The American Connoisseur

# Rajput painting and the Mughals

## 'Gods, Thrones, and Peacocks—Northern Indian Painting from two traditions'—an exhibition mounted by the Asia Society, New York

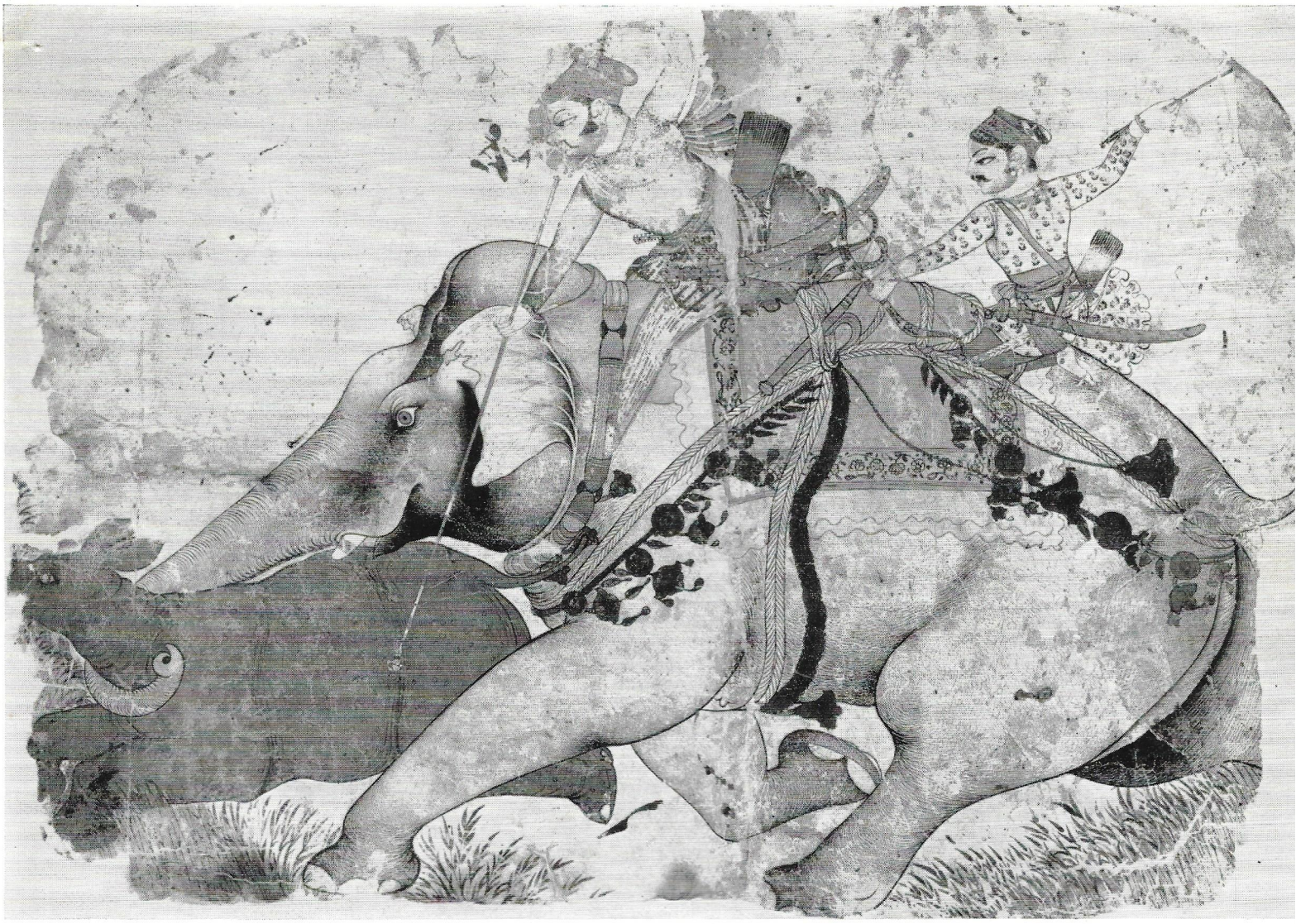
MILO C. BEACH

THE Rajput rulers of northwest India, bold in the harem and fierce on the battlefield, were ardent patrons of painting, whose most characteristic works have tremendous dash, filled with forceful gesture and blazing colour. Pre-sixteenth-century examples of this undiluted Rajput style are virtually unknown, however, and by the second half of the sixteenth century, the Mughal Empire had established political and cultural overlordship over all but the most recalcitrant Rajput territories. Mughal painting and painters then became influential at Rajput courts in direct proportion to the political relations of the rulers involved.

The development of Rajput painting, and its relationship to that of the Mughals and to various pre-Mughal schools, is examined in the exhibition 'Gods, Thrones, and Peacocks—Northern Indian Painting from Two Traditions', now at the Asia House Gallery, New York. The problem is explored within the scope of four collections; those of Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith, Mrs. John F. Kennedy, Mr. Stuart C. Welch, who organised the exhibition in collaboration with the author, and the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, where the show was originally presented in the Spring of 1965. The majority of paintings shown are from Rajput schools, and both the exhibition and its catalogue can be considered in conjunction with an earlier exhibition 'The Art of Mughal India', shown by the Asia Society in the Winter of 1963-64.

Seemingly of Indo-European background, the Rajputs probably invaded India during the sixth century A.D. They quickly became Hindus, and members of the Ksatriya, or warrior, caste. A 'Battle Scene', from a *Bhagavata Purana* manuscript dating about 1540 or earlier (No. 2), is an almost purely Rajput work. While the palette is simple—red, black, brown, green, and white—the juxtapositions are lively; the outlines are strong, angular, and energetic; the composition is two-dimensional; and the subject is a religious text. One of the few imported traits is the Islamic arabesque, seen on some of the chariots and quivers.

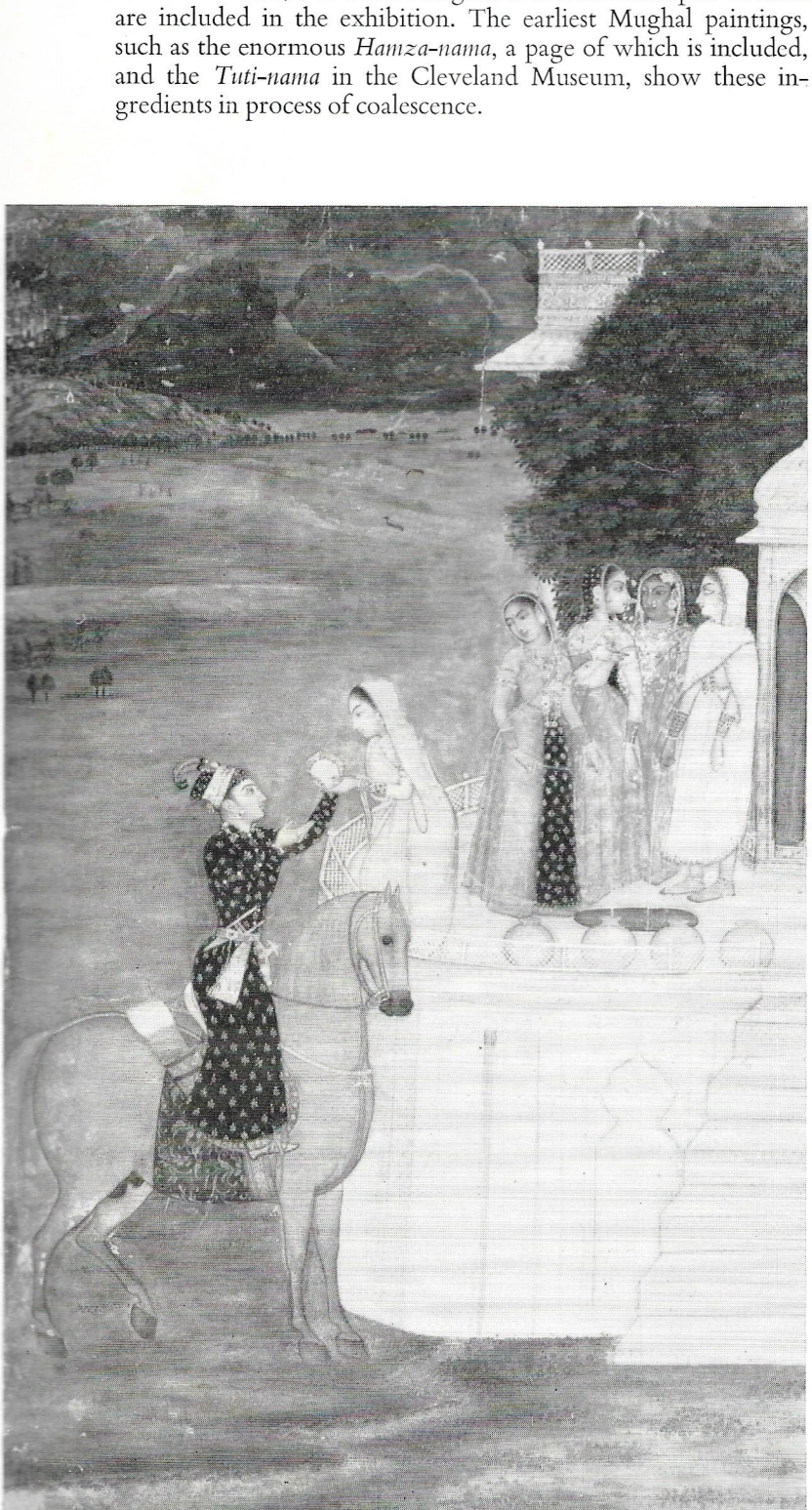
The Mughals, later arrivals in India, were descended from the Mongol conquerors Ghengiz Khan and Timur (Tamerlane). Babur (r. 1526-1530), the founder of the Mughal Empire, established himself in Delhi in 1526; and his successors remained Muslim. In contrast to the energetic stylisations of the Rajput tradition, Mughal art is naturalistic, concerned with actual observation and highly sensitive portraiture. It represents the 'foreign' rather than the 'native' element in northern Indian painting; and is secular and aristocratic in tone. Stylistically, however, it is a synthesis of native as well as foreign sources.



1. *Ram Singh I (1686-1708) of Kotah pursuing a rhinoceros.* Rajasthan, Bundi style at Kotah, *c.* 1700, $12\frac{1}{4} \times 18\frac{7}{16}$ inches. *Lent anonymously through the Fogg Art Museum.*

2. Battle Scene. From a *Bhagavata Purana* series. Rajasthani, Mewar (?), *c.* 1540, $7 \times 9\frac{3}{8}$ inches. *Lent by Mr. Stuart C. Welch.*

Humayun (1530-1556), Babur's son and successor, had brought two Persian artists from the court of the Safavid Shah Tahmasp to India to initiate and train a workshop of painters; a project enthusiastically continued by the Emperor Akbar (1556-1605), after his father Humayun's untimely death. The atelier was filled out with painters already trained in styles then current in India; pre-Mughal Muslim (Sultanate), as well as Rajput, Western Indian, and other indigenous strains. Examples of these are included in the exhibition. The earliest Mughal paintings, such as the enormous *Hamza-nama*, a page of which is included, and the *Tuti-nama* in the Cleveland Museum, show these ingredients in process of coalescence.



**3. An Encounter at a Well. Painted at Kishangarh, Rajasthan, *c.* 1740-50, 11½ × 6 15/16 inches. *John Kenneth Galbraith Collection.***

A work signed by Daulat, 'A Dervish and a Musician', executed about 1609, reveals the Mughal style fully formed. In it, a small doe gazes with innocent wonder at a holy man, who has scarred his arms as proof of his devotion to god, and at his frenzied companion. The refinement of technique to the service of an accurate and pointed observation is in complete contrast to the 'Battle Scene' mentioned above. These two paintings represent, in a sense, the major poles against which the evolution of northern Indian art can be charted.

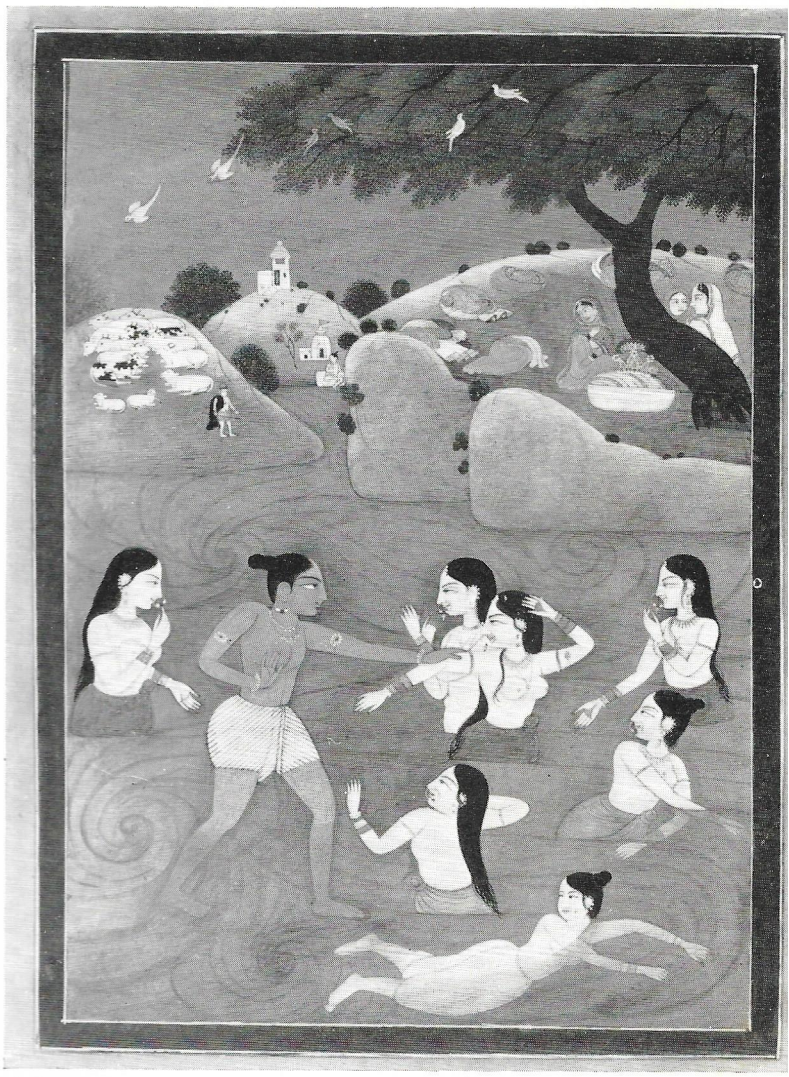
Rajputs came to admire Mughal fashions during prolonged, sometimes imposed, service to the Empire. And the availability of Mughal trained painters periodically released from the emperors' employ accounts for waves of intensified influence: in 1584 and 1601, for example, when Akbar moved his court from Fathepur-Sikri to Lahore, and then to Agra; in 1605, when Jahangir (1605-28) pruned his inherited workshops, probably in the interest of quality, and to remove the lingering Rajput elements (although he himself was born of a Rajput mother); in the later seventeenth century, after Aurangzeb (1658-1707) became strictly orthodox; in 1739, when Nadir Shah sacked the Mughal capital, forcing many of Muhammad Shah's (1719-1748) highly skilled artists to flee; and in 1757, when the British took Bengal, upsetting the workshops at provincial Mughal courts. Yet while Mughal artists easily found employment, not all courts were equally receptive to such Mughal infiltration. Rana Pratap (1572-97) of Mewar, whose lineage was first among all the Rajput clans, preferred to retreat to the forests and be carried about in wicker baskets by aboriginal tribes, than acknowledge Mughal supremacy. Had his kinsmen possessed a similar Rajput pride, and overcome traditional clan rivalries, the Mughals could not have withstood their advance.

Painting at Mewar retained much of its Rajput spirit to the middle of the seventeenth century, although such details as costume showed an acceptance of Mughal customs before that time. And later, while the court style became increasingly *à la Mogol*, religious texts and traditional subjects were treated in a more conservative style; this is true at other Rajput courts as well. At Kotah, a school well-developed by 1700, a portrait of Ram Singh I pursuing a rhinoceros (No. 1), combines Rajput colour and zest, with Mughal subject matter and accuracy of description. In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Stuart C. Welch points out such telling details as the backlash of the bell-ropes, which would only have been included by a Mughal trained eye. Still other schools, such as Bikaner, or Amber (Jaipur), closely and willingly allied to the Mughal cause, quickly mingled Rajput taste within the imperial manner.

The schools we have mentioned this far have all belonged to Rajput courts in Rajasthan. In the Punjab Hills, the Himalayan foothills to the north, painting is known at the court of Basohli, and adjoining regions, by the late seventeenth century. In type it is close to early Rajasthani painting, and to some works from Nepal, yet its more immediate predecessors have been lost. A page depicting a *nayika* (the heroine of a stock romantic situation) from a *Rasamanjari* manuscript (No. 6), among the earliest known Basohli works, already shows some Mughal influence; for example, in the modelling, and the fineness of finish. Yet the burning palette, wild distortions of form, and heavily charged emotional atmosphere are thoroughly Rajput.

Mughal artists in greater numbers than ever before found their way to Rajput courts after the Sack of Delhi in 1739. At Kishangarh, in Rajasthan, a painter probably trained in Muhammad Shah's atelier painted 'An Encounter at a Well' about 1750 (No. 3). This is the traditional Mughal subject of a Muslim prince receiving water from a Hindu girl. In keeping with his

**4. Lovers Strolling by a Pool. Perhaps painted at Kangra, Punjab Hills, *c.* 1780, $6\frac{3}{4} \times 4\frac{7}{16}$ inches. *Mrs. John F. Kennedy Collection.***



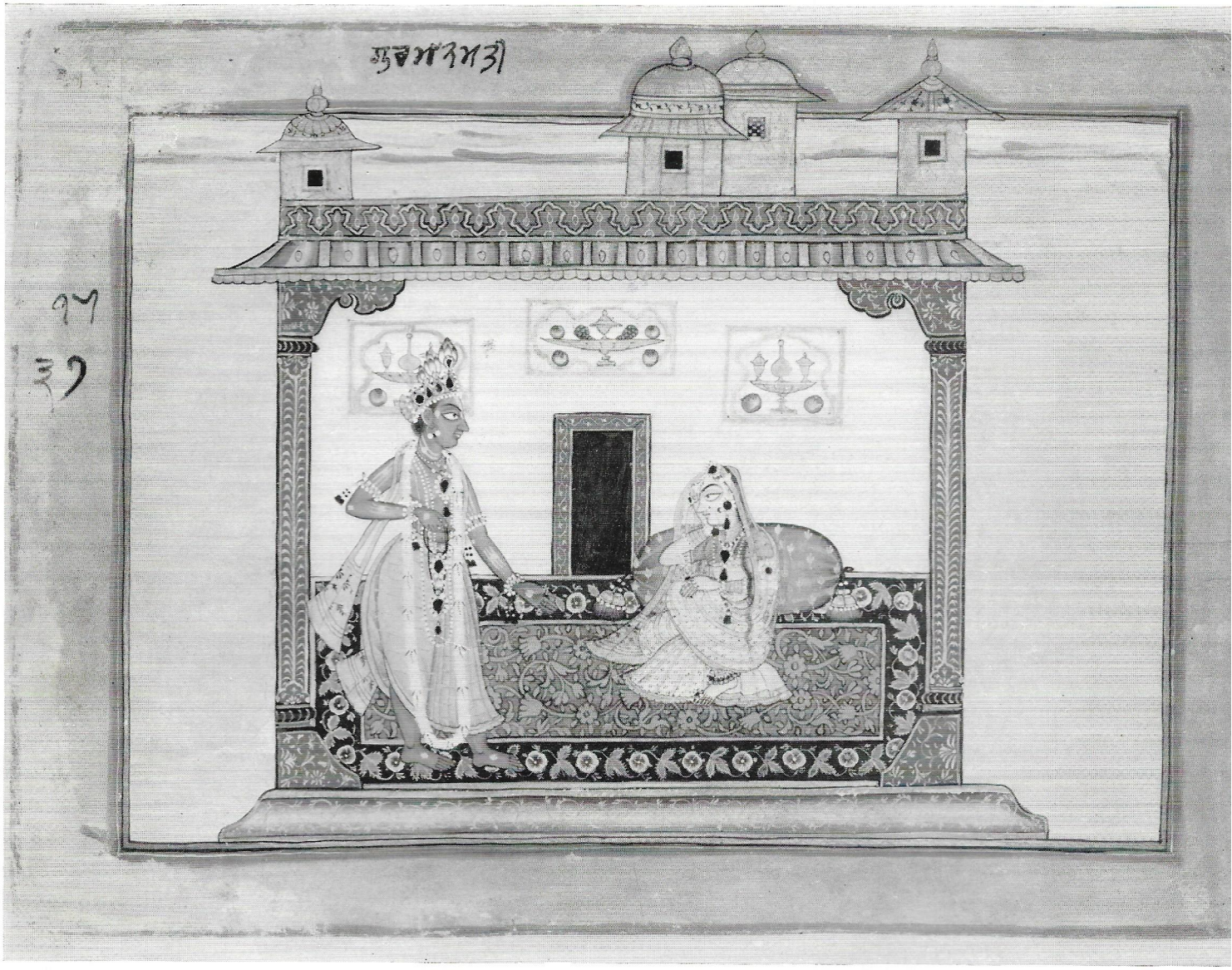
**5. Krishna Swims with the Gopis. Perhaps painted at Kangra, Punjab Hills, *c.* 1820, $9\frac{3}{16} \times 6\frac{9}{16}$ inches. *John Kenneth Galbraith Collection.***

new situation, however, the painter has consciously altered the theme for his new Rajput patron; the prince's coat is tied neither on the right, the Mughal practice, nor on the left, in Rajput fashion. The issue is avoided. Kishangarh painting developed one of the most distinctive combinations of Mughal and Rajput feeling. And later, as Mr. Welch further remarks, the leaf-shaped eye seen in 'An Encounter at a Well' achieves an almost outlandish attenuation, a step simultaneously forward and back. This increasing formal exaggeration, continuing at Kishangarh as at many other Rajasthani schools into the nineteenth century, accords with Rajput taste, yet is executed with a palette and a technical finish that remain Mughal.

The particular stress of the exhibition, and the strength of the Kennedy and Galbraith Collections, are works painted in the Hills after 1739. With only slight acknowledgement of the style popular earlier at Basohli, this was a development of the current Mughal style, and emphasized fineness of finish and highly romantic subject matter. 'Lovers Strolling by a Pool', painted about 1780 (No. 4), is a direct development of this phase as it was first known at Guler and Jammu, and may have been painted at Kangra. Among the most lyrical and graceful Rajput works, paintings of this type have little in common with the sixteenth century *Bhagavata Purana*. Yet this notably Mughal moment of Rajput painting did not last. By 1790, the Mughal trained generation of artists was dying off. With the waning of Mughal power and influence, Rajput taste reasserted itself. The sensitive introspective figures seen here developed harder, more angular profiles, and in both Rajasthan and the Hills, works often took on a flamboyance hard to resist. A spectacular Darbar Scene from Devgarh (No. 7), a lesser court attached to Mewar, shows the glaring colour and turbulent composition of the Rajput tradition applied to a Mughal subject, and retaining Mughal concern for accurate portraiture, however unflattering. Somewhat later in date, a scene of Krishna swimming with the Gopis, from the Hills (No. 5), weaves angular figures and gestures into a strong two-dimensional composition that looks back to the vigorous manner of pre-Mughal Rajput art.

British domination gradually ended traditional painting in north India, except on bazaar and folk levels. Rajput princes now wanted hunting pictures, group portraits, and landscapes similar to those which British patrons hired 'native artists' to supply. Soon, even when traditional subjects were attempted, imported aniline dyes were used. Krishna, the blue god, was painted 'bluer than ever . . . dancing with Gopis in landscapes greener than any grass'.

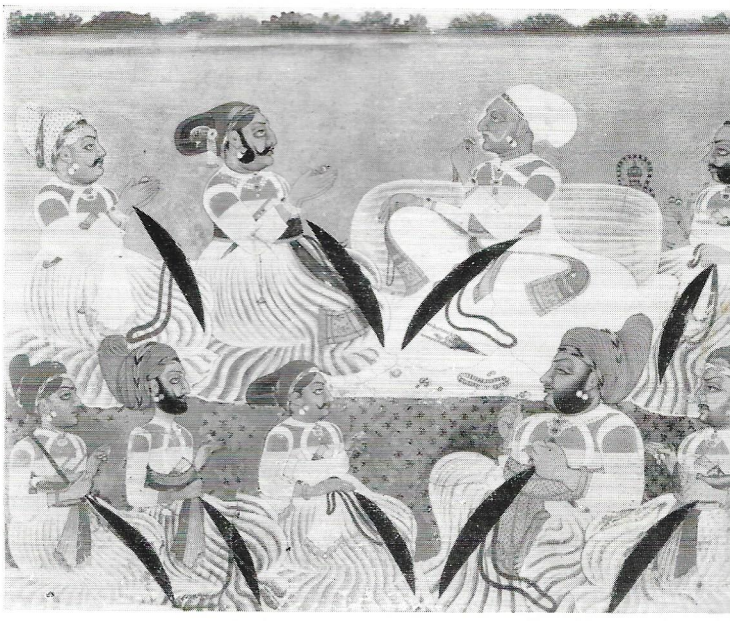
The complex relationships revealed by this exhibition offer almost infinite possibilities for investigation, some of which we can briefly note. While major centres of Rajasthani painting are well-defined, there are a number of sub-schools whose stylistic distinctions from their respective parents are exceedingly subtle.



**6. A Nayika and Her Lover. From a *Rasamanjari* series. Basohli area, Punjab Hills, *c.* 1680, $9\frac{1}{4} \times 13\frac{1}{8}$ inches. *John Kenneth Galbraith Collection.***

Painting at Kotah, Karauli, and Uniara, for example, are offshoots of painting at Bundi. In the Hills, the question of provenance and relationships is still more difficult, due to the lack of reliable inscriptions, and a frequent stylistic uniformity. The majority of later Hill pictures is thus termed 'Kangra (?)' in the exhibition, although this centre's traditional reputation as the chief Hill atelier has not yet been substantiated by fact.

In addition, influences came continually from outside the Mughal Rajput orbit. Painting in the Deccan, the southern plateau land, became familiar to and popular with both Mughals and Rajputs who served Aurangzeb during the emperor's campaigns in the area. At Kotah, the direct influence of Persian artists and designs is felt in certain hunting scenes. And several paintings from the Punjab Hills show an oval format, and use of reflections and shadows that probably derive from imported European prints, sources influential in Mughal painting from the time of Akbar. Yet such considerations, while intriguing to specialists, do not detract from the visual appeal of the works themselves, nor from the central themes of the exhibition: the impact of Mughal art on the art of the Rajputs, and the reëmergence of Rajput traits after Mughal influence effectively ended.



**7. Darbar of Rawat Jaswant Singh of Devgarh. Painted at Devgarh, Rajasthan, late eighteenth century, $15\frac{5}{8} \times 20\frac{9}{16}$ inches. *Anonymous Private Collection, Courtesy of Fogg Museum of Art.***