

An exploratory study on cultural shifts, societal rules and visual representation with special emphasis on Renaissance Art, Scandinavian Art and Mughal Period

Sara Khanna

Mayo College Girls' School, Ajmer

DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i06.022 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i06.022>

Received: 10 June 2025 / Accepted: 25 June 2026 / Published: 30 June 2026

ABSTRACT

The research paper looks deeply into the cultural, societal, economical and political shifts that took place before and during the Renaissance, Scandinavian and Mughal art periods and how their visual representation was affected due to change in political, societal circumstances and time. A special emphasis is on artists who shaped their art around the three periods and how they shifted due to the changing circumstances. This research paper intricately studies the three very important time periods of art around the globe.

Keywords: Renaissance, Scandinavian, Mughal, Political instability, Romanticism, Scandinavianism, The Nordic Lyrical Light

Research Question: This paper analyses the impact of cultural, societal developments that take place during a time period and the manner in which it effects the artists of that era and hence, their understanding of the situation and hence representing it on canvas or in the form of sculptures. What are the difference in the Renaissance period, Scandinavian and Mughal era? Who were the main artists during this time period ? Were they for or against the establishment ? How did one period into the other? What was the type of transition that occurred ?.

1. Introduction

Art is an expression which all cultures share around the globe. Art reflects the human experience and provides great insight into the values, cultures and beliefs of different eras. As art emerged and slowly became part of different cultures which used it in different forms, it slowly became a medium of communication across time and space, telling stories of different civilizations. From century-old masterpieces to present day contemporary designs, all is showcased by art. From Monet's water lilies to Indian cave paintings , art has played an integral role in how we perceive

various socio-cultures, economic and political perspectives. It can spark debate, highlight social issues of different times and show the “art of living” of different times.

The way ‘art’ is viewed has changed over time, it has inspired photographers to capture famous events, and how people would showcase their inner feelings and political and social views on a canvas, because they could not be spoken out-loud. Artists, regardless of their medium, tend to have a unique sense of vocabulary that goes beyond words; it presents opportunities for capturing subtle thoughts and human experience, as it presents a way to connect people through its stories.

The power of art lies in the fact that it influences the way we think, process and view different perspectives is undeniable. It can transform culture, communication and expression, providing us with a platform to explore innovative solutions and push the boundaries of what is possible. Artists being sensitive human beings, are portrayed through various forms, situations and emotions which they feel sensitive towards. They understand the pain of the public, whether it is within their own country or in the world and they try to portray it to the world. This was seen in the way various artists combined together, to raise funds for eradicating malnutrition in Africa. This indicates the manner in which health issues of infants and children were raised to a global platform by various artists in the sphere of performances as well as art.

This research paper explores how the art of three specific eras namely- Renaissance, Scandinavian and Mughal was influenced by social, political and cultural aspects and how it was impacted by the same.

2. Literature Review/Background

In the 14th century, a revolution which fueled the cradle of art, in the beautiful city of Florence, was the Renaissance period which lasted from the 14th to the 17th century. Prior to the Renaissance was the Gothic Age, which lasted from 12th to the 14th century. This period was flooded with the style of tall cathedrals, elongated figures and tinted glasses. This was a move away from flat Byzantine Styles towards more naturalism and emotion, which set the stage for rebirth of the classical ideas of Renaissance. As this period of rebirth seeped into Florence and other parts of Italy, the emergence of the Medici into spreading the movement also took place. The Medici family was responsible for the Renaissance period. This was aided by their wealth and political affiliations. They were an influential family whose love and passion for art led the spread of this movement in not only Florence but also in other parts of Italy and eventually Europe. Cosimo de’ Medici spent 60,000 gold florins on various architectural structures, art forms and cultural events. The Medicis, under the family patriarch Cosimo de’ Medici became the undisputed patrons of art during that time period. They used their wealth to commission emerging artists and contribute to the cultural scene of Florence. As the movement grew in size,

Florence emerged as an artistic city with *political and social ideas*. [1]. The Renaissance Period was politically impacted as most of the artists used to stay in homes of the political elite. They were commissioned by them to paint and sculpt in their premises. As they would be staying for long periods of time, their political inclination which was also portrayed in their art was dependent on the elite with whom they were connected. Lorenzo De' Medici being an example, as he housed Leonardo Da Vinci, and Donatello for a number of years at a time, clearly epitomising the proximity between art and power during the period. *Nowhere is the intimate relationship between the artistic and political worlds made more apparent than in the 1818 painting by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres depicting Leonardo on his deathbed, his head cradled by the French king himself*. This clearly confirms that art in the Renaissance was of an inherently political nature. Politicians used the works of artists as key assets in maintaining and furthering political power.

Figure 1: The Death of Leonardo da Vinci, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres



Source: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/jean-auguste-dominique-ingres/death-of-leonardo-da-vinci-1818>.

Scandinavian Art

Going back in time, the Viking period (8th to the 11th century) was the age of the gripping beasts, originating in Scandinavia. The Viking period produced different kinds of Viking art during its flourishing period and brought the idea of transforming everyday items into artistic statements. Although before this period flourished, the German Iron Age (793-1066 AD) had gained fame in Sweden. At the time the style of this age was heavily focused on intricate, stylized animal ornamentation, which ultimately served as a foundation for the later Viking period, emerging in the 8th century. Created by untrained artists for decorative and symbolic purposes, Scandinavian art has had distinctly different colourful traditions as it was isolated from the rest of Europe, therefore its art was largely untouched by mainstream European culture. The most prized possessions of the Vikings were their ships, which were used for both trade and war. Excavated ships have shown that they were richly decorated pictures of interwoven animals and mythical beasts. The Viking period indulged in many forms of Scandinavian folk art, like Wood carvings, Decorative painting, paper cutting , textile arts, metalwork , pottery and ceramics, folk costumes, folk instruments. Many elements of the folk art originate from different regions and time periods but some common elements are plants and flower motifs, geometric patterns, dala horses, roosters and birds and much more.

Figure 2:Osberg Ship Decoration - Detail



Source: <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/9335/oseberg-ship-decoration>

These motifs were inspired by the legends, stories and fables in Scandinavian culture.[2] Because of its unique style and combination of beauty and simplicity, this style continues to be known around the world as a distinctive art form. Their folk arts purpose was to decorate the mundanities of life and to bring pleasure to everyday tasks. For this reason, their basic items such as doors, windows, traditional waterjars , board games were decorated intricately .

Figure 3:1837 Norway Trunk- Made by Vorm Mjaavatn, Painted by Ivar or Kjetil Urdal



Source:<https://nazmiyalantiquerugs.com/blog/exploring-swedish-scandinavian-folk-art-traditions-and-motifs/>

Mughal Art

As art was celebrated diversely in different regions of the world, during the 16th century in India, the invaders from Mongol , present day Mongolia, established one of India's largest and strongest dynasties which became to be known as the Mughal Empire which set in Delhi and Agra, which were their initial powerhouses in India following Babur's victory in 1526. With them they bought a new art form in India which transformed the way the Hindus looked at art. Before the Mughal domination, India focused mainly on temple architecture , intricate stone/ bronze sculptures (Chola bronzes) , mural paintings as well as miniature paintings on palm

leaves. The tastes and patronage of the first six Mughal rulers , which are known as The Great Mughals, defined Mughal art and architecture which have continued to be endured till this day.

Emperor Jahangir, remains as a known connoisseur and patron of art, has described opulent court events and sumptuous gifts in great detail in his memoir, Tuzuk-i Jahangiri. Taking interest in describing his life in the form of naturalism, the Mughals took interest in ornamenting small objects also.

Figure 4: Mango shaped flask- mid-17th century; India; rock crystal, set with gold, enamel, rubies, and emeralds.



Source:<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-arts-of-the-mughal-empire>

During the golden age of Mughal rule (approximately 1526–1707), the emperors had a marked interest in naturalistic depictions of people, animals, and the environment. They employed the most skilled artists, who documented courtiers and their activities as well as the flora and fauna native to India. Informed by Mughal patronage, a new style of painting emerged in illustrations

made for books and albums, which combined elements of Persian, European, and native Indian traditions. These works demonstrate keen observation of the natural environment and the royal court. The emperors collected their favorite poetry, calligraphy, drawings, and portraits in extensive albums, which were among their most valued personal possessions and were passed down to successive generations.[3]

Figure 5: Detail of wall showing highly naturalistic floral decoration, Taj Mahal, Agra, India, 1632–53.



Source:<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-arts-of-the-mughal-empire>

Although the paintings were never realistic they often included themes of naturalism, realism, usage of vivid colours, ornate patterns , Islamic calligraphy as well as symmetry and balance. The paintings provided glimpses of contemporary life in even the most fantastic settings, a feature that would endure in the Mughal paintings. [4]

Figure 6: *Hamza's spy Basu beheads an enemy and gains entry to the castle of Acre, detached folio from the Hamzanama, gouache on cotton backed with paper, 1562 – 77*



Source: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-arts-of-the-mughal-empire>

The emperors would depict stories of fantasies mixed with their everyday life experiences they came across. Many Iranian artists at the time had joined Akbar's court, bringing with them an enhanced attention to colour and detail. One of the most intriguing features of Mughal art was its attention to detail. Paintings were done with very fine brushes made up of animal hair, especially squirrel hair and the colours used were organically made from fruits and the bright yellow colour would come from cow urine.

The skill set of the artisans were unmatched at the time, with masters like Mir Sayyid Ali painted a complete, detailed polo match on a single grain of rice, featuring horsemen and goalposts, showing the ultimate attention to detail in Mughal Art.

As admirers of jewellery and art, every emperor had different interests and liking towards gems and art which diversified the era of Mughal paintings .

3. Research Gap and Methodology

The paper would analyse the impact of the political, social and cultural environment on the different art forms namely Renaissance, Mughal and Scandinavian. How far were the artists influenced by the above three indicators and what were the influences that led them to move into the next period, essentially going against the present political, social and cultural system. The above gap would be researched in all the three art periods that have been indicated above.

The methodology adopted would be of the qualitative type where authentic research material would be utilised in indicating the prevalence of the art forms in the particular period as well as their transformation to subsequent time periods.

4. Analysis

Art is a medium which is used to depict the influences that are present in that time period, normally social, political, cultural and economic. These are portrayed by various individuals through various mediums ranging from canvas, to murals, sculptures, songs, poetry and drama.

4.1 Renaissance Art

From the mediaeval art period to the Impressionist, Surrealism, and Postmodernism , the world of art has seen its fair share of influential movements. The most important of all however, has been the Renaissance period. This period was an art movement, which was a period of incredible creativity in Europe that truly celebrated individualism and humanism, contributing to the rise of such acclaimed artists as Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo. Prior to Renaissance art, it was mostly a reflection of religious beliefs.

Art showcased all kinds of religious depictions, however when Italians started abandoning this style of art and started focusing on themes like humanism and realism. As the society started to know the name of the emerging period as “Renaissance” many artists started to emerge in the Florentine society- Michelangelo, El Greco, Andrea del Verrocchio and many more.

Michelangelo, who is best known for his works in sculpting, having created many masterpieces is best known for his works in the Sistine Chapel ceilings and in addition to paintings like *The last Judgement*.

El Greco, who is another famous and influential artist in the Renaissance era. He is known as a painter, sculptor and an architect during the Renaissance period in Spain.

The art period was greatly propelled by immense economic prosperity and a shift towards capitalism. A new class which was classified as the “elite wealthy” was noticed as many bankers and a wealthy class of merchants such as the Medici Family emerged. Their commissions into art and architecture of Florence led them to displaying their social standing as well as displaying civic power.

In social terms, art started becoming a tool for civic pride, social status and personal expression, while architecture incorporated human proportions. Art became a status ladder, as wealthy merchants and influential families started investing in the timeless pieces.

Art not only became a medium of spreading new ideas but a political tool as well

Slowly as art seeped into the society, it started serving as a political propaganda, which was used by the elites to legitimate power, display wealth and assert authority. It was also used to symbolise power in society. Art embodied classical symbols for example the lion (for showcasing authority), the pomegranate (for Church unity) etc. This indicates the influence of politics, society and at times even the environment in the display of art. It is quite well - known that the influence of happenings within that time period is depicted in almost all spheres of artistic expression be it, novels, paintings, sculptures, poems etc.

4.2 Scandinavian Art

Scandinavian art embraces the mixture of overlapping traditions and culture of Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland. In the 19th century, “ Swedishness” and its representation became significant themes in Swedish art. Owing to socio-cultural changes and political development in 19th century and early 20th century Europe. It was imperative for the artists to respond to the growing demand for the construction of national identities.

This eventually led to a search for individualistic motifs which were specifically rooted in tradition, culture, history and folklore. The emergence of the Swedish- Nordic identity bloomed from the Romantic tradition. In the case of Sweden, the individualistic identity emerged not only from culture and folklore but also Viking history and mediaeval literature.

In postwar Western Europe, politically committed art was an integral part of the development of modern art. Evidently, some artworks highlighting everyday life were made by many Nordic artists who took a political stand during the war time-period such as the Norwegian painter Willi Middlefart and Reidar Aullie. “*Scandinavianism*” was a political and social tool which was used beyond individual nations. This movement (1830s-1850s) was used to create and maintain good cultural and political ties and unity between Denmark, Sweden and Norway to counter external pressure from countries like Germany and Russia.

Huge cultural impacts seen on Nordic art was due to the lyrical quality of the Nordic light. The treatment of light is considered to be “*lyrical*”, rather than being purely “*scientific*” or “*aesthetic*” which uniquely defines and presents the region’s pictorial output.

Scandinavian art is more than a regional aesthetic, it is in its true nature a visual representation of the Nordic social contrast. By blending the deep-rooted tradition and folklore as well as forward-thinking of humanity and philosophy, it simply transitioned from being a 19th century nation-building to a global standard for being a human-centred design.

4.3 Mughal Art

The influence of the Mughal Empire on art, architecture and culture remains one of the most defining aspects of India’s historical heritage. The Mughals during the 16th-18th century bought a blend of Persian, Central Asian and native Indian aesthetics which gave rise to a unique Indo-Islamic cultural synthesis. The Mughal contributions to the art were quite unique and enormous. The idea of miniature painting started in the courts when the rulers became patrons of it, which led to many Mughal school styles of art which amalgamated Persian styles with Indian dramatic themes.

One of the remarkable achievements of the Mughal period was the grandeur, and sophistication it bought with itself. The Mughal courts of the rulers like Akbar, ShahJahan and many more became a cultural hub, patronising artists and their intricate work of miniature paintings that celebrated the philosophical richness and talent of the artists. The specialty of the miniature paintings lay in the intricate and detailed painting of everyday court scenes, the beautiful landscapes and religious motifs. Artists like *Basawan* and *Manohar* were critical in blending the Persian artistic traditions and Indian styles.

The miniatures not only served as a decorative piece but also as a source of historical context in understanding the life of the Mughal rulers and their lifestyles. Other forms of art such as storytelling and poetry also flourished during the reign of the Mughals with famous poets like Mirza Galib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz influencing the Indian art of poetry till date.

Mughal art not only ruled the country during its tenure but captured it culturally, socially, politically and economically to a great extent whose effects on art during the time of the rule as well as in the present are preserved and showcased.

5. Impact of Political, Cultural and Societal influences on Artists during the above three periods

5.1 The Renaissance Art

Politics, culture and societal changes shaped art, the Renaissance period saw a great shift in the way art was presented and interpreted. From being a source of inspiration and creativity, art shifted its dynamics and became a symbol of stature for many elites as well as presented political leanings during the mid 15th century. This led to this form spreading in different parts of Europe and around the world, as the artist's work started getting more recognition for its political usage and decorative purposes like Michaelangelo's work at the Sistine Chapel.

5.2 Scandinavian Art

This art form has its own uniqueness- the beautiful blend of traditions and cultures from all the Nordic countries. This amalgamation was seen heavily in art as it emerged a thousand years back. Politics started being presented in the art form in Post war Western Europe, when politically driven artists showcased their views by painting their everyday lives with political meaning and values. "*Scandinavism*" and "*National Romanticism*" and many other terms were used to describe certain cultural and social associations between the Nordic region.

A revolutionary cultural impact was seen in association with art and the so-called "*The Nordic Lyrical Light*" which uniquely defined the region and its art.

5.3 Mughal Art

The reign of the Mughal period was one of the most impactful times for art, especially on social, cultural and political aspects. The art that was once only in the Nawab's court for their personal enjoyment, started having political overtones and cultural aspects. Competition between Mughal kingdoms was a common occurrence.

These cultural, social and political aspects shaped the growth of art and the working of artisans during these three periods.

6. Transition of one period to another and reactions of artists as they move to different eras

6.1 Renaissance Art

The world renowned artists like Michaelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci would not have been able to reach the level of renown they have, if the shift of periods between Renaissance to the present day Modern art did not include several other periods. From the 15th -17th century, in Europe, specifically in the North of Alps, Jan van Eyck and Albercht Dürer introduced significant advancements in oil paintings and various forms of printmaking. They learnt that oil paintings took a long time to dry which helped in greater manipulation of colour and texture, resulting in intricate paintings. A unique characteristic of northern art was a shift from religious and mythological art towards paintings focusing on the everyday people and ordinary life. This period also saw the rise of wood-carvings and engraving.

This was followed by Baroque art, focusing on drama and dance of light and movement. It laid emphasis on contrast and emotional intensity along with movement. Artists like Caravaggio, pushed the boundaries of realism and drama and started using intense *chiaroscuro*, a technique that employs light and dark contrasts, to paint intense compositions. Artists grew from Romanticism to Impressionist art and finally to modern day art. The continuing push from Renaissance to Modern art showcases the level of unleashed creativity , innovation and expression.

6.2 Scandinavian Art

The transition was seen in the late 19th-20th century which focused on the shift from National Romanticism to Modernism. The change was seen due to industrialisation, social reforms and adaptations of different styles from France. Inspired by the French, the change led to artists going against rigid academic rules. Artists like Christian Krohg and Frits Thaulow introduced new, brighter ways of painting, often focusing on social issues and everyday life.

A revelation came when the Stockholm Exhibition was set up in 1930, which turned out to be the key point for the shift from the old Scandinavian design to Functionalism, which blended function designs and artistic expression. The movement then moved towards focusing on the Nordic light and finally revaluation of everyday life which led to the discovery of modern Nordic art together.

6.3 Mughal Art

Mughal art in India during the 16th-17th century developed from emphasis on conducting workshops to “post- Mughal” style art. A gradual transformation occurred that was triggered by declining imperial patronage and political instability. This forced the artists to adapt to new regional and European patrons. As the British strengthened their rule, the skilled artisans migrated from the imperial atelier to the regional courts of Rajputana, Lucknow, Hyderabad, etc. This led to the birth of “provincial Mughal art”, which was often bolder but less refined than the earlier work.

The fancy type of Mughal art died as the East India company was set up. British patrons started demanding documentation of the flora, fauna and their local lives through paintings. Adaptations to Regional themes led to the Westernization culture entering India, leading to the loss of many art movements amongst them being Mughal art.

All three periods have seen their fair share of change and revolution in the painting styles and techniques, resulting in the manner in which art has changed through the ages with each generation of artisans improvising and adding to original techniques.

7. Limitations

The study was limited due to the porosity of time and financial means to research and document the changing art developments over the centuries.

8. Conclusion

In the present day and age, Renaissance, Scandinavian and Mughal, art forms are celebrated and well-known around the world. It is imperative for these three extraordinary and renowned art forms to be preserved because they are not just a form of expression, but they ignited the spread of art in different forms and in different regions of the world. They have become an integral part of the education system as they represent the changing cultural, economic and social lifestyle of people in that time period and their influence on subsequent eras. The art reiterates the importance of cultural, economic, political and social influences on their art forms. It also brings out the effect and journeys of artisans of that time period and the manner in which they shaped the art movement in centuries to come.

Figure 8: Pen box and utensils, white nephrite jade set with rubies, emeralds and diamonds, 1650 – 1700, Mughal



Source: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-arts-of-the-mughal-empire>

Bibliography { in text citation }

[1] Ferguson, S. (n.d.). The Use of Art as a Political Tool in Renaissance Italy. *Retrospect Journal*.

[2] Nazmiyal, J. (2023). Exploring Swedish Scandinavian Folk Art Traditions and Motifs. *NAZIMAL COLLECTION*.

[3] Introduction. (n.d.). *THE MET*.

[4] The Arts of The Mughal Empire. (n.d.). *V and A.*(2025)

References

1. Fitzpatrick, L. (2023). How Art Shapes Culture and Reflects Human Experience. *PRESSBOOKS*.
2. The Arts of The Mughal Empire. (n.d.). *V and A.*(2025)
3. Smith, C. H. (n.d.). *Scandinavian Art.*(1922)
4. Renaissance Art to The Modern Age: A Deep Dive Into Art History. (2024). *Sotheby's*.