Rita Dixit
Indian Miniatures
Gods and Gardens: Divinity, Magic and Faith

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Gods And Gardens: Divinity, Magic And Faith

Dear Enthusiast,

I present my first catalogue around the theme of Gods and Gardens. I exhibit virtually artworks on three themes; the cosmic landscape of the Gods (India's great legends), the sacred spaces of forests and groves and gardens in poetry and design. In doing so, I hope to convey to you the wonderful breadth of styles and periods that is the Indian miniature.

A sentiment so eloquently expressed by the artist and collector Alice Bonner. *"The most perfectly formed Indian miniature contains the quintessence of an entire world in an area no bigger than the human hand. And if not an entire world, then at least a certain aspect of its mysterious, hidden meaning….It is an inexhaustible fount of revelations, which gradually unfold from the thoughts captured in the image. This is what makes the miniature so valuable, more valuable than the outstanding technique, the colours and the gold with which it is executed".* Diaries 1956.

(Dialogues on Alice Bonner, International Symposium, Museum Rietberg, Zurich, 2018).

Rita Dixit
Indian Miniatures
London, October 2020

Acknowledgement

For my friends

For those present and those in spirit

The hymns of the Vedas evoke an ever-present theme – religious awe of nature, scenery, trees and water:

May Peace radiate in the whole sky in
The vast ethereal space,
May peace reign all over this earth, in water,
In all herbs and the forests,
May peace flow over the whole universe,
May peace be in the Supreme Being,
May peace exist in all creation, and peace alone,
May peace flow into us.
Aum- peace, peace, peace!

Yajur Veda Samhita (36:17)

Hindusim and Nature – Nanditha Krishan
Penguin, Random House, India 2017

Email: r.dixit@indianminiatures.co.uk

1 Churning Of The Ocean: A Spiritual Quest

Gouache with gold on paper
Size: 24cm x 18cm (image);
30cm x 23cm (folio)

Kangra, India
circa 1850

This exquisitely detailed painting captures the moment when the Ocean of Milk finally yields the Amrit, (nectar of immortality) and its other wondrous treasures. In this 1000-year old epic tug-of-war between the Gods and the Demons, Mandara Mountain is used as the churn and Snake Vasuki is used as the rope. When the Amrit appears the Gods and Demons go on to fight over its possession. After, many adventures, it is finally consumed by the Gods. This is a well-known story of a mythical landscape that existed before creation, potent imagery that endures in art.

Allegorically, the episode refers to the Hindu view of an individual's own spiritual journey. The "churning" through devotion, meditation and yoga are used to gain control of one's thoughts and senses in order to attain the ultimate gift of self-realisation (the Amrit).

In this painting, the softness of the palette, (a legacy of the Guler style) gives it an ethereal, dream-like quality, very apt for the celestial setting. The Gods are painted with a serene delicacy with an energy emanating from the grey swirls of the ocean as it froths. Vishnu is shown resplendent in his lotus seat upon Mount Mandara, and in his incarnate forms as Krishna and the turtle Kurma. In a comic and jarring contrast, the tiring demons, holding the heads of the snake, are depicted as supplicants, palms outstretched towards Vishnu.

Airavata's trunk is shown wrapped around the Kalpavriksha tree, a reflection of their association with Indra. For Indra, goes on to plant the tree in the heavenly garden of Paradise. In the scriptures, it is described as having gold roots, coral leaves and gemstone buds. Its earthly counterpart is likely to be the Indian Coral Tree Erythrina variegate.

For examples of Kangra paintings on the same subject circa 1810, see Dr. Linda Leach, Mughal and Other Indian paintings from the Chester Beatty Library. Scorpian Cavendish. 1995.

The wonderful treasures that emerge from the ocean's depths float as if in motion, across the top of the painting: (1) Chandra, the moon (adorning Shiva's forehead), (2) Uchhaishravas, the celestial horse, (3) Khamadhenu, the cow of plenty, (4) Kaustubha, the divine jewel, (5) Panchajanya, Vishnu's conch, (6) various jewelled vessels and a celestial nymph, (7) Airavata the white elephant – Indra's mount. (8) the Goddess Varuni, (9) Kalpavriksha, the wish-fulfilling tree, (10). Dhanvantari, the heavenly physician. Here shown unconventionally carrying the Amrit, the supreme treasure in his bare hands. A reference back to the idea perhaps, that Amrit is not just for the Gods.

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2 Lord Rama Victorious

Opaque pigments with gold on paper
Size: 36.5cm x 28cm (image);
37.5cm x 29cm (folio)

Kangra or Guler, India
circa 1800

The *Ramayana*—"Rama's journey"—is one of India's oldest stories, about the exile and return of Rama, prince of Ayodhya. Valmiki's epic Sanskrit poem dates to around 400 AD, but the stories are much older.

The enduring message of the Ramayana is the interconnectedness of living things, man, nature and divinity. The poem is a botanists delight, rich with beautiful descriptions of forests, medicinal plants and herbs, rivers, mountains and animal characters. (see Nanditha Krishnan, Hinduism and Nature, 2017. Penguin Books).

In this painting, Lord Rama's victory is honoured by all of creation – the earth and the heavens. The painting visually expresses this with commanding and entertaining detail. Rama's mission to rescue his queen, Sita could only be secured with the help of the natural world: medicinal plants to stem the losses on the battlefield, the monkeys led by Hanuman and Sugreeva, the bears led by Jambhavan,

Surasa the sea serpent and the giant fish who help create the land bridge to the Island of Lanka.

This dynamic painting takes its inspiration from the Book VI – the Yudda Kanda (Book of War). The closing verses (chapter 108) of this epic work are captured by the artist with thrilling effect.

Rama stands triumphant in Indra's celestial chariot, the charioteer Matali portrayed in full armour. Rama is holding the "mystic missile", gifted by the God Brahma, and used to kill King Ravana, his demon foe. The two kings: one the victor, the other vanquished, given equal yet contrasting prominence in the foreground of the scene.

Verse 34: "Rama, the delight of Dasaratha who had just killed his enemy and thus who was steadfast in his vows, …ṣtood surrounded on the battle-field by his own people and the army shone like Indra the lord of celestials".

Verse 22: Having lost his life, that king of demons for his part, who was endowed with terrible swiftness and invested with great splendour, fell down from the chariot to the ground.

There is joyous fanfare in the heavens above the battlefield. The kettle drum is played in the sky and the Gods (led by Indra on his elephant mount), the celestial bards (charanas) and spirits (gandharvas) rejoice. The Gods shower Lord Rama with flowers in celebration.

Meanwhile, the rejoicing monkeys run riot using trees and boulders to force the demon army to retreat. In touching detail, the painter leads our eye to the uppermost left corner of the painting where Sita the abducted queen, forlorn and dishevelled has yet to be given the news of her husband's victory.

The origin of this painting is inconclusive. Stylistically, it draws references from the well-documented 2nd Guler Ramayana series circa 1790, the later books having distinct blue and gold borders. The rendition of detail, however, would indicate a later Kangra Series (not the 1780 Kangra series). For example, the Death of Bali in the Toledo Museum of Art. Though the colours in this series are far livelier and less subtle than in this painting. (See The Classical Tradition in Rajput Painting from the Paul F. Walter Collection, New York, 1978, no.78).

The size of the painting may suggest it is a single works executed with exquisite attention to detail and knowledge of Valmiki's verses. Interestingly, an example of a Ramayana painting with similar dimensions portraying Gods and celestials in celebration at Rama and Sita's return though without the facial detailing of this painting, was attributed to Mandi. (see A Painting from the Ramayana, Mandi, circa 1820, Christie's New York, lot 357, March 2017).

http://www.valmikiramayan.net

3 Son's Of The Forest: Lord Rama And Prince Lakshmana In Battle With Ravana

Gouache and gold on paper
Size: 23.3cm x 16.6cm
Guler, India
circa 1840

The *Ramayana* story embodies the Hindu idea of dharma – duty, behaving correctly according to one's position and role in society. Thus Rama is portrayed as the ideal son and ruler, Sita as the devoted wife, Lakshmana as the dutiful brother. The blue-skinned Rama is identified as the seventh incarnation (avatar) of the Hindu god Vishnu, the Preserver, who descends to Earth whenever evil threatens to overturn cosmic order. Lakshmana stands shoulder to shoulder with his half-brother Lord Rama. He is the embodiment of filial loyalty and shares many adventures with the royal couple in their exile.

Nature symbols are used repeatedly to symbolise the struggle between Rama and Ravana as the triumph of good over evil. After 14 years of exile in the forest, the Royal brothers affinity with the natural world is depicted by their dress, their heads adorned with crowns made of leaves. By contrast, with Ravana animal imagery is used to convey deceit and trickery in the form of the deer. For the deer was the demon Mareecha sent by Ravana to lure Sita away from safety and to her subsequent abduction.

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The Landscape Of Dreams: Three Folios From A Book Of Dreams (Svapna Darshana)

Provenance: Mewar Royal Collection
Mewar, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India
circa 1720

Svapna is the word that refers to the state of dreaming and through it, to "seeing a vision in a dream" (Art and Soul: Of Dreams and Diverse Images, BN Goswamy, the Tribune, India, February 2004). The history of dream interpretation and divination is an ancient one in India with traditions in Buddism (Buddha's mother dreamt of a white elephant) and Jainism (Mahavir's mother had 14 auspicious dreams).

The earliest Hindu reference to dreams can be found in the Rig Veda, the most ancient of texts. Descriptions of dreams signifying omens appear in the Upanishads (The Chhandogya Upanishad).

Dreams were not deconstructed in such texts to analyse a person's state of mind or hidden desire as in a Western scientific tradition. Rather dream books or texts were used to interpret, foretell and portend events (omens) and often contained single images.

The Royal Mewar Book written in Sanskrit was a unique commission in ambition and scale (100 folios – all widely dispersed). This catalogue brings together three of the folios.

Art Historian A. Topsfield writes: *"For kings and subjects alike, the interpretation of dreams and omens could be as much a guiding factor in their enterprises as the prescriptions of the astrologers. A cat crossing one's path might nullify plans for a journey. When still intact it must have had singular charm. In its textual headings omens are graded in progressive categories, 30 from evil (asubham; e.g. a burgled house, families of dogs or monkeys) and undesirable (neshta; e.g. a poor man), to good (subham; e.g. cows in a byre), excellent (srestha; e.g. a yogi in a hermitage, a king enthroned), or the best of all (uttamam; e.g. winged elephant, lions, a pride of lions). Most of these subjects are drawn from everyday experience and rendered by the Udaipur artists with an unaffected directness of observation"* (See Andrew Topsfield, Court Painting at Udaipur (2002), p. 144).

The Sanskrit in these folios is very easy to follow, the texts illustrated beautifully for aristocratic readers – the complete work would have been an interesting read without being too taxing, akin to an exquisite coffee table book rather than a hefty tome.

Of interest, is that many of the dispersed folios be they neshta e.g. cats (see below) or uttamam e.g. Lord Kubera (see below); and the winged elephants cited above appear to have had their folio numbers and dream "grade ratings" removed (For the winged elephant example cited above see Painting 31, Domains of Wonder, BN. Goswamy & Caron Smith, San Diego Museum of Art 200).

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4 The Cats: Neshta

Opaque pigments on paper
Size: 25cm x 18.75cm (painting);
25.8cm x 21.4cm (folio)

Udaipur, Mewar, Rajasthan, India
circa 1720

In Hindu, lore cats are often associated with deception and insincerity. The four felines are positioned against a green background laying across the path of anyone deemed unfortunate enough to come across them.
The cats are adorned with gold collars and each is depicted with charming attention.

The Sanskrit inscription reads:

Unpreventable obstructions, always, Pride and futility, Sorrow and discord,
All this is indicated by a cat.

Sincere thanks to Dr. Richard Williams, SOAS, London for his analysis of the text and kind translation.

5 The Boar: Neshta

Opaque pigments on paper
Size: 25.5cm x 21.6cm (folio)

Udaipur, Mewar, Rajasthan, India
circa 1720

Provenance:
Christie's London, 12th June 2018, lot 28
Christie's Amsterdam, 12 October 1993, lot 34

Exhibited:
Indian Miniature Paintings c.1590–c.1850, Amsterdam, 1 October–30 November 1987, no.23

J. Bautze, Indian Miniature Paintings c.1590–c.1850, exhibition catalogue, Amsterdam, 1987, no.23, p.61

The Sanskrit inscription reads:

Loss of property, mental anguish, Death of sons, terrible fear, Death, sorrow, suffering:
A boar indicates all this.

Sincere thanks to Dr. Richard Williams, SOAS, for his analysis of the text and kind translation.

Email: r.dixit@indianminiatures.co.uk

6 Lord Kubera – God Of Wealth (Probably) Uttamam

Opaque pigments with gold on paper
Size: 25.5cm x 21.6cm (folio)

Udaipur, Mewar, Rajasthan, India
circa 1720

The Sanskrit inscription reads:

Health and pleasure,
A place of gathering for worship,
The benefit of a son's birth and
a life of comfort:
The Lord of Wealth, Kubera,
indicates all this.

According to the Puranas, Lord Kubera once ruled Lanka, but was overthrown by his demon half-brother Ravana, later settling in the mythical city of Alaka in the Himalayas. Alaka was situated near Mount Kailas, the heavenly abode of Shiva. Kubera's treasure houses were located within the eight lesser peaks surrounding Kailas.

Sincere thanks to Narmada Prasad Upadhyaya, Indore, India for his kind translation of the text.

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7 The Ramayana – Rama And Sita Arrive In The Forest

Gouache with gold on paper
Size: 36cm x 25cm (painting)

Kangra, India
circa 1820–30

Provenance: Formerly in the collection of publisher Tom Maschler

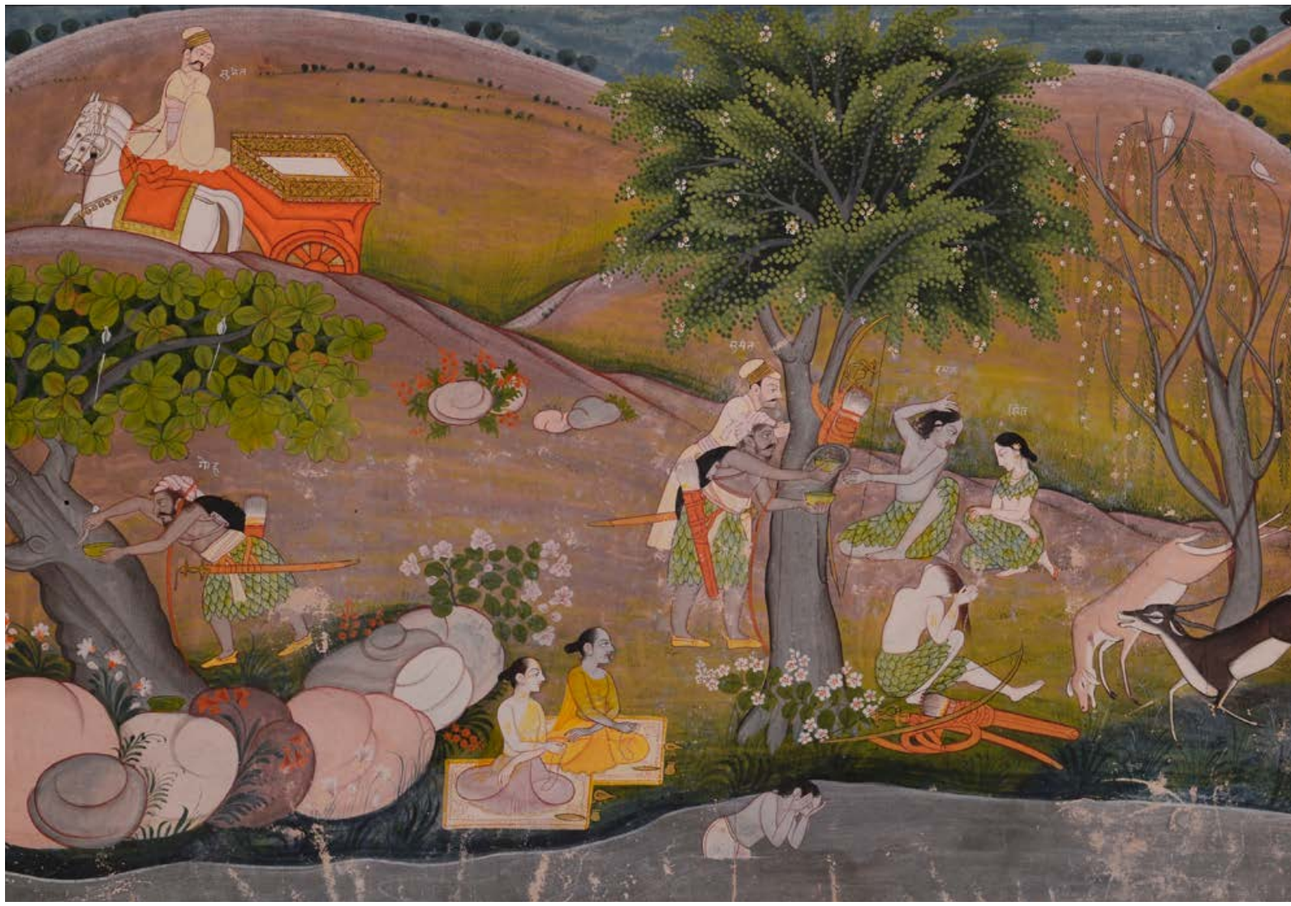
Sotheby's
Arts of the Islamic World
October 2019, lot 195

In Hindu lore, forests are places of refuge, and inspiration-places to be revered rather than feared. Sacred spaces where the greatest Vedic literature was revealed to sages and ascetics living in forest hermitages. In Valmiki's Ramayana, Lord Rama's 14-year journey from Ayodhya to Lanka was spent passing through four different forests. This charming painting provides us with many visual clues as to where in his journey this scene may have taken place. Lord Rama, Sita and Lakshmana are brought to the forest by the royal courtier, Sumantra and spend the first phase of their exile in Chitrakoot forest (modern-day location between Utter Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh) besides the Mandakini river. Valmikis calls it the mahlivana or great forest. The forest is described as having a hill and evoking a sweet (madhura) rasa, with an air of purity and spirituality. Inhabiting the forest are tribal peoples gifted with supernatural qualities. (See Environment and Ecology in the Ramayana, Indian Journal of History of Science, Mira Roy, 2003)

The visual narrative is beautifully composed so that one's eye travels in a circle starting from the lower left and moves around the picture to finish up at the upper left. The main characters (with the exception of Sita) appear more than once within a single frame, a technique BN̤ Goswamy calls "continuous pictorial rendering" (the Spirit of Indian painting, Thames and Hudson, 2016). The technique is employed by Indian painters to show the passage of time.

The present unfolds in the centre of the painting. One views the scene through the eyes of Sumantra hiding behind the tree. One of the forest dwellers is offering the royal couple what appears to be an insect repellent tapped from a forest tree. Lakshmana is arranging his hair in a jata to begin the vanaprastha (forest retirement). In the upper left corner, one sees Sumantra in the royal carriage looking back at his royal charges – one last time, as he prepares to leave them. Back to the future, one sees the two princes in meditation as they settle into their new life in exile.

The painting is from the Pahari region situated at the foothill of the Himalayas and with distinct flora and fauna that one would not find in a deciduous tropical forest like Chitrakoot. To the right is painted a Himalayan Birch (the upright birch) with its catkins and distinct leaning shape, a common sight across the hillscapes of Himachal Pradesh. The central flowering tree could be any number of flowering fruit trees, such as Myrobolan (cherry plum), the Tilaka (cluster fig or ficus racemosa). The tapped tree resembles the Ficus elastica (rubber tree) but is most likely to be a stylized interpretation of a tree with medicinal properties.



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8 A King Consults The Sage Narada

Gouache and gold on paper
Size: 33cm x 28cm (painting)

Inscribed verso in *nasta'liq* script.
The inscription reads *sarandhim surghuk, vabuta narah ji srim*

Pahari,
Probably Kangra, India
circa 1830

Narada is a vedic sage, famous in Hindu traditions as a divine seer and counsellor of Kings such as Yudhishthira and Krishna in the epic tale, the Mahabharata. He is credited with inventing the musical instrument, the Vina, which he is shown carrying over his left shoulder. In this painting, Narada is shown in dialogue with a King.

This graceful painting is unusual in its portrayal of a king seated upon a bejewelled tiger. In paintings from the Punjab Hills, the tiger is commonly the subject of royal hunting scenes (see, for example, an illustration from the Hamir Hath: Ala-uddin and Mahima hunting, Punjab Hills, India, circa 1790, Sotheby's, lot 13 June 2012 & Pleasures of the Hunt, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, ca. 1800 North India, Punjab Hills).

The image represents an elegant blending of Indian visual traditions. In mainstream Hindu iconography, the tiger (representing royalty, majesty and strength) is the popular mount for female deities such as Durga and Parvati. In Kerala, southern India, the tiger is the mount for Lord Ayyappa, the son of Shiva and Mohini, a forest ascetic and warrior-sage. Interestingly, the "king seated upon a tiger" theme is also popular in Indian folk art and oral story-telling. The Gazi Scrolls (Murshidabad, Bengal, c.1800), in the British Museum, were used as visual props in story-telling performances. The scroll painting tells the story of the 12th century Bengali Muslim Saint, Gazi who was known for his power over dangerous animals such as the tiger and snake. In the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans, West Bengal, locals worshipped Gazi and Hindu deities such as Dakshin Rai for protection from tigers.

One panel from the British Museum scrolls shows Gazi holding a snake and seated on a tiger with its tail flamboyantly curled above his head. The tigers in both paintings are shown, content in their submission, with curled, dramatic claws with their riders seated upon a rich coverlet.

9 Painting Of The Musical Mode Asavari (Asavari Ragini)

Opaque pigments on paper
Size: 29cm x 22.2cm (painting)

Murshidabad, Bengal, India
circa 1780, Mughal period

Provenance:
Formerly in the Kelekian Collection, New York.
Joseph Soustiel, Paris
Alexis Renard, Paris

Ragamala (garland of melody) paintings combine art and music in a way that is unique to India. Essentially, painted melodies, Ragamala paintings convey the mood of the raga (or musical mode), through depictions of deities or lovers in varying states of union and separation. Ragas can be organised according to the season and the time of the day they should be played. The Raga Asavari is a late morning Raga.

The emotion of the musical mode of Asavari is metaphorically expressed as a solitary and desolate tribal woman abandoned by her lover. She is conventionally shown seated within a rocky grove in communion with nature and the snakes she charms. The sacred grove has a long association with that of tribal worship of nature spirits and local deities residing in trees, rocks and animals.

In this charming painting, Asavari is accompanied by a courtly retinue of female musicians and servants, with a royal palace shown in the background, an overture perhaps to the much earlier influence of the imperial Delhi style on Murshidabad painting.

Of note, is the distinct curved horizon that can be seen from the late 1760s in Murshidabad painting (see J. Losty, Painting at Murshidabad 1750–1820' in Murshidabad: Forgotten Capital of Bengal, ed. Neeta Das and Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, Marg Foundation, Mumbai, pp. 82–105). For another example of a Ragamala painting with this distinct curved horizon see "Megha Raga: The Crowned and Garlanded Krishna Stands Holding A Single Flower In A Landscape", Murshidabad, c. 1760, British Library (Bridgeman Art Library).

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10 Their First Encounter

Opaque pigments with gold on paper
Size: 28.2cm x 17.9cm (image);
39.4cm x 25.5cm (album page)

Oudh, India
Late 18th Century, Late Mughal Period

Provenance: Private UK Collection

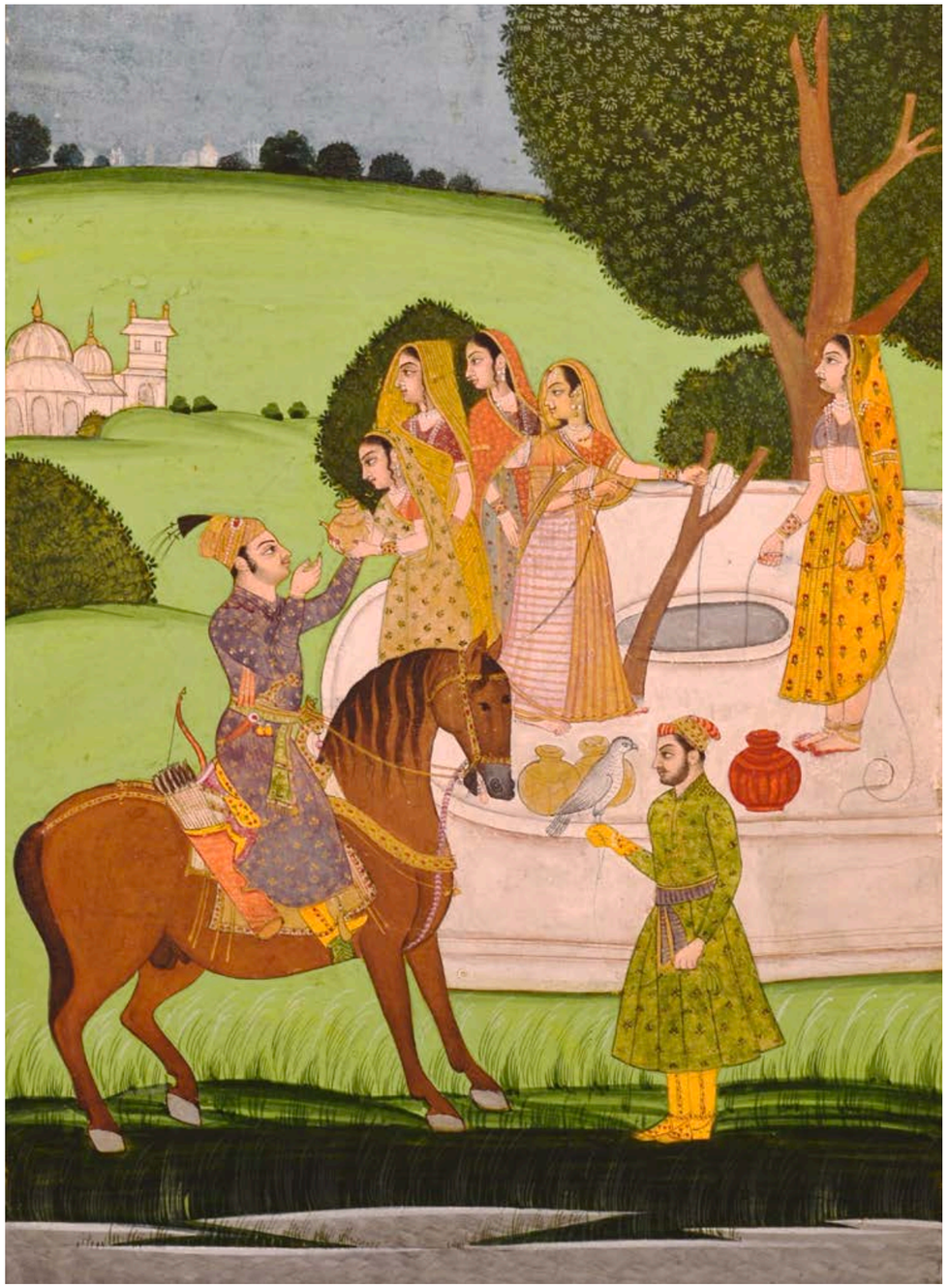
Last Night I heard that love was on its way,
There is no better place than school.

Especially love-making's school,
That place as fair as lovely Shahid

Nayrang-I'Ishq
Ghanimat Kunjahi
1685, India

"The prince and the village girl share an amorous encounter at the well" was a popular theme for artists during the late Mughal period in centres such as Delhi, Lucknow, and Murshidabad. The theme derives from a number of Persian literary sources, in particular, the Nayrang-I'Ishq quoted above (the Charm of Love), by Mughal Sufi poet, Ghanimat Kunjahi. Written during a period of considerable Muslim-Hindu cultural interaction, the poem was later absorbed into Sanskrit works. Stanza 40.7 describes how in pursuit of a stag, Shahid comes upon a village where he is struck by the sight of village girls at a well. He is particularly struck by the beauty of Wafa, the daughter of the village headsman. That night, the village is attacked by Afghan raiders who capture Shahid and Wafa. The poem ends well for the pair who are freed and later married. (see. C. Shackle, Persian Poetry and Qādirī Sufism in Later Mughal India: Ghanīmat Kunjāhī and his Mathnawī-yi Nayrang-i 'ishq, in The Heritage of Sufism: Volume 3, Late Classical Persianate Sufism, Boston, 1999). The ideal of "love at first sight" is also a pan-European one expressed in the tradition of the courtly poets of the middle ages.

In this painting, a beautiful maiden leans across to offer the handsome stranger a drink from the well. Neither appears abashed, and their eyes fix upon each other as if a spell has been cast. Of note is the way their hands come together around the vessel of water, though they do not touch. The mono green background gives a prominence to this encounter, watched by the other village girls. There are subtle details that give context to the scene – the stranger's courtly attire and jewelled ruby dagger. His companion's falcon hints at their noble status. By contrast, the village girl's sari is tied in the style of a working women as she draws water from the well. For notable examples, see Oliver Forge & Brendon Lynch, Indian Painting 1600–1870, New York 2012 and Painting 91 in Domains of Wonder, BN Goswamy & C. Smith, 2006).



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11 Meeting Of The Eyes

Gouache with gold on paper
Size: 26.4cm x 21.7cm (painting)

Garhwal, India
circa 1790–1800
Bihari Lal verse in verso

Provenance:
Maggs Bros., London, Oriental Miniatures, Bulletin no. 5, April 1963, no. 105

Note of interest: A preliminary sketch of the same scene is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Drawing for an Illustration from a Sat Sai of Bihari Lal Series: attributed to Fattu, 1785–90.

In this classic Indian composition, the red oval frame heightens the intensity of the unrequited passion between the lovers Krishna and Radha who gaze longingly at one another through a pavilion space. In Garhwal, as elsewhere in the Punjab Hills, the romance of Radha and Krishna fascinated the Rajput nobility.

The scene is an illustration to Bihari Lal's Sat Sai, one of the masterpieces of Brajbhasa literature. Bihari Lal was a 17th century court poet who worked at the court of Raja Jai Singh (r. 1611–1667), at Amber, near Jaipur. His verses became extremely popular because in a tiny couplet he could paint the entire scene, often relying on the reader to imagine what is left unsaid. The perfect cue for painters. Such literary texts would have been used in artist workshops as the basis for a commission.

In this painting, the five couplets in verso read.

She faces everyone, but in a moment, turns her back on them all. Her gaze, a qibla-compass, stays fixed on him alone. (44)

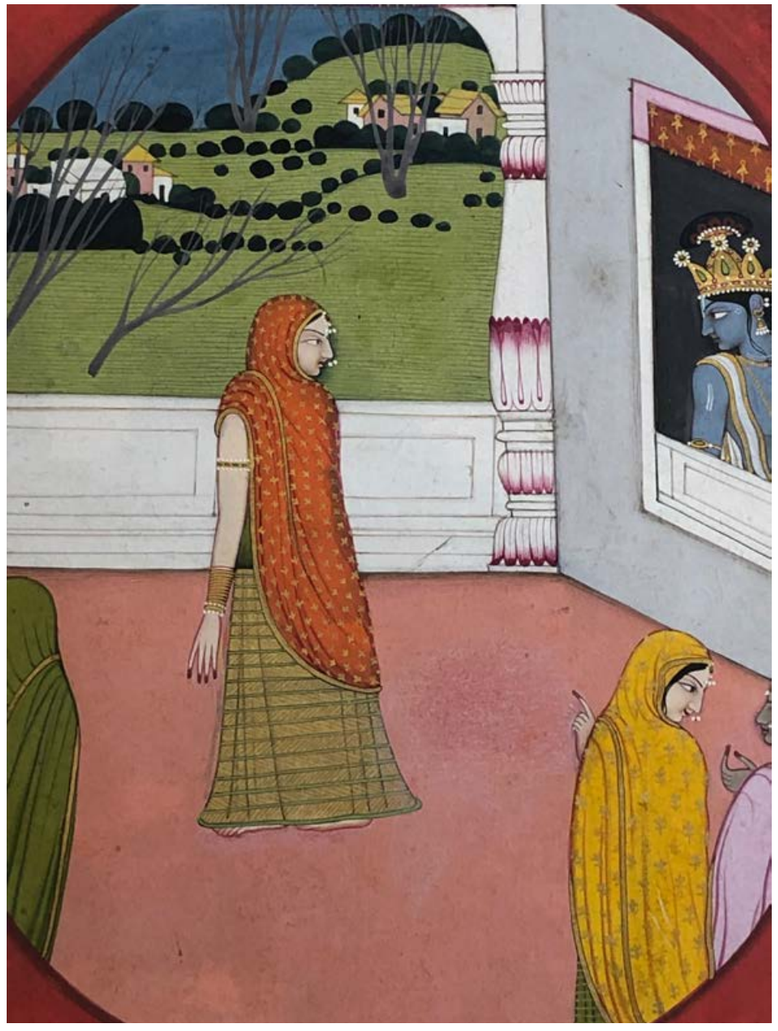
He suggests, she refuses, he's charmed, she's annoyed, they meet, she smiles, embarrassed: when the house is full, they say all this with their eyes. (45)

This isn't love! I have some affliction in my eyes. I don't understand how I'm always thirsty when they're always filled with water. (46)

She stands, beautiful head to toe, but he longs to see her smile. The cunning one's greedy eyes will not give up on their desire. (47)

She does not see honour or dishonour, she sees his dusky body. What to do? Filled up with greed, her nimble eye is roving. (48)

Sincere thanks to Dr. Richard Williams, SOAS, for his kind assistance and translation.
The painting, imbued with much meaning, is illustrative of the late 18th century Garhwal style, brought abruptly to an end with the twin calamities of an earthquake in 1802 and the invasion of the Gurkhas in 1803. In his analysis of Garhwal painting, W.G. Archer notes the use of leafless branches to parallel the feminine form, the insertion into the landscape of little-globe like trees, and the imbuing of the feminine figures with a sinuous grace. (See Archer introduction in The Faber Gallery of Oriental Art, Garhwal Painting, 1957). For a comparative example, see "Krishna watching Radha's toilet", Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, c.1795, San Diego Museum of Art).



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12 The Kiss – Desakar Ragini: An Illustration To A Ragamala Series

Opaque pigments on paper
Size: 25.4cm x 19.7cm (folio)

Sirohi, Rajasthan, India
circa 1675–1700

The Kingdom of Sirohi was a small princely state in southern Rajasthan. During the seventeenth century a flourishing school of painting was established under the patronage of Akheyraj Ī (1620–73) and his grandson, Bairisal (1676–97). *Ragamalas* were a popular subject at Sirohi, which produced first wall paintings of Ragamala subjects and then painted sets of varying sizes. Sirohi paintings from this period are important for they represent the last examples of the early Rajput style unadulterated by Mughal influence. A style defined by flat backdrops and their horizontal layering (see J. Losty, Rajput Paintings from the Ludwig Habighorst Collection, 2019 Francesca Galloway).

Desakar ragini is the pictorial image for ragas appropriate to the rainy season (July and August), a time of year traditionally associated with fertility. Desakar ragini paintings usually, though not exclusively depict an amorous couple as in this intimate example, evoking a sense of passion and play. In delightful contrast, an example of Desakar Ragini, in the Victoria and Albert Museum, shows the couple as Radha Krishna playing a game of pachis (Indian board game).

The Sirohi Ragamalas are characterised by an individualised iconography and a vibrant palette, with the dominance of oranges, browns, reds and olive green. For further discussion on Sirohi, see Catherine Glynn, Robert Skelton, Anna L. Dallapiccola, Ragamala paintings from India: From the Claudio Moscatelli Collection, London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2011, pp. 13–14).

Email: r.dixit@indianminiatures.co.uk

13 Ari Singh Enjoys Vaisakh

Gouache with gold on paper
Size: 27cm x 19cm (image);
33cm x 25cm (folio)

Provenance: Royal Mewar Collection
Jotdan inventory numerals in verso

Mewar, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India
circa 1770

Maharana Ari Singh II (r. 1761–1773) was widely reputed to have gained the throne to Mewar through unfair means and was an unpopular monarch. Much of the art depicting his reign, be they portraits or hunting scenes show him in heroic pursuits, the able equestrian and noble hunter. (e.g. Maharana Ari Singh Hunting Wild Boar, 1764, Simon Ray, 2013). These idealised scenes, perhaps a far cry from the stark reality facing Mewar at that time, an insecure kingdom on the brink of a Maratha invasion.

Panoramic garden vistas were a subject of painting during his reign. For a beautiful example see Maharana Ari Singh at Jag Mandir, featured in "Palace Life" by Ramya Shreenivasan in Anna Jackson and Amin Jaffer ed. Maharaja: The Splendour of India's Royal Courts, London: V&A Publishing, 2009.

In refreshing contrast with much of the formal portraiture from this period, this delightful painting with distinct folkish borders commissioned c.1770 presents the ruler at leisure with his ladies in a Rajput garden. The painting is from a Barahmasa series. In a similar way to ragamala paintings, with their visual representations of musical modes, the Barahmasa (meaning the twelve months) conveyed the joys of love and pangs of separation experienced by couples within the context of the changing seasons.

Vaisakh corresponds to the month of April, one of the hottest months of the year, thereby explaining the need for Ari Singh and his consort to be sprayed with cold water. This painting is one of a dispersed set from the Mewar royal collection, another of which, depicting the month of Magha (the 11th month, January & February), is in the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia.

The Mewar royal inventory number (from the palace store or Jotdan) is written in red on the reverse: 30/23. These numbers date from the 19th century and correspond with A. Topsfield's inventory of paintings in the Udaipur Jotdan (noted in his article "The royal paintings inventory at Udaipur" in John Guy (ed.), Indian art and connoisseurship: Essays in honour of Douglas Barret, 1995, p. 192). The number indicates that this painting is no. 23 of category heading 30 for general literary texts such as Ragamala, Sur Sargar and Rasikapriya.

The central feature of the Rajput royal Garden, many still in existence today, is the stepwell or tank (vav, or baoli/baori). An ornate example; the Raniji ki Vav constructed in 1699 at Bundi and a fabled example; Rani Padmini's Garden at Chittorgarh, the 14th century Mewar, summer palace. Constructed by the wealthy, tanks served as water reservoirs in arid desert environments and were used for planting, e.g. the water-lilies shown in the foreground of this painting, for cooling gardens and for play as in this image. For example, the opulent royal bath in Badi Mahal garden in Udaipur city palace.

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14 A Harem Garden With European Galleons

Gouache with gold on paper
Size: 33.3cm x 28.1cm (image);
44.1cm x 36cm (folio)

Provincial Mughal, India
circa 1760–1770

The reverse with attribution in pencil
'From/Chester Beatty Colln.'

Provenance:
Formerly in the collection of the late Professor Donald Robertson of the Persian Department, Cambridge University
Christie's October 2018. Lot 182.
Bonhams, October 2009, lot 253.

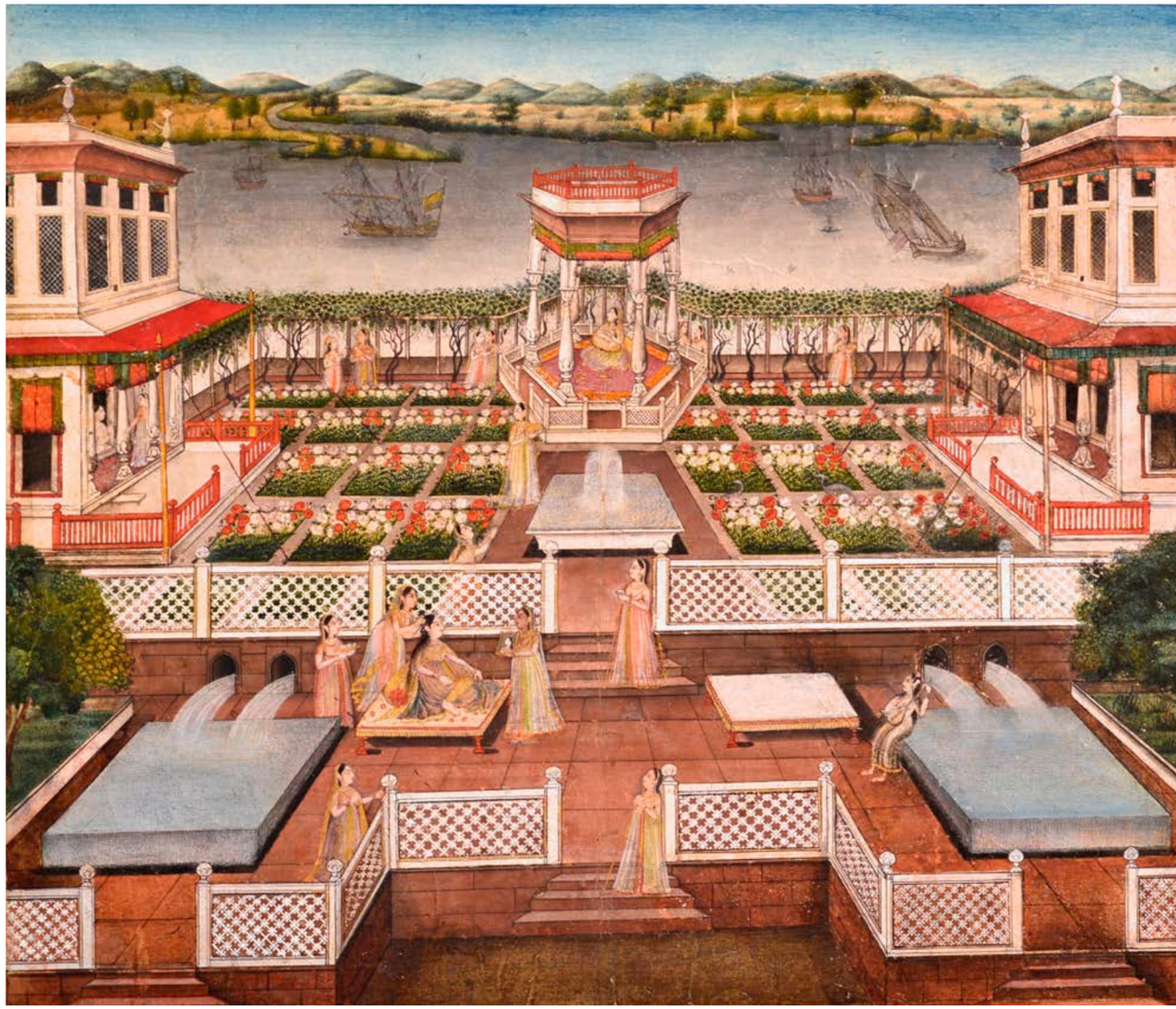
In India, the classic Islamic garden developed to a high degree of refinement. The garden was an embodiment of paradise. The central feature of the Mughal garden was the chahar bagh (four quadrant) design organised in the form of a cross with a central pavilion or fountain. The four-square design derived from Koranic references to the four rivers of wine, water, milk and honey.

This painting is a lovely illustration of the chahar bagh design within a harem, with planting beds filled with poppies, roses, and an espaliered vine behind the marble pavilion. The river, whilst a scenic backdrop was critical to where such gardens were built, for unlike Rajput tank gardens, Mughal tomb and pleasure gardens were designed around irrigations systems, channels and water chutes as shown in this painting.

The Princess being coiffured by her attendants sit nestled within the seclusion of the harem, with other courtly ladies at repose. A gentile and feminine ambience pervades the picture that would in some ways sit at odds with the masculinity of the European galleons and trading ships. However, these are depicted as if in a sketch, ghostly, present but not intruding into the garden idyll.

In his book, "A Second Paradise", the historian, Naveen Patnaik, (Doubleday, 1995) describes the ambience of the harem garden: *"Purdah gave a special poetry to Indian architecture. The desire to conceal women from view produced the inner courtyards, the verandahs, the intricate lattice shutters of that private world. It was a domain unto itself, and some harem festivities were of a heart-stopping beauty"*.

The painting is executed in the style of the painter Faizullah of Faizabad, Oudh, who came to prominence with his lavish paintings of receding palace terraces and gardens in his own flamboyant interpretation of the European perspective. For example, see "A dancer balancing a flask of perfume on her head", Chester Beatty Library, Dublin (in L. Leach Mughal and Other Indian Paintings from the Chester Beatty Library, 1995, no.6.334, p.695); "Entertainment in a Harem Garden, c. 1765, Sotheby's 2011.



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15 A Princess With A Terrace At Dusk: The Apricot

Gouache and gold and paper
Size: 40.7cm x 27.5cm (abum page)

Late 18th century
Late Mughal period, probably Oudh, India

This ornate terrace scene depicts a hennaed princess being offered a plate of apricots (hang or mui) by her lady attendants. Seated upon a marble terrace, underneath a gold canopy or awning, the onset of dusk provides the perfect time to enjoy a garden setting. For dusk is the time when the heady scents from flowers such as champaka (jasmine), gardenias, the moon creeper convolvulvas, and stephanotis would have been enjoyed from such garden terraces.

Of interest in this painting, is the gold plate containing just two apricots. The first Mughal emperor Barbur is credited with introducing improved fruit varieties such as the apricot from Kabul. Initially, from cuttings and later with new grafting techniques. The apricot, like other fruits such as Kabul melons, seedless pomegranate, quinces and peaches were grown in cooler environments such as Kashmir and were very popular among the noble classes.

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16 Sultan Abul' Hasan Of Golconda: The Rose

Deccan, India, possibly Hyderabad
Late 18th century

Gouache and gold on paper
Size: 22cm x 13.8cm (image);
32cm x 23.8cm (album page)

Provenance:
Formerly in the Collection of Peter and Evelyn Kraus, New York

The 18th century heralded a deep sense of nostalgia that was very apparent in the types of paintings being commissioned, particularly at the court of the Asif Jahi dynasty at Hyderabad. In spite of the sorry end to the rule of the Qutb Shahis, the Hyderabad court continued to produce sumptuous portrait scenes of earlier rulers. Mark Zebrowskī writes, *"the subject of portraiture are often given the stern profiling of Mughal Princes full of imperial purpose, but are placed in such a dream world of exotic shapes and colours"*. (Architecture and Art in the Deccan Sultanate, Vol. I in Mitchell & Zebrowskī, 1999).

This sumptuous portrait is of the eighth and last Sultan of Golconda, Abul' Hasan Qutb Shah. It appears to be from a late 18th century album or set of the Sultanate rulers, owing to the heavy ornamentation and gilding characteristic of later paintings. The reverse of the album page is bound in green silk. Another page from this album, bearing a striking likeness to Abdullah Qutab Shah VĪ (his predecessor with his trademark drooping moustaches) was sold at Christie's, New York in September 2003 (Lot 123).

Such albums or sets containing portraits of past notables were likely to be the product of the bazār studio, rather than court ateliers. Such works were popular and collected by Europeans and affluent individuals (see J.P Losty, the Development of the Golconda Style in Indian Art and Connoisseurship: Essays in Honour of Douglas Barrett, Ed. J. Guy, IGNCA & Mapin, 1995).

Sultan Abul' Hasan surrendered to Aurangzeb's troops at the Siege of Golconda in 1687 and died in captivity in Daultabad fort. One would not imagine he had such an ignominious end from his portraiture. Labelled the "king of taste", Abul' Hasan's physical form and facial features are very distinct and he is often portrayed in tasteful repose carrying a rose. See portrait, c. early 18th century, Sotheby's The Sven Gahlin Collection, Lot 48 October 2015. Other examples are in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. The significance of the damask and musk rose in Mughal portraiture could be the subject of a separate catalogue, suffice to say, the rose carries deep symbolism in Hindu and Islamic traditions.

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17 Twin Paintings Of Jain Devotees In Prayer

Gouache on paper
Size: 30.8cm x 18.7cm (2)

Udaipur, Rajasthan, India
circa 1840–1860

Provenance:
Formerly in the collection of the late Professor Donald Robertson of the Persian Department, Cambridge University.

This pair of paintings depicting male and female Jain devotees in prayer are delightfully unique in their elegant pairing and the intriguing inscription – a blending of a dialect known as Kari boli and Rajasthani, written in Devanagiri script. The couple are standing in front of each other in prayer at the 15th century Jain Temple of Rishabhdev, situated outside Udaipur, metaphorically drinking in the nectar of Jain teaching.

The inscription below the male devotee, named as Parmesji states that he is standing in the temple, which is described as the durbar or court of Rishabhdev, the first Tirthankara or spiritual teacher of Jainism. The inscription below the female devotee compares her devotion to that of a bumblebee drinking the nectar from a flower. Both paintings are charmingly illustrated with a floral frieze to exemplify this point.

Both Jains and Hindus have great respect for this temple since they believe Lord Rishabhdev fulfils all their wishes and desires. The temple is also known as Kesariyaji temple because of the tradition of worshipping the idol with Kesar or saffron – an important detail in light of the dominance of vivid yellow in both paintings. The pair are richly attired and of note is the receding style of the hairline of the female devotee which one sometimes sees in devotional Nathadwara paintings of this period.

Jain and Hindu temples have sacred green spaces for prayer and contemplation. Such spaces located within temple enclosures often include a shrine and many sacred trees with ayurvedic properties. A wonderful example is the 600-year-old Rayan tree (manilkara hexandra) in the Jain temple of Ranakpur, Rajasthan. Under this tree, devotees place offerings to a footprint idol of Lord Rishbhdev (Adinath).

Sincere thanks to Narmada Prasad Upadhyaya, Indore, India for his kind reading and translation of the text.

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India's sacred books: the Vedas (knowledge), the Itihasa ("that which happened), the Purnanas (ancient texts), the Sutras (threads) and Kavya (poetry) tell us much about the natural world. The Kama Sutra, for example, describes how viewing a garden can be a prelude to a royal seduction, an enduring theme in miniature paintings. For garden historians, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the most important texts. But much can be gleaned from the paintings themselves and how artists employ visual tools to convey the hidden meaning of poets. Keshavdas was renowned for using nature is his works as a metaphor, such as the fragrant grove, or a blossoming tree to suggest amorous pleasures.

18 The Brutish Encounter

Gouache and gold on paper
Size: 30.7cm x 24.5cm (folio)

Mewar, Rajasthan, India
circa 1660

Provenance:
Published in Rasikapriya, by Harsha V. Dehejia, 2013, D.K Printworld (P) Ltd.
Page 153

European Private Collection

Formerly in the Royal Collection, Bikaner
Bonhams, October 2016, lot 289.

This beautiful painting is an illustration to the Rasikapriya (Handbook of the Connoisseur) by Keshavdas, the celebrated court poet at the Kingdom of Orchha, Bundelkand. Keshavdas composed his masterpiece on the classification of heroes and heroines (nayakas and nayikas) in 1591. It is written in the elaborate riti (mannerist) style of Hindi literature and portrays the love between Radha and Krishna with much symbolic imagery and covert eroticism. (See. Rasikapriya of Keshavadas, K.P Bahadur, Delhi 1972).
The Rasikapriya was not a literary text meant for appreciation by the general public. Composed under royal patronage as an instruction to aspiring poets to appreciate the rasika genre of poetry, the work presented several challenges to the artist. Written in the scholarly *Braj bhasa*, there would have to have been a scholarly intermediary to help them grasp the literary nuances of the text.

The text proved an ideal vehicle for the artistic talents of Sahib Din, however, gifted court artist to Maharaja Jagat Singh of Mewar. He was charged with two almost simultaneous commissions of the Rasikapriya comprising some 110 pages between 1630 and 1640, 21 pages of which were in the Bikaner Royal Collection.

Topsfield reveals that original Sahib Din works were duplicated by different hands in the period 1640–1660, the tradition of copying and imitation was common practice in artist ateliers. Sahib Din appears to have made copies of his own works (the c.1630–35 series). Topsfield references a series c.1660 carried out by a follower of Sahib Din. It is likely that this painting is from this set. For another example of a c.1660 folio, catalogued by J. Losty see "A meeting of lovers in the dark"; Folio from a Rasikapriya series Mewar, cat. 3 in J. Losty, Rajput Paintings from the Ludwig Habighorst Collection, 2019 Francesca Galloway).
However, the Indian Art Historian, Harsha V. Dehejia places this folio closer to 1680. In his book aforementioned.

The Brutish encounter deals with the subject of non-consensual, violent sex. The predatory male is being sternly rebuked for his actions by the women in yellow and blue – the speaker of the poem, as she gestures to his victim. He is reprimanded for being a novice lover (or nae rasika), ignorant when it comes to the sophisticated science of love. The verse is in the voice of a female companion, rebuking a man for the rough and insensitive way he slept with an inexperienced woman (mugdhā).

The verse is replete with floral imagery to suggest her deflowering, the artist's placing of a young deer in the garden outside the bed chamber compounds the effect. Two male peacocks and the rising sun are painted with coy humour, as the birds and the rising sun watch the unfolding of events.

The verse reads:

"You pleased her while she was with her girlfriends, and made her make you promises, you drugged her and put her to sleep, and did it by force, my lord!

This maiden is delicate like a lotus stem, a garland of jasmine flowers,

yet you crushed her! Are you a man or a beast? She does not know that dawn has broken, Keshavdas says, listen to this:

just look at her worn-out body, what has become of her spirit? This picture-perfect woman is now still like a painting,

tell me, then, novice lover, where is the artistry in all this?"

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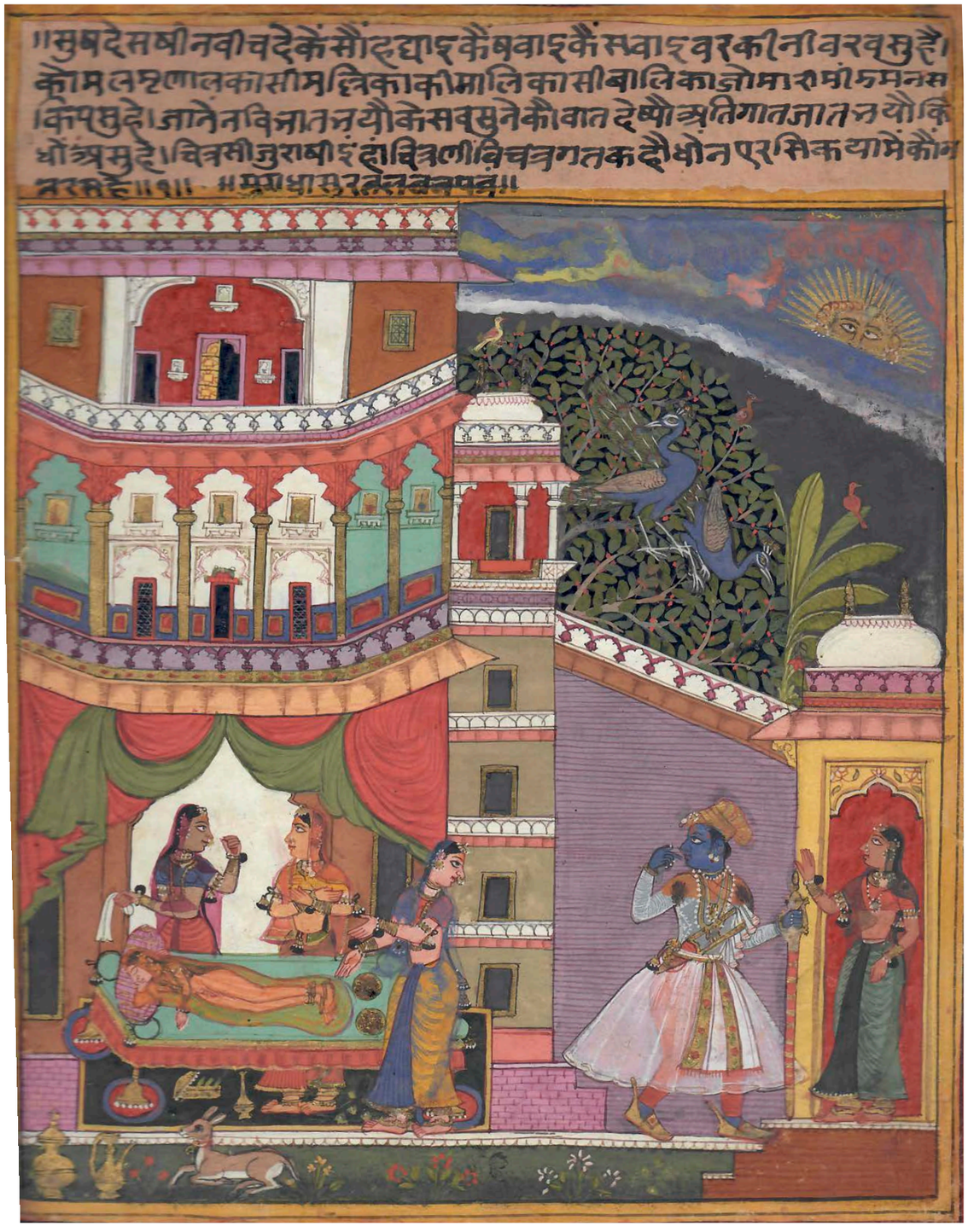

By today's standards, the subject matter here—non-consensual sex—is disturbing. The verse belongs in a longer series, which includes "women in their prime" and "mature women" who have very different verses on lovemaking, which contrast with this early instance…The poem might be read as an enjoinder to men to avoid violent, non-consensual sex, since true connoisseurs consider it beastly rather than sophisticated.

The wordplay around the themes of pictures and paintings in the final line lends itself, of course, to the visual artist. The speaker of the poem is the woman in yellow and blue, who is talking to the man over her shoulder while gesturing to his victim. The crude lover has been depicted with soiled armpits, suggesting his physical exertions while manhandling the woman, but also to mark him as lacking the sophistication of a true lover-connoisseur (rasika).

Sincere thanks to Dr. Richard Williams, SOAS, London for his analysis of the text and kind translation.

Reference:
Topfield. A. Court Painting at Udaipur, Artibus, ASIAE, 2002.

Of Royal Patronage: Indian paintings from the 16th to 19th centuries. Carton Rochell Asian Art. New York. 2020

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19 Krishna The Lover Contemplates Leaving

Opaque pigments on paper
Size: 19.5cm x 13.5cm (image);
20cm x 14cm (folio)

circa late 17th century
Central India, possibly Malwa or a Mewar sub-regional school, India

This intriguing miniature painting is an illustration to the Kavipriyā (Handbook for Poets, 1601) by Keshavdas, and describes the month of Kvar / kwānr (or Ashvin) in early autumn (September–October). This verse is part of a barahmasa cycle, in which the beloved tries to persuade her lover to stay by her side by describing the monthly festivals and marvels he would miss out on if he left home.

Like any other inscription from this period, this verse has been written in an idiosyncratic fashion: there are some small scribal errors and variations, and the top line of the verse is missing, which make the reading of the poem quite difficult for scholars.

The text begins with an invocation to one's forefathers:

During this month the spirits of ancestors come down to Earth to receive propitiations from people on Earth. People worship the nine Durgas for success in life and salvation beyond. Kings accompanied by pandits (religious advisors) set out on tour to see their kingdoms.

The poet Keshavdas says the sky is clear after the rainy season, the distressed earth is adorned with water and lotuses are in bloom. The moon illuminates the clear unclouded nights. Lord Vishnu and his consort, Lakshmi dance a celestial dance. In Kvar there is a wishing tree of lovemaking. The nayika requests her lover not to leave her.

The painting is intriguing because the artist has focused on the Sanskrit etymology of Ashvin, "horse", and has depicted Lord Krishna inspecting his horses (perhaps as he considers leaving home). Whereas other artists, like the Bundi painter of the British Museum series, illustrate different aspects of the verse such as the celestial dance and kings visiting their kingdoms. (British Museum, the month of Asoj, c.1675-1700 Bundi, accession number 1999,1202,0.5.4).

The horses are sensitively painted with a nobility and grandeur fitting for Lord Krishna. Lord Krishna is richly attired and towers above the retinue of ladies to his side. Important figures were conventionally painted like this in Rajasthani and central Indian paintings from this period to denote their exalted status.

Sincere thanks to Narmada Prasad Upadhyaya, Indore, India and Dr. Richard Williams, SOAS London, for their kind translation, and analysis of this difficult text.

20 Vairati Ragini: Picturing Sound

Gouache, gold and silver on paper
Size: 24.8cm x 18.6cm (folio)

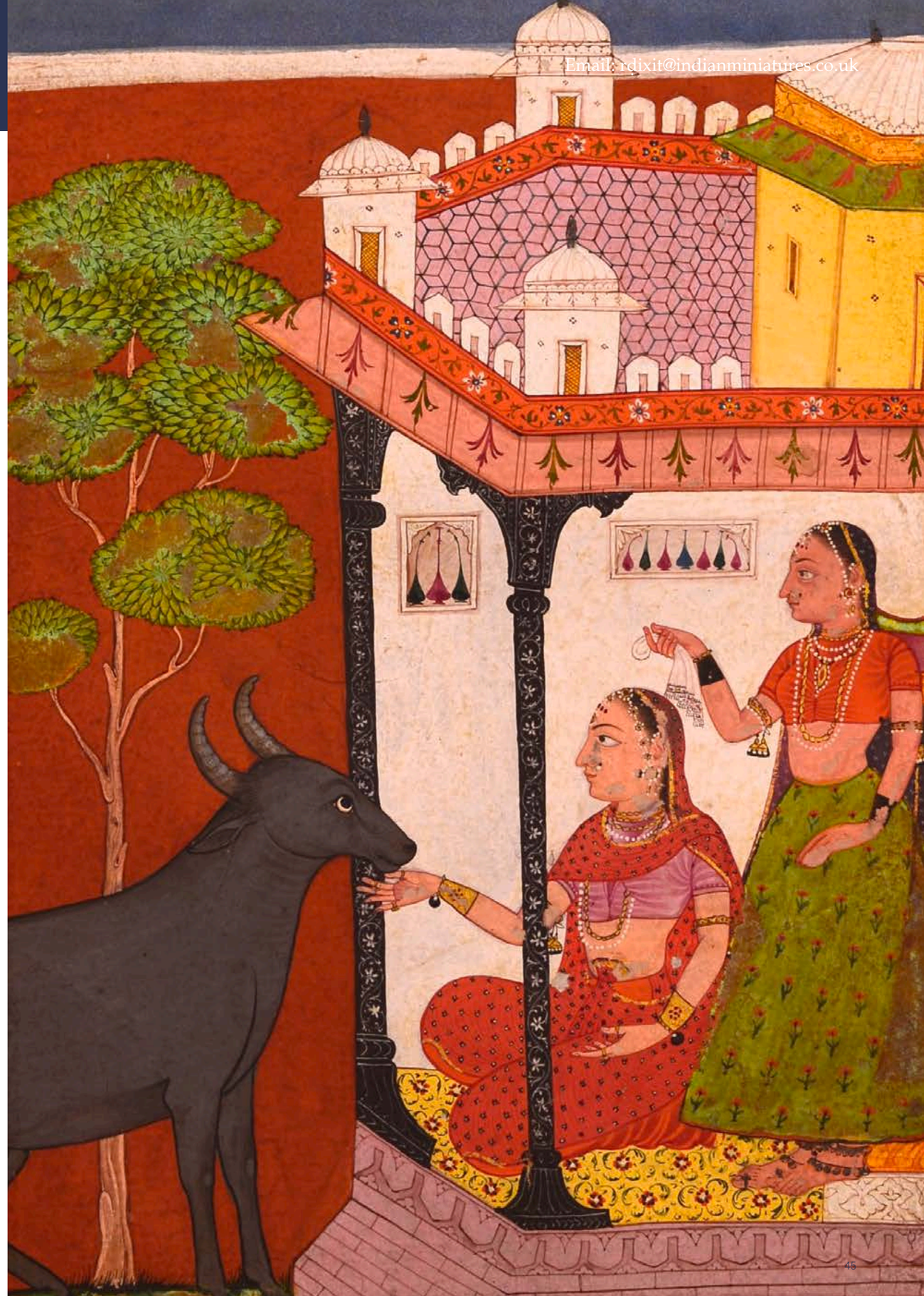
Bilaspur, India
circa 1680–1690

Provenance:
Formerly in the Royal collection, Mandi. inscription verso sri raga di vairati, cover paper with a stamp of the Mandi Royal collection.

This clear, crisp and orderly composed painting derives from a dispersed ragamala series produced c.1680–1690 in the Pahari Hill Kingdom of Bilaspur. Ragamala paintings were especially popular here and artists appear to have interpreted the ragamala system with a good deal of license and fantasy. According to the popular ragamala classification system laid out by the sixteenth century priest, Kshema Karna, Vairati is the first wife of Sri Raga. His complex "family" system of ragas comprised six principal ragas Bhairava, Malakoshika, Hindola, Deepak, Shri, and Megha, their wives (raginis) and sons (ragaputras).

The sound of Vairati is that of a water buffalo (though here represented by the bull). Kshema karna describes the visual image attached to it as a woman and a companion enjoying the cool draught of a fly whisk (hence the two women combined with a representation of the sound). In this scene, a seated noble woman is stroking the chin of a gentle, and rather tame bull, who appears to have wandered into a palace garden. Her companion stands behind her with a richly embroidered handkerchief for her friend to wipe her hands upon. Their finery is exquisite and the detail gives us much information on the adornment of noble ladies at that time. For another Pahari version of this raga, see K. Ebeling, Ragamala Painting, 1973, p. 276, no. 311.

The execution of colour, the facial features and the two-dimensionality of this painting are common features both of Bilaspur painting in its earliest phase at the end of the 17th century and this series. One sees common elements with other folios, as with the distinct red background, and the narrow bands of blue and white for the sky. See Shankarabharana Ragaputra, Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art. The Catherine Benkaim collection. For other examples from the series, see J. Dye, Arts of India: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2001, p. 338, no. 142; W. G. Archer, Indian Paintings from the Punjab Hills, London 1973, Kahlur (Bilaspur), vol. I, p. 176; vol. Ī, p. 231. no. 8.



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