Islamabad in order to keep alive the art. Furthermore, a new structure has also been constructed behind the tomb of Madhu Lal Hussain, at Baghbanpura,

Lahore which is no doubt a remarkable blend of Persian and Mughal architecture.

**Keyword:** *cenotaph, Philosophical paradigm, Pietra dura, originators*

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