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Rajput Painting

with an introductory essay and catalogue notes by Sherman E. Lee, Director of The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio. Published in conjunction with an exhibition held in Asia House, New York City.

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Introduction



Large size has become commonplace in modern painting, particularly with the "action" painters. Frustration with the framed picture, "suitable for hanging," has been one of the driving forces behind the move to giantism. And yet, a few of the modern and recent old masters, Tobey, Wols and Klee for example, have achieved much in little space. Medieval European manuscript illuminations have reached new highs in auction prices; Old Master drawings, once plentiful, are now available to but a few. A still small voice whispers that perhaps a miniature scale can be a freedom granting one. The artist can reach a faithful audience, one at a time; and the looker must see and search. A glance is not enough.

It has always seemed strange that Rajput painting has not achieved a greater measure of recognition in the modern art world. These small pages are usually not painted in a carefully detailed, refined way—they are not in the tradition of such miniatures as those produced in Mughal India or Elizabethan England. They are bold in drawing, daring in color. Many of their pictorial devices anticipate those of modern masters such as Matisse, Picasso and Nolde. Rajput painters often combine images of exotic poetry with the fervor of Hindu music. But there has been little recognition of their art beyond their homeland. Coomaraswamy's pioneer book of 1916 has recently been joined by other significant publications. While the great collection he formed at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is still the best in America, it has been surpassed by the recently developed collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. A few museums and collectors in the United States have been active in the field and the present occasion seems a likely one for the inclusion of

some old favorites with a large number of previously little known or unknown miniatures.

Painting for the Rajput princes of Northern India was the last creative expression of the Indian Medieval tradition. With these miniatures the question of decadent or retarded art forms arises, for Rajput painting is in some ways a folk art or at least a semi-folk art, and it may well be this quality which has made it less appreciated in the West than it deserves. The Rajput style is found in miniature painting, with subject matter ranging from the abstract and intellectual to the extremely concrete and emotional. The size is partly due to the influence of the Islamic, Persian-derived art of the Mughal court. While manuscript illumination was practiced in India before the coming of Islam, it is likely that the full development of Rajput painting owes at least its format to the influence of Persian and Mughal painting. To this influence also may be attributed the heightened color characteristic of Rajput painting, which in many cases outdoes that of the paintings from which it is derived. The use of color by the Rajput painter is one of the most creative aspects of the style for he often used it much more arbitrarily than the Mughal artist, and in a manner quite akin to that of the creative modern painter.

These small paintings, meant to be kept in albums and seen in sequence, are a product of a cultural atmosphere that included independent city-states, a regional point of view as opposed to the national or imperial one of the Mughal court, and the very important matter of patronage, for the miniature painter could not survive without the patronage of wealthy or royal personages. While Mughal influence is important, there is at the same time a basic difference between Mughal and Rajput painting. The former, with all of its detail and marvelously taut and powerful drawing, is still naturalistic in its approach. It tends to be realistic and desires to conquer the appearances of nature, particularly in human and animal portraiture. On the other hand, most Rajput paintings are

conceptual, as the artist was mainly concerned with the idea, whether religious or poetical, behind the picture, and used color and the patterning of shapes to express the mood or atmosphere of the idea, its "rasa" or "flavor."

The origins of the Rajput style are two-fold. We have mentioned the underlying influence of Mughal painters, who, in turn, were much influenced by Persian miniaturists. The second influence is one out of Indian Medieval tradition, and from a very particular and specialized part of that tradition—the Jain and Hindu manuscripts made in Western India for wealthy monasteries and merchants of the region. These manuscripts, *page 12*, are painted on paper, with the text dominating a small illustration on each page. They derive certain mannerisms from Medieval Hindu fresco painting as can be seen in the murals that survive on the ceiling of the ninth-century Kailasanatha at Elura. There are also influences from Persia, mainly in certain textile designs and sprays of flowers; but no Persian would ever have painted miniatures of this type, which owe a large part of their peculiar style to the geometricizing, anti-humanist approach characteristic of Jain sculpture of Gujarat. Here is one of the most abstract and purely conceptual forms of painting ever produced. Color is used in simple, flat areas; figures are arbitrarily conventionalized; the outer eye, for instance, in a three-quarter view of the face projects conspicuously as it does in the frescoes at Elura. This orientation is not confined to the handling of figures but architectural details and interior furnishings, trees and the sky, all have their lively, stylized formulae. These are so constantly repeated that they often become monotonous. The patterning of the textile designs and the use of gold is also part of a seemingly desperate effort by the painter to reduce the visible world to a small conceptual framework which can be comprehended in a manner analogous to the reading of the script next to the picture.

The Mughal style was primarily realistic and its natural outlet was portraiture and narrative. But there are details in

some of the most famous of Mughal manuscripts on which Indian artists apparently worked where a fusion of the two styles occurs and the conceptual, abstract approach of the West Indian tradition was wedded to the Mughal observation of nature to produce a fused style, which we can call Rajput. This style, existing only in details or out-of-the-way passages of Mughal paintings, lay at hand and ready for a sympathetic subject matter, the material was found in the literature of the revival of devotional Hinduism in Northern India.

There are some who see in Rajput painting only a decadent and degenerate form of Mughal painting, but works of the second half of the sixteenth century have enough elements of the West Indian manuscript style to prove at least the partial development of Rajput painting out of this tradition. However, color is less abstract, more decorative, and we have the use, as W. G. Archer says, of "passionate reds and verdant greens," to produce a new style which is primarily lyrical, rather than intellectual, one which appeals to the emotions rather than to the mind. The future of the Rajput style was to be in North Central India, at first in Rajasthan and neighboring Malwa, the same region that produced the Nagara style of Indian Medieval architecture and sculpture. Later the style was to flower in the foothills of the Himalayas, the Punjab Hills. The first phase of the Rajasthan style, was primitive, derived from the fusion of West Indian and Mughal elements, and found in a few rare manuscripts of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In these, *page 15.* there is an almost perfect fusion of the abstract patterning, the eye convention, and something of the color of the Gujarati manuscripts, with a new, fresh, complexity of composition, which becomes the Rajput style. Niches with their vases are still used as patterns; the figure is confined to profile or the full front view; but the new style is now capable of expressing an intensity of passion, particularly through color, most appropriate to that revival of personal devotion typical of the Krishna cult in the Later Medieval

Period. There are almost no traces of Mughal influence, except in architectural motives and as Mughal domestic architecture dominated North India representations of a cupola here or of niches with their pointed arches there, are derived from the familiar Mughal architecture rather than Mughal painting.

There are two major geographic areas and schools of pure Rajput painting. The first and earliest is that of Rajasthan and Malwa (see map on page 3), active in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and occupying the area which corresponds roughly to the region west and north of Delhi, as far as the foothills. The second is the school of the Punjab Hill states including Basohli, Jammu, Guler, Garhwal and Kangra, particularly active in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It produced the most charming and lyrical of the Rajput paintings, while the Rajasthani School provided the most powerful and most daring.

The schools are unified to a certain extent by subject matter and symbolism. Principal subjects illustrate seasonal songs called ragas or musical modes, epics and literature concerned primarily with Krishna and, by the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Shiva. We find, particularly in the Rajasthani School, a union of music, literature, and pictorial art, through the musical mode. Such a unity could only occur where there was an accepted tradition of interpretation, where a given color, certain birds and flowers suggested particular moods or situations, where a representation of the month of August brought to mind the musical phrase appropriate to and traditional for that month. Within the Rajput tradition there was a truly unique union of music, literature, and painting, even beyond that achieved by the Baroque painters under the motto *Ut Pictura Poesis*. A pictorial representation of a musical mode has many levels of reference: a specific musical theme, a particular hour, day and month as well as a familiar romantic situation between the protagonists, usually Radha and Krishna.

The Nayaka subject dealing with types of women in love, generally eight of them, was also a favorite subject of the Rajasthani School. In this we find romantic love, that is love at first sight and usually extra-marital. This phenomenon seems characteristic of a well-guarded social order where marriages are arranged, and is based upon physical attraction which they do not distinguish from a spiritual one. *Abhisarika Nayaka* is she who goes out to seek her beloved, and the appropriate poem reads:

"Serpents twine about her ankles, snakes are trampled under foot, divers ghosts she sees on every hand. She takes no keep for pelting rain nor hosts of locusts screaming amidst the roaring of the storm. She does not heed her jewels falling, nor her torn dress, the thorns that pierce her breast delay her not. The goblin wives are asking her, 'whence have you learned this yoga?' How marvelous this trysting, oh *Abhisarika*."

It is significant that in an early picture, *page 16*, the representation of this Nayaka is not literal, but general. In later depictions of this particular heroine, the representation becomes quite literal: we see the serpents, the jewels falling, and the rain.

The Nayakas and traditional religious subjects, representations of Shiva, of Durga, and of Vishnu, are characteristic of Basohli, the earliest of the hill schools; while representations of the narrative stories of the Krishna cult seem most characteristic of the later hill schools. Portraits and court groups occur in all schools, usually where Mughal influence is heaviest; but in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, portraits of court groups and court functions seem to be common to all hill schools.

Priority for the development of a recognizable Rajput "primitive" style must be assigned to Southern Rajasthan and Malwa, geographically a part of Central India, but a close neighbor to Rajasthan. Pages from a few series are known, all in a similar style dated as early as c. 1540 by

Gray and Archer, who assign them to Mandu. Some Persian elements are discernible in the ornament, but the colors and figural representations are clearly derived from the West Indian manuscript tradition and perhaps in part, from an almost lost mural tradition of the Medieval period.

This new manner appears to have spread to the north and by 1630 there is a broadly homogeneous style ranging from Malwa to Mewar with, of course, local variations and flavors. The famous Coomaraswamy series, with its distinctive dark blue backgrounds, shows the Malwa style in a particularly bold and daring way. *Abhisarika Nayaka* here is both a musical mode (*Madhu Madhavi Ragini*) and a representation of a heroine, who goes in the night to meet her lover. She comes through the black night with peacocks screaming about her, rain clouds form, and the lightning flashes; but the representation is not frightening. The situation is "conventional;" but if so, the use of color, of shapes, and of patterns of shape and color is hardly stereotyped. It is extremely daring and bold, and results in work which recalls Egyptian painting as much as it seems to anticipate some of the experiments of modern painting, particularly by artists such as Matisse. In this manuscript of about 1630 we have an early, classic statement of the Rajasthani style, after the assimilation of different elements contributing to it.

Another page of about 1680, *page 20*, represents a musical mode, in which there is the same daring use of color and patterning, but a greater emphasis on detail, and a degree of subtlety, which we might expect in the second or third generation of the school.

The development of Rajasthani painting in the eighteenth century is towards greater finish and perfection of detail, under the influence of Mughal painting; but it still maintains the brilliant and arbitrary use of color which is the particular hallmark of Rajasthan. These qualities are clearly present in the Bikaner and Jaipur pages in the present volume. Bundi, and its derivative, Kotah, continue the bolder traditions of

Rajasthan into the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The second major school, that of the Punjab Hills, is, in terms of quantity of work, probably the most important. In many cases it equals the Rajasthani School in quality, but of quite a different kind. It emphasizes linear drawing and, with the exception of the Basohli school, a lyrical, gentle style. The Basohli is the earliest school in the hills and makes the transition from the Rajasthani style to the developed Hill style. Basohli miniatures have something of the rich color and daring juxtapositions found in Rajasthani painting, but with something that is peculiar to the early Basohli School and its derivatives, Kulu and Nurpur, and does not appear in other later paintings of the Hill States. This unique quality is a use of extremely warm color. With those of Soutine, they are among the hottest paintings that have ever been created. These mustard yellows, burnt oranges, deep reds and torrid greens, are pulled together in a unity as hot as Indian curry. The rigidity of the poses of figures recalls Rajasthani miniatures.

A very fine Basohli page of about 1690, *page 61*, shows a category of subject matter in which the Basohli School excelled: the representation of deities in almost iconic form. The manner goes back to earlier traditions, that is, rather rigid figures within a balanced composition, and their representations of Shiva, Vishnu, Brahma and others. In this case, we have a representation of Shiva and Parvati, but Shiva particularly, as the slayer of the elephant demon. They float in the sky on the elephant's hide, against stormy, curling clouds above a warm, if rather sparse, Basohli landscape.

But the characteristic work of the Hill States is to be found in the paintings produced first in Guler, and later, when the style expanded, in all the Hill States. It is a gracious and poetic style, somewhat under the influence of Later Basohli painting but with heavy Mughal influences. Its technique is more complex and tighter than that of Basohli. The miniature technique

of the Mughal School, with its use of polished white grounds, under-drawing, over-drawing, and then a rich jewel-like application of color, was carried on by the Hill painters; but at the same time, some of the flat mural or jewel-like color of the Rajasthani School was also preserved. Subject matter tends to be involved with either the poetic revival of the Krishna cycle, with its pastoral symbolism and erotic overtones, or with the heroic epics of the past, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. While the musical modes almost disappear, the subjects of the heroines, the Nayakas, are continued, and also some of the traditional religious subjects. But in general, the characteristic Hill School subject matter is either from the Krishna Lila, or from the two great Hindu epics.

A particular album page, *page 85*, by the "Garwhal Master," as W. G. Archer calls him, presents the characteristic elements of the developed Later Punjab Hill style. There is an emphasis on decorative pattern achieved by line and shape repetitions. An attempt is made, perhaps under Western influence, at landscape vistas with architectural views and perspective in depth. A more realistic and observant delineation of the figure is achieved with an attempt to characterize youth, old age, and social position. All this is combined with enough decorative character, to distinguish the style very sharply from that of the Mughal School. Guler produced works which combine the very best qualities of the Rajasthani and Mughal Schools. Another page, *on page 81*, displays a rich use of color in the blue Krishna against pearly white accompanied by pale mustard yellow, a fascinating combination; while the pure linear drawing of the figure, profile, and drapery is a particular hallmark of the Later Hill Schools. The introduction of perspective in the little porch leading off the main room is unobtrusive and serves as a point-of-focus, heightening interest in the figure of Krishna, gazing into the distance and yearning for his beloved, Radha. The glances of the attendant girls are subtly depicted; and the whole picture shows the hand of one of the great masters of the school.

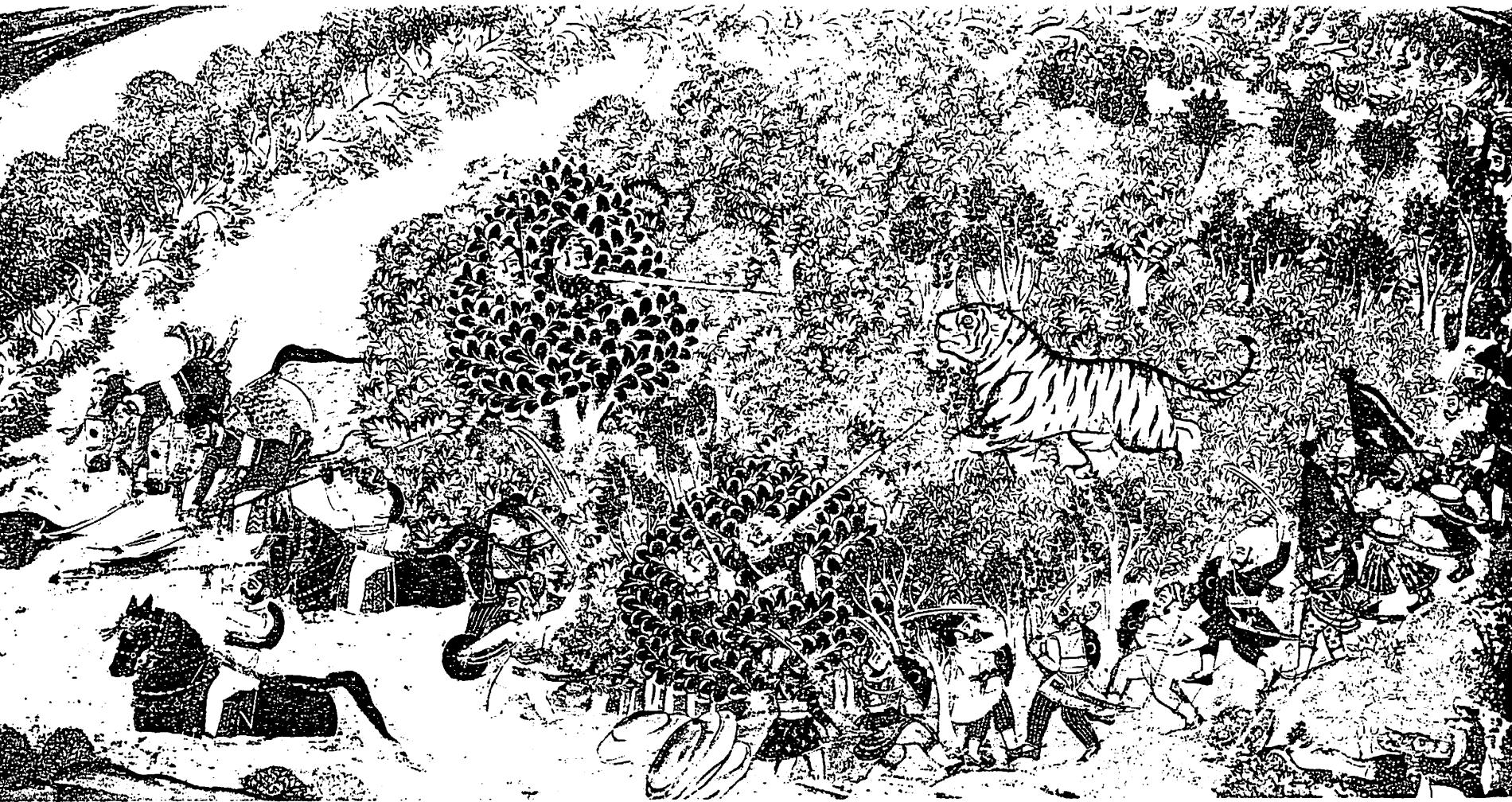
The later schools of the Punjab Hills, particularly in rather large pages, show intense interest in the Hindu epics. Here realism is combined with something of a fairy tale quality, in works of the greatest interest. Another Guler page is one of the masterpieces of the Hill States and a rare representation, page 82, of a traditional subject. It is the same subject seen in pages of Bundi and Kulu origin, Durga slaying the bull demon Mahesha. The demon is a realistic bull and not a man issuing from a bull, as was the case of the earlier pages. Durga, on her chariot drawn by two tigers, and attended by her child-warriors, is drawn in a very beautiful fine-line style. The landscape used to reinforce the meaning of the composition, is divided into two parts: one, a rather barren and distant expanse with a storm, over the evil bull; the other, a lush view with a clear blue sky, over the forces of good. At the same time, the fairy tale never-never-land atmosphere of later Rajput painting fills the whole picture. We are no longer worried about the fate of the bull; the gory end in store for him does not bother us. The tigers are almost playful; and the goddess herself, even in her most vengeful aspect, appears as a lyrically beautiful young woman.

Rajput painting ends, as far as quality goes, by the middle of the nineteenth century, though some artists produced reasonably good pages up to 1900.

Sherman E. Lee
Cleveland, August, 1960

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38. TIGER HUNT ON A RIVER BEND.

Rajasthan, Kotah, c. 1790.

Probably painted for Raja Umed Singh (1771-1820).

"The best horseman and marksman in the country." (Tod-Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan.)

Two very similar pages from the Gayer-Anderson Coll. are in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, H: 9 15/16", W: 19 5/16".

PR 11, George P. Bickford Collection, Cleveland, Ohio.

(opposite page)
36. RAM SINGH I (1676-1708) of KOTAH PURSUING
A RHINOCEROS.
Rajasthan, Kotah, c. 1700.
H: 12", W: 19 1/2".
Anonymous Loan.

