



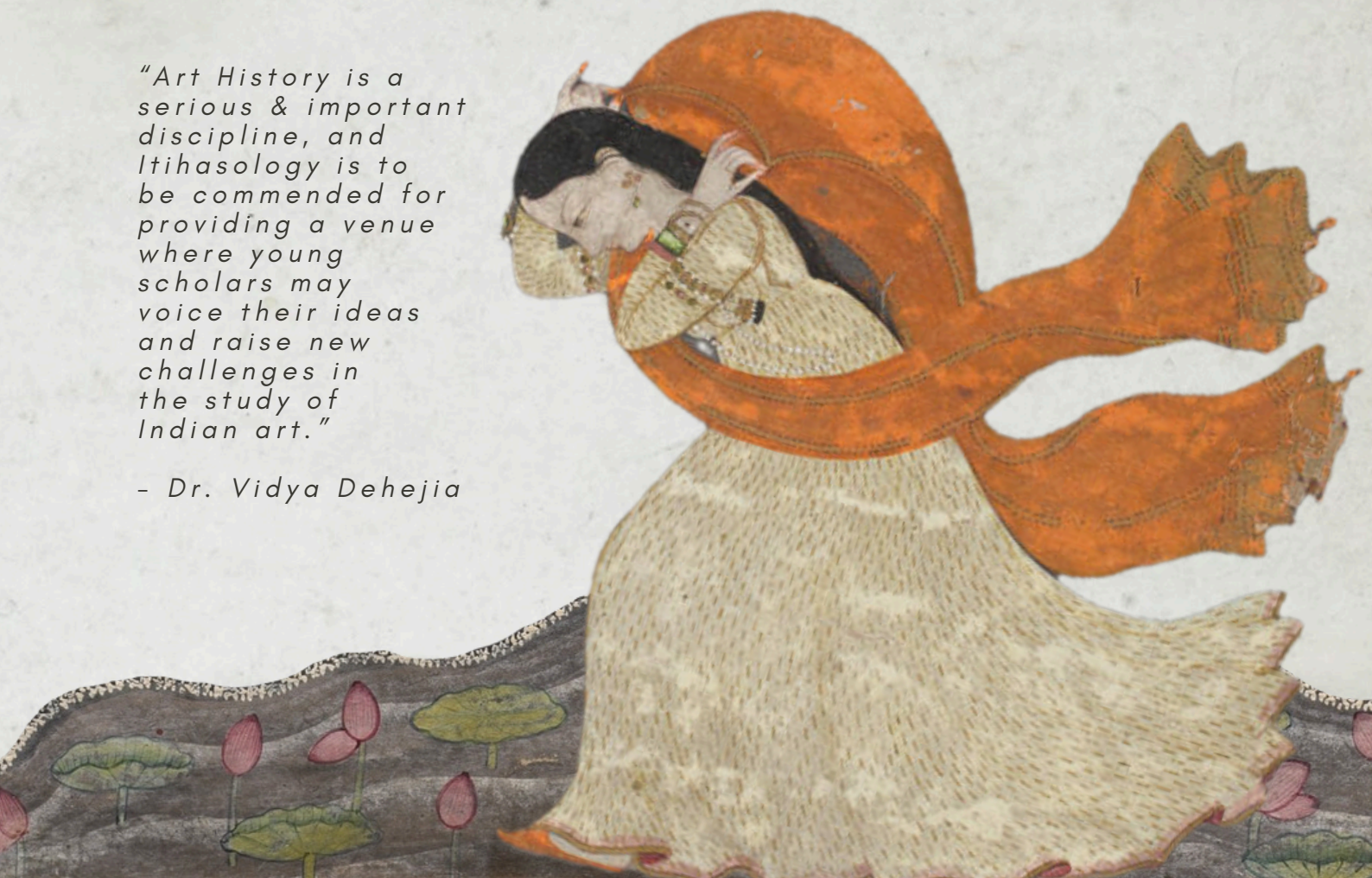
The Itihāsology Journal

Volume 4

*Essays in honour
of B. N. Goswamy*

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- Dr. Vidya Dehejia



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On the Journal

Dr. Vidya Dehejia

Barbara Stoler Miller Professor Emerita of Indian and South Asian Art
Columbia University

“It is a pleasure to write a few words to introduce volume 4 of *Itihāsology* (2026) that is dedicated to the scholarship of B.N. Goswamy who introduced a new direction for Indian painting by challenging the anonymity of painters. His revolutionary study of the *bahis* in pilgrimage centres enabled him to put a name and a face to works produced in states in the foothills of the Himalayas by the family of artist Pandit Seu. Students of Indian painting are in Brijen’s debt for opening up the field for further scrutiny.

All the essays in this volume are intended as tributes to Goswamy’s scholarship, and the young contributors raise new questions about Indian painting. Was capturing personality – not just *surat* but also *ma’ni* – the reason for emperor Akbar’s commission of portrait albums? What might be the reason that Siva was portrayed in three-quarters view in the Punjab hills? Why did late Kishangarh artists turn to the portrayal of the ridiculous? What is the role of “play” in paintings that depict a couple, often Shiva and Parvati, playing a board game with dice? Might one focus on the *vasakasajja* heroine (in anticipation of her lover), not only as seen by the artists and viewers of its time, but also consider its transformation by Ravi Varma, Chughtai, and Amrita Sher-Gill? The final essay is a tribute to Goswamy’s role in challenging museums that display pre-modern art to highlight long-standing Indian knowledge systems, as well as the role of the artist. Art History is a serious and important discipline, and *Itihāsology* is to be commended for providing a venue where young scholars may voice their ideas and raise new challenges in the study of Indian art.”

On Dr. B.N. Goswami's Life & Work

Dr. Partha Mitter

Emeritus Professor, History of Art

University of Sussex

“It is with both pleasure and much sadness that I write in appreciation of B.N. Goswami both as an outstanding scholar and remarkable human being. Goswami was a legendary figure, and emerged as the most eminent authority on Pahari and Rajasthani painting. We met occasionally and I had the pleasure of giving a lecture at Chandigarh at his invitation a number of years ago.

I came across Brij Goswami during my researches into medieval Indian art. I was deeply interested in Mughal, Rajasthani and Pahari painting and closely followed the writings of W. G. Archer and others. The debates on the attribution of Pahari painting centred on the question of its stylistic origins, and a lively debate was conducted by the eminent authority, W. G. Archer and other art historians. It was at this time that I came across B N Goswami's remarkable essay, published in 1968, 'Pahari Painting, the Family as the Basis of Style,' on the identification of the Pahari artists, Pandit Seu, Nainsukh, and Manaku. His essay on the use of Panda records as a device of attribution was nothing short of revolutionary. Stylistic analysis, which was the mainstay of attribution in the case of Pahari artists, were of limited reliability and at best speculative. These family records placed these artists on a surer footing. I acknowledged publicly Goswami's contribution to the field of miniature painting, but his method had wider implications with regard to pre-colonial Indian art, which lacks much supporting evidence. Soon specialists in miniature painting accepted Brij Goswami's remarkable breakthrough. Goswami began his career as a member of the Indian Administrative Service but gave it up to pursue his deep interest in the history of art. He

emerged as a formidable scholar, with over twenty scholarly books to his credit, and a foremost authority on Sikh art and culture.

We met soon after on my visit to India and we became close friends. He was kind enough to invite me to the Punjab University at Chandigarh, where he was Professor of Art History and Director of the university museum, to give lectures. Unfortunately, he had to be away in Europe during my visit, but his art historian wife, Karuna extended warm hospitality to me. Indeed, Goswami became renowned as a peripatetic, international scholar with close connections with the Rietberg Museum in Zurich in Switzerland, where he collaborated with its director, Eberhard Fischer. He was also visiting professor at the Heidelberg University, Universities of California at Berkeley and Los Angeles and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Indian art has lost a remarkable and highly original scholar but his outstanding legacy will continue so long as Indian miniatures remain a serious object of study.”

Gulammohammed Sheikh

Artist, poet, and critic

“Dr Brijinder Nath Goswamy passed away in the early morning of November 17, leaving a great void in the world of Indian art history. He was a scholar nonpareil, who spoke and wrote on Indian art with a felicity prompted as though by Saraswati, the goddess of learning sitting on his tongue and fingertips, leaving his audience and readers spellbound.

Scholarship sat lightly on his broad shoulders. No genre of painting, ranging from the classical to the folk or from traditional art to the modern, remained beyond his grasp. He could engage with all of these with equal ease and expertise. On the one hand, his vision embraced the overarching perspectives of a tradition as a whole. At the same time, his penetrating eye would uncover a hidden secret in a tiny detail sitting in the corner of a painting. His linguistic range could summon a gem of a poem from Urdu, Persian, Hindi or Punjabi to match and illuminate the spirit of the visual image. Besides being a scholar of great eminence, he was a rasika, a shaukeen, a true connoisseur whose erudition was steeped in empathy.

Although he wrote on myriad themes, his first love was the schools of Pahari art, especially the Guler family of painters like Nainsukh, his brother Manaku and father Pandit Seu. His monograph, a fulsome volume titled *Nainsukh of Guler: A Great Indian Painter From a Small Hill State* (1997), followed by another on Manaku, *Manaku of Guler: The Life and Work of Another Great Indian Painter From a Small Hill State* (2017), are landmarks of unique distinction. It established that the oeuvre of a single artist can be studied in detail by defining various stages of his output in totality besides dispelling the long-held notion of Indian art being undifferentially anonymous.

In his initial research for the essay, “Pahari Painting: Family as a Basis of Style”, in the 1960s, he had made path-breaking discoveries by studying the bahis or pilgrimage records to

overturn previously upheld vague theories of schools designated by names of princely states. Much like the gharana system of music, modes of painting, too, remained within the close family network of painters, he argued.

A vast body of work, volume after volume, followed, with elan and new perspectives. Besides writing, he curated exhibitions like the one on the theme of *rasa*, selecting exquisite works of art to correspond with each of the nine *rasas*. In order to reach out to a wider audience, he wrote a regular newspaper column, which brought art history into the lives of people. He wrote and lectured worldwide on diverse themes, from the sacred in art to portraiture, on Indian costumes, and even on cats in art (*The Indian Cat: Stories, Paintings, Poetry, and Proverbs*), his delightful farewell publication. The wealth of knowledge on each of the subjects, he gathered by conducting hard research and he shared it with a generosity of heart, thus becoming a people's art historian. His erudition, articulation, connoisseurship, bringing grace to his core of humanism, will remain unmatched. Among the generations enlightened by this luminous persona, he will be always remembered, and sorely missed.

Reminiscing, I think I first met him in November or December 1966 when I (and Bhupen Khakhar) went to Chandigarh to appear for an interview for a lecturer's post in art history at the Panjab University. None of us were selected. I wonder what course my life would have taken if indeed I had been! However, in the late 1960s (perhaps) and the 1970s, he came several times to Baroda to collect works for the Chandigarh museums and gave lectures based on his developing research in art history. His research and publications were a great boon when I taught the history of Indian painting in those years, but also at a personal level, they contributed greatly to my appreciation of Indian miniature painting and its influence on my art.

Both my wife Nilima (artist Nilima Sheikh) and I were fortunate to strike a bond of personal kinship with him and his wife, art historian Karuna Goswamy, sharing ideas and perceptions. He generously gifted his books and took an interest in our art making. In 2005,

when he curated “Ritu”, an exhibition on seasons, I exhibited an accordion-format book, which I later gifted to him. In return, he gave me an original painting from Kutch. Our bonds deepened when he asked me to come to Chandigarh to speak at the launch of his volume on Manaku. His work and this kinship have deeply enriched our lives and our work.”

Editors' Note

The more we look at art, the more we understand the layers that this world has inhabited throughout centuries. And especially when we look at the long arc of visual culture that comes from South Asian art history, and the various visual expressions that have existed since time immemorial, we begin to see just how many worlds we are sitting upon.

Be it the prehistoric cave paintings of Bhimbetka, where our early ancestors were configuring life and immortalising their daily lives, ways of being, fears, tribulations and beliefs onto walls; the bronze, terracotta and carnelian works of the Harappan civilisation; the intricate seals, beads and figurines that travelled across its cities; the imposing architecture and sculptural traditions of temples; the exquisite worlds of Buddhist and Jain manuscripts; or the various medieval ateliers where painters, scribes and craftspeople built an expansive vocabulary of visual expression. From the painters of Persia travelling with Humayun to the many worlds of the miniature, sculpture, textile and painting traditions that followed, this is an extraordinary and layered visual inheritance.

And it has always taught us to be a *rasika*: a connoisseur in the truest sense, one who is able to taste the nectar, the *rasa*, of these works and undergo that deeply moving emotion which strikes us almost like a thunderbolt.

Throughout the history of a civilisation, the role of the sutradhara — the storyteller, the revealer, the one who removes these layers so that we may understand what lies beneath — has therefore been essential. And for so many of us across the world, it was the late, respected professor and art historian B.N. Goswamy who performed this role.

He was able to gaze at a miniature, a Pichwai, a sculpture, and make us see it anew, revealing its many vocabularies, meanings, and ideas. He built an entire world around art, so that we did not see masterpieces in isolation, but truly understood the context that gave them life. Through his eyes and his lens, you could almost hear the brushstrokes of the painters;

understand the genealogy and families of artworks and ateliers; consider the ways in which pigments were made and used; and imagine the artists sitting together, looking at, thinking about, or being commissioned to create something.

It is in his honour that we have dedicated the fourth volume of *The Itihāsology Journal*.

Like each year, this volume continues to be a bouquet of ideas. But for the first time, our theme is essays on art history, presented in honour of Dr. B.N. Goswamy. All our authors have deeply immersed themselves in the worlds of art and rigorous, nuanced scholarship to bring together ideas that are multifaceted and revelatory, allowing us to look at art in ways that draw us in and invite us to look again.

We are grateful to Dr. Vidya Dehejia for her comments on the essays; to Dr. Partha Mitter and acclaimed artist Gulammohammed Sheikh for sharing their obituaries on Dr. B.N. Goswamy; and to all of you, our community of history-aficionados at *Itihāsology*, who continue to encourage us to do what we do.

The purpose of this Journal continues to be the same: to bring public history to wider audiences, to disseminate South Asian scholarship, and to bridge the gap between aspiring scholars and acclaimed academics.

And this is the *guldasta* we have to offer this year.

We hope you enjoy reading this journal as much as we enjoyed working on it.

Kudrat B. Singh, Eric Chopra and Nandini Ramola Das

About the Editorial Board

Eric Chopra: Founder of *Itihāsology* and author of *Ghosted: Delhi's Haunted Monuments* (2025). Holds a BA (Honours) in History from St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi. Interested in the histories of art, ghosts, aesthetics, emotions, tangible & intangible heritage and sexuality. He designs and leads a range of events and experiences, and is the co-host of the *For Old Times' Sake Podcast* and Jaipur Literature Festival's *Jaipur Bytes Podcast*.

Kudrat B. Singh: Creative Director of *Itihāsology*. Holds an MPhil in Modern South Asian Studies from the University of Cambridge and a BA (Honours) in History from St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi. Interested in the histories of politics, art, gender, and religion. She co-hosts the *For Old Times' Sake Podcast*, heads design at *Itihāsology*, and leads museum and heritage walks.

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talking to the employees made her realise how deep the love and respect for their former vice-chairman, Dr. B.N. Goswamy, runs.

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About the Cover

Itihāsology works to enhance public engagement with Indian history and art, and our Journal covers reflect this commitment. The cover of the fourth volume, as much an ode to Dr. B.N.

Goswamy's brilliant scholarship as the essays in this edition, marries three 18th century artworks – *Virahotkanthita Nayika Yearning for her Lover* (c. 1770, Bundi. Harvard Art Museums), *A heroine waiting for her lover: Vasakasajja Nayika, from the "Nurpur" Rasikapriya* (c. 1750, Pahari Kingdoms. Cleveland Museum of Art), and *Abhisarika Nayika Braving a Storm* (c. 1760-1770, Punjab Hills. Worcester Art Museum) – creating an evocative scene of heightened feeling, motion, and oneness with the landscape, reminiscent of the masterful miniatures Dr. Goswamy dedicated his life to studying.



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Śivadarśana: The Gaze of the God in the Pañjāb Hills

Marco Brau

Introduction

Darśana is one of the most profound words in Sanskrit vocabulary. Coming from the root *drś*, “to see”, it encompasses a wide range of meanings, from the most literal ones, concerning the act of seeing (Monier-Williams 1899: 470,3), to the most intellectually elevated. In fact, the most widespread use of the term is as parallel to the European concept of philosophy, although radical differences remain (Halbfass 1990: 263, 273; Bronkhorst 2025: 12). The philosophical term *darśana*, as well as its Prakrit versions, is found in the works of Bhartṛhari, Candrakīrti and Śāṅkara, to name a few (Halbfass 1990: 265-268). However, it is with the doxographic literature that the term acquired an objective connotation and imposed itself as the best designation for the Indian “theoretically oriented, systematized world-view” (Halbfass 1990: 266, 273). The first appearance of the word *darśana* on the title of a doxographical work is in the *Ṣaḍḍarśanasamuccaya* of Haribhadra (8th

century), where the author exposes the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy (Halbfass 1990: 264, 266).

The title of the present work, *Śivadarśana*, however, is not found anywhere in the Indian philosophical and doxographical literature. Nonetheless the related *Śaivadarśana* is the title of the 7th chapter of the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha* of Mādhava (14th century), an exposition of the principles of the dual *śaiva* school known as *Śaivasiddhānta*, that flourished between the 8th and 13th centuries, firstly in Kāśmīr and later in South India (Torella 1980: 361-363; Cowell 1997; Bronkhorst 2025: 1, 10). However, the *Śaivasiddhānta* is not the only school of Śaivism considered by Mādhava, but the equally important system of the *Pratyabhijñā* is exposed in the 8th chapter (Torella 1980: 363-364). Other philosophical systems of *śaiva* devotees presented in the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha* are the system of the *pāśupata* followers of Nakulīśa and that of alchemy, furthermore Vaiśeṣika and Nyāya

are presented as *śaiva* systems as well (Bronkhorst 2025: 6, 10).

A synonym of *darśana*, the related *dr̥ṣṭi*, was initially used in Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamakakārikā* and in the *Brahmajālasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya* to refer to soteriologically harmful opinions, bondages and obstacles on the way of liberation, opposed to the “correct vision” of Śākyamuni (Halbfass 1990: 266, 272). However, this word appears, free of any pejorative connotation, in the title of Somānanda's *Śivadr̥ṣṭi* (10th century; Halbfass 1990: 536). This seminal text of the *Pratyabhijñā* is the first endeavour to systematize the different non-dual *śaiva* perspectives of Kāśmīr into a coherent philosophy and its impact is shown in the success it will have among Somānanda's intellectual descendants, Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta (Gnoli 1957: 16-18; Gnoli 1959: 55-63; Torella 2014: 551-552).

However, it is in the Pañjāb Hills that we will start our search for the gaze of Śiva, apparently a marginal god in the artistic production of the region, but whose three quarter face representation constitutes almost a *unicum* and is worthy of scrutiny.

We will consider some of the most beautiful *pahārī* paintings where the god is depicted in his singular perspective, analysing that evidence to understand why this deity distinguished himself from the other characters, represented in profile as the norm prescribed. We will start from the most recent instances at the beginning of the 19th century, moving backward in time, till the very root of the *pahārī* tradition in the second half of the 17th century, trying to see whether this detail is particular of a certain devotional affiliation, court or family workshop. Exceptions will be considered and an explanation will be attempted relying on iconographical and technical means. Our research will be extended to those characters that, in some way or another, share a part of Śiva's nature, and therefore the three quarter depiction is opted as well. Answers to all these questions will be looked for, diving deep into the religious environment of the Pañjāb Hills and in the devotional affiliation and tantric practices of the painters. Thus starts our path to cross our gaze with the auspicious gaze of the god, with the *Śivadarśana*.

Śiva's gaze from brush to brush

One of the most wonderful paintings produced in the *śaiva* context of the early 19th century is the masterpiece of Sajnu (Fig. 1).¹ Under the patronage of Rāja Īśvarī Sen of Maṇḍī he painted a *Hammīr Haṭh* set, a *Bārahmāsā* series, drawings of the *Jaiminīya Aśvamedha*, but also single folios and portraits (Goswamy & Fischer 1992: 314). The following painting shows Śiva as a householder (Panthey 1981: 60-62), travelling with Pārvatī, Gaṇeśa and Skanda in a mountainous environment. At the center is Śiva on his vehicle, the bull Nandī. The five-headed god is represented according to his mainstream iconography: knotted hair, the crescent and the third eye on his forehead, a serpent as sacred thread, clad in a tiger skin, the trident with the drum at its top. Jewels are the norm in gods' depictions, but his bare feet and the bag remind us of his ascetic connotation. Śiva is followed by Pārvatī, seated on a tiger, and by Gaṇeśa, who holds the axe, the alms bowl, and the writing tusk, while sitting on his mouse *vāhana*. In front of everyone is Skanda: six-headed, the ever-young god rides his peacock, holding a whip, a bow and an arrow.

What strikes most of this folio of *śaiva*, but rather familial, spirit is the gaze of Śiva. The god's middle face stands exactly at the center, frontally, while the others in three quarters, rather than in profile. One may think that this variation is caused by the difficulty in depicting five heads in profile. However, through a comparison with other policephalous figures, such as Skanda, we understand that this is not the case. Therefore we should consider it a particular feature of Śiva's iconography, as it developed in the *pahārī* tradition. This is evident in other paintings of the same nature, such as the one where the family is covered by the skin of Gajāsura, while Skanda sucks milk from his mother's breast (Randhawa 1954: pl. 40; Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 354),² and the one where Śiva and Parvatī prepare the *bhaṅg*,³ and in the following examples as well. It is almost like Śiva is piercing the paper boundaries between the represented character and the observer with his flaming third eye to exchange his gaze, hence to give *darśana* to the spectator, or perhaps to the painter himself.

A similar painting comes from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* of Mānaku of Guler (Fig.

2),⁴ son of Paṇḍit Seu and brother of Nainsukh, known also for other *vaiṣṇava* works, such as *The Siege of Lankā* and the *Gītā Govinda* (Beach 1965; Jain-Neubauer 1981; Goswamy and Fischer 1992; Goswamy and Fischer 2011; Brockington and Brockington 2013; Brockington 2023). The painting illustrates a scene from the 24th chapter of the 4th book of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, when Rudra teaches the Pracetas about knowledge and mental control. Furthermore the ten sages will appear in an illustration from the 30th chapter (Beach 1965: 169, 171, 173; Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 261).⁵ The middle register hosts the characters. The Pracetas are in the left half - only nine of them are painted, to spare room for the complex icon of Rudra (Beach 1965: 169) -, looking in profile towards Śiva. The sixth Pracetas from the left is an exception: his face is in three quarters. The figure of Rudra occupies the right half: he sits cross-legged like a *yogin* on a throne whose feet resemble hourglasses. Rudra holds in his ten hands and brings on his body different weapons and ascetic objects. The central of his five faces is frontal, the others in three quarters. The leftmost head is looking towards the Pracetas, while the

others look elsewhere. The third eye lies at the center of every foreheads.

Sometimes the *lakṣaṇas*, the attributes of this complex iconography, called Sadāśiva, could be borrowed from other traditions (Panthey 1987: 41-42), such as in the Sadāśiva of the Master of Maṇḍī:⁶ five are *śaiva*, four are *vaiṣṇava*, one *śākta*. Nandī and the tiger of Parvatī are present as well. With his five heads - four painted and one hidden behind - he sits on a throne, like a *liṅga* on a *yonī*, covered by the skin of Gajāsura. These paintings are instances of the syncretistic attitude of the time, for they assemble elements from different religious environments (Kramrisch 1981: 168-169; Goswamy & Fischer 1992: 206) Another detail to consider is the sixth Pracetas' three quarter orientation. We could imagine that a feature of his reveals continuity with Rudra, of whom the three quarter representation is specific. Perhaps the key is the concept of *yoga*, a prominent theme in this painting. In fact, the Pracetas were devotees of Śiva, they prayed to him and spent 10.000 years in contemplation (Beach 1965: 169; Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 261). Hence we can consider them as the highest examples of *bhāktas*, *ṛṣis* and accomplished

yogins, holder of a deeper vision of reality, of a deeper *darśana*.

In the stream of *vaiṣṇava* tradition, we find the *Churning of the Ocean of Milk* (Fig. 3) by the Master at the Court of Rājā Cattar Siṃh of Cambā (1690-1720).⁷ Apart from portraits of the court dignitaries, a *Rāgamālā* and a *Rasamañjarī*, his artistic production includes a *Daśavatāra* series (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 129-132). The *Churning of the Ocean of Milk*, a section of the latter, depicts the recovery of the *amṛta* by the turtle *avatāra* Kūrma (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 132, 146). Mount Mandara acts as a barrier between the demons and the gods. In the left half the three *asuras* are intoxicated by the fumes of Vāsuki (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 146). What is most interesting is their face: the first and the third *asuras* have facial hair, while the third has an elephant trunk; the latter is in profile, while the former are in three quarters. Vāsuki twists around the mountain, whose foundation is the tortoise Kūrma. Viṣṇu sits on top of the mountain with Lakṣmī (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 132, 146). On the right half, the gods float above water. Viṣṇu - he is depicted here for the third time - is followed by Brahmā. Śiva

ends the line, his face in three quarters. In the upper portion everything that came out of the Ocean of Milk is displayed (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 146).

Several collections host depictions of this widespread composition.⁸ However the episodes holds its relevance still today, transmitted in the folk painting of Rājasthān, called *paṛ* painting. On top of the scrolls is present a strip representing *svarga*, where different gods and Visnu's *avatāras* live. Among them Kūrma is present in this canonic composition (Malik 2005: 80; Smith 2015: 44). In all these examples Śiva is depicted in three quarters and the anthropocephalic demons share this feature as well. In the same way demons are shown in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and in the *Siege of Laṅkā* of Paṇḍit Seu and Mānaku respectively (Jain-Neubauer 1981: 20, 24). Hence, it can be argued, to these *asuras* as well belongs a feature which assimilates them to Śiva, probably their fearful appearance, and their *darśana* survives in the centuries.

The opening folio of the *Rasamañjarī* series by Devīdāsa of Nūrpur represents in a continuous narrative the invocation of Bhānudatta to Śiva (Fig. 4).⁹ The poet sings

of *Ardhanārīśvara*, the union between the masculine *puruṣa* and the feminine *prakṛti* (Panthey 1981: 45-46), but Devīdāsa painted Śiva and Pārvatī as two separate beings (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 64; Goswamy and Fischer 2011: 453; Goswamy 2014). A tree marks the separation in two moments, expressing the movement from a previous to a subsequent action. On the left, the couple moves rightward. Śiva's left leg moves the first step, so that the god shows his back, and embraces Pārvatī (Welch 1973: 69; Kramrisch 1981:193; Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 63-64; Goswamy and Fischer 2011:454; Goswamy 2014). Over the tree, the couple lays on a tiger pelt - the original text describes an antelope skin instead (Kramrisch 1981: 193; Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 64; Goswamy 2014).

This painting is one of the few examples where the gaze of Śiva is not directed to the viewer, but in the direction of their movement, a *darśana* toward the future action. The same detail was repeated in the opening folio of the *Rasamañjarī* series of 1715 by his son Golū (Dwiwedi 1969: 266; Randhawa and Bhambri 1981: 8; Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 61-62, 64; Goswamy and Fischer 2011: 439, 455). One can speculate

that the profile orientation of Śiva is caused by this particular composition. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that Devīdāsa represents Śiva in three quarters in a second folio from the same *Rasamañjarī*¹⁰: Śiva and Pārvatī are playing *caupaṛ*, when suddenly the god steals his wife's necklace and wears it (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 70-71). Hence, the profile depiction of Śiva is not a signature mark of Devīdāsa's brushwork and it is not connected to the painter's unease in the profile representation of Śiva's face *lakṣaṇas*. Most probably the exception is caused by the fact that Śiva shows the viewer his back, hence it is impossible for the artist to paint him in three quarters and a profile representation is preferred.

The last painting we will discuss is by the master Kṛpāl of Nūrpur, the very start of pahārī painting. He was known as the Master of the Early *Rasamañjarī* Series, however he is most famous for the *Tantric Devī* series of 1660-1670 (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 30-31; Goswamy and Fischer 2011: 439-440, 456). Spread over twenty-four folios, the depictions of the Goddess are accompanied by *dhyāna śloka*s, *śākta* verses of an unidentified text (Goswamy and

Fischer 1992: 31; Goswamy and Fischer 2011: 440, 447-448; Goswamy 2014). Among these paintings, the one we are discussing (Fig. 5)¹¹ is the most useful for comparing the depiction of the face of Śiva with that of the other deities and drawing continuities and divergences. Over a circle of transcendence, on the left side, Śiva - in three quarters -, Viṣṇu and Brahmā are going to bow, hands in *añjalīmudrā*, paying homage to Bhadrakālī (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 32, 36). Bhadrakālī, on the right side, seated on the *śava*, the cadaver, is taller than the gods, “dark as the clouds that gather at the end of an aeon of time”. She bears *śaiva* signs, the crescent and the third eye (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 32, 36). She is talking to the other gods, perhaps she is teaching them, for her right hand is extended in their direction, while the left one massages the right ankle.

In this painting even the Goddess is depicted in three quarters. She is surely in continuity with Śiva for she is his prakṛti and śakti, the power setting the world in motion, the other half in the *Ardhanārīśvara*, where the male and female principles are fused together, and even when they are set apart the link is never cut

(Panthey 1981: 45-46, 62-64; Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 36). In this painting Śiva and Bhadrakālī shares some *lakṣaṇas*, the crescent and the third eye, and the presence of the *śava* suggests a second inactive presence of Śiva (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 36). However the Devī is polymorphous. In another folio of the same series the Goddess is worshipped by Cyavana (IMIN 26): she is represented in profile, holding *vaiṣṇava* items, but at the same time she keeps the crescent, the third eye, and the *śava* (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 38-39; Goswamy and Fischer 2011: 445). Even when the tantric *śaiva-śākta* relationship is emphasized by the blood-filled chalice, the skull cap and the ecstatic dance (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 40-41; Goswamy and Fischer 2011: 444, 447),¹² the Devī could be depicted in profile. Indeed, the infinite energy of the Goddess cannot be restrained in a fixed iconography.

In the next section we will try to advance some hypotheses for this unusual Śiva's face depiction, looking at the religious, devotional and tantric contexts and practices of the Pañjāb Hills between the 17th and the 19th centuries.

Bhakti, dhyāna, darśana

Despite the cultural significance of the spread of Vaiṣṇavism in the Pañjāb Hills, the ancient customs were not abandoned and Śiva and the Goddess continued to be venerated. The Devī was venerated as Cāmuṇḍā to ensure military success, hence many shrines were erected in her honour, as in Kāṅgrā under Rājā Ghamaṇḍ Cand, or in Cambā, during the expansive policy of Rājā Rāj Siṃh (Archer 1973: xix), but other forms of the Goddess, like Mahāsarasvatī, Mahālakṣmī and Mahākālī, were also worshipped in some centres of Jammū - Śāktism is the most popular devotional stream in the state still to these days (Jamwal 2006: 165, 167). On the other hand the cult of Śiva, whose antiquity in the Pañjāb Hills can be traced back to the 7th century, flourished from the 13th century as shown by the multitude of his temples. The most important are the Baijnātha and the Narabaleśvara in Kāṅgrā, and among the 44 temples of Maṇḍī, 24 were dedicated to Śiva, such as the Bhūtanātha of Rājā Ajbar Sen and the Trilokanātha of Sultān Devī (early 16th century; Panthey 1987: 19-20).

Furthermore, several *śaiva* and *śākta* festivals were established and take place in the Pañjāb Hills still today: the Bisu festival, the Maṇi Maheś Yātrā, Kuñjar Mahādev, the Triloknāth fair, the Rālī festival, the Haritīlaka Tṛtīyā or Ciriyo kā brat, and Śivaratrī, celebrated everywhere in India, especially in Cambā, Kāṅgrā, Kulū and Maṇḍī (Panthey 1987: 21). Further proof of the closeness of *rājput* kings to the *śaiva* cult is provided by the manuscript paintings and portraits depicting the monarchs worshipping Śiva (Panthey 1987: 36, pl. 1-2). Many examples are given by Panthey, including the portraits of Sidh Sen and Īśvarī Sen of Maṇḍī (Panthey 1987: 20). The most famous of these paintings is the one by Sajnu, where the king stands in profile in front of Nandī, his hands joined in *añjalīmudrā*, in adoration of the icon of Sadāśiva with his wife Pārvatī (Archer 1973: pp. 362-363, no. 46; Panthey 1987: 39, pl. 14; Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 316).¹³ A second example comes from Rāmnagar and depicts Rājā Indra Dev I of Bāndrālā¹⁴: the king, in profile, clad in saffron with a *śaiva tilaka*, joins his hands in *añjalīmudrā* and offers a lotus flower to the altar, where Śiva's family is seated on a tiger pelt.¹⁵

While the aforementioned evidence adds contextual details, it does not fully explain nothing the special worship that the *pahārī* painters held for the Devī and Śiva. Therefore, we should now refer to the painters' portraits, for they bear information about the religiosity they practiced. This is the case of Mānaku and Nainsukh, sons of Paṇḍit Seu.¹⁶ In the portrait of Mānaku, painted by his brother, the artist hosts on his forehead a *śākta tilaka*, two upwardly curving lines below which a circular dot is placed (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 248; Goswamy 1997: 76; Goswamy and Fischer 2011: 644). The self-portrait of Nainsukh is that of a boy in profile, holding in his hands brush, board and paper sheet, his forehead host the *śākta tilaka* (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 268; Goswamy 1997: 21, 48; Goswamy and Fischer 2011: 666). It is in the self-portrait of Nainsukh that the symbols of the painter's occupation share the same place of the religious symbol, uniting these two apparently separated worlds in the person of the *pahārī* master.

The *śākta* affiliation of painters is supported also by popular stories that show the presence and intervention of the Goddess in the lives of her worshippers. When an artist,

commissioned by a *rājā* to paint a portrait of the secluded queen, was going to finish his masterpiece, a drop of black fell onto the thigh of the *rānī*. The painter, unable to remove this spoil, presented the picture to the king and suddenly the *rājā*'s mood changed: that drop of black resembled the mole the queen had in that spot, hence the king thought of an illicit relationship between the painter and the *rānī* and imprisoned his subject. However, that night the Devī appeared to the king and ordered him to free the artist, a devotee of hers and unjustly treated: it was her who caused the drop fall from the anonymous painter's brush (Goswamy 1969: 892; Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 8-9). This legend posits the painters as devotees of the Goddess and their skill as a remuneration of their worship.

A second legend refers to a more unique relationship between a well-known artist and the Devī: still in 1987, when Suneet Chopra wrote his article *The artist as a social being*, the people of Nūrpur were able to point to the platform where Golū used to play *caupar* with the Goddess (Goswamy 1969: 892; Chopra 1987: 123). In this legend we can find evidence of the relationship

between the painters and the Devī as perceived also by their communities. This second narrative, however, goes a step further: if in the previous legend the artist was unaware of the Goddess intervention, this time the artist sits consciously at the same level of the Devī and challenges her. Hence, the *citrera* is equated to Śiva: the god is the actual player of *caupaṛ* against the Goddess and teases her, as it was depicted in the *Rasamañjarī* by Devīdāsa (Craven 1966: pl. 55; Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 60).¹⁷

The equation and subsequent identity between the *śaiva* devotee and Mahādeva was the goal of the path of accomplishments according to the Tantric movements of medieval and early modern India. This identity was reached through the understanding of the non-duality between the God and the world, an emanation of his, and enabled the *yogin* to acquire supernatural powers, *siddhi*, and made his will come true. This understanding, in turn, was obtained through *dhyāna*, which included the repetition of *mantras* and the visualization, *darśana*, of the deity with all his/her *lakṣaṇas* to be gradually recollected in the mind and in the body of the practitioner (White 2009; White 2011;

White 2022). We have to keep in mind that meditation was a key stage in the creative process of a *tarkhān-citrera*. An artist was not only involved in painting activities and everyday chores, but he also had to learn prayers, memorize *mantras*, perform *pūjās*, and meditate withdrawn in *samādhi*, the mind made *sthira*, for “*dhyāna lagānā* helped cleanse the mind for turning out better work” (Goswamy 1969: 892; Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 10; Goswamy and Fischer 2011: 434).

Therefore, we can speculate that probably the painters’ practice of *dhyāna* included the visualization of the icons of the Devī and of Śiva, focusing on their multiform manifestations, looking into their eyes in this tantric exchange of *darśanas*. This is the function of the *Tantric Devī* series of Kṛpāl, where the *dhyāna ślokas* and the depictions of the Devī, two aspects of the same reality, phonic and optic, are juxtaposed on the same page (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 31-32; Goswamy and Fischer 2011: 447-448). Hence we can consider the *śaiva-śākta citrera* a *yogin*, involved in *dhyāna* to accomplish *siddhis*, creativity, painting skill and artistic success, true gifts of the Goddess to her

devotees, like in the instance of the anonymous painter and the black paint spoil. In the process the painter becomes a companion of the Devī, her cheater play-mate in *caupar*, like Golū, her half in the *Ardhanārīśvara*, intimate and powerful at the same time, as depicted by Devīdāsa, the *puruṣa* of the *śakti*. It is in this context a proper identification of the *citrera* with the god takes place and, when the painter exchanges his *darśana* with the icon of the three quarter faced Śiva, he is, perhaps, staring at himself.

Conclusion

This study has dealt with a large number of paintings which, despite being separated by more than one hundred years, still share the same three quarter depiction of Śiva's face. This iconography is not connected to a devotional affiliation, as it is present in *śaiva*, *vaiṣṇava* and *śākta* texts, and even in works which reflect a courtly secular world. This divergence is neither caused by a technical unease of the painter in the depiction of Śiva's many faces, for other polycephalous characters, such as Skanda, are represented without any problem, neither in the depiction of the face *lakṣaṇas*,

for they are still visible in many Devī's profile depictions. The singular exception is attested in the opening folio of the *Rasamañjarī*, both in Devīdāsa's and Golū's manuscripts: however this is caused by the depiction of the god from the back. This face orientation is shared among characters who are in continuity with a part of the god's nature: the Pracetas, devotees of Śiva accomplished through *yoga*, the anthropocephalic *asuras*, and the Devī. However more research through philological and art historical means is needed to reach a reliable conclusion.

Furthermore, even in a context dominated by the *Viṣṇubhakti*, the cult of Śiva and the Devī remained rooted in the local tradition. The Devī was venerated as Cāmuṇḍā to assure military success and many temples were built in her honour, just fewer than Śiva's. Several kings established *śaiva-śākta* festivals and fairs and supported the production of Tantric manuscripts and portraits of theirs involved in rituals and worship. However, it has been proved that the *śākta* devotional stream was especially popular among painters: their names reflect their *śaiva-śākta* affiliation, their portraits bear *śākta tilakas*, folk stories refer to this

trope and the *citreras* were involved in *dhyāna* sessions which resemble the practices of *śaiva* *yogins*. This evidence proves the special relationship between painters and the Devī through Śiva, who the

artist perhaps identified with, hence the need to mark their bond with the specific three quarter representation and the subsequent intimate exchange of *darśanas*.

Notes

1. This painting is stored in the Rietberg Museum, Zurich (2005.124): <https://rietberg.ch/fr/collection/2005-124> .
2. This painting is stored in the Government Museum and Art Gallery of Chandigarh (E 10).
3. This painting is stored in the Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin (I 5057): <https://recherche.smb.museum/detail/492456/gott-shiva-und-seine-familie?language=de&question=kangra&limit=15&controls=none&objIdx=0>.
4. The painting is stored in Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (63.144): <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/149268/the-prachetas-paying-homage-to-shiva-from-a-bhagavata-puran?ctx=c3aa7d2f-5869-4ebb-a285-46ffbe9143b8&idx=16>.
5. This painting is stored in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (63.142): <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/149266>.
6. This painting is stored in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (I.S. 239-1952): <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O74041/shiva-painting-unknown/>. See also: Archer 1973, Vol II: 266; Kramrisch 1981: P-9; Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 206-207.
7. This painting is stored in the Rietberg Museum, Zurich (RVI 1249): <https://rietberg.ch/sammlungen/rvi-1249>. See also: Skelton 1961: no. 41; Goswamy and Fischer 1992: no. 57.
8. Two examples are the painting stored in Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1977.443.2; <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/37989>), and the painting stored in the Seattle Art Museum, Seattle (52.141; <https://art.seattleartmuseum.org/objects/14431/churning-of-the-sea-of-milk?ctx=21e234cc-b517-4f5a-8c3b-818207b65324&idx=261>)
9. This painting is stored in the Binney Collection of the San Diego Museum of Art (1990-1043): <https://collection.sdmart.org/objects-1/info/5072>. See also: Welch 1973: no. 36; Kramrisch 1981: P-29; Goswamy and Fischer 1992: plate 22; Goswamy and Fischer 2011: 451; Goswamy 2014.
10. This painting is stored in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (57.185.2): <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/37942>.

11. This painting is stored in the Rietberg Museum (RVI 956): <https://rietberg.ch/sammlungen/rvi-956>. See also: Goswamy and Fischer 1992: plate 7.
12. This painting is stored in the Rietberg Museum, Zurich (REF 3): <https://rietberg.ch/sammlungen/ref-3>.
13. This painting is stored in the Bhārat Kalā Bhavan, Vārāṇasī.
14. This painting is stored in the Rietberg Museum, Zurich (RVI 944): <https://rietberg.ch/fr/collection/rvi-944>.
15. Many instances of this kind of composition exist in the Pañjāb Hills, however some of them are object of debate: a painting is reported on the website of the Los Angeles County Museum of Arts as “Adoration of Shiva by Raja Jagat Singh of Nurpur (r. 1618-1646), Folio from a Bhagwanji-Narainji Manuscript”, but the same painting appears in Kramrisch 1981 (p. 211) and Pal 1978 (p. 168) as “The Descent of the Ganges”, hence the noble character is considered to be Bhāgīratha. <https://collections.lacma.org/node/254001>.
16. It is interesting to note that the name Seu is the local variety of the proper Śiva (Chopra 1987: 122), connected also to Śiba, the name of the painter who wrote a letter to his patron complaining and asking the permission to leave his court (Goswamy 1966; Goswamy 1969: 893; Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 8; Goswamy 2011: 437). Furthermore the name Devīdāsa has to be translated as “servant of the Goddess” and highlights the *śākta* devotional affiliation of his father Kṛpāl.
17. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/37942>.

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Sajnu, *Śiva's family*, single folio, Maṇḍī 1820, Rietberg Museum, Zürich (2005.124):

<https://rietberg.ch/fr/collection/2005-124>.

Plates



Fig. 1: Sajnu, Śiva's family, single folio, Maṇḍī 1820, Rietberg Museum, Zürich (2005.124).

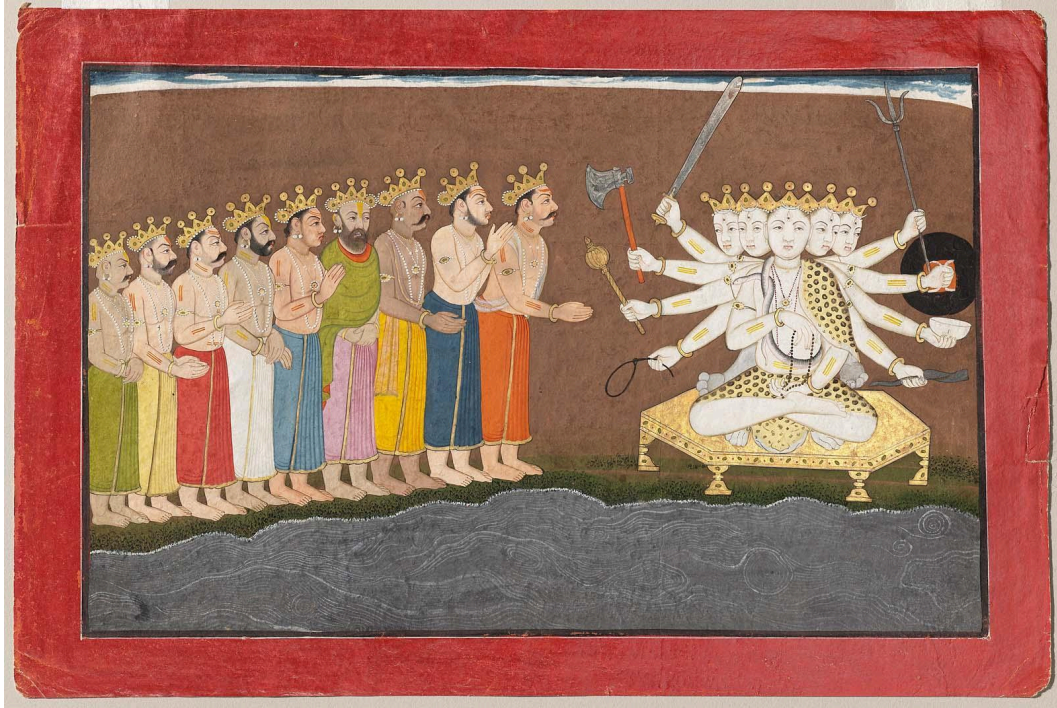


Fig. 2: Mānaku, *The Pracetas paying Homage to Śiva*, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* series, Guler 1740, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (63.144).



Fig. 3: Master at the court of Cattar Siṃh, *Kūrma avatāra: the Churning of the Cosmic Ocean*, *Daśāvatāra* series, Cambā 1700, Rietberg Museum, Zürich (RVI 1249).



Fig. 4: Devīdāsa, *Pseudo-Ardhanārīśvara*, *Rasamañjarī* series, Basohlī 1694-1965, San Diego Museum of Art, San Diego (1990-1043).

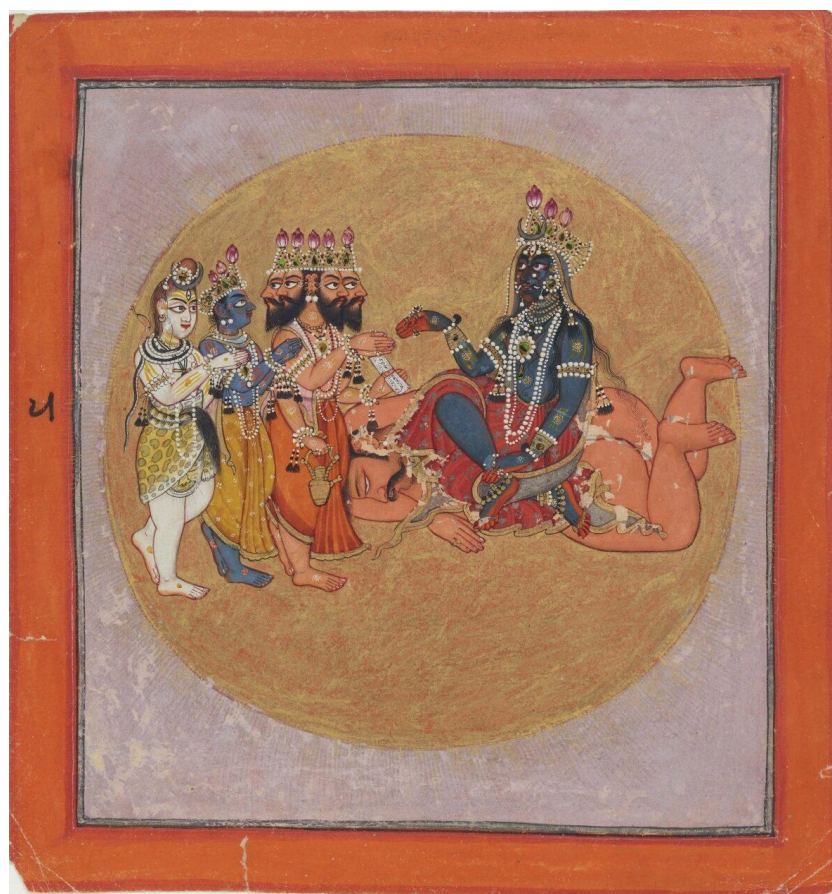


Fig. 5: Kṛpāl, *Devī adored by the Gods*, *Tantric Devī* series, Basohlī 1660-1670, Rietberg Museum, Zürich (RVI 956).

Catching Souls in Graven Image: Exploring the Science of Physiognomy (*‘ilm-i firāsa*) in Mughal Art

Zainab Naqvi

Introduction

In 1616, Sir Thomas Roe, the English envoy of King James, was waiting upon the Mughal Emperor Jahangir for an audience. Asaf Khan, the vizier, approved the gift of a painting that Roe fancied much, fit to be offered to the king.¹ Roe informs that Jahangir was very pleased with the offering and summoned his chief artist to see the portrait. Assured that no Indian artist could replicate the masterpiece, Roe dissed at the Indian artist who claimed to make an exact copy of the portrait, calling him a ‘fool’. The next time Roe visited the court, five exact copies of the painting were presented to him, and he was asked to select his preferred copy. Roe records that it was after much difficulty that he was able to pick his copy and closes the episode accepting that ‘in the arte of limninge his (Jahangir’s) paynters woorke miracles.’²

This intriguing episode from Roe’s account offers insights into the miraculous accuracy

of portraiture that was patronised by the Mughal emperors. The present article argues that the emphasis of Mughal patrons on this degree of lifelikeness and painstaking realism of portraiture was a motivation of their belief in *firāsa* (physiognomy) or the mystical ‘science of discerning’ innate character from outward form. The vast repertoire of portraits depicting grandees, princes, subordinate kings, nobles, friends and rivals in Mughal albums (*muraqqa’*) suggests that the interest in accurate likenesses (*shabih*) was not just for documentation or aesthetic purposes. Instead, the *shabih* was accepted as a medium for discerning the innate character and intent of its subject. Mughal kings prided themselves as ‘true discerners’ of the inner character and abilities of their grandees, and realistic portraiture was a medium through which this royal agency could be exercised.

The *ṣūrat* and *ma'nī* dimensions of existence

The Persian term *ṣūrat* encompasses various meanings: picture, portrait, appearance or face, whereas the Arabic term *ma'nā* denotes 'sense' or 'meaning'. In a more philosophical dimension, the pair of terms alluded to the deeper meanings of existence, where *ṣūrat* indicated the temporal world, regarded as momentary or transient and the *ma'nī*, on the other hand, came to indicate the afterlife or 'the world to come.' This concept of *ṣūrat* (external form) and *ma'nā* (internal reality) is allied closely to the dichotomy of *ẓāhir* (extrinsic) and *bāṭin* (intrinsic), a fundamental concept in the science of physiognomic discernment (*'ilm-i qiyāfat wā firāsa*). Attributed to Antonious Polemon (ca. 88-145 AD), the science of physiognomy took the Islamic world by storm when his Greek treatise was translated into Arabic in the ninth century.³ This concept of *ṣūrat* and *ma'nā* is visually depicted in a double portrait in the Shah Jahan album, which shows Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), being presented with a book by I'tmad-ud-daula, his vizier and father-in-law (Fig. 1).⁴ Inscribed within the book is a statement that says, 'by the pleasure of Allah (God) Shah Nuru'ddīn Jahangir, son of Akbar

pādshāh, is king both in form (*ṣūrat*) and essence (*ma'nī*).'⁵ The laudatory remark for Jahangir, inscribed within the illustration in *mise-en-abîme* style, hints at the complex dynamism and meaning that the Mughal-painted image had acquired.

The concept of *ṣūrat* and *ma'nī* was a deeply embedded idiom of meanings that juxtaposed the esoteric and exoteric, the material and spiritual and the temporal and the hereafter in Mughal histories.⁵

A posthumous and allegorical association between Akbar and his successor Jahangir, painted by Balchand, depicts the two realms of existence of *ṣūrat* and *ma'nī*, where Akbar is depicted in his heavenly abode while Jahangir continues to rule the material world (Fig. 2). Jahangir gestures imploringly towards Akbar, while the latter gently leans towards him as a sign of paternal affection and approval and presents him a falcon, hinting at the transfer of power from one king to another. However, their eyes do not meet, indicating the separation of the two realms.

The science of physiognomy and the Mughals

This dichotomy of *ṣūrat* and *ma'nī* relates to *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* or the two components of the science of physiognomy and its discernment (*qiyāfat wā firāsa*). The encyclopedia of *Jawāhiru'l 'ulūm-i Humāyūnī* (Treasures of Imperial Sciences), dedicated to Mughal emperor Nāṣiru'ddīn Muhammad Humayun (r.1530–40 and 1555–6), explains *qiyāfat* (physiognomy) and *firāsa* (insightful discernment) as the mystical science of discerning inner or moral traits (*khawāṣ wa khaṣā'il*) from outer form and appearance (*shakl wā shamā'il*), which can be attained by prophets, saints, or those who have mastered spiritual insight.⁶

After Polemon's treatise was translated into Arabic in the ninth century, multiple Qur'anic and prophetic traditions (*ḥadīṣ*) on discernment from physical attributes were reinterpreted in the light of this science.⁷ The physiognomy of Prophet Mohammad was accepted as perfect in terms of form and character, a Christian priest named Bahira, for instance, recognised the prophethood of Muhammad by examining

his facial features and divine marks on his body.⁸

Physiognomy linked physical features to personality, reading the body from head to toe. Traits like red eyes suggested anger, a large head meant bravery, while small or poorly formed heads implied weakness. Disproportionate bodies were seen as signs of physical and intellectual inferiority. Trembling eyes signaled laziness, while protruding or drooping eyes suggested dishonesty or low intelligence.⁹ A discerning gaze was considered a kingly value that rulers were supposed to master for better judgment and the smooth functioning of the empire. The author of *Jawāhir* recommends,

“Awareness of physiognomy is an obligatory duty for just and able kings and nobles (*salāṭīn wā umarā'*) to discover the real capability and innate talent (*qābīliyat wā isti'dād*) of an individual to assign appropriate occupations and duties to each of them. So that noble tasks are not assigned to fools and the lowly ones to the wise. This principle brings order to the kingdom (*mulk*) and

prosperity to people (*ra'īyat*) and nurtures the sovereignty (*salṭanat*) of the just and wise king."¹⁰

Ancient Indian treatises also reveal the awareness of this novel science. The prognostic technique of detecting crime or theft from the body language of the suspects is present in the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, the sixth century compendium of Varāhamihira which refers to it as the science of 'angavidya' or prediction through limbs. The text informs that bodily gestures and facial features and prognostics of touch could enable a skilled astrologer to predict theft or crime.¹¹

Abū'l Faḥl informs that while stipulating the wages and occupations in the cadres of his empire, 'the lord of the world (Akbar) determines the value of men from the marks on their forehead (*naqsh-i peshānī*) in order to increase or decrease their salaries and based on these marks, he distinguishes an artisan from a soldier.' Even the skilled seers (*dīdawārān*) are astonished at his ability and are counted as secondary in this skill.¹²

While appointing Mullah Sa'd Allah to the post of *arḡ-i mukarrar* (reviser of petitions),

Shah Jahan is said to have used 'his usual just discrimination of character in discovering the abilities of the Mullah from his physiognomy.'¹³ An eighteenth-century South Indian account tells of two brothers seeking military service after the Mughal takeover of the Bijapuri Carnatic under Aurangzeb. The elder, strong and well-built, was accepted; the younger was rejected for his frail, short stature (*az naḥāfat-i jism wa qaṣr-i qāmat*).¹⁴ Despondent, he obtained an amulet from a skilled amulet-maker and placed it in his turban, to present himself before the king once more.¹⁵ Aurangzeb's 'far-seeing eye' (*dīda-yi dūr-bīn-i bādshāh*) spotted him in the crowd and had him summoned, demanding the hidden charm. When the vizier asked how he knew, the emperor replied that a sudden urge to appoint the youth led him, by inference (*be-qiyās fahmīdīm*), to detect the effect of a potent amulet (*athar-i ta'wīz-i mu'assir*), though neither the 'observer' nor the 'observed' had changed.

Since expertise in *firāsa* is not just related to the skill of reading facial features; it is also tied to valid judgement and clairvoyant vision. In his memoir, Jahangir narrates that during the conquest of Gujarat, Akbar

asked a Hazara (Afghan), skilled in the science of physiognomy, to predict the outcome of the battle. The Hazara predicted that victory would belong to the royal army, but not without losing a prominent *amīr* (noble).¹⁶ The Mughal forces did gain a victory in that battle, but soon the news of the martyrdom of Saif Khan Koka, the high-ranking noble and foster-brother of Akbar, arrived.¹⁷

Babur, the dynasty's founder, used physiognomy when he first met Farid (later Sher Khan of the Sur dynasty, 1540–1556) in Bengal, warning his governor Junaid Barlas to arrest or kill him, as 'the eyes of the Afghan indicate sedition and strife-mongering' (*shor wā fitna angezī*).¹⁸ The governor failed to do both. When Humayun succeeded to the throne of Babur's hard-earned victories in Hindustan, Sher Khan dismantled it in 1540, which waned Mughal power in India for a good fifteen years.

Similarly, the theologian and courtier at Akbar's court, Badauni, defines the blue eyes (*chashm-i azraq*) of Sharif Amuli as a sign of enmity with the Prophet Muhammad. Amuli was a Persian Nuqtawī

refugee at Akbar's court, a gnostic sect characterised as heretical (*mulhīd*) in mainstream Islam. Amuli's favourable reception by Akbar in 1577 gave the disgruntled theologian enough reason to disapprove of his appearance as ridiculous (*ṣūrat-i maẓḥak*) and unacceptable (*ḥayāti na qabūl*).¹⁹

At the birth of Akbar, Abū'l Faẓl refers to the skill of 'clever physiognomists' (*mutafassiran-i zarāk*) who noted the signs of greatness heralding good fortune from his facial features, defined in laudatory terms by the chronicler.²⁰ Jahangir comments on the perfect physiognomy of his father in his chronicle, where he notes each facial feature with special care, which attests to the significance of *firāsa* in Mughal conceptions of kingship.²¹ These physiognomic ideals parallel ancient South Asian traditions. Buddhist texts describe thirty-two marks of the *mahāpuruṣa* (great man), all attributed to the Buddha. In the *Lakkhaṇa Sutta*, traits like a lion-like chest, delicate skin, tender hands, and firm feet signify innate spiritual authority, kingship, and worldly greatness.²²

The idea of the *lakṣaṇa* or physical marks of royalty in the images of great men or kings

was much engrained in the art schools of the seventeenth century as well. B. N. Goswamy explains the adherence to these ‘visual metaphors’ by painters at Rajput courts of Rajasthan in their reluctance to assume Mughal realism in portraits of kings despite close contact with Mughal art.²³ Similarly, for rendering ‘grand subjects’ the Pahari masters of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* series of Mankot, dwelled on cognizances (*lakṣaṇa*) like an unusually staring eye, a patch of hair on the cheeks growing out of the beard line and bulging biceps.²⁴ The king as per these idealised formulae was supposed to be depicted with stylised features where his legs looked like ruby pillars, chest like a cliff of crystal and arms appeared as bolts on a door instead of their individual appearance. However, the persons of less than royal ranks were rendered with individualised features.

It is an interesting contrast that while the consideration for the science of *firāsa* compelled Mughal painters to paint accurate likenesses and reinterpret those features in the light of the science of physiognomy; the regional courts of the seventeenth century departed from real likenesses of kings and heroes in order to

adhere to set ideals and notions of greatness in painted image.

A double portrait of Jahangir and Akbar in the Gulshan Album exemplifies idealised royal physiognomy shaped by *firāsa*, where symmetry and balanced posture signified sovereignty (Fig. 3). Both figures have broad shoulders, erect spines, and composed stances, while retaining distinct facial features. Jahangir’s forward gesture conveys authority and command, whereas Akbar’s bare-chested, slightly leaning form emphasises martial strength and his affinity for physical pursuits. Together, they present ideal yet individualised expressions of imperial presence. The link between physical features and moral temperament was also well established in Indic traditions. Sanskrit texts echo ideas similar to *firāsa*, circulating in elite courtly cultures. In early medieval India, the king’s body was seen as a visible index of virtue and merit, with ideals of beauty, symmetry, and bodily perfection closely tied to prognostic and divinatory sciences.²⁵ This connection is further evident in epigraphic and literary sources alike, for instance, the second-century Junagarh inscription of the Śaka king Rudradāman emphasises bodily and physical attributes as

markers of royal virtue.²⁶ Similarly Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita* associates Emperor Harṣa's facial and bodily features with his virtues (*guṇa*) and his fitness to rule.²⁷

Vernacular traditions similarly valourised royal appearance. Chand Bardai's account of Prithviraj Chauhan's hunt portrays him with a moon-like, tilak-marked forehead, a fragrant, ritually pure body, and a lion-like gaze. His alert senses, controlled strength, and swift, steady movements convey courage and majesty, as nature itself seems to respond to his presence. As Cynthia Talbot shows, such idealised bodily tropes helped shape his evolving image as a heroic, near-superhuman figure through literary memory.²⁸

Physiognomy and Mughal portraiture

In the *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, Abū'l Faḥl calls the act of painting (*taswīr*) 'marvellous magic' and a source of wisdom for those capable of discerning it. He mentions that Akbar commissioned an immense portrait album containing the likenesses (*shabīh*) of all the grandees and nobles of his court. The album, he states, would bring to new life (*ḥayāt-i tāza*) those who passed away and

grant eternal life (*jāwīd zindagī*) to those who are alive.²⁹ This shift towards portraiture from narrative painting occurred in the final decade of emperor Akbar, and portraiture was perfected under Jahangir and Shah Jahan.

Stuart Cary Welch highlights how these unidealised images lay bare the strengths and weaknesses of the subjects and become a medium of analysing enemies as well as evoking absent friends. According to Welch, Akbar's portrait album was therefore a powerful and threatening 'catcher of souls.'³⁰ This focus on capturing the sitter's personality and psychology as revealingly as possible highlights the use of physiognomic discernment mediated through these accurate face studies. Ebba Koch has argued that the documentary realism of Mughal art, decisively distinguished it from its Safavid counterpart which depicted highly idealised figures rather than recognisable individuals or historically accurate events.³¹

Mughal painters often set figures against plain backgrounds, with faces in full profile and bodies in three-quarter view, a style refined in the Shah Jahan and Jahangir albums (Fig. 4). A folio from the Jahangir

album contrasts two figures: Khizr Khan of Khandesh, shown with folded hands and a rosary, signalling submission to Mughal authority despite his upright, princely bearing; and Abdullah Khan, whose upward gaze, strong physique, and groomed moustache project martial prowess. His gesture of *taslim* (salute) shows deference, while his hand on the sword underscores his military power within the empire.³² The bottom-right portrait shows Abdul Wahab with pen and paper, as if recording orders at the imperial court. His composed posture and writing implements suggest dutiful service, likely secured through his father Hakim Ali's connection to Akbar. The bottom-left depicts Bakhtar Khan Kalawant, envoy of Ibrahim 'Adil Shah (1614). A noted musician, he appears with a forward lean, drooping shoulders, and clasped hands, signs of deference. His lowered gaze underscores submission, while his brightly patterned jamā marks his Deccani identity.

Portraiture studied faces and temperament across the Mughal elite, while the emperor ruled as a 'king of kings' over subordinate rulers.³³ *Firāsa* offered emperors a way to gauge loyalty, potential, and threat. Portraits such as that of Mahabat Khan

convey a bold and politically astute figure through assertive body language (Fig. 4), while Sayyid Abu'l Muzaffar Khan's erect posture, upward gaze, and martial attributes project disciplined authority and inherited status (Fig. 5). In contrast, tributary chiefs and subdued rulers are depicted with controlled, inward demeanours, signalling reduced autonomy. Favoured allies like Suraj Singh Rathor retain elements of honour alongside gestures of submission (Fig. 6). Together, these visual strategies reinforced hierarchy, loyalty, and the authority of the Mughal empire.

Jahangir showed great interest in the physiognomic portraits made at his atelier. In his memoir, he takes pride in accurately guessing the artists who worked on a portrait on the spur of the moment. He states, 'And if there is a picture containing multiple portraits, and each face is done by a different artist, I can perceive which face is the work of whom. If some other person has put in the eye and eyebrow of a portrait, I can recognise whose work the original face is, and who has done the eye and eyebrows.'³⁴

Likely driven by physiognomic interests, Jahangir sent the painter Bishan Das with Khan 'Alam's embassy to Iran to capture the likeness of Shah Abbas and his court (Fig. 7). Jahangir praised the accuracy of this portrait, later used by Abu'l Hasan for further depictions. These works also reflected Mughal–Safavid diplomacy over Qandahar, often portraying Mughal supremacy - symbolised by a dominant ruler and lion motif - over a diminished Shah Abbas (Fig. 8).

Mughal portraiture could also convey psychological depth, as seen in the image of the dying Inayat Khan, which reflects Jahangir's fascination with mortality and the transition from the physical (*ṣūrat*) to the eternal (*ma'nā*), themes he explored in the *Majālis-i Jāhāngiri*.³⁵ In a recent study, Naman Ahuja interprets Jahangir's morbid curiosity with the near-death portrayal of Inayat Khan, attributed to prolonged opium abuse, as a self-reflective 'cautionary tale' given the emperor's own addiction to alcohol and opium. From this perspective, the role of portraiture, not merely as representation but as a means of memorialising death or capturing a soul at the threshold between life and death, comes

to the fore.³⁶ Painted by Balchand, the portrait minutely records the noble's emaciation, every wrinkle and bone carefully rendered. Jahangir himself was not exempt from such scrutiny: his once ideal physiognomy is shown deteriorating under alcoholism (Fig. 9, compare with Fig. 10). A study attributed to Hashim depicts him near death, with striking frailty. Uniquely among Mughal emperors, Jahangir allowed his image to register this decline, marking the height of realism in Mughal portraiture.

Marking 'presence through absence'

The 'viewing' of the monarch's physiognomy formed a key element of Mughal sacred kingship, shaped by Sufi devotional ideas where seeing the master's face led one toward the divine. This informed *jharokha* portraiture, derived from the practice of *jharokha darshan*, in which the emperor appeared at a palace window for public viewing at dawn. Under Akbar, this ritual drew large crowds who regarded his sight as a blessing. It evolved into a distinct visual genre, showing the emperor in profile within an ornate window frame, crystallising into a powerful imperial symbol (Fig. 10).³⁷

Realistic physiognomies could stand in for absence, and on a more mystical plane, connect the living with the dead. In the painting of Jahangir contemplating Akbar's portrait, the image becomes a site of allegorical, posthumous dialogue (Fig. 11), also enabling symbolic reconciliation after Jahangir's earlier rebellion during his princely years in Allahabad and affirming his legitimacy. Beyond politics, portraiture mediated intimate bonds across death. In a *mise-en-abyme* image, Nur Jahan holds Jahangir's portrait, suggesting a love that endures beyond the king's death (Fig. 12). In both works (Fig. 11 & 12), the image bridges *ṣūrat* and *ma'nī*. Notably, Jahangir's portrait follows the *jharokha* format, prompting Nur Jahan's slight forward-leaning gesture of reverence, while Akbar's upright depiction in Jahangir's gaze conveys parity between two sovereigns, one in the temporal world, the other in the eternal realm.³⁸

Likewise, in the Sufi devotional realm, portraits operated as a medium that could transcend specific constraints, such as the religious obligation of *pardah* (seclusion) between male Sufi masters and the female devotees. This is exemplified in the case of

Jahanara Begum, the daughter of Shah Jahan, who procured a portrait of the prominent Sufi saint, Mullah Shah Badakhshi, through her brother Dara Shikoh, as a surrogate for the *pir*'s physical presence.³⁹ The *pir*'s image, seen as a vessel of spiritual grace, underscores the power of images to embody a person's true being. In this sense, accurate physiognomic portraits were thought to transcend worldly and afterlife limits, 'capturing' not just physical form but the subject's very essence through art.

Mughal vengeance through *firāsa* and *ṣūrat*

Another purpose that the skill of physiognomy served was the recognition of beheaded rebels or enemies. Severed heads of the rebels were sent to the imperial threshold to gain rewards from the emperor at other times they were sent to rebelling chiefs as a warning. Accurate identification of rebels was necessary, and it was the task of those skilled in physiognomy to ascertain that a rebel had been killed. In 1565, Ali Quli Khan mobilised the Uzbeks and Mongols to stir rebellion against Akbar at Kannauj and Kara. Two years later, when Akbar finally crushed the rebellion, he gave

a general order to behead the rebels. Akbar announced that whoever brought a Mongol rebel's head would receive a gold coin (*muhri ṭilā*) and whoever obtained the head of an Indian rebel would get a rupee (*rūpiya*). The *Akbarnāmā* refers to physiognomists or face readers (*chihra-shināsān*) who were employed to ascertain the ethnicity of the slain rebels for the distribution of rewards.⁴⁰

Portraits of Deccan rulers made for Jahangir reflect Mughal imperial ambitions in the region. The image of Ibrahim 'Adil Shah II of Bijapur shows his diminished status through subdued body language, and is inscribed in Jahangir's own hand as '*amal-i Hashim* (done by Hashim) and '*shabīh-i khub-i Ibrahim 'Adil Khan* (a good portrait of Ibrahim 'Adil Khan)' (Fig. 13). Hashim, familiar with the Deccan, rendered features with close physiognomic attention. He also portrayed Malik Ambar, the formidable Abyssinian commander who resisted Mughal expansion. Campaigns against him, such as Abdullah Khan 'Firuz Jang's' ill-coordinated advance despite plans to join Man Singh, underscore the political and military tensions surrounding these portraits.⁴¹ As they entered Daulatabad, Malik Ambar's forces overpowered the

Mughal armies and Abdullah had to retreat towards Ahmadabad after a humiliating defeat. When the news of the retreat of Mughal armies reached the court, Jahangir was so enraged that he took one of the portraits of Abdullah Khan in his hands and lashed out, saying, 'Today no one equals you in terms of ability and lineage, rank and treasure, and army. You should not have run away! From today onwards, your title is Gareiz Jang (the fugitive from battle).'⁴² The portrait of Abdullah Khan performing *taslīm* (as discussed above, Fig. 4 top right) is inscribed in Jahangir's own hand; perhaps it was the same portrait that Jahangir cursed so furiously that day.

Abdullah Khan was able to reclaim his lost honour by an act of bravery several years later when he captured and killed Khan Jahan Lodi, a former noble turned rebel (the decapitated man in the composition). This event is depicted in a detailed and crowded battle scene in the *Pādshāhnāmā* (Fig. 14). Noted art historian Kavita Singh explains that this illustration does not just record a historical event but symbolises imperial power with the chinar tree placed at the compositional centre as the axis mundi of the richly painted illustration.⁴³ She notes

that the visual structure of the painting reaffirms Shah Jahan's omnipresence and cosmic centrality, where the chinar tree supplants the king's 'presence through absence' and functions as a symbolic surrogate before his armies, which reinforce moral order in the turbulent world. Trees, especially the chinar, functioned as motifs of devotion and mysticism in Persianate art. Here, the chinar anchors the composition and structures hierarchy: looming above the generals Abdullah Khan and Sayyid Muzaffar Khan Barha, and below them the defeated rebels, it visually reinforces Mughal order and justice. The scene projects imperial severity - rarely used except for rebels and traitors - and reflects a belief in images as active presences, akin to talismanic forms used in magic and divination.⁴⁴

By the sixteenth century, images were an accepted medium for proleptic visions and future auguries across the Islamic world. Nizami Ganjavi's *Haft Paykar* (Seven Portraits), for instance, refers to the future-telling images that Sasanian king Bahram Gur encountered inside a cave, which foretold his future kingship.⁴⁵ Images were pregnant with allegories of magic and

could conjure up favourable omens, predicting or influencing the future. The *Akbarnāmā* refers to a dismembered man, which young Akbar drew while training in painting with the Persian painters Mir Sayyid Ali and Khwaja Abdus Samad at Kabul, before the Mughals gained control of central India. Hemu (commander of the Sur dynasty) was captured and killed by Bairam Khan (the Mughal commander and regent of Akbar), but despite Bairam's insistence to behead Hemu, Akbar declined.⁴⁶ Years later, Abū'l Faḡl connects that ominous painting with the Mughal victory when Akbar confided with his chronicler that he abstained from beheading Hemu because he had already beheaded him in a painting years ago.⁴⁷ This episode highlights that painting was accepted as an ominous medium that held occult and proleptic powers to influence the future.

Jahangir was emulating this belief when he portrayed himself targeting the severed head of his detested enemy, Malik Ambar, stuck on a lance in a grandiloquent allegorical composition by Abu'l Hasan (Fig. 15). Jahangir is atop an orb representing the earth, aiming at a severed head representing Ambar. Near the severed head, the artist has

placed two owls with a caption, ‘the rebel’s head is the abode of owls.’ The talismanic imagery further complicates as we see the orb representing the Earth resting on a bull, which itself stands on a giant fish. The cow here represents the *gāo-i-zamīn* (bull of earth), a Persian term for *kuyūthā* (Arabic), which refers to a bull believed to bear the earth on its horns/back, which stands on a giant fish or whale called *bahamut*.⁴⁸ These iconographic elements of medieval Islamic cosmology give a profound meaning and visual appeal to this self-aggrandising image of Jahangir.

Likewise, images of enemies were subjected to ceremonious and symbolic destruction before battles in order to influence and presage their final annihilation in the real world. Before the second battle of Panipat (1556), which changed the destiny of the Mughal empire and the subcontinent, the *mūr-i ātish* (artillery officer) was ordered to make a *ṣūrat* (an idol or effigy here) of Hemu, which was to be filled with combustibles and thrown into fire. Abū’l Faḏl tells the reader that even though, in *ẓāhir* it was for the amusement and encouragement of the army, but in *ma’nī* it was the very essence of the enemy that was

set to fire through that image.⁴⁹ If picturing beheaded rebels immortalised revenge against treachery and served as a warning to enemies, beheading and destroying the *ṣūrat* of enemies led to their annihilation in the dimension of *ma’nī*, a theme woven in *firāsa* and the Mughal graven image.

Conclusion

The multi-layered knowledge system, ranging from physiognomy, divination and talismanic imagery, gives new meaning to the graven image and its value in Mughal kingship and governance. Through the concept of *ṣūrat* and *ma’nī*, and the multiple and varied meanings these terms imply in the discipline of *firāsa*, newer paradigms can be unlocked to reinterpret the world of Mughal portraiture and art. The modern mind is often unacquainted with knowledge systems embedded in historical and cultural contexts, such as physiognomy, an imperial preoccupation and investment that was a theme hidden in the mysteries of Mughal portraiture. As mediums of ‘capturing the souls’ portraits could forge bonds between dead sovereigns and their heirs, grantees with their master, lovers with their beloved and devotees to their spiritual masters,

whether separated in this world or in the
hereafter.

Notes

1. The painting was a small limned portrait of a woman, perhaps a friend of Roe made by the celebrated artist Isaac Oliver (1551-1617). Sir Thomas Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to the Court of the Great Mogul, 1615-1619: As Narrated in His Journal and Correspondence*, ed. Sir William Foster (London: Hakluyt Society, 1899), 39.
2. Jahangir was delighted at the skill of his artists and had asked Roe to take one of the artworks to England and show them “wee are not soe unskillful as you esteeme us.” Roe and Foster, *Ibid.*, 222-4.
3. On *firāsa* in the Muslim world, see Robert Hoyland, “Physiognomy in Islam,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam (JSAL)*, 30, (2005): 361-402.
4. The Shah Jahan album, named after the fifth Mughal emperor and one of the patrons of the album along with emperor Jahangir is also known as the Kevorkian album, housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. For a brief account of the album’s journey see Stuart Cary Welch, *et al.*, *The Emperors’ Album: Images of Mughal India* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987), 11.
5. Heike Franke, “Emperors of Şūrat and Ma’nī: Jahangir and Shah Jahan as Temporal and Spiritual Rulers,” *Muqarnas* 31 (2014): 123–49. More on this terminology, see Mika Natif, *Mughal Occidentalism: Artistic Encounters between Europe and Asia at the Courts of India, 1580-1630* (Boston: Leiden, 2018), 208; Yael Rice, *The Brush of Insight: Artists and Agency at the Mughal Court* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2023), 97- 138.
6. The encyclopaedia is a rare source from the early Mughal period compiled for Humayun in the first half of his reign. Muḥammad Fāzil ibn ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad Miskīn Qāzī Samarqandī, *Jawāhiru’l ‘ulūm-i Humāyūnī*, ed. Abdur Rahman (Maulana Azad Library, Aligarh Muslim University, Ms. 87, 1530), f. 766 a-b. [henceforth: M. Fāzil].
7. Yael Rice builds upon the study of Hoyland on the diffusion of *firāsa* in the early modern Islamic world. Rice, *The Brush of Insight*, 103.
8. A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishāq’s Sirat Rasūl Allah* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 79-81.
9. M. Fāzil, f. 766 b - 767 b.

10. Ibid., f. 768.
11. Varahamihira, *Brihat Samhita*, tr. Panditabhushana V. Subrahmanya Sastri (Bangalore: V. B. Soobbiah & Sons, 1947), pp. 406-17.
12. Abu'l Faẓl ibn Mubarak, *Aīn-i Akbarī*, ed. H. Blochmann (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1872), 1:191.
13. Inayat Khan, W. E. Begley and Z. A. Desai, *The Shah Jahan Nama of Inayat Khan* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 275.
14. Burhan Khan Handi, *Tūzak-i Walajāhī*, eds T. Chandrasekharan and Syed Hamza Hosain Omari (Madras, 1957), 73-75.
15. The soldier in question was Muhammad Sa'id—later Nawab Sa'adatullah Khan—the founder of the future Nawabate of Arcot (1692-1855). He was eventually taken into service at a lower office on grounds of leniency.
16. The Persian text calls it *ilm-i shāna-bīnī* 'science of looking' (at the shoulder-blades), which was an ancient divination technique of taking auguries from the shoulder-blades. Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i Jahāngīrī*, ed. Syed Ahmad, (Aligarh, 1854), 21.
17. Jahangir and W. M. Thackston, *The Jahangirnāmā: Memoirs of Jahangir: Emperor of India* (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, 1999), 43.
18. Abū'l Faẓl ibn Mubarak, *Akbarnāmā*, ed. Maulawi Abdur Rahim (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society, 1877), 1: 148.
19. Abdu'l Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhab-ut Tawārīkh*, ed. Ahmad Ali and W.N. Lees (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society, 1864), 2: 247.
20. Abū'l Faẓl, *Akbarnāmā*, 1: 44.
21. Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahāngīrnāmā*, 36.
22. *The Digha Nikāya*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter, (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1890), Vol. 1, p. 109. These external signs of greatness are also enumerated in the Dharmasamgraha attributed to Nagarjuna, see: *Dharmasamgraha: An Ancient Collection of Buddhist Technical Terms*, ed. Max Muller & H. Wenzel, vol. 1. (Clarendon Press, 1885) pp. 53-55. Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, *The Indian Buddhist Iconography: Mainly based on the Sadhanamala and other cognate Tantric Texts of Rituals* (London: OUP, 1924), p. 9-10.

23. B. N. Goswamy, "Of Devotees and Elephant Fights: Some Notes on the Subject Matter of Mughal and Rajput Painting," In *Life at Court: Art for India's Rulers, Sixteenth- Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Vishakha Desai, xix-xxiii, (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1985), xxii. Molly Emma Aitken, *The Intelligence of Tradition in Rajput Court Painting*, (Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 24-6.
24. B. N. Goswamy and Eberhard Fischer, *Pahari Masters: Court Painters of North India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 97, 198.
25. Daud Ali, *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India*, (UK, CUP, 2004), pp. 144-5.
26. *Epigraphia Indica* 8, (Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1905-6), no. 6, p. 44.
27. E. B. Cowell and F. W. Thomas, trans., *The Harṣa-Carita of Bāṇa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968).
28. Cynthia Talbot, *The Last Hindu Emperor: Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past 1200–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
29. Abu'l Faḍl, *Aīn-i Akbarī*, 116-117.
30. Welch, et.al., *The Emperors' Album*, 16.
31. Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, Collected Essays, (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 162. Hajek similarly notes the lack of realism in Rajput art when compared to Mughal paintings. Lubor Hajek, *Miniatures from the East*, (London, Spring Books, 1964).
32. The Gulshan Album (*Muraqqa'-i Gulshan*) originally contained at least one hundred eighty folios and a large corpus of them are preserved in the Jahangir Album housed at the State Library of Berlin (Staatbibliothek zu Berlin), Germany.
[Digital Collections of Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Workview: Jahangir-Album \(PPN71774034X - PHYS 0001 - overview-toc\) \(staatsbibliothek-berlin.de\)](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:5:1-63888-p0001-9)
33. Eugenia Vanina, "Shah of Shahs or 'Shah of India'? Some Observations on Territoriality and Power in the Mughal Empire (Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries)," *Studies in People's History*, 10, 1 (2023): 57 - 78.
34. Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnāma*, 268.
35. Abdus Sattar ibn, Qasim Lahauri. *Majalis-i Jahangiri*, eds. 'A. Naushahi and M. Nizami (Tehran, 2006), 84-85.

36. Naman P. Ahuja, *The Body in Indian Art and Thought* (Europalia international, 2014), p. 14-15.
37. Moin calls these *jharokha* inspired tiny portraits distributed to the king's devotees as 'painted rituals.' Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 224.
38. On *jharokha* as an iconographic tradition in Mughal art see J.P. Losty, 'The Carpet at the Window: A European Motif in the Mughal Jharokha Portrait,' *Indian Painting: Themes, History and Interpretations; Essays in Honour of BN Goswamy* (2013): 52-64.
39. Murad Khan Mumtaz, "Contemplating the face of the Master: Portraits of Sufi Saints as aids to Meditation in Seventeenth-Century Mughal India," *Ars Orientalis* 50 (2020): 106-128.
<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/ars/13441566.0050.015?view=text;rgn=main>
40. Abū'l Faẓl, *Akbarnāmā*, 2: 295.
41. Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama*, 135.
42. Shams-ud-daula Shah Nawaz Khan and Abdul Hayy, *The Māsir-ul-Umāra (Biographies of the Muhammadan and Hindu Officers of the Timurid Sovereigns of India from 1500 to about 1780 A.D.)* tr. H. Beveridge and Bani Prasad (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1941), 1: 99.
43. Kavita Singh, "Mughal Chronicles: Words, Images and the Gaps In-between," in *Reflections on Mughal Art and Culture*, ed. Roda Ahluwalia (Mumbai: Niyogi Books, 2021): 16-37.
44. Murad Khan Mumtaz, *Faces of God: Images of Devotion in Indo-Muslim Painting, 1500-1800*, (Boston: Leiden, 2023), 123. An astrological manuscript containing talismanic imagery was made for Akbar and is available at the Rampur Raza Library, see Yael Rice, "Cosmic Sympathies and Painting at Akbar's Court," in *A Magic World: New Visions of Indian Painting*, ed. Molly Emma Aitken (Mumbai: Marg, 2016), 88-99.
45. David J. Roxburgh, *Prefacing the Image: the writing of Art History in sixteenth-century Iran* (Boston: Leiden, 2001), 179.
46. The *Akbarnāmā* records that the thirteen-year-old Akbar hesitated to execute the grievously wounded Hemu, with Bairam Khan insisting that he behead him in order to assume the title of *ghāzī* (holy warrior). Its reluctance to credit Akbar with the act may emerge from scruples against killing a defenceless captive, a strategy which could have reinforced Akbar's prophetic image and the miracle of his painted image. More plausibly, the attempt to absolve him from the atrocity, considering the huge number of Hindu elite serving the

threshold. V. A. Smith, however, suggests that Akbar likely complied and carried out the execution and that the account was tempered to make the incident less distasteful. V. A. Smith, “The death of Hemu in 1556, after the battle of Panipat,” *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1916): 527-535.

47. Abū'l Fażl, *Akbarnāmā*, 2: 42-3.

48. For an explanation of the elements of Islamic cosmography see Bilha Moor and E. A. Rezvan, “Al-Qazwīnī's *Ajā'ib Al-Makhlūqāt wa Gharā'ib Al-Mawjūdāt*: Manuscript D 370,” *Manuscripta orientalia* 8, no. 4 (2002): 38-68.

49. Abū'l Fażl, *Akbarnāmā*, 2: 43.

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Plates



Fig. 1: *Emperor Nur-ud-din Muhammad Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), presented with a book by I'tmad-ud-daula, by Manohar, Metropolitan Museum of Art.*



Fig. 2: *Jahangir and Akbar in the world of šūrat and ma'nā*, by Balchand in the Shah Jahan Album, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 3: Double portrait of Emperors Jahangir and Akbar, a page from the *Gulshan Album*, State Library of Berlin (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Orientabteilung).

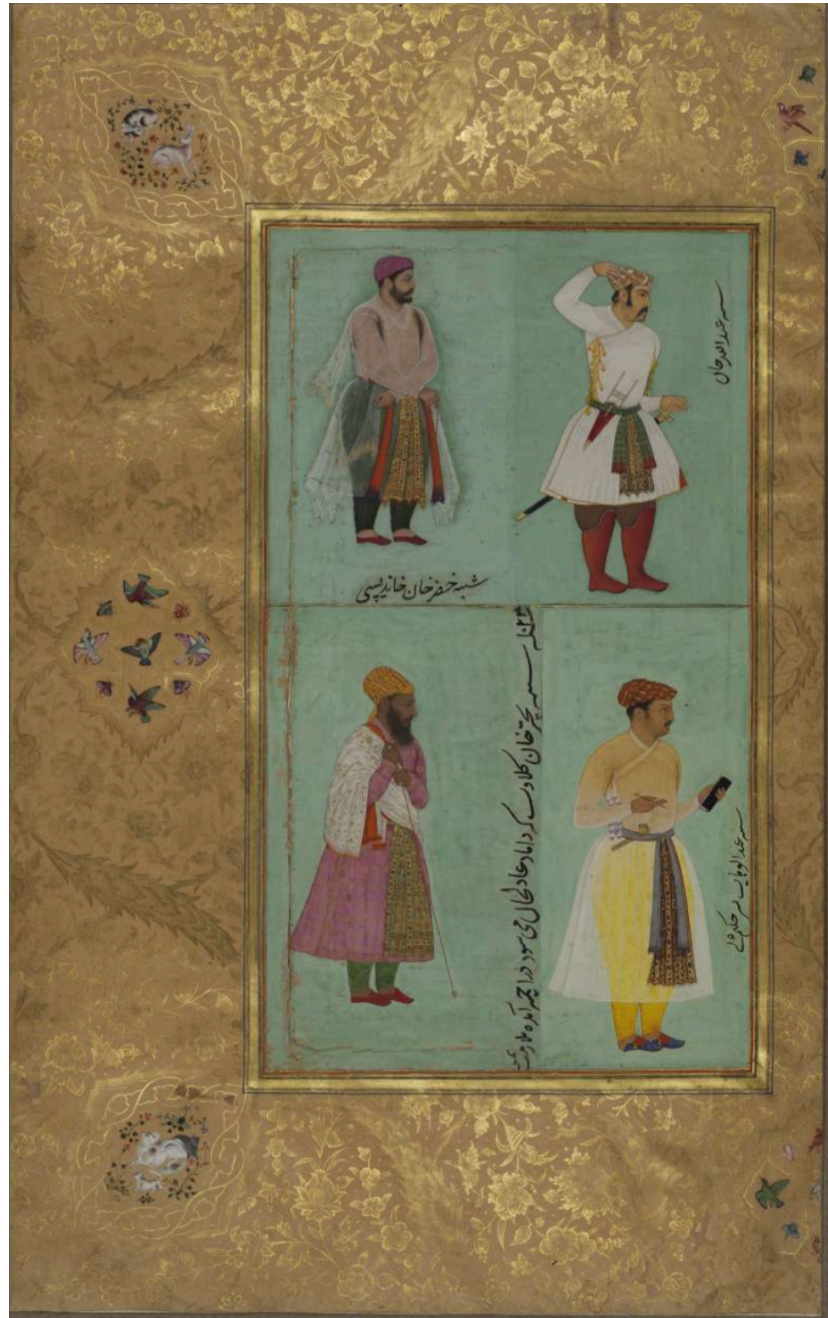


Fig. 4: *Four physiognomies from the Jahangir Album*, Top left Khizr Khan Khandeshi, son of the erstwhile Khandesh royalty, Top right Abdullah Khan 'Firuz Jang', Bottom left Bakhtar Khan Kalawant, envoy of Ibrahim 'Adil Shah to Jahangir, Bottom right Abdu'l Wahab, son of Hakim 'Ali, Akbar's physician and courtier, State Library of Berlin (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Orientabteilung).

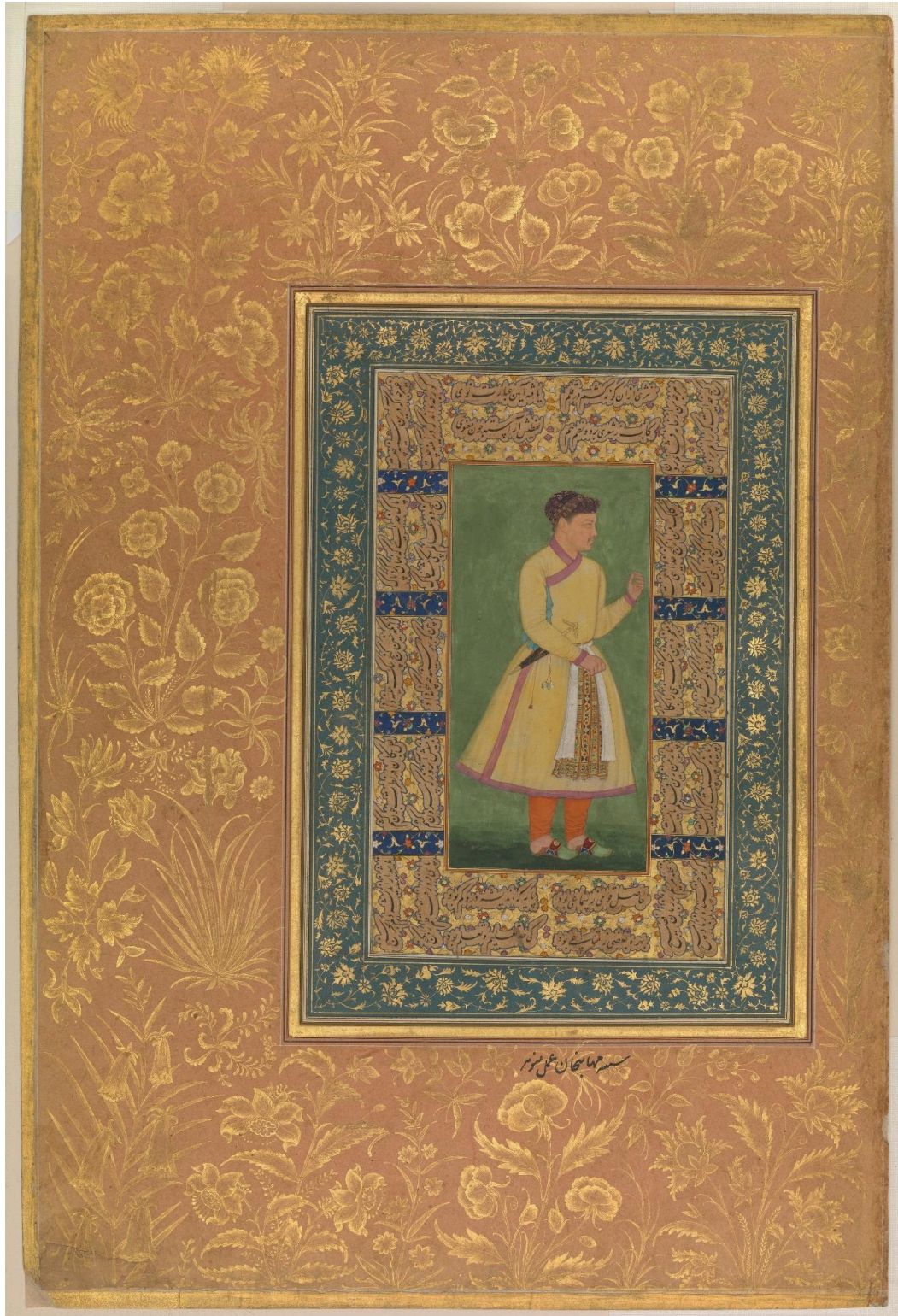


Fig. 5: Portrait of Mahabat Khan in the Shah Jahan Album, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 6: Portrait of Sayyid Abu'l Muzaffar Khan, Khan Jahan Barha, Folio from the Shah Jahan Album, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

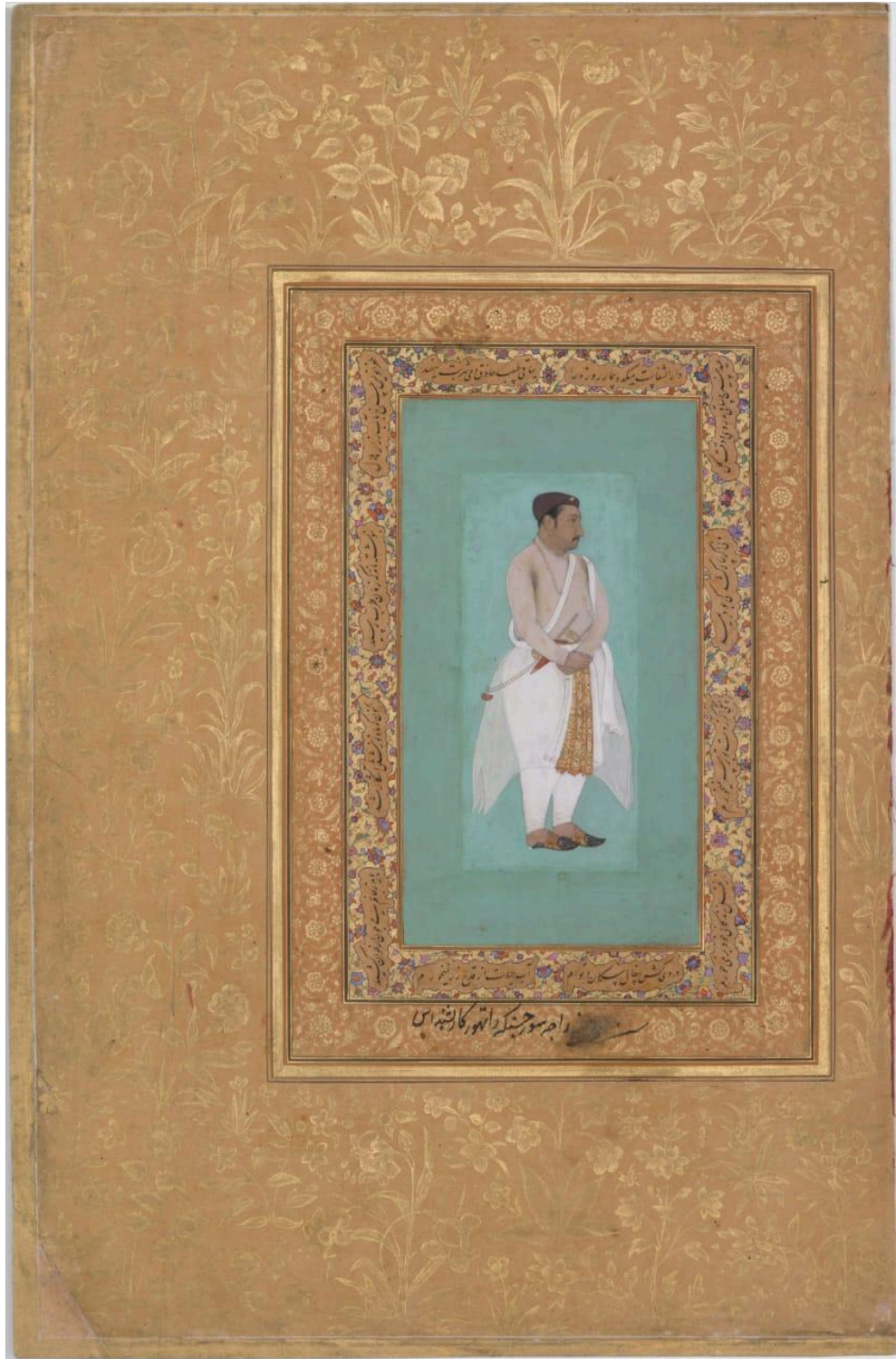


Fig. 7: *Portrait of Raja Suraj Singh Rathor*, Folio from the Shah Jahan Album, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 8: *Portrait of Shah Abbas*, attributed to Bishan Das, British Museum.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1920-0917-0-13-2

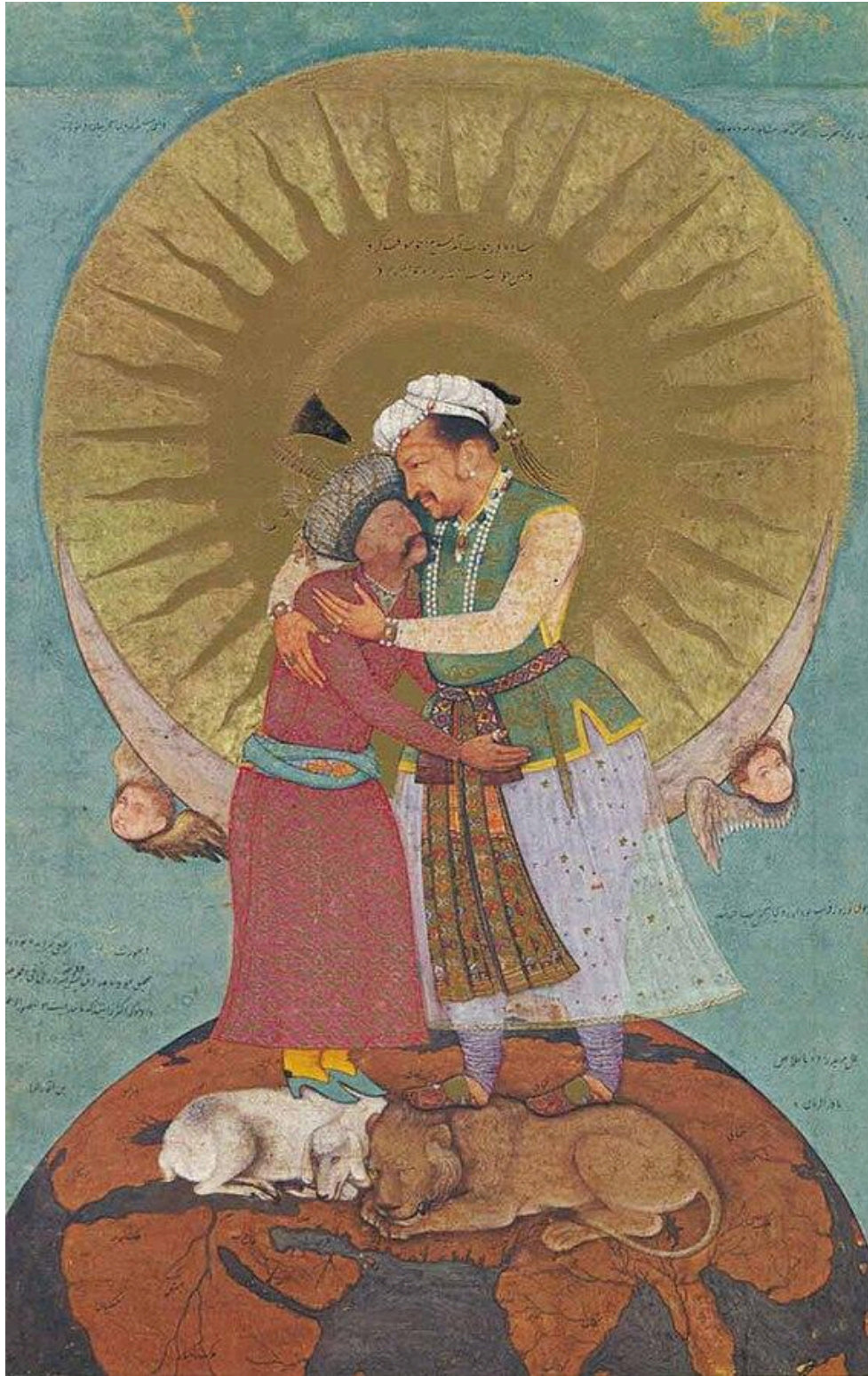


Fig. 9: *Jahangir embracing Shah Abbas* from St. Petersburg Album, by Abu'l Hasan, Freer Gallery of Art. https://asia.si.edu/explore-art-culture/collections/search/edanmdm:fsg_F1945.9a/



Fig. 10: A portrait of Jahangir in old age, British Museum.

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/1614076948>

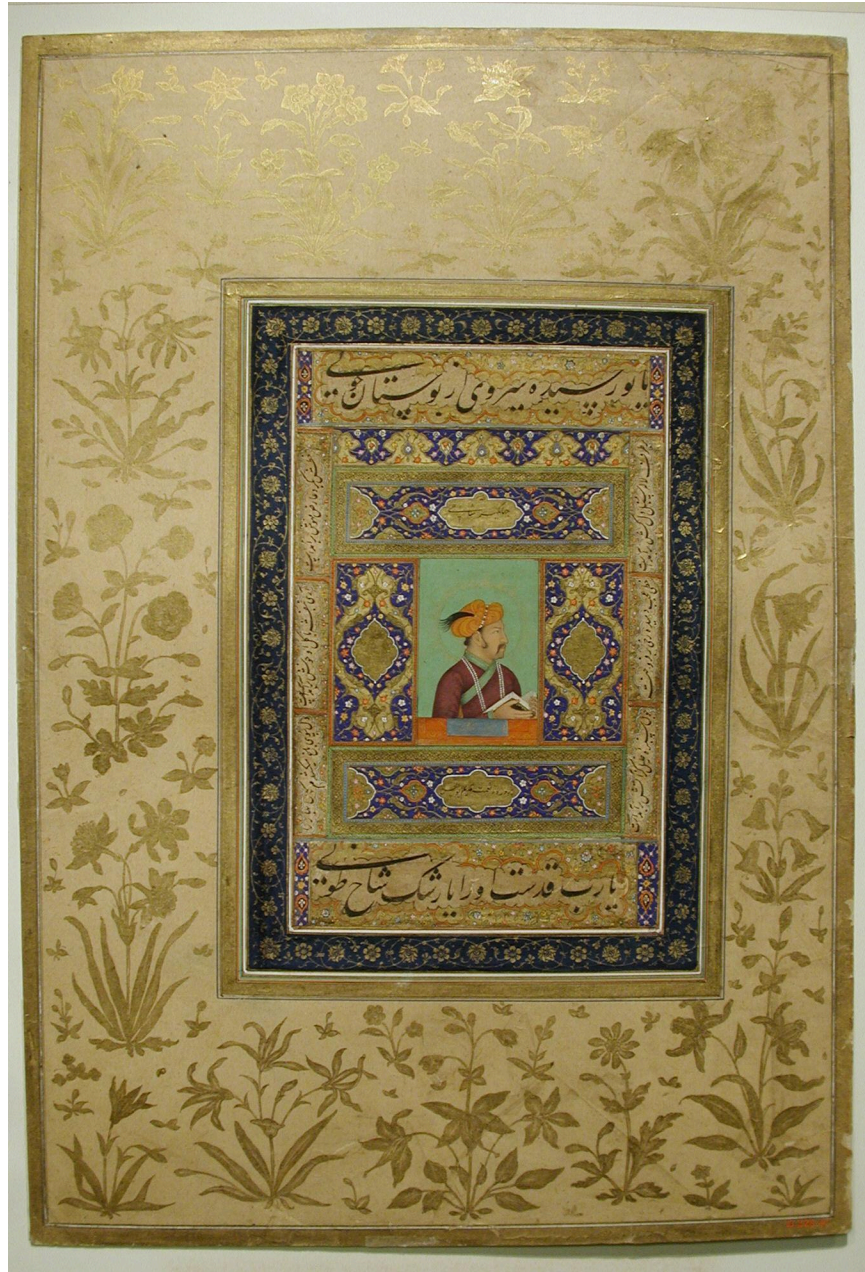


Fig. 11: *Physiognomy of Emperor Jahangir from the Jharokha genre*, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

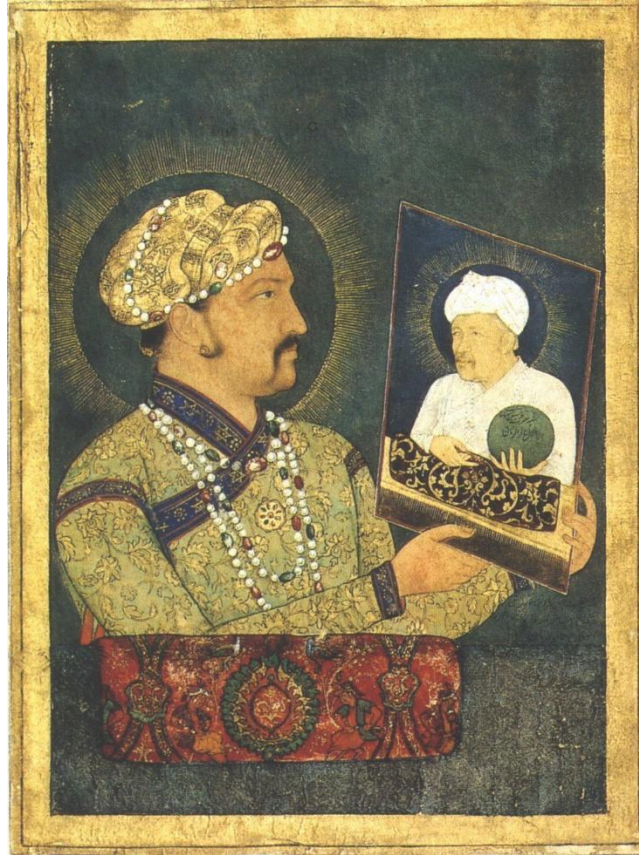


Fig. 12: *Jahangir Holding a Portrait of Akbar*, by Hashim and Abu'l Hasan, Musee Guimet, Paris.



Fig. 13: *Nur Jahan holding a portrait of Emperor Jahangir*, The Cleveland Museum of Art.

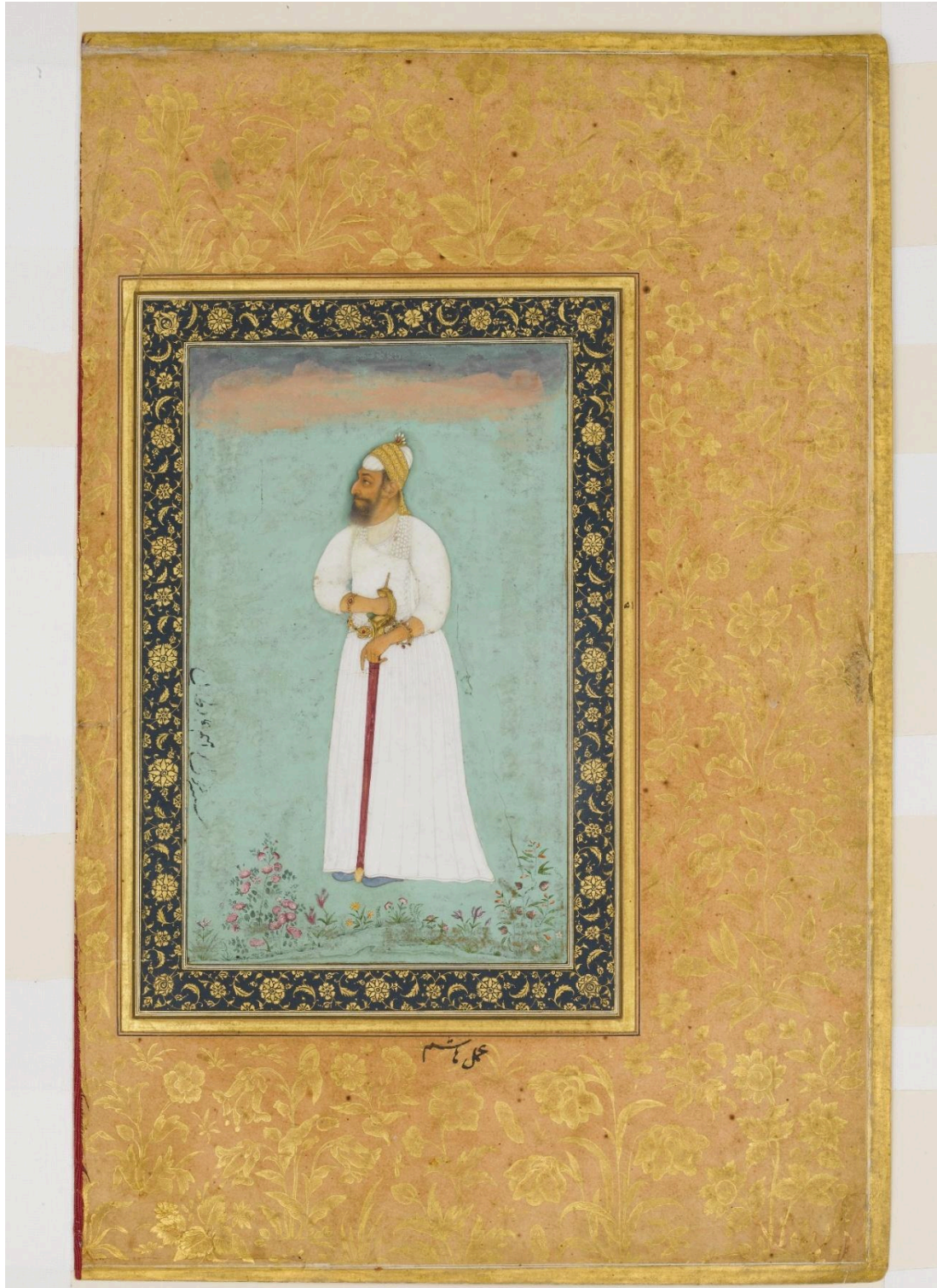


Fig. 13: *Portrait of Ibrahim 'Adil Shah II of Bijapur, the Shah Jahan Album by Hashim, Metropolitan Museum of Art.*



Fig. 14: *The decapitation of Khan Jahan Lodi and other rebels, an armoured Abdullah Khan, leader of the campaign is depicted on the top left. Artwork by Abid, from the Windsor Pādshāhnāmā, Royal Collection Trust.*

<https://www.rct.uk/collection/publications/eastern-encounters/the-decapitation-of-khan-jahan-lodi-3-february-1631>

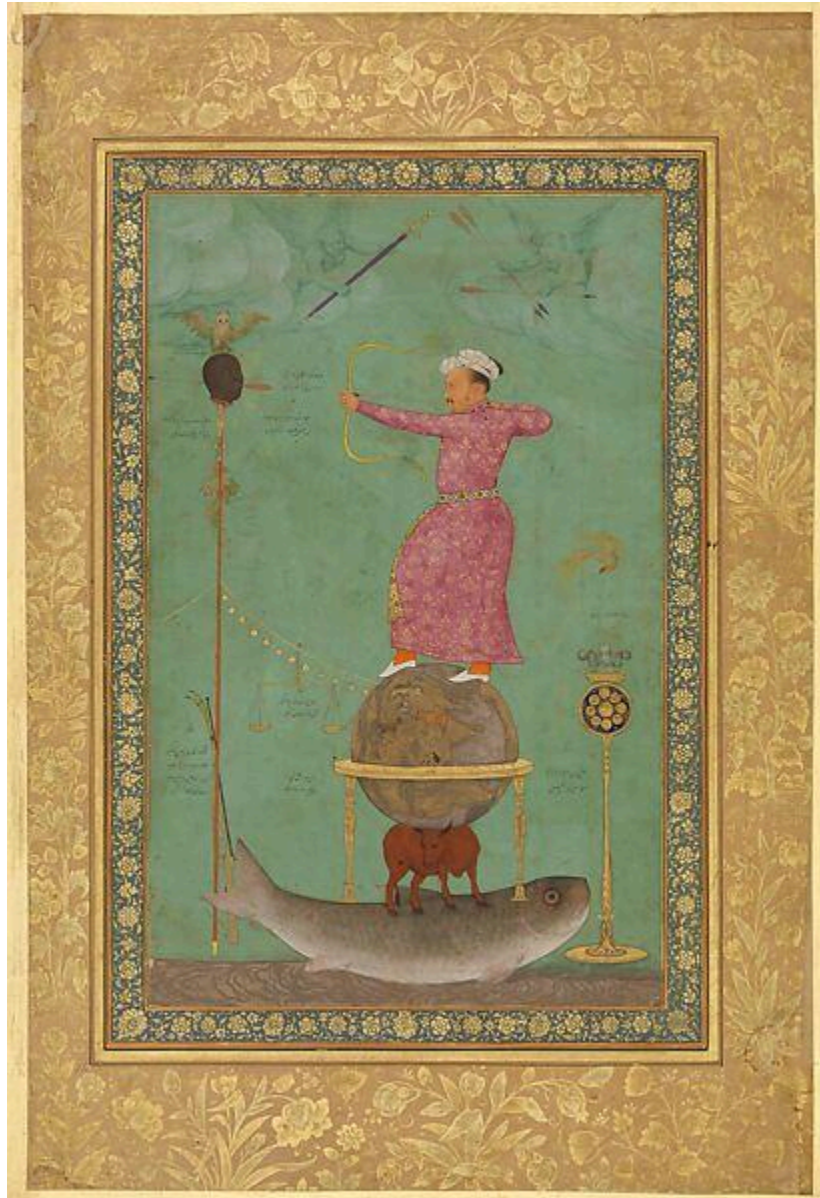


Fig. 15: *Jahangir shooting the head of Malik Ambar*, by Abu'l Hasan, folio from the Minto Album, Freer Gallery of Art.

https://asia.si.edu/explore-art-culture/collections/search/edanmdm:fsg_F1948.19a/

Laughter in the Court and Comic in Corporeality: Depiction of the *hasya* in Rajasthani Paintings

Abhinav Mishra

Comic as a 'semblance' of the Erotic

The *rasa*

At the beginning of the sixth chapter of the *Natyashastra*, the 'curious learned men' ask Bharata why *rasa* is called '*rasa*' (meaning nectar in its literal sense). This curiosity, starting from that very moment, became the central focus in further commentaries or *tikas* in *rasa shastras*, which usually dealt with poetry and performance but later expanded to include music, painting and reading, conjunctively known as *lalita kala* in some later texts. *Rasa*, in simple terms, is defined as an element which is generated in the heart of the connoisseur (known as the *rasika*) by the works of a poet or dramatist. How this *rasa* is created is another much-debated topic among aesthetic theorists, which involves the coming together of *vibhava*, *anubhava*, and *samcharin* emotions, and a fine-tuning between them that creates the core idea of it¹. The classical traditions of fine arts in India have placed the *shringar*, or erotic, on the highest pedestal among the nine *rasas*.

Hasya as *Anukriti*

The sociology of the *hasya*, or the comic in Bharata's writing in *Natyashastra* is quite complex and perhaps reductive, as it is found usually among women and characters from

lower social strata with very few exceptions. Bharata suggests that from the *sringar rasa* comes the *hasya*.² The later investigations by aestheticians suggest that the full range of causal relationships among the *rasas* can be indicated by just four of them. Bhatta Tota, who comes from the Abhinavagupta school of thought, in his *Literary Investigations*, extends the point of imitation and elaborates that any *rasa* which is presented as a "semblance" or imitation of any other *rasa* is the cause of the *hasya*³. This semblance or mimesis, termed as '*anukaran*' of the *shringar*, accentuates the *hasya*. This idea of one *rasa* churned out of another is usually known as the *anukriti*. Etymologically, *anukriti* refers to "following the action of", supposedly the idea of imitation in a performative sense.⁴ This translation of *anukriti*, however, as Parul Dave Mukherji points out, is quite complex as the widely accepted English translation has seen a whole trajectory of shifts from Plato till the present time.⁵

Interestingly, the fractured connection between *shringar* and *hasya rasas* always persists, as according to the treatise on aesthetics, the erotic *rasa* pertains only to the heroic high class, while the comic is reserved for the 'low' or middling class. In Dandin's seminal work in Sanskrit poetry, *Kavyadarsha* (*The Mirror of Poetry*), one can see the translation from the *sringara* to the comic⁶. In

one of the lines, the *nayika* (archetypal heroine) was angry with the *nayaka* (archetypal hero), but the *sakhi* (female confidant) tells the *nayika* to move her blouse. This request turns the whole emotion of the *nayika* from anger to shyness, bursting into laughter because her breasts are marked with scratches caused by her lover during lovemaking.

Women's body as a source of *shringar*

Keeping these observations in mind, one can see how the bodies of women were used in the *riti* poetry to evoke *sringara*, employing the literary device of *nakh-sikha varnan* (description from the tip to the toe). When these poems were being taught and made into visuals, the sense of adornment also transferred from the text to the visuals. While this essay does not explore the much-discussed tradition of translating poetry into visuals, two factors were certainly at play: the female body and how it was being used to evoke the erotic. Artistic expressions which were literal, sensual, and supposedly aural were now being visualised vividly. For instance, Jaydeva's erotic imagination in the *Gita Govinda* takes a visual form in Sahibdin's artwork (Fig. 1), where the patron (the Udaipur Rana) can see how tenderly Krishna adorns Radha, treating her with love and care. This colophon page of the *Gita Govinda*, painted in 1629, highlights and presumes that a *nayika's* body should be adorned and also subverts the gendered roles⁷. Here, Krishna, as the highest form of *nayaka*, is the one who is putting sandalwood paste, combing her hair,

and not her *sakhi*. This page is charged with erotic imagery as Sahibdin divides each verse into compartments. Molly Aitken calls this strategy 'compositional logic' or 'structure of desire'⁸. That was a practised trope in Rajput court paintings, where the compositions were usually organised as contiguous compartments and space was allocated. In this artwork, one cannot neglect the role of the ostentatious female body rendered. There are also certain expectations of the female body, which acts like an *uddipana*, or the "substantial excitant" which help in evoking *shringar*. Usually, the *uddipanas* are materials associated with the idea of adornment (garlands, sandalwood, etc.). In this illustrated folio, unlike the Rasikpriya folios by the same artist, the focus is mostly on the *nayika*, and the pictorial focus is not disturbed by the usual placement of *pandan*, *surahis*, and the *gulab pash* (betel case, goglet, and rosewater sprinkler). While adorning the body, a sexual undertone is often implied—what might this act lead to? It could begin with a gentle embrace and culminate in lovemaking so intense and tender that even the weight of gemstone earrings or strings of pearls makes the lovers break into a sweat. One may debate whether such depictions also shaped an idea of the 'idealised' body meant for admiration.⁹ However, these ideal woman bodies gradually became a subject of humour and satire.

Shringar to Hasya

One of the determinants or *vibhavas* of *hasya* includes 'mentioning of different faults.' The list of these determinants is long and includes: dressing in an unseemly manner, the use of irrelevant words, quarrelling, and even defective limits. One of the earliest episodes in which these points were considered in the visuals is the illustrated manuscripts of *Chandayan* by Mulla Daud. One of the crucial episodes describes the meeting of the leading ladies, Chanda and Maina, the second and first wives of the protagonist, Lorik. . Their meeting at a temple is a melodramatic event, and once the abuses are exchanged, they break into a fight. The words they exchange are so sharp and biting that the stage for conflict is already set. Here, one must keep in mind the role of adornment in *shringar*, and how descriptions of *nayika-bhed* often depict gemstones scattering in the intensity of lovemaking. Playing on both *hasya* and *shringar*, Daud strategically describes how Chanda and Maina snatch each other's jewellery and clothes, tearing at them until both women are left exposed. Once Maina is done disheveling Chanda's *solah śringār*, she stops and moves aside. In a comical twist, the temple deity runs for his life. Before running away, he mentions the reason: both of them are *apsaras* from Indra's court; if any of them dies, Indra will surely kill him. Again, this reminds us of the beauty of both these ladies, yet their fight is so lethal that Maharudra, a manifestation of Shiva known for his destructive anger, leaves the temple sanctum. One can consider how these elements were used in parallels to Bharata. Many scholars suggest that Mulla Daud's text was recited or

performed, so possibly these determinants arising from *śringār* mutate into *hāsyā* for the listeners or viewers¹⁰.

Corporeality and the Comic in Rajasthani paintings

The use of a body to invoke a *rasa* can also be seen in the satirical paintings from Kishangarh. Humorous Kishangarh paintings reached their height under the patronage of Maharaja Raj Singh (1706-48)¹¹. For example, in *A Formidable Lady* (Image 2), possibly made in 1735, a hint to the involvement of the artist Bhavani Das in this atelier, though the painting employs fine brushwork and skilled artistry, the depiction of the woman's body is quite unusual. Here, unlike the Sahibdin *nayika*, the woman depicted is the subject of ridicule. She was depicted over almost half of the page wearing a diaphanous white dress with a white *odhani*. Interestingly, one has to keep in mind that the colour attributed to *hasya* by Bharata is white, which basically is related to this *rasa*'s chosen deity (the Ganas). Furthermore, it is also prescribed that one should colour his face in white and wear white costumes while performing a comic play.¹² Four men look at her with amusement as if she is going to gulp them down. It was not clear, in the absence of any inscription, whether these paintings were commissioned for a royal court or library. These unusual paintings were produced in large numbers at Kishangarh in the mid-18th century, though with amusing themes, but evidently quite separately and never intended to be bound in a codex manner.

Sardonic Mulla Dupiaza from Mewar and his Gendered Jokes

In 1720, something unusual was also happening at the royal library of Mewar, under the patronage of Sangram Singh II (r. 1710-34). Following the footsteps of his predecessors, Maharana Raj Singh I (r. 1652-1680) and Maharana Amar Singh II (r. 1698-1710), Sangram Singh's period saw a rampant number of manuscripts being produced, along with the famous huge *Tamasha* paintings¹³. These primarily address religious themes and ethical codes, with the one notable exception of *Mulla Dupiaza*.¹⁴ This unique series, based on the sayings of Mulla Dupiaza, a legendary figure renowned for his wit in the court of Akbar, exemplifies the fusion of manuscript traditions with the practices of court portraiture. The atelier of Sangram Singh warrants significant scholarly attention due to its distinctive painting style, which represents a unique amalgamation of various influences. Prior to Sangram Singh's reign, the new Mewar style was in its formative stages, particularly under the patronage of his father, Maharana Amar Singh. This emerging style drew inspiration from European engravings, as well as Mughal and Deccan grisaille techniques. Moreover, the influx of Bundi and Kota artworks, facilitated by Sangram Singh's maternal lineage, as his mother was a Bundi princess, further enriched the artistic milieu. This confluence of visual styles and the exposure to a diverse array of artworks culminated in an

unprecedented artistic experiment, making Sangram Singh's atelier a unique one.¹⁵

The focus here is on a few pages from the painted manuscript, which highlight the above-discussed idea of the body as a tool of *hasya*. One of the illustrations (Image 3) shows a covered palanquin with a lady peeping as a 'carrier of the vulva'. Though this manuscript usually puns about how women of 'easy virtue' are manipulating men and how the *paswans* (category of prostitute in Rajasthan)¹⁶ are using their sensual bodies, among many other instances, this unusual page comments on the body and the character of that lady without evidently showing the lady at all. The humour present in this manuscript takes these cues and uses the bodies of the 'polluted' ladies for humour. These ladies are often taken for granted, and, since they don't have anything to hide, jokes about their bodies abound. The predominant visual hallmark of these illustrations, or more precisely, the recurrent motif that appears across nearly all the folios, is Mulla Dupiaza seated and narrating stories, encapsulated within an epigram inscribed on a yellow panel in each painting. A pertinent question arises: what might be the rationale for consistently embedding these two figures in each illustration? This device immediately recalls the folios of *Chandayan*, where Mulla Daud is similarly depicted narrating the story of Lorik and Chanda as it unfolds.

Although many Kishangarh paintings are said to draw on local idioms that are now lost or no longer used in the vernacular, the commissioning of works on the theme of

Mulla Dupiaza may point to a more specific literary inspiration. Rather than being influenced only by the satirical writings of ‘Ubaid Zakani, these paintings appear more closely aligned with the spirit of Mir Mohammad Ja’far, better known as Zatalli. Like Zakani, Zatalli was angered by the aristocracy’s preference for crude entertainment over the patronage of serious poets and writers. In response, he abandoned conventional court poetry and turned to what was then considered “vulgar” language, producing sharp satirical verses (*haju*) that mocked social hypocrisy and elite tastes. This satirical, irreverent tone offers a more convincing literary parallel for the Mulla Dupiaza theme in Kishangarh. How Zatalli’s work travelled from Delhi courts to Mewar may be a question to ponder, as limited written material is available on Zatalli and his other contemporaries. This was also the time when Urdu was being infused into the courtly culture, and the works of great poets were reaching the local population. This trend reached its zenith after Nadir Shah’s invasion, when significant financial investment in cultural activities was a tactic to divert attention away from the political chaos. Therefore, one possible explanation is that the

juxtaposition of Mulla Dupiaza, with his associations with crude humour, alongside figures contributing to the corpus of canonical literature, might signify an effort to critique the decaying cultural ethos of Hindustan at that time.¹⁷

Conclusion

Nobody can match the playful gaze of B. N. Goswamy when he looked at these Rajasthani manuscripts, especially that of Mulla Dupiaza. He noticed how the bodies, whether distorted and angular (mostly at the wrong places), just pinch the viewer for a tickle. He highlighted the astute observation of the artist and how they would have been familiar with these bodies and encountered these people closely. This makes one think about how these paintings are not just a visual form of humour, but also expressions of how the humour effectively took shape in the reflection of contemporary society. The idea of *haju*, which was famous in Persianate traditions, seeped into the Urdu-Hindi texts by the time these paintings were created. In the words of Goswamy, “there is very little in the range of Indian painting that comes close to so direct a statement on its times as this unexpected and delightful series.”¹⁸

Notes

1. Babu Lal Shukla Shastri, *Natyashastra of Bharat Muni: Critical Edition, Part One* (Varanasi: Chaukhamba Sanskrit Sansthan, 1984), 210-234.
2. Sheldon Pollock, *A Rasa Reader; Classical Indian Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 179-188.
3. Ibid., 79- 82.
4. Parul Dave-Mukherji, "The Theory of Anukrti in the Abhinavabharati," *Verlag Der Österreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften*, 2014.
5. Mukherji further problematises the colonial residues still lingering over Indian art history and how major art historians have avoided the idea of *anukriti* falling under the spell of colonial art theories. She also discusses the idea of *anukriti* in *Abhinavabharati* in detail. See Dave-Mukherji, "The Theory of Anukrti," 241.
6. Pollock, *A Rasa Reader*, 179-188.
7. For further discussion on Sahibdin and his style see Molly Emma Aitken, "Introduction," *The Intelligence of Tradition in Rajput Court Painting* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010). Compositions were usually organised into contiguous compartments, with space 10.
8. Molly Emma Aitken, "Dark, Overwhelming, yet Joyful: The Monsoon in Rajput Painting," *Monsoon Feelings: A History of Emotions in the Rain*; ed. Imke Rajamani, Margrit Pernau, and Katherine Butler Schofield (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2018), 137-184.
9. Seema Bawa, *Locating Pleasure in Indian History Prescribed and Proscribed Desires in Visual and Literary Cultures* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India Pvt. Ltd., 2021).
10. Scholars, namely Mataprasad Gupta, Aditya Behl, Parmeshwari Lal Gupta and Shyam Manohar Pandey, suggest that *Chandayan*, among many *premakhyans*, was performed possibly for the people, hence, the various translations and transliterations. For an elaborate discussion on this please see Naman Ahuja, "Ishq between Languages, Cultures & People: The Historical Context of the Chandayan," *The Chandayan* (Mumbai: Marg Publications 2024), 16-31.
11. Navina Najat Haidar, "Satire and Humour in Kishangarh Painting," *Court Painting in Rajasthan* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2000), 78-91.

12. Shukla Shastri, *Natyashastra*, 296.
13. Andrew Topsfield, "Court Painting at Udaipur: Art under the Patronage of the Maharanas of Mewar," *Artibus Asiae. Supplementum* 44 (2002): 141-178.
14. Andrew Topsfield, "Whither Mulla Two-Onions? A Page from the Udaipur Mulla Dopiyaza Series," *Orientalia* 52, no.6, (Nov-Dec. 2021): 2-9.
15. Oliver Forge and Brendan Lynch, *Indian Paintings from the Heil Collection* (London: Oliver Forge and Brendan Lynch Ltd, 2016), 14-15.
16. G. H. Ojha, *Rajputane ka Itihasa*. Vol 2, Part 4 (Ajmer: Vedic Yantralaya, 1932).
17. C. M. Naim, "Popular Jokes and Political History: The Case of Akbar, Birbal and Mulla Do-Piyaza," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 24 (1995): 1456-64.
18. B. N. Goswamy, *Essence of Indian Art* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1986), 95-122.

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Plates



Fig. 1: Colophon page from the *Gita Govinda*, Sahibdin. Mewar, Rajasthan 1629.

Opaque watercolour with gold on paper, Private Collection.

Image Reproduced from: Andrew Topsfield. "Court Painting at Udaipur: Art under the Patronage of the Maharanas of Mewar." *Artibus Asiae*. Supplementum 44. 2002. pg 63.



Fig. 2: *A Formidable Lady*, attributed to Bhavanidas. Kishangarh, Rajasthan. circa 1735.

Opaque watercolour with gold on paper. Private Collection

Image Reproduced from: Haidar, Navina Najat. "Satire and Humour in Kishangarh Painting". *Court Painting in Rajasthan*. Marg Publications. 2000. pg 81

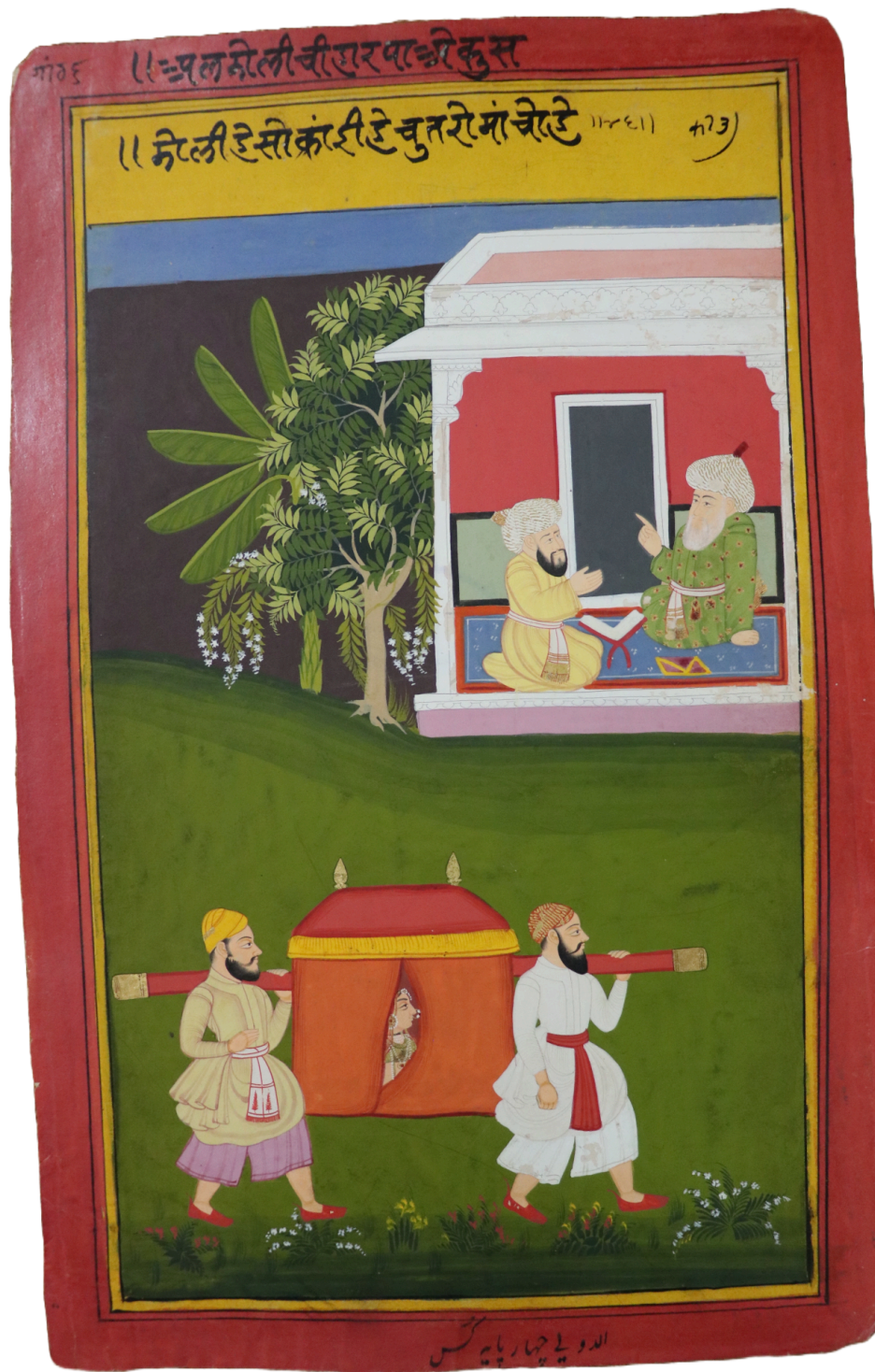


Fig. 3: Folio from the *Mulla Dupiaza*, unknown artist. Mewar, Rajasthan. C. 1720-35. Government Museum of Udaipur. Photo by Author.

Liminality and Femininity of the *Sakhī* in Kangra Paintings

Renuka Pohnerkar

Keśavadāsa, a Brajbhāṣā poet, dedicated two chapters to the female messengers between lovers in the *Rasikapriyā*, a 16th-century work that meticulously details the types of heroines, heroes, and the romantic scenarios of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa.¹ These chapters outline their duties as go-betweens and also categorizes them based on their role in society. The ‘best’ of these are the closest friends of the *nāyikā*, or the heroine, living in close proximity with her. The rest are classified according to their profession as they belong to a lower class than the *nāyikā* and perform the duties of the messenger for financial gain.² Poets of the *rītikāvya* tradition, or a courtly poetic tradition that celebrated the romantic sentiment, such as Keśavadāsa, and Bihārī of the 17th century, describe this ‘best’ kind of love messenger as a *sakhī*.³

A *sakhī* plays many intermediary roles to unite the lovers, wherein the most ‘ideal’ *nāyikā* is Rādhā, as the beloved, and the most desirable *nayaka*, or the hero, is Kṛṣṇa, as the lover.⁴ The 13th chapter of the *Rasikapriyā*

begins with a clear list of her duties as follows:

*To instruct, entreat, unite, adorn,
To stoop, and chide—these are the acts
Which bosom friends for lovers perform.*⁵

She visually comes to life in the painting traditions of the northwestern courts of India that drew inspiration from the prevalent poetic traditions. The developed Kangra style paintings from the late 18th- early 19th century are excellent examples to illuminate her character through an art historical perspective. Folios based on literary works such as the *Rasikapriyā* of Keśavadāsa and the *Satasai*, or 700 verses by the poet Bihārī, can provide a magnified view of her persona.

Different Rajput courts developed their respective *kalams*, or distinct visual styles, that can be differentiated based on the ways in which various components of the paintings were rendered. Human figures, use of colours, and the treatment of natural elements were codified by court *kalams* such that the *sakhī*,

be it her facial features, body, or attire, looks no different than the *nāyikā*.⁶ Evidently, artists seem to have employed other visual cues to demarcate the figure of the heroine from the rest, such as the direction of the gaze of the *sakhīs*, their compositional placement around the *nāyikā*, and their position with respect to the viewer within the image, apart from the explanatory inscriptions that may accompany the folios.

The *sakhī*'s character is versatile and molds depending on the context of the image. She mirrors the male lover's gaze and invites the viewer to embody it, exhibits the *nāyikā*'s beauty to the male lover and often the *nāyikā*, too, or intervenes to unite the lovers. 'Male gaze', here, refers to Laura Mulvey's theory about the portrayal of women having an exhibitionist character that is designed for male desire.⁷

Looking at the *sakhī* in Kangra paintings

As seen in Fig. 1, the woman in the visual centre and fully visible is the *nāyikā*, whereas the figure with its back to the viewer and partially visible is the *sakhī*. Although her gaze is directed outside the frame of the painting, her right hand is raised in the direction of the

nāyikā and so is her body. It is based on a verse from the *Satasai* about the radiant beauty of the *nāyikā* who has disappeared into the moonlit night as she goes to meet her lover, and it is only her fragrance that the 'bee-like' *sakhī* follows in awe.⁸ Here, the *sakhī* becomes the visual narrator of the *nāyikā*'s attractiveness. Her raised hand on her nose and misdirected gaze express the obscurity of the *nāyikā*, although visible to the viewer, as she merges in the radiance of the moonlight. Consequently, the viewer can envisage the intensity of her fragrance as she makes the image a multi-sensory scene. At the same time, she embodies the male lover's disposition by making the *nāyikā* the object of her admiration.

The *sakhī* accentuates the status of the *nāyikā* as the object of observation all the more in Fig. 2. She is identified as the *citrinī* type of *nāyikā*, or an admirable kind of woman who has an affinity towards music as per Keśavadāsa's classification of heroines. The *nāyikā* takes a central and superior position in the image as she is shown sitting on a carpet and pillows with her instrument and a hookah before her.⁹ The *sakhī* all but peeks from the corner of the frame in the painting as she plays her instrument, almost as if

supporting the *nāyikā* in her musical pursuit. In both the paintings we have discussed thus far, the *sakhī* attends to the *nāyikā* and is employed in the image to enhance the portrayal of the *nāyikā* for the audience. In the second artwork, though both the figures look alike and engage in playing music, it is the fully visible *nāyikā* who is the ‘*citrīṇī*’ and representative of the ‘feminine’ characteristics prescribed by the male poet. Although the image sidelines the *sakhī*, she becomes a fragment of this idea of femininity by extension due to her role in the image.

Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 further accentuate the *nāyikā*’s figure as the site of deliberate looking by depicting her at her toilette with several attendants. In the third painting, the male lover as Kṛṣṇa is present such that, in the spatial world of the painting, he has a direct view of the *nāyikā*’s bare body. Although the *sakhī* behind the *nāyikā* is holding a cloth, presumably for providing privacy to the bathing *nāyikā* from the residents of the palace, Molly Emma Aitken rightly suggests that such paintings incidentally frame the *nāyikā* for observation by using the cloth behind her as a backdrop for the direct line of vision of the lover.¹⁰ The fully clothed *sakhī* before the *nāyikā* can not be mistaken for the

heroine even though the entirety of her figure is visible as her gaze, too, similar to the other *sakhī* and Kṛṣṇa, is directed at the bathing *nāyikā*. Kṛṣṇa, here, replicates the viewpoint of the audience and prompts us to adopt his gaze and adore his beloved, much like the *sakhī* in his first painting.¹¹

While seemingly unaware of Kṛṣṇa’s presence, Aitken suggests that the female companions “..frame the *nāyikā*, set her apart, even unveil her for her lover’s eye” in such paintings. Can it be deduced then, as *sakhīs* are epitomes of friendship, that the idea of female companionship generated by these artistic traditions includes exposing a friend to the male gaze?¹² Taking this idea a step further, as *sakhīs* are also fragments of a socio-culturally constructed femininity, does this act of revealing one another constitute being ‘feminine’?

Fig. 4 takes the beauty of the *nāyikā* as the subject of the painting a step further by depicting a *sakhī* showing a mirror to the *nāyikā*. By observing the *nāyikā* in this scenario, it is evident that the *sakhīs* at her toilette, the audience with the lover’s gaze, along with the *nāyikā* herself are subjected to admire her physical beauty. Unlike Fig. 3, the

spatial world of this painting is rather ambiguous with a solid brown background and blue skies on top with orange and gold streaks. The presence of a younger attendant underlines the beauty of the *nāyikā* as the focal point of pure wonder.

But with the two side-profiled *sakhīs* having largely similar features as those of the *nāyikā* and her reflection, barring variations in their complexions, who does the audience really desire? The ‘superior’ beauty of the *nāyikā* is a result of our imaginative reading of the painting that is cleverly prompted by the *sakhīs*, who are cleverly created by the artist while maintaining the stylistic boundaries of the Kangra *kalam*.

A *sakhī* conveying the beauty of the *nāyikā* with the help of her image within a painting can be seen in Fig. 5 wherein Kṛṣṇa is arrested by the portrait of his lover. The accompanying verse from the *Rasikapriyā* treads the line between the effect of looking at a loved one’s portrait being a reminder of their absence as well as it substituting for their presence.¹³ As the verse does not mention the *sakhī*, it can be conjectured that her portrayal was utilised by the artist to produce the scene in question. Additionally,

she takes on the role of a witness to Kṛṣṇa’s emotional landscape that unfolds upon seeing his beloved’s portrait.

As she engages with the *nayaka* to advocate for the *nāyikā*, similarly, the *sakhī* is depicted championing Kṛṣṇa to Rādhā in Fig. 6. Her gaze directed upwards at the seated Rādhā as she addresses her shows her entreating attitude. These two paintings are clear examples of her primary role as the go-between the lovers.

For viewers of the paintings, she is a go-between the narrative and the audience, too. Without her presence, the painted image and the narrative lacks insight. It can be argued that she is as important a character in the narrative of the lovers as the lovers themselves. Yet, the *sakhī* is a nameless entity whose duties towards the couple are the only traits we know about. Bihārī and Keśavadāsa categorize her place in society in various professions, a rather subordinate status, that allow her access to the intimate exchanges with the *nayaka* and *nāyikā* without suspicion; a practical remedy for her persona to exist in the socio-cultural backdrop of 15th-18th century courtly life. In spite of these poetic and visual traditions largely focusing on

emotional premises, there are hardly any concerns about the *sakhī*'s intimate life. It is her malleability into any role that the story momentarily requires that gives her a place of importance in it without taking away the attention from the main characters, the lovers, and without creating any complexities of sub-plots by giving her character a strong identity. Such an accommodating attribute seems reasonable for the narratives that are predominantly focused on the union of the lovers which generates *śṛṅgāra rasa*, or the romantic aesthetic sentiment, or are oriented towards *bhaktī*, or devotion in the audience. However, the fact that these diverse roles are fulfilled most often by a *sakhī*- a female, evidently introduces a gender perspective.

Conclusion

With the painstaking categorisation of women oriented towards determining their desirability in works such as the *Rasikapriyā*, it can be supposed that any and all female figures are subject to sexualisation in a painted image based on it. As typification of 'ideal' women in such canonical works leads to a socio-cultural construction of femininity,

wherein Rādhā is the exemplar, the roles of the women around her, too, are invariably liable for its scrutiny. Hence, while the stock character of *sakhī* lacks any real identity, she is nonetheless subjected to uphold and convey the parameters of femininity. As all her actions revolve around the idealised heroine, the hero, and their union, she defines female companionship to a certain degree, too. Such conclusions can be made with a gender perspective due to the lack of a male equivalent of the *sakhī* of comparable importance in the milieu of these poetic and visual traditions.

The lens of femininity in Kangra paintings based on the *Rasikapriyā* and the *Satasai* only partially reveals the socio-cultural effect of the *sakhī*'s character in Indian traditions. Other lenses such as sexuality in visual art and in canonical texts like Vātsyāyana's *Kāma-sūtra* have also been explored to interpret the *sakhī*.¹⁴ In other words, the *sakhī*'s multifaceted and popular character continues to invite deep art historical speculation that can reveal much more about the society that has frequently reproduced her portrayals.

Notes

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Plates



Fig. 1: *Heroine and Sakhi in Moonlight*, from Bihari's *Satasai*, India, state of Kangra, Punjab Hills, ca 1780-90. Collection of Doris Weiner.



Fig. 2: *Chitrini Nayika*, from a *Rasikapriya Series*, India, Himachal Pradesh, Kangra, c. 1780, Harvard Art Museums.

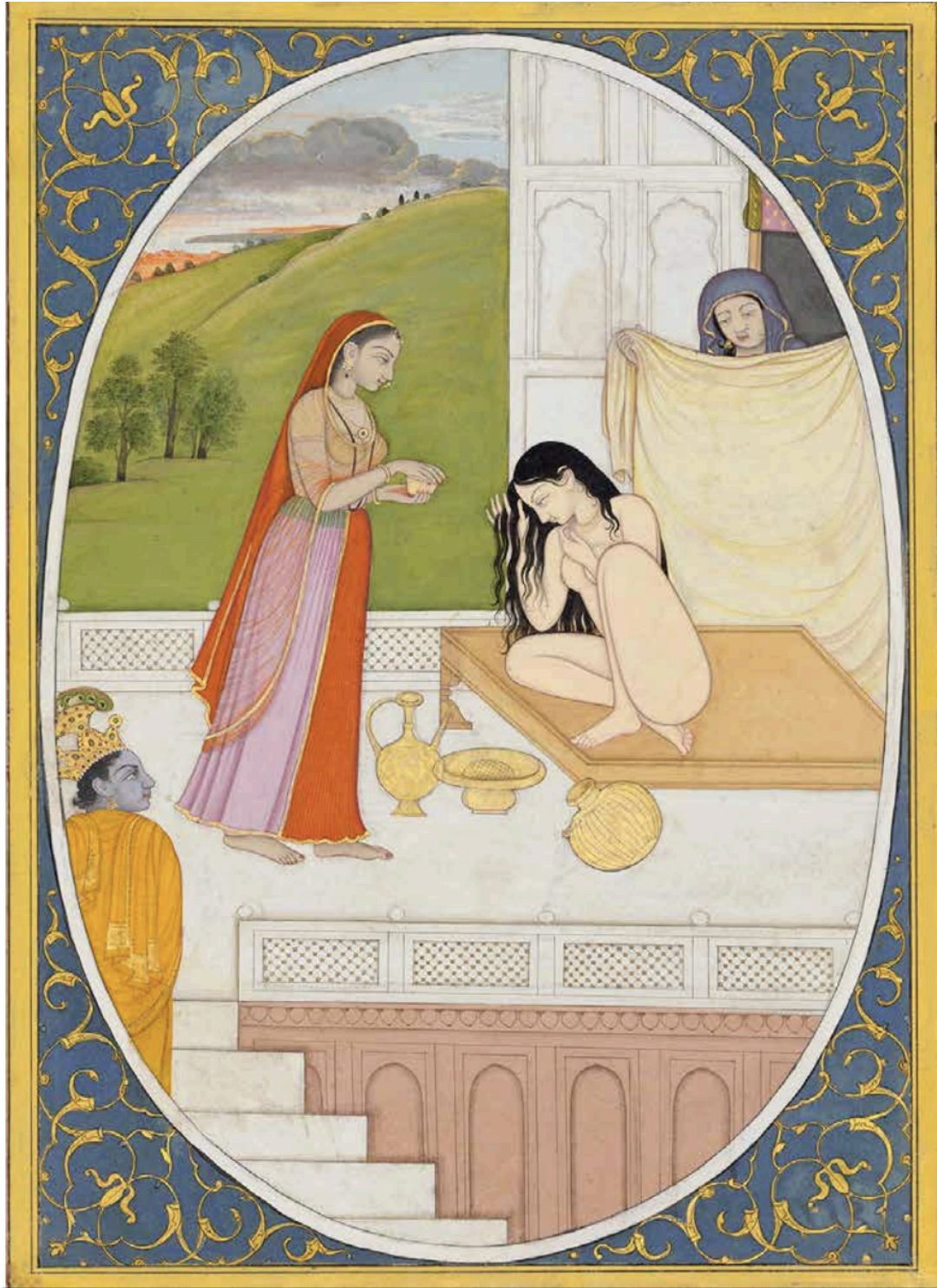


Fig. 3: Krishna observes Radha's Toilette, page from the 'Tehri-Garhwal' Satsai of Bihari, Probably painted by the Guler artist Fattu at Kangra, c. 1785. Collection of Eva and Conrad Seitz.



Fig. 4: A Nayika at her Toilette, Guler, c. 1750–60. Collection of Eva and Conrad Seitz.



Fig. 5: Krishna examines a Picture of his beloved which the Sakhi has brought him, page from the *Rasikapriya* of Keshav Das, attributed to Purkhu, Kangra, c. 1810–20. Collection of Eva and Conrad Seitz.



Fig. 6: An illustration to a *Rasikapriya* Series: A Sakhi pacifies Radha on behalf of Krishna, Kangra, circa 1820. Auctioned at Christie's, London, on 25 May 2017, Lot 74.

Khelaghar: Where Games Are Played

Utsa Saha

This paper explores the fundamental role of ‘play’ as a loaded and layered carrier of meanings. Playing serves more than one purpose. While history demands the collective remembrance of victorious feats through the preservation of materials like weapons and portrayals of conquests and contests, the genre of the depiction of the quotidian is comparatively less explored. The icon of gaming, or as one could say, playing, is frequently positioned as an intimate act of indulgence, which allows the viewer access to the interior. The central idea is: Who plays these games and who loses to whom? Much like the eternal defeat of Hindu god Shiva to his consort Parvati at the game of dice, are victories or defeats predetermined? The Horst Metzger collection at Museum Rietberg houses a wide collection of Pahari paintings, which were generously donated to the museum on the demise of Metzger. It is through the scholarly contribution of BN Goswamy that some of these paintings were identified and contextualised. This paper shall engage in a close reading of one of the paintings from

the *Baramasa* series, treating Goswamy’s description of it as a starting point.¹

Games occupy and perform an integral role in society, ranging from fulfilling cognition-oriented and skill-building variations to complex, developed structures, often inscribed with rules. Through play, one learns to engage and partake in society. Some games are devised to familiarise young individuals with the social order. The element of play precedes and presupposes human civilisation. Animals engage in play through their merry gambols and frolics. A toddler is often handed a teether or a rattle, underscoring the belief that through these objects, improved bodily development will be facilitated. Devotional objects like miniature cots and cribs, when excavated, often were furnished with overhanging bells that were meant to produce jingling sounds. While the play impulse is often related and associated with the primal and biological function, historian J. Huizinga, in *Homo Ludens* suggests that various scholars have reinterpreted play at different intervals. For

some, play is identified as a release and discharge mechanism of superabundant energy, while others perceive it as an innate “need for relaxation”. In other instances, it acquires a didactic role employed through the model of games. The games formulate an imitative miniature corpus of training activity, through which a young creature derives and learns to garner skills required of them to encounter serious life-altering situations that one may potentially face later in life.² For example, the game of chess is believed to train strategic decision-making and plotting, specifically on battlefields, for young princes. A simple Rubik’s Cube often bears the primary understanding of sharpening one’s critical skills and assists them in building cognitive skills that shall be useful within the larger frame of life.

Games often serve as the mediating bodies through which play is performed. Within the corpus of childhood archaeology, a wide range of rattles and wheel carts have been excavated. On the other hand, a separate substratum of games has been devised for the mature. Games have been associated with the practice of prognostication, as evident in stories of the *Mahabharata*. In

Hindu mythology, Yudhishthira from the *Mahabharata* and Vidurapandita from the *Jatakas* have all taken their turns rolling the dice. The roll of a dice has consequently determined their fate, bringing Yudhishthira and the Pandavas ill luck. The haughtiness and deceptive nature of Sakuni, the contender of the Pandavas, are primarily identified through his associative trickery, reinforced through the game. According to popular myth and regional or oral retellings, the dice were crafted from the bones of his deceased father, King Subala. They were infused with magic properties and bore a curse that allowed Shakuni to foresee and control the results. If prognostication and faith-determining are placed on one end of the spectrum, the other end records the more popular conception of games as leisurely activities and rites.

An amusing wordplay can be attested upon *Leela* or *lila* which means two consecutive things within the context of games. *Leela* is a traditional board game that originated in ancient India and is considered a precursor to the modern-day Snakes and Ladders.³ It was likely created by Hindu scholars with the intention of teaching moral values. Simultaneously, *lila* is also representative of

the divine play that unfolds between the devotional figures of Radha and Krishna, signifying the holy union. This idiom of *lila* is often manifested or depicted as a nocturnal dance of the divine couple under the full moon, or is often manifested through a direct depiction of the game itself. As a part of this play or divine *lila*, Indian paintings have widely noted the exchange of identities between Radha and Krishna through the exchange of attire, on the fringes of roleplay.

This gaming impulse, as one perceives it, has been endemic since the beginning of civilisational histories in India. The sites of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro have been excavated and revealed six-sided and four-sided dice. The existence of bone dice excavated from Egypt essentially proves that the allusion of the bone dice in the *Mahabharata* did not simply arise from a speculative standpoint. These objects have an origin; they have been touched, rigorously used, and even buried in funerary sites alongside other objects of the quotidian.

Six-sided and four-sided dice have been widely excavated from Harappa and

Mohenjo-Daro of the ancient Indus Valley Civilisation, alongside extant tantalising brick game boards. The Rig Veda records a popular hymn that sheds light on a gambler's lament of loss, evidencing the presence and practice of gambling in ancient India. The game of dice between the Hindu god Shiva and his consort Parvati is illustrated beautifully in Shulman and Handelman's seminal essay on the game of dice. The game follows a cyclical pattern where Shiva eternally loses to Parvati and hence retires to the forests, and Parvati wins him back through self-transformation.⁴ For a society that has for so long strategically relied and been bolstered by games, courtly or folk, sacred or secular, it is of utmost importance to locate these games as a crucible for unearthing the civilisational histories of the periods they inhabit.

The act of play is different from the playful act. Yet, they exist in a state of overlap. The play-act simply entails playing or engaging in a game. The playful act underpins a tendency to play-pretend, through trickery or mockery. A sentiment akin to this is observed in a *Baramasa* painting depicting a game of dice in the eighth month of the Hindu calendar, *Karttika*. The creation of a

master painter succeeding Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler, the painting represents lovers seated atop an open terrace. Identified as a derivative of Keshavadasa's celebrated text *Kavipriya*, it elucidates the time of Deepavali, the festival of lights.⁵ This specific *Baramasa* painting has been circulated and undergone multiple re-interpretations. Andrew Topsfield identifies this portrayal of "ideal poetic lovers" as a scene that perfectly exemplifies *Krishnalila*, as in a scene of Krishna and Radha playing for gold coins with three stick dice on a terrace on Diwali night.⁶

The suggestion of an amorous end to the game is suggested by Topsfield and Goswamy through an analysis of the objects that surround them. Goswamy observes the full sacks lying on the carpet close by, and the heaps of golden coins that lie tossed by their sides. Yet, Krishna's bag of coins appears to be larger, and he also has two bags, as opposed to one on her side. Radha, who is seated facing Krishna, seems to firmly point her finger towards the ivory die, levelling some accusation in mock anger. The playful act or the guise of play-pretence is evident here, as she protests rather coyly. Krishna, in turn, gazes at her

and takes in her lustrous form, instead of aiding her game-related concerns.⁷ It is splendid to think about how and why an artist would choose to employ a game scene with such intricacy and refined execution, only to suggest a consecutive departure from it.

The painting is divided into two registers. In the upper register, the night sky dotted with specks suggesting stars, is illuminated artificially by a pair of nightlamps from two suspended poles situated at the right corner of the painting. The barricaded terrace is shielded from public view, and neither does it allow a glimpse of the outside to the onlooker. The lovers sit at a threshold space atop a rectangular carpet, which is tossed right outside what appears to open into the residential quarters inside. However, the painter does not allow access into the interior space of the residence. The door behind the lovers opens into what seemingly represents the entry into the household, but the light from the lamps perched in the sky, or the candles that burn on a golden stand, does not illuminate the interior. In Topsfield's work on games, he elaborates on the conduciveness of games played during Diwali to herald good luck. To roll the dice

in a game of chaupar (cross and circle board game) during the festival of Diwali was to foretell one's family or business fortunes for the upcoming year.⁸

However, there is an interference here. It can not be ascertained that it is the game of chaupar that has cast a spell on the enchanted lovers. There is no game board in sight. However, the throw of the rectangular die suggests a gambling episode. Huizinga has reflected on the "tension" generated by play in wanting to achieve something difficult, to succeed. Play functions on the unreleased tension that is stirred up, in an attempt to arrive at a destination, to end the very tension. This element of tenseness asserts an ethical value in testing the player's prowess and "fairness". Despite the player's ardent desire to achieve victory, they must comply with the rules of the game. The temporary world of pretence and myth-making ultimately collapses when rules are broken or tampered with, collapsing the play-world and setting real life going again. Additionally, he also elucidates the role of the "false player" or the cheat, who pretends to be playing the game and thus, not robbing the play of its "illusion", and hence not shattering the

play-world.⁹ The aspect of tension-creation stirred up by this painting is commendable. Moments exist at the brims, the divine couple sit at the intersection of the home and the outside, in public and under the open sky, yet in the privacy of guarded walls.

Krishna embodies the "false player", who seems to have plotted an unfair means of victory. The temporary play-world that surrounds and engulfs the players might be on the verge of emotional eruption, and the transcendence into the real world resulting in the union is conspicuous and supposedly, not too far away. Play doubles itself, once and primarily through the dice and game, and secondly through a performed and pretended argument that is at its crux of development. It functions as a passage, a vestibule through which the conflict and tension are ignited and expressed. Through this very act of pretence and more formally, play-pretence, games transcend as acts of mere entertainment. Krishna transitions from a victorious gamer to a lover, who, by his own will, takes the liberty of pursuing an unfair act of winning, only to be lovingly chided and reprimanded by his beloved. One is drawn to look inwards at and beyond

their crouching bodies into the background, but is disrupted by the almost open door that invites and allures but never provides complete access to the looker. The overhanging blinds are tied with festoon blinds and are positioned peculiarly like a proscenium curtain, meant to insinuate a centralised framing of the lovers when viewed from the outside. One slight tuck at the tiebands and the curtains shall close on them. The compositional devices bind the scene into a compact game, at the zenith of its fruition, also signalling that the viewer-intruder must look away, as did the painter in hurriedly closing in on the lovers. The element of tension nurtured and sustained throughout the play forms a leitmotif that doubles as a marker of eros. The durational longevity demanded by a game to proceed into completion restrains the lovers from immediately collapsing or shattering the play-world, thus creating a moment of cathartic dramatisation.

The play-world is one of the rare sites where these transgressions are allowed to unfold. The winner partakes in treachery to kindle jealousy. Jealousy manifests as an expression of desire, which later develops into passionate flatteries of desire. Jacob Schmidt Madsen's "Gameplay As Foreplay" consecutively hints towards this. In the games of *Mānasollāsa*, a 12th-century Sanskrit encyclopedic text written by King Somesvara III, the nature of amorous games played between the king and the women imitates such patterns. Which woman regards the king's partiality, which woman responds to it with a furrowed brow, which woman pries and waits to ridicule him on his defeat and which woman grows jealous when another rejoices?¹⁰ In one's jubilation lies another's pathos. The king, inspired by the popular motif of Krishna, and in this context, Krishna, like the king, observes, absorbs and experiences the varying emotions of his beloved *nayika*.

Notes

1. *Barahmasa* literally translates to "twelve months" from Hindi/Indo-Aryan languages, referring to a genre of poetry and painting. It illustrates the changing seasons and landscapes of the Himalayan foothills through the lens of human emotion.
2. Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Translated by R. F. C. Hull. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1949, pp 2
3. Leela, "The Game of Life," Leela, n.d., <https://lilagame.ru>.
4. Don Handelman and David Shulman, *God Inside Out: Śiva's Game of Dice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)
5. B. N. Goswamy and Eberhard Fischer, *Pahari Paintings: The Horst Metzger Collection in the Museum Rietberg* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2017),
6. Andrew Topsfield, "Dice, Chaupar, Chess: Indian Games in History, Myth, Poetry, and Art," in *The Art of Play: Board and Card Games of India*, ed. Andrew Topsfield (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2006), pp 18
7. B. N. Goswamy and Eberhard Fischer, op cit. pp 48
8. Andrew Topsfield, op cit. pp 18
9. Huizinga, Johan, op cit. pp 11
10. Jacob Schmidt-Madsen, "Gameplay as Foreplay at a Medieval Indian Court: Translation and Discussion of *Mānasollāsa* 5:16, *Phaṇjikākriḍā*," *History of Science in South Asia* 10 (2022): 169–234, <https://doi.org/10.18732/hssa82>, pp 216

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Plates



Fig. 1: *Shiva and Parvati Playing Chaupar: Folio from a Rasamanjari Series, Basohli (Jammu)*
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 2: Krishna and Radha gamble on Diwali night with stick dice, Guler, Punjab Hills, c. 1760-70, Museum Rietberg, Zurich

Vāsakasajjā Nāyikā: From Miniature Painting to Modern Interpretation — A Critical Analysis of Select Studies

Aakansha Roy

Introduction

The image of the woman adorning herself has long held a central place in Indian art and literature. Known as the Vāsakasajjā Nāyikā she is among the *Aṣṭa Nāyikās*, the eight heroines defined in Bharata Muni's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and expanded upon in later poetic treatises such as Keshavdas's *Rasikapriya*. Each Nayika represents a distinct psychological emotional state in relation to love. The Vāsakasajjā, whose name literally means “prepares her bed and decorates herself to please her lover” is depicted as the ideal of anticipation, grace and romantic preparation.

In classical Sanskrit aesthetics, she embodies *śṛṅgāra rasa*, the erotic sentiment that encompasses beauty, desire, and emotional refinement. The act of adornment (*Alaṃkāra*) becomes not merely physical but deeply symbolic, reflecting emotional readiness and inner harmony.

In Miniature paintings, the identification of the nayikas is somewhat easier, even though often misidentified, the artists have followed the character traits as seen in the Sanskrit texts and traditional literature. The *Natyashastra* described such a nayika as the one “Dressed up for union.”¹ [[XXIV, 212., *Natyashastra*]. However, modern artists such as Raja Ravi Verma, MAR Chughtai, Amrita

Sher-Gil, have often taken inspiration from the Indian styles of painting tradition, they have never outrightly said the kind of Nayika they were painting. It is only through the situation or characteristics that we can impose a kind of Nayika on the painting. It is more interpretative than said, and a judgment on the artist. The modern reinterpretation of the Vāsakasajjā Nāyikā dismantles the aestheticized object of anticipation and reconfigures her as a self-aware subject, thereby marking a transition from *rasa*-based spectatorship to psychological interiority and female agency.

The Classical Concept of the Vāsakasajjā Nāyikā

In Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (2nd century BCE–2nd century CE), the *Aṣṭa Nāyikās* are presented as archetypes that help evoke the *śṛṅgāra rasa* in performance and visual representation. The classification of the *Aṣṭa-Nāyikā* can be traced to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, where the emotional states of the heroine in relation to her lover are systematically categorized. The text states:

तत्र वासकसज्जा वा विरहोत्कण्ठिता वा ।
स्वाधीनपतिका वापि कलहान्तरिता वा ॥
खण्डिता विप्रलब्धा च तथा प्रोषितभर्तृका
।

तथाऽभिसारिका चैव इत्यष्टौ नायिकाः स्मृताः॥

Later writers like Keshavdas in *Rasikapriya* (17th century) elaborated their characteristics in further detail where he elaborated on more types of Nayika. The Vāsakasajjā is the woman who, confident in her lover's affection, prepares herself for union. Her chamber is filled with fragrances, flowers, ornaments, and mirrors. Her attendants assist her as she gazes at her reflection and decorates herself, embodying grace, anticipation, and emotional fulfilment. Bhanudatta in *Rasamanjari* (2) describes such a nayika:

*She puts on all her jewellery,
Perfumed her thick head of hair,
And at her bedside had them place areca nut and
betel leaf.
And the bedroom, when the woman
entered, her body all aglow,
was a darkened overcast day
set ablaze by golden ketaki flowers.*

The Nāyikās within *śṛṅgāra rasa* can be categorized into two broad emotional states: love in union (*saṁbhoga*) and love in separation (*vipralambha*). The Vāsakasajjā Nāyikā belongs to the category of love in union (*saṁbhoga*).

In poetic imagination, the Aṣṭa Nāyikās represent not merely sensual beauty but the harmony between inner emotional states and their outward expression. For example, the mirror (*darpaṇa*) symbolizes self-awareness, while adornment represents the

transformation of emotion into visible beauty. The Vāsakasajjā's serenity and poise distinguish her from other Nāyikās, such as the *Virahotkaṇṭhitā*, who pines in separation, or the *Kalahāntarītā*, who is estranged after a quarrel. She thus reflects a state of emotional completeness and confidence.

According to the philosophy of *rasa*, as explained by thinkers like Abhinavagupta, these states of love are perceived not as individual feelings but as universal aesthetic experiences. In the realm of art, the Vāsakasajjā thus becomes a symbol of aesthetic excellence, where human love is transformed into an ideal of spiritual and emotional beauty.

Re-reading the Vāsakasajjā

In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bharata's definition of the Vāsakasajjā as the woman "dressed for union" situates her firmly within *saṁbhoga śṛṅgāra*, the mode of love oriented toward anticipated fulfilment rather than separation (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, XXIV). Yet this anticipation is not merely narrative; it is affective and aesthetic. Later theorists such as Bhanudatta in the *Rasamañjarī* and Keshavdas in the *Rasikapriya* elaborate this category through sensorial detail, perfumed hair, decorated beds, ornaments laid out, and lamps lit, constructing an environment in which inner emotion is externalized through material culture.

What is essential in this context is that the Vāsakasajjā is characterized not merely by an

action but by a state of preparedness. Adornment serves as a semiotic system: the mirror (*darpaṇa*) denotes self-awareness, flowers suggest fertility and longing, and the onset of night signifies the impending union. According to Abhinavagupta's theory of *rasa*, these symbols do not convey the personal emotions of an individual woman but function within the process of *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*, or universalization. Consequently, the *Vāsakasajjā* is less about a psychological individual and more about an affective arrangement, an aesthetic condition designed to evoke *śṛṅgāra* *rasa* in the observer.

Vasaksajja Nayika in Miniature Painting Tradition

Miniature painting traditions translate this aesthetic state into a tightly regulated visual language. Across Rajasthani, Pahadi, and Mughal schools, the *Vāsakasajjā* appears within a consistent iconographic framework: the prepared bed, twilight settings, subdued palettes, solitary figures, and restrained bodily gestures. This repetition is not a lack of invention but evidence of a shared visual grammar designed to sustain.

In this section, I shall not go over each school of miniature painting and its sub-schools. My aim is to understand some prevalent features or activities across different schools of miniature paintings that help us understand the *Vāsakasajjā* *nayika* better. Jayadeva, the celebrated 12th-century poet, describes *Vāsakasajjā* in his *Gīta Govinda* *ashtapadi* "Nath Hare" as follows:

पश्यति दिशि दिशि रहसि भवन्तम्।
तदधर मधुर मधूनि पिबन्तम्॥
नाथ हरे जगन्नाथ हरे।
सीदति राधा वासगृहे ध्रुवम्॥

Translation: Radha is surely (*dhruvam*) pining (*sidati*) in the bed-chamber (*vasagrhe*), sucking at (*pibantam*=*drinking*) that (*tat*) sweet (*madhura*), honeyed (*madhuni*) lower lip (*adhara*), secretly (*rahasi*) looking (*pashyati*) in all directions (*dishi dishi*) for you (*bhavantam*), O Lord (*natha*) Hari (*hare*), O Lord of the Universe (*jagat+natha*)

The late eighteenth-century Kangra painting (Fig. 1) exemplifies this discipline of restraint. The *Nāyikā*'s body is rendered in gentle profile, her gaze lowered, her posture contained. The surrounding forest is not descriptive but evocative of enclosure and privacy, reinforcing the inward turn of her emotional state. Anticipation here is communicated through stillness rather than gesture. The lush green landscape creates a layer of isolation, emphasizing the absence of the lover. However, there is a lack of bed for union, her body posture showcases an anticipatory stance, looking out for her lover. Her one finger is on her chin, signalling how she may be lost in the thoughts of her lover, rather than an anxious stance or facial expression. Even though the bed is missing, her positioning and facial expression match accurately with the *Vāsakasajjā* type *nayika*.

In the Bundi painting however (Fig. 2), there is a distinct bed which has been prepared by

the nāyikā. The Nāyikā is seated on a prepared bed, surrounded by paired animals that invoke a romantic mood. The visual language aligns closely with poetic descriptions in Rasikapriya, where the environment itself participates in anticipation. Darkness in these images is not incidental; it intensifies the affective charge. The Nāyikā does not seek or pursue, rather, she waits. Miniature painting thus presents the Vāsakasajjā as an idealized emotional type whose subjectivity is subsumed within an aesthetic system oriented toward spectatorship.

The visual language of the miniature aligns closely with the poetic description in Rasikapriya, where the Vāsakasajjā Nāyikā is described as preparing herself and the environment in anticipation of the lover's arrival:

चंदन विटप वपु कोमल अमल दल,
कलित, ललित लता लपटि ललाम की।
केशवदास तामें दुरी दीप की सिखा सी दिपै,
इकलस नीलबस दुती अंग की।
पीने पानी पंछी झुंड बस सकल जित जित,
होइ बित बित चकित चहैं चोप संग की।
नंदलाल-आगमन बिलोकत कुंजजाल बाल,
लीनी गई तेहि काल पंजर-पतंग की।

This verse describes the heroine waiting within a bower, adorned and surrounded by nature, her beauty likened to a flame of a lamp, while she anxiously anticipates the arrival of her beloved. The imagery of enclosure, stillness, and expectation resonates with the miniature's depiction of the prepared bed and the Nāyikā's restrained posture.

Darkness in these images is therefore not incidental. The Nāyikā's immobility intensifies the affective charge; she does not seek, pursue, or call, she waits. Miniature painting thus presents the Vāsakasajjā as an idealized emotional type whose subjectivity is subsumed within an aesthetic system oriented toward spectatorship and rasa experience.

Modern Transformations

The modern engagement with the Vāsakasajjā marks a decisive shift from codified archetype to individualized subject. While artists such as Raja Ravi Varma, Abdur Rahman Chughtai, and Amrita Sher-Gil draw upon the emotional residue of the Nāyikā, they dismantle her iconographic scaffolding and reconfigure anticipation as psychological interiority. The transformation is not merely stylistic; it reflects a change in how feminine subjectivity is constructed and perceived.

Raja Ravi Varma

Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906), widely regarded as a pioneering figure in modern Indian painting, played a crucial role in this transition. Known for synthesizing Indian mythological subjects with European academic realism, Varma sought inspiration from classical Sanskrit literature while employing oil painting techniques derived from Western traditions. His works often translated literary heroines into visually accessible and emotionally expressive figures. Paintings such as Shakuntala, Damayanti, and Mohini demonstrate his engagement with the

emotional typologies found in aesthetic treatises, even though they are not explicitly labelled as Nāyikās. Through these works, Varma effectively reinterprets the classical heroine within a modern pictorial language.

In the painting *Mohini* (fig. 3), Varma captures qualities that resonate with the Vāsakasajjā Nāyikā. The figure stands in a poised yet dynamic stance, with one foot slightly forward, suggesting anticipation and readiness. Her body is gently twisted, creating a subtle sense of movement without overt action. This restrained dynamism parallels the emotional state of the Vāsakasajjā, who is defined not by action but by preparation. The flowing, unbound hair and elaborate jewellery emphasize adornment, while the sensuous rendering of drapery accentuates the corporeal presence of the figure. Unlike miniature painting, where adornment functions within a symbolic system, Varma's treatment emphasizes tactile realism. Jewellery glints under light, fabric folds respond to gravity, and the body occupies measurable space. The emphasis shifts from decorative symbolism to embodied presence. Mohini's gaze, slightly withdrawn yet aware, further enhances this ambiguity between anticipation and self-consciousness. She appears both prepared for an encounter and absorbed in her own presence, marking a departure from the purely archetypal Vāsakasajjā.

The mythological foundation of Raja Ravi Varma's *Mohini* may be traced to the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, where the episode of

Vishnu assuming the enchanting female form appears in the Eighth Skandha, within the narrative of the churning of the ocean (Samudra Manthana). Raja Ravi Varma's interpretation of *Mohini* draws upon this textual moment, but rather than illustrating the narrative event directly, he isolates the enchantress as a self-contained figure. The painting emphasizes bodily grace, sensuous stance, and elaborate adornment, foregrounding the visual power of feminine allure that the Purāṇic narrative attributes to Vishnu's illusion. Mohini is depicted standing in contrapposto, one leg gently bent, suggesting poised anticipation. Yet unlike miniature painting, where adornment functions as symbolic code, Varma's realism renders these elements materially tangible.

The emphasis moves from narrative deception to aesthetic anticipation. In this sense, Varma's *Mohini* may be interpreted as a modern reconfiguration of the Vāsakasajjā Nāyikā: she is adorned, poised, and anticipatory, yet her subjectivity emerges through bodily realism and individualized expression.

This transformation becomes more pronounced in *Radha in the Moonlight* (c. 1890). Here, Varma retains the anticipatory stillness associated with the Vāsakasajjā but relocates it within the language of Western academic realism. The symbolic bed, attendants, and ritual objects characteristic of miniature painting are absent. Instead, moonlight becomes the primary expressive device. The soft illumination isolates Radha's

figure against a subdued background, creating a quiet psychological space. Light performs the function once carried by iconographic elements: it intensifies mood, directs attention inward, and establishes emotional tension. Waiting is no longer structured by allegorical signs but by emotional restraint and bodily stillness. The viewer encounters Radha not as a codified aesthetic type but as an individual consciousness suspended in time. Yet Varma's treatment remains idealizing. The softness of form, luminous skin, and graceful posture maintain the aestheticized femininity of the earlier tradition. Her interiority is offered to the viewer as a gentle spectacle, preserving the pleasurable dimension of śṛṅgāra while subtly introducing psychological depth.

Abdur Rahman Chughtai

In the works of Abdur Rahman Chughtai, the transformation continues. Chughtai's engagement with the Nāyikā motif represents a further shift toward interiorization. Influenced by the wash technique associated with Bengal School artists and Japanese painting traditions, Chughtai abandons the volumetric realism of Varma in favour of fluid lines and atmospheric tonalities. In *Hariman Tota* (c. 1920s), (fig. 5) the nayika can be seen decorating herself, where the presence of the parrot adds the tonality of romance and anticipation. It is contrary to the painting of Gloomy Radhika (fig. 6) where the anticipation can be seen turning into sadness, perhaps disheartenment, where she has been left alone for too long by her lover where she

no longer fits into the Vasaksajja nayika, and may perhaps be a Proshtibhatrika nayika or Vipralabdha nayika.

Through the works of Varma and Chughtai, the Vāsakasajjā undergoes a significant transformation. In The Vāsakasajjā thus survives not as a fixed iconographic type but as an emotional residue, reinterpreted through the visual languages of modern Indian art.

Amrita Sher-Gill and the Feminist Gaze

The transformation culminates in the works of Amrita Sher-Gil. Amrita Sher-Gill's *The Toilette* (1933) (fig. 7) and *The Bride* (1940) enact the most radical reconfiguration of the Vāsakasajjā. While the act of preparation remains, its purpose is fundamentally altered. There is no lover implied, no promise of arrival. The body prepares, but for itself.

Sher-Gill's women are heavy, grounded, and inward-looking. Their nudity or partial drapery resists erotic display; instead, it foregrounds bodily awareness. As Yashodhara Dalmia observes in relation to *The Bride*, Sher-Gill's figures embody a deep, inward yearning. This yearning is not oriented toward union but toward self-recognition. Through a female gaze, Sher-Gill dismantles the aesthetic economy that once positioned the Nāyikā as an object of pleasurable contemplation. Adornment becomes an act of self-engagement rather than seduction. Sher-Gill's engagement with such themes must be situated within her conscious turn

toward Indian visual traditions in the early 1930s. After her return to India, she repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with academic realism and sought inspiration in Ajanta murals, folk art, and miniature painting from Bundi. As she wrote in a letter, Indian art, for her, possessed “an extraordinary vitality and intensity of feeling,” qualities she found lacking in Western academic modes. Scholars such as Stella Kramrisch and Yashodhara Dalmia have noted that while Sher-Gill did not imitate miniature painting stylistically, she absorbed its compositional stillness, frontal intimacy, and emotional compression, reworking these elements through a modern, painterly language.

Within this context, *The Toilette* may be read as a deliberate inversion of the Vāsakasajjā motif. Sher-Gill’s women are heavy, grounded, and resolutely inward-looking. Their nudity or partial drapery resists erotic display; instead, it foregrounds bodily awareness and psychological presence. Unlike the idealized Nayikā of miniature painting, whose adornment externalizes emotion for aesthetic consumption, Sher-Gill’s figures remain opaque and self-contained. As Yashodhara Dalmia observes in relation to *The Bride*, these women embody a profound inward “yearning,” yet this yearning is not oriented toward union with another but toward self-recognition and emotional self-possession.

Through a distinctly female gaze, Sher-Gill dismantles the aesthetic economy that

historically positioned the Nayikā as an object of pleasurable contemplation within *śṛṅgāra rasa*. The viewer is no longer invited to relish anticipation as an erotic spectacle. Instead, the paintings insist on the woman’s autonomy over her own body and interior life. Adornment becomes an act of self-engagement rather than seduction; waiting is no longer a performance for desire but a condition of embodied consciousness.

Here, waiting is no longer a transitional phase within a romantic narrative. It becomes existential, an awareness of the self suspended in time. The Vāsakasajjā, stripped of iconography, survives as an affective residue: the quiet density of anticipation without its traditional object.

Conclusion

Tracing the Vāsakasajjā from miniature painting to modern art reveals not the disappearance of anticipation but its profound reorientation. In miniature paintings, waiting is aestheticized, regulated, and universalized to produce *rasa*. In modern art, the same pause persists, but its ownership changes.

In Raja Ravi Varma, anticipation is humanized yet idealized. In Chughtai, it becomes lyrical and introspective. In Sher-Gill, it is reclaimed as a condition of embodied consciousness. Through a feminist lens, the modern Vāsakasajjā ceases to perform waiting for an external gaze. She waits with herself.

This shift, from archetype to subject, from spectacle to self-awareness, marks the

transformation of the Nayikā into a modern woman. What remains constant is the charged space between readiness and fulfillment. What changes is who controls its meaning.

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Plates



Fig. 1: *Radha Pining for Krishna* from a *Gita Govinda* manuscript, 1775-1780, Kangra, Himachal Pradesh state, Punjab Hills, India.



Fig. 2: Vasaksajja Nayika, Bundi, Rajasthan, circa A.D. 1700, National Museum.



Fig. 3: *Mohini*, Raja Ravi Varma

<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/mohini-playing-with-a-ball-raja-ravi-varma/sgH5u2H2mYspjw?hl=en>



Fig. 4: *Lady in Moonlight*, Raja Ravi Varma.

https://museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/ngma_del-ngma-02013-942

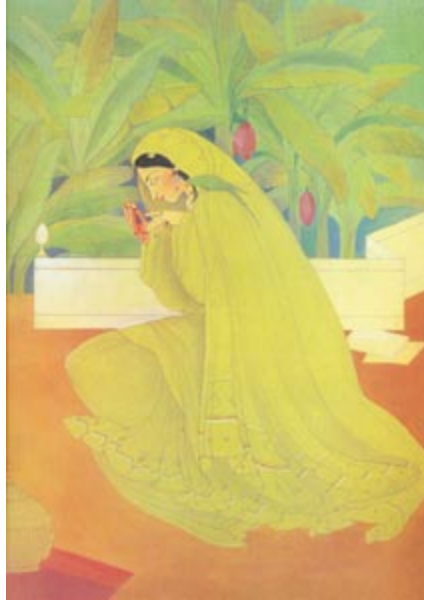


Fig. 5: *Hiraman Tota*, MAR Chughtai, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.



Fig. 6: *Gloomy Radhika*, MAR Chughtai, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.



Fig. 7: The Toilette (1933), Amrita Sher-Gill



Fig. 8: The Bride, Amrita Sher-Gill

From Nalanda to Chandigarh: B. N. Goswamy and an Indian Idea of the Museum

Stuti Mudgil

The modern museum in India carries within its foundations the tensions of its birth. As historian Tapati Guha-Thakurta has demonstrated, the nineteenth-century museum in South Asia functioned less as a space for aesthetic contemplation and more as a bureaucratic machine designed to extract, classify, and make India legible for imperial governance.¹ Early institutions, such as the Indian Museum in Calcutta (est. 1814), did not so much “preserve” Indian objects as transform them into evidence for anthropological, archaeological, and racialised narratives of the colonial state.² Against this legacy of object-centred display practices, where the work of art was severed from the life that had created it, the scholarship and curatorial practice of the late art historian BN Goswamy offered a radically different mode of seeing Indian art. He would often remind students that a painting “did not begin on the museum wall,” but in the courtyard, temple, or atelier where it was first imagined.³ His emphasis on context, kinship, lived tradition, as well as the inner life of the artist, worked not simply as an art-historical method, but as a sustained counterargument to the epistemologies that shaped the colonial museum.⁴

The core argument of this essay is that Goswamy’s approach, rooted in microhistory, genealogical reconstruction, close reading of texts, and deep engagement with living

traditions, functions as a decolonial intervention in how Indian art can be displayed, understood, and cared for in museum spaces. He did not write overt polemics against colonial museology; however, the methods he developed over five decades amount to a re-centring of Indian artistic knowledge systems and an undoing of the distance that colonial institutions introduced. This essay draws on his scholarship, his curatorial practice, and theoretical literature on museums and coloniality to examine how his work offers a way of bringing together the object, its maker, and its viewer.

When Goswamy entered the field in the 1950s and 1960s, the dominant approach to Indian painting was still governed by taxonomies inherited from colonial scholarship.⁵ Artists were largely anonymous; works were grouped by stylistic schools; and the visual habits of European connoisseurship shaped the interpretation of the pictures. It is not incidental that the earliest museum catalogues in colonial India relied heavily on these classificatory systems. The anthropologist Bernard Cohn has shown how such taxonomies formed part of the “investigative modalities” of colonial rule, structuring how India could be known and administered. The museum became part of this apparatus: a space where the “native object” could be studied, arranged, and made legible within a

European frame. The result was a museum culture in which Indian art was routinely detached from the worlds of narrative through which it had lived.

It is precisely this detachment that Goswamy's work sought to repair. His project was not antiquarian but relational. By tracing the genealogies of Pahari painters, he demonstrated that Indian artists were neither nameless artisans nor interchangeable executors of courtly style, but highly individual practitioners embedded within social networks. *Pahari Masters* (1992), perhaps his best-known contribution, is emblematic of this approach. Through painstaking archival work using family records, inscriptions, letters, and court documents, he reconnected over a hundred artists to their lineages, revealing the depth of their training and the nuances of their creative decisions. In doing so, he challenged one of the most enduring legacies of colonial art history, which was the erasure of individual Indian artistic agency. If the colonial museum presented art as detached from the hands that made it, Goswamy insisted that to see Indian painting fully, one must first recognise the living human worlds that produced it. This mindset is reflected in a note he made about the use of beetle-wing inlays when writing on a Pahari painting in the Chandigarh Museum, in which he described it as "a whisper of devotion in pigment."⁶

His method has far-reaching implications for museum practice. By recovering artists' names, relationships, and movements, he

shifted the interpretive centre from the external gaze of classification to the internal logic of the tradition itself. Exhibitions curated by him, both in India and abroad, foregrounded the mutual obligations between the painters and the patrons, as well as emotional and philosophical sensibilities that informed their visual choices. Moreover, Goswamy's writings encourage readers to engage with art as a meditative act rather than a hasty visual survey. He once described a painting as "a pulse... a trace of its maker's world." This sensitivity to the maker's world shaped his engagement with named Pahari masters such as Nainsukh of Guler and Manaku. In Nainsukh's celebrated portrait of Raja Balwant Singh of Jasrota, the ruler is shown not in imperial splendour but in moments of private reflection like writing a letter, supervising a hunt, seated informally within a tent. Goswamy read such images not merely as court documents but as subtle negotiations of intimacy between patron and painter. The brush registers personality; the composition records proximity.. He insisted that a museum must honour the rhythm and lineage of the tradition it represents.⁷

Late art historian Kavita Singh argued that one of the most pressing challenges for museums in South Asia is "restoring the severed contexts" of objects without romanticising them.⁸ Goswamy, in lectures, essays, and exhibitions, repeatedly returned to the idea that Indian art must be approached not as a static inheritance but as a living continuum.⁹ His discussions of manuscript traditions, for instance, drew on Sanskrit,

Braj, and Punjabi texts to show how image and word were understood as mutually enlivening. His association with and deep admiration for the Calico Museum, presented repeatedly through his *Art & Soul* column in *The Tribune*, emphasise the importance of animate presences within ritual, pedagogical, and performative settings as revealed in works of art. To treat them merely as objects in vitrines, stripped of the recitations, gestures, and rhythms that once accompanied them, was to misread their purpose.

The anthropologist, James Clifford, writing in the 1980s on ethnographic museums, noted how such institutions often transformed dynamic practices into “salvaged” artefacts.¹⁰ Goswamy’s writings counter this tendency by insisting that Indian visual traditions derive meaning from continuity and from relationships maintained across generations, from stories retold, and from the shared vocabulary of form and devotion. This sensitivity to living tradition shaped his curatorial work as well. In exhibitions, he often organised galleries to mimic the visual and narrative rhythms of the traditions he studied. Rather than isolating works by category, he allowed them to speak to one another across time and space, creating a sense of unfolding experience. Viewers encountered paintings not as discrete aesthetic objects but as part of a larger imaginative world governed by *rasa* (the agreeable quality of something, especially the emotional or aesthetic impression of a work of art), *bhava* (psychological states of the mind that convey emotion and meaning to

the audience), and narrative resonance. Although he curated many exhibitions abroad, he never appeared to be catering to foreign audiences’ tastes, instead, he sought to foreground the complexity and integrity of Indian visual traditions.¹¹

This approach stands in contrast to the early colonial museum’s habit of displaying Indian art according to typologies derived from comparative archaeology. It also differs from the formalist modernist display strategies that dominated many post-independence museums. Goswamy’s displays insisted that the museum need not remain a space of distance; it could become a space of encounter. A striking example of this is his interpretation of the Krishna-Radha theme.

Instead of treating the paintings solely as visual extensions of episodes from the *Bhagavata Purana*, he emphasised how painters made interpretive choices that mirrored the emotional peaks of poetic texts. In his analysis, the artists were a reader, listener, and devotee before they were makers of images. This repositioning of the artist as an informed participant in a shared cultural world is deeply at odds with how colonial museums first framed Indian art as the product of collective, anonymous “native crafts”. It also challenges contemporary curatorial tendencies which often foreground methods of visual analysis without attending to the internal categories through which Indian art understands itself. In a 1997 *Art & Soul* column, he expressed his concern at how little care is extended to audiences:

“Why can’t we tap into the massive audience, or viewership, who long to know and to see, even hunger perhaps? Because we are not doing enough, it does not take much effort, but we simply do not work hard enough or care enough.”¹²

The decolonial force of Goswamy’s work can also be seen in his insistence on humility before tradition. He frequently cautioned audiences against approaching Indian art with the assumption that its meanings could be captured through external theoretical systems alone. Instead, he encouraged readers and viewers to attune themselves to the sensibilities embedded in the objects: the iconographic depth of Vishnu’s forms¹³, the symbolic richness of gesture, the layered references in miniature painting, the scriptural echoes within manuscript illumination. By invoking familiar devotional texts, such as verses from the *Hanuman Chalisa*¹⁴ (a 16th-century Hindi devotional hymn in praise of Hanuman, widely recited across North India), as well as discussing various personal encounters, he drew attention to how deeply visuality is woven into Indian cultural imagination.¹⁵ This move did not simplify the artwork; instead, it opened a pathway for viewers to recognise the intellectual and spiritual labour underlying visual forms. In the preface of his book, *Rang Roopa*, he mentions that he “hopes through his work, works of art from India become part of the readers’ awareness, even perhaps their imagination...”¹⁶

A book devoted to perhaps the most laymen of readers became a repository of the most fascinating stories and facts, constantly prompting the reader to study them deeper. He further revisited the connection of storytelling and arts via his lectures and articles. In another article, he says: “I am sure Calico museum is the most Indian of all museums in India...It is not easy to think of other museums that succeed in shaking themselves free of Western models in the decisive manner that the Calico Museum does...beyond just an Indian facade, it taps into a rich Indian vein and embodies ways of seeing, and of establishing relationships, that are most appropriately rooted in the culture from which the object it houses come.”

This clear connection between the context and the story and their juxtaposition with the displayed object is what draws the viewer closer to art, and its history.

By showing how paintings invite the viewer into the inner world of the figures they depict, he expanded the interpretive space of the museum beyond its traditional disciplinary boundaries. Central to his decolonial intervention is his refusal to separate scholarship from care. In the Indian context, where living traditions often intersect with museum collections, the ethics of collecting and displaying become deeply entangled with questions of cultural responsibility. In this sense, his work aligns with global debates on the museum’s role in cultural stewardship, yet it remains distinctly Indian in its grounding.

His methods offer a model for an Indian museology that neither imitates Western paradigms nor isolates itself from global discourse, but instead draws from the depth of Indian artistic traditions to craft its own ways of seeing. At a moment when museums

worldwide are grappling with questions of restitution, context, and voice, his scholarship offers a blueprint for how Indian institutions might imagine a future grounded in continuity, sensitivity, and intellectual integrity.

Notes

1. Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004)
2. Ibid.
3. Usha Bhatia, a long time associate of Dr. Goswamy, in personal conversation with the author.
4. Goswamy, B. N., *Pahari Masters: Court Painters of Northern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).
5. Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996)
6. B. N. Goswamy, *Conversations*, 2022.
7. B. N. Goswamy, "Content, Context and Chaos," *The Tribune*, 20 June 2003, where he talks about the importance of courtesy and respect shown to borrowed art and historical objects.
8. Kavita Singh, "Museums and the Politics of Cultural Representation in India," *Art History* 24, no. 2 (2001): 247–256.
9. Trisha Gupta, "The Art of Seeing: B. N. Goswamy and The Spirit of Indian Painting," *Chhotahazri blog* (7 Jan 2015). 'Its commissioning editor at Penguin, Nandini Mehta, had heard him lecture, and her brief to him was to "write the way you speak." To which he replied "It was a compliment, but also a challenge."
10. James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," in *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
11. Usha Bhatia, a long time associate of Dr. Goswamy, in personal conversation with the author.
12. B. N. Goswamy, *Conversations*, 2022.
13. Ritika Kochhar, *In the Lotus Feet of the Guru - A Conversation with BN Goswamy*, 2022: "I feel very strongly that visually we are illiterate. I'm going to lecture in Bombay, part of the Centenary Celebrations of the Museum, and the title I've given to it is The Things That We Do Not See. That's the title of my lecture. The person who has made things has thought

about it. We can't be that person, but we can try to get under the skin of that person. Look at the amount of thinking that went behind iconography."

14. Ibid, "Take the Hanuman Chalisa. I don't know if you recite it or have memorized it. It starts with 'Shri Guru Saroj Raj'- The Lotus feet of the Guru from which you take the dust. 'Nij man mukudar sudhar'- When mirrors used to be made of copper, you would clean them with the softest thing so that they wouldn't get scratched. And the softest thing that Tulsidas can think of is the pollen taken from the lotus feet of my Guru. With that I cleanse – not clean, cleanse the mirror of my heart. Why do I need to do that? 'Baranau Raghuvar Bimal Yash.' His aura is so clean because it has no additives. And if the mirror of my heart isn't cleansed, then how can I see his glorious aura? It's thrilling. We recite it like parrots. But if you pay some attention to all this, you will not forget this."
15. B. N. Goswamy, *Conversations*, 2022.
16. B. N. Goswamy, *Ranga Roopa* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2010). Preface: "In India, we have some wonderful paintings and sculptures that contain both meaning and delight; unfortunately, we do not often explore this world."

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- Bardhan, Anand. "Museums & Archives: A Public Space for Education." Talk presented at the International Museum Day commemoration Symposium, IGNCA, 2024.
- Goswamy, B. N. "Ways of Seeing Indian Painting." Lecture delivered at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi, 2012.

Plates



Fig. 1: This published Metropolitan Museum of Art article image demonstrates how beetle-wing fragments were used to represent shimmering inlays in jewelry. [Painted with Beetles: Shimmering jewels in Pahari School paintings \(May 2025\)](#).

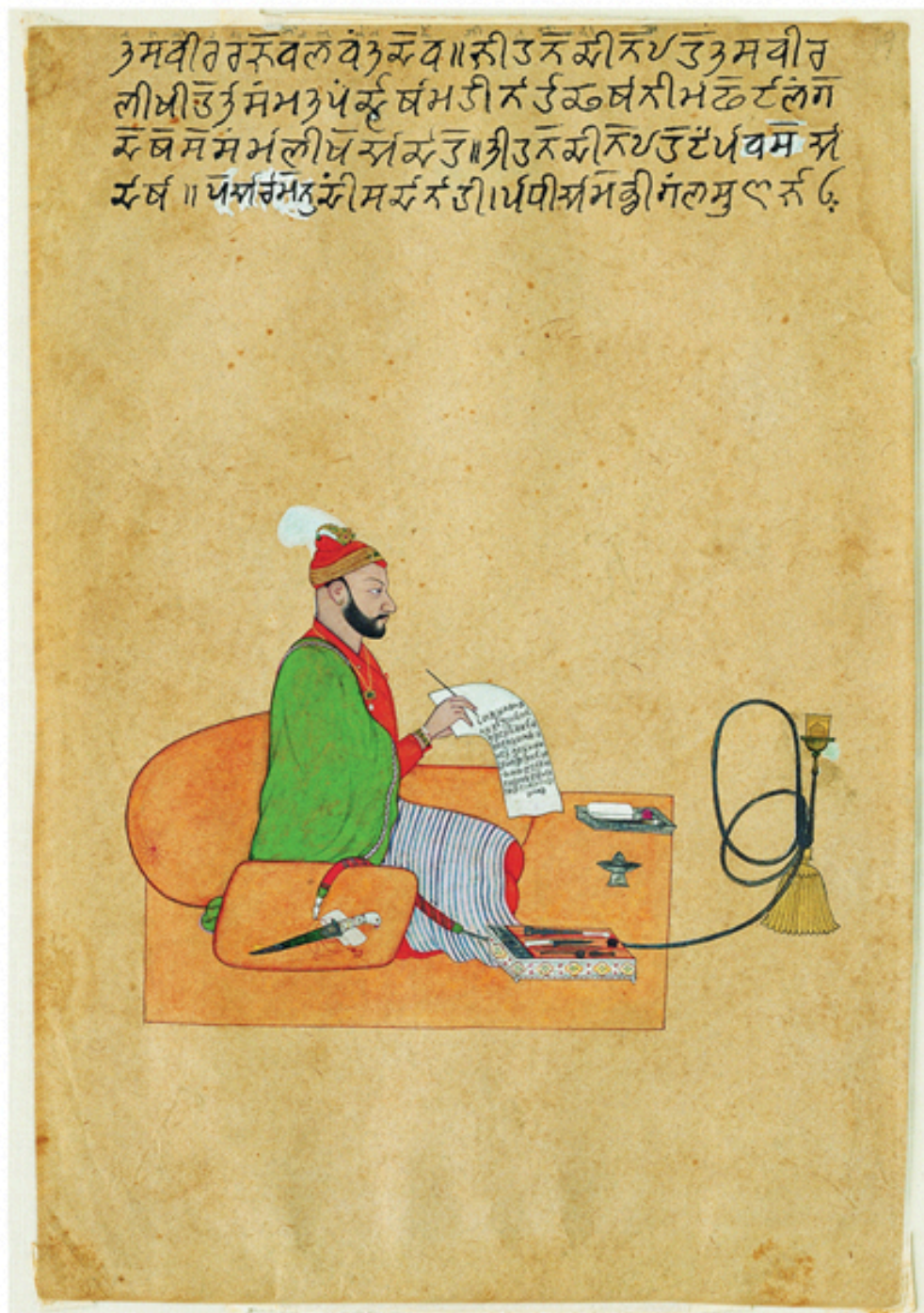


Fig. 2: Raja Balwant Singh writing a letter to Amrit Pal of Basholi, Nainsukh of Guler, c. 1740s, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya.

The informality of pose and spatial compression exemplify the relational intimacy Goswamy foregrounded.



Fig. 3: Radha and Krishna, Kangra school, 18th century, Allahabad Museum.