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The Ritualization of Complex Skill Acquisition: Cultural Transmission of Mastery of Indian Miniature Paintings

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Abstract

Cumulative cultural transmission preserves traditional knowledge and practices for generations, yet this phenomenon is understudied in the context of Asian artistic traditions. Indian Miniature painting provides an ideal context for studying the cultural transmission of mastery due to its apprenticeship model embedded in history and tradition. The learning and practice of Indian miniature painting provide an opportunity to examine whether these artistic processes resemble ritualized transmission, characterized by procedural rigidity, adherence to established norms, and religious symbolism. We interviewed 262 artists, ranging from novices to experts from Rajasthan, India, to explore the functions of ritualized transmission in acquiring mastery. The results revealed a strong consensus among artists regarding adherence to structural flow in art production with minimal deviation. Most artists agreed that novices should conform to traditional aesthetics more than experts. Mastery of technical skills and knowledge of cultural traditions were deemed essential before innovation, underscoring how ritualization requires strict adherence to established practices. For many artists, the process resembled a religious act, emphasizing customs, purity, and reverence. Our research highlights the functions of ritualization in acquiring mastery to ensure the preservation of distinctive aesthetics, uniformity in learning, and integration of spiritual and religious beliefs in the cultural transmission of traditional arts.