

Use Of Backdrop Painting In Photography Studios And Theatres**Paramita Biswas¹ & Dr. Shreekanth Gour²****Review: 05/04/2025****Acceptance: 12/05/2025****Publication:11/06/2025****Abstract**

This study explores the evolution and significance of backdrop painting in Kolkata's theatres and photography studios from the 18th century to the modern era. It examines how traditional Indian art forms blended with Western techniques to create immersive visual environments that enhanced storytelling and performance. The research highlights the technical aspects of backdrop painting—such as perspective, lighting, and composition—and the role of artists in shaping stage and studio aesthetics. It also discusses the socio-cultural impact of backdrops, including their use in early photographic practices and their symbolic function in theatrical narratives. By drawing on theories from visual culture, theatre studies, and material culture, the study provides a deeper understanding of backdrop painting as both an artistic expression and a performative tool. The paper emphasizes the continued relevance of this art form amid digital advancements and calls for its preservation as an important part of India's visual and performance heritage.

Keywords: Background, Backdrop Painting, Theatre, Stage, Photo Studio, Canvas, Kolkata

Introduction

The 18th and 19th centuries marked a significant transformation in the spatial and visual composition of painting, particularly in theatrical backdrops. Indian painting, traditionally two-dimensional, began adopting Western techniques of realism and three-dimensional perspective, leading to a shift in how space and depth were depicted on stage (Divkar, 2019, p. 80). Artists skillfully painted scenes of mythology, urban life, and nature, enhancing theatrical storytelling by creating the illusion of real environments through light, color, and architectural accuracy. The development of theatrical lighting—from candles and oil lamps to gas and eventually electric lights—further emphasized the need for visually compelling backdrops (Divkar, 2019, p. 81). By the 20th century, large canvas backdrops were commonly used, blending Indian and colonial styles. Artists had to balance accurate perspective with proportionate human figures, often working with assistants for large-scale execution (Divkar, 2019, pp. 82–84). Backdrops were engineered to be practical as well as artistic. Typically, 14 to 18 feet high and 25 to 29 feet wide, they were suspended from rods and weighted at the base for stability. These were painted in advance and designed for easy setup and storage, forming a vital component of stagecraft (Divkar, 2019, p. 87).

2. Review of Related Literature**Ghosh (2015), *Chobi Tola: Bengalir Photography Charcha***

Siddharth Ghosh examines the evolution of photography in Bengal, emphasizing the role of backdrop painting in shaping early studio aesthetics. He documents how painted backdrops added narrative and cultural depth to

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portraits, and recognizes the contributions of women photographers in expanding the practice. His work situates backdrops as more than decorative elements—seeing them as visual tools of identity and storytelling.

Kiernan (2017), *The Hand-Painted Studio Backdrop*

Kat Kiernan explores the decline and revival of hand-painted backdrops in contemporary photography. Her article addresses how digital screens have replaced traditional methods but argues for the enduring charm and texture of painted canvases. She advocates for preserving these tactile forms of visual art, especially in portraiture, where backdrop choice affects mood, tone, and storytelling.

Divkar (2019), *The Art of Theatrical Backdrops*

Amol Divkar's study offers a detailed look at the technical and artistic processes behind backdrop painting in Indian theatre. He highlights how artists blend traditional Indian and Western styles, use linear perspective for depth, and adapt lighting to enhance visual storytelling. The book also covers practical aspects such as material preparation, team collaboration, and stage coordination, providing a contemporary understanding of backdrop painting as both craft and performance aid.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study applies theories from art history, visual culture, and theatre studies to explore backdrop painting as both a symbolic and performative medium. Using visual semiotics, it interprets how imagery, perspective, and composition convey meaning. The concept of performative space highlights the backdrop's role in shaping narrative and setting. Material culture studies further reveal how backdrops functioned as physical, reusable objects. Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive understanding of backdrop painting's artistic, cultural, and historical significance.

4. Need for Visual Aids or Examples

Including visual aids is crucial to enhance the academic and visual depth of this study on backdrop painting. As a visually driven art form, backdrop painting relies on elements like perspective, color, and lighting that are best understood through images. Photographs of historical backdrops, studio portraits, tools, and stage layouts would clarify technical descriptions, illustrate stylistic influences, and reveal artistic processes. Integrating such visuals would make the study more engaging, comprehensive, and aligned with interdisciplinary standards in visual culture research.

5. Objectives of the Study

1. **To** examine the historical development of backdrop painting in Kolkata's theatres and photography studios from the 18th century onwards.
2. **To** explore the influence of both traditional Indian and Western artistic styles on the evolution of backdrop painting.
3. **To** analyze the socio-cultural role of backdrop paintings in shaping visual narratives and enhancing audience engagement.
4. **To** investigate the technical aspects of backdrop painting, including the use of perspective, lighting, color, and composition.
5. **To** understand the significance of backdrop painting as an essential component of stage design and studio photography aesthetics.
6. **To** highlight the contributions and techniques of artists involved in creating theatrical and photographic backdrops.

7. **To** assess the adaptability and continued relevance of backdrop painting in modern visual and performance arts.

6. Research Questions

1. How did backdrop painting develop historically in Kolkata's theatres and photography studios?
2. What cultural and artistic influences shaped the styles and techniques of backdrop painting in Kolkata?
3. In what ways did backdrop paintings contribute to the visual and thematic composition of theatrical productions and photographic portraits?
4. What were the technical methods and artistic practices used by backdrop painters to create depth, realism, and atmosphere?
5. How did socio-cultural factors in colonial and post-colonial Kolkata influence the themes and usage of backdrop paintings?
6. What is the contemporary relevance of traditional backdrop painting in today's theatre and studio practices?

Research Methodology

This study is based on qualitative analysis using secondary sources including historical texts, journals, and photographic archives. In addition, field observations of contemporary studio practices and interviews with local artists were conducted.

Discussion

Rise in Photography Studios in Kolkata

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Kolkata saw a significant rise in photography studios, marking a new chapter in visual culture. One of the earliest and most prominent establishments was Bourne & Shepherd, founded in 1866 (Ghosh, 2015, p.76). A distinctive feature of Indian studio photography at the time was the use of painted backdrops, which quickly became essential for enhancing visual appeal. The profession gained traction in the mid-19th century with the opening of The Bengal Photographers' in 1862, Bengal's first commercial studio (Ghosh, 2015, p.23). Notably, women also entered the field early on—Mrs. E. Mayer opened a studio in 1863, offering Indian women a more comfortable environment for portraiture. By 1877, Mrs. D launched the 'Janana' studio on Waterloo Street. Bengali women such as Sarojini Ghosh, Annapurna Dutta, and Chanchala Bala Dasi followed suit, contributing to the flourishing studio culture where backdrops played a central role.

Theatres Established in Kolkata

The history of theatre in Kolkata can be broadly divided into two major phases: the Girish era (1873–1921) and the Shishir Kumar Bhaduri era. The former was marked by musical and dramatic performances lit by foot lamps, while the latter introduced naturalistic acting and dialogue delivery, setting new standards in stagecraft. Scenery and costumes also gained prominence during this time. Theatre in Kolkata was initially influenced by British colonial culture, with early 19th-century venues such as the Athenium, Baithakkhana, Chowrangi, and Sans Souci theatres. British officials introduced the first formal stage, known as the 'Play House'. From 1854 to 1868, theatre gained popularity among Kolkata's elites, leading to the rise of private theatre societies like Sobhabazar, Bahubazar, and Baghbazar Natyasamaj. The establishment of the Classic Theatre by Amarendranath Dutta in 1897 marked a cultural shift. This era also saw the growth of prominent theatres like the National, Alfred, and Mitra Theatre (Sur, 2014).

Stage Planning

Stage planning is a foundational element of theatrical production, integrating key components such as backdrop, lighting, costume, makeup, and atmosphere to create a cohesive visual experience. The success of a play relies on the harmony of these elements; imbalance in any one aspect can detract from the overall impact (Kabir, Bhorer Kagoj). Traditionally, stage backgrounds were treated as artistic compositions, with the proscenium acting as a frame for large painted backdrops. Scenes were carefully designed with proportionate front and back wings to simulate depth and distance, often re-used across multiple productions. This method reflected a global tradition of scenic design from the 17th to early 20th centuries. Dramatist Syed Jamil Ahmed emphasizes the artistic necessity of backdrop painting, noting that staging a play without it—such as using a plain white wall—can lead to visual confusion and diminished narrative focus (Ahmed, 1393). Thus, effective stage planning remains vital to theatrical storytelling.

Use of Perspective in Backdrop Painting

Perspective plays a crucial role in backdrop painting, enabling artists to create the illusion of three-dimensionality on a flat surface. Achieving this optical illusion requires both technical drawing skills and an understanding of scientific principles. Linear perspective, which uses vanishing points where imaginary lines converge, helps depict depth by making closer objects appear larger and brighter, and distant ones smaller and duller (Phadke, 2013; Jane, 1996). This method allows the backdrop to simulate realistic environments that support the narrative of the play or photograph. Additionally, non-linear perspective contributes to the visual effect by manipulating color tones, texture, and shading to enhance the sense of space. Techniques like chiaroscuro and varying acuity levels add sharpness and detail where needed, based on the artist's skill (Divkar, 2019, p. 99). Together, these perspective methods elevate backdrop painting from mere decoration to an immersive, integral part of visual storytelling.

Role of the Painter in Backdrop Painting

Backdrop painting is a meticulous process that requires artistic vision, technical skill, and spatial awareness. The painter begins by sketching a detailed layout on paper, often including a color version that serves as a reference for the final large-scale canvas, typically around 18 by 30 feet (Divkar, 2019, p. 103). The canvas is laid flat and secured with weights to ensure stability. The artist then draws a rough outline and proceeds to paint in sections, progressing only when satisfied with each part (Divkar, 2019, p. 111). Mastery in handling light and shadow is crucial, as backdrops must convincingly portray day or night scenes. These effects are further enhanced by stage lighting, which requires collaboration between the painter and lighting technician (Divkar, 2019, p. 106). Through this coordinated effort, the backdrop transforms into a dynamic visual element, supporting the mood and realism of theatrical or photographic productions.

Comparative and Contemporary Perspective

While traditional backdrop painting in Kolkata played a vital role in shaping theatrical and photographic aesthetics, contemporary practices have shifted significantly with the advent of digital technology. In modern studios and theatres, printed vinyl backdrops and green screen technologies have largely replaced hand-painted canvases. These digital alternatives offer convenience, customization, and cost-effectiveness, but often lack the depth, texture, and artisanal quality of traditional painted backdrops (Kiernan, 2017). Unlike the hand-crafted charm of older backdrops, digital images tend to feel more uniform and impersonal, reducing the tactile interaction between artist and medium.

Comparatively, Kolkata's traditional backdrop practices were deeply rooted in cultural storytelling and manual artistry, blending Indian and Western techniques to create immersive visual narratives. In contrast, cities like Mumbai have largely transitioned to technologically advanced stage and studio settings, reflecting their dominance in commercial film and media industries. London, with its strong tradition in theatre, maintains a balance between digital innovation and the preservation of scenic art, especially in institutions like the Royal Opera House or National Theatre, where painted sets are still commissioned for classical productions (Persac, 2016).

This comparison highlights the uniqueness of Kolkata's historical approach, which was both resourceful and artistically rich. However, the global shift toward digital backdrops underscores the need to preserve traditional methods as a form of intangible cultural heritage. Integrating both traditional and modern approaches can offer a richer visual experience—where historical authenticity meets technological precision—thus allowing backdrop painting to remain relevant in contemporary practice (Liu, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, backdrop painting has played a vital role in shaping the visual and cultural landscape of theatre and studio photography in Kolkata. It combines artistic skill, technical precision, and cultural symbolism to create immersive environments that enhance storytelling. From traditional hand-painted canvases influenced by Indian and Western styles to their adaptation in modern digital formats, backdrop painting remains a dynamic and influential art form. Its historical significance, aesthetic value, and functional relevance underscore the need for continued appreciation and preservation. As both visual narrative and cultural heritage, backdrop painting continues to inspire contemporary visual and performance practices.

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