

Women in Pahari Miniature Paintings

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ABSTRACT

The Pahari School of Miniature painting and book illustration developed in the independent states of the Himalayan foothills between the 17th and 18th centuries and began to decline after 1800. The style of painting which flourished in Basohli, Jammu, Mankot, Nurpur, Chamba, Kangra, Guler, Mandi, and Garhwal in the hilly areas in the northwest has been termed the Pahari School. All paintings of these Schools provided vital information on women in Medieval India. Women in Pahari paintings have distinct facial features such as fish-shaped elongated eyes or large expressive lotus-shaped eyes, round chins, prominent noses, oval faces and receding foreheads. Popular themes in which women were depicted are portraits of local rulers and the Hindu gods and figures from Hindu mythology, Radha-Krishna and Madhava-Malati love themes and themes from the Bhagavata Purana, themes from literary texts like Rasa Manjari, Ramayana and Gita-Govinda, themes on Shiva and Parvati, Rama Lakshmana and Sita, Mahisasurmardini, King and Queen, etc.

Key Words : Women, Pahari Miniatures, Mythology, Literary, Basohli, Chamba, Kangra, Rasamanjari, Ragamala, Radha and Krishna, Bhagavat Geeta, Gita Govinda, Bihari Satasai, Baramasa

INTRODUCTION

The life of women as depicted in the miniature paintings captures the roles played by them along with the popular perceptions in which they were viewed. In particular Pahari miniatures illustrates them in various themes and these depictions throw light on various aspects of women like court life of royal women, ordinary life of common women, jewellery, dress-patterns, popular practices, local traditions and customs of the times, etc.

Pahari style of miniature painting and book illustration developed in the independent states of the Himalayan foothills Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir states of India. These paintings developed and flourished during the period of 17th to 19th century. Pahari painting (literally meaning a painting from the mountainous regions). Pahar means a mountain in Hindi, done mostly in miniature forms, originating from Himalayan hill kingdoms notably Basohli, Mankot, Nurpur, Chamba, Kangra, Guler, Mandi and

Garhwal. Nainsukh was a famous painter of this school under Raja Balwant Singh.

Pahari paintings can be distinguished from the Mughal Style in their simplicity and freshness and from Rajasthani painting in their lyrical Quality.¹ Its development can broadly be classified into three distinct Schools: Basohli, Guler-Kangra and Sikh. Generally this style is made up of two markedly contrasting Schools on the basis of their geographical range and features namely:

- The bold intense Basohli and Kulu Style (Influenced by Chaurpanchika style).
- The delicate and lyrical Guler and Kangra Style (Based on cooler colours and refinement).
- Sikh School.

Regarding Basohli Paintings, the town of Basohli is situated on the bank of the Ravi River in Himachal and is located in Kathua district of Jammu and Kashmir ruled by Balauria Rajas. Rasamanjari series dated 1693 is a landmark. It was illustrated by Devidas under the

patronage of Raja Kirpal Pal. Gita Govinda of 1730 is also believed to have Basohli origin. This style is known for borders on a coarseness of treatment as contrasted with the charming refinement of the Kangra pictures.²

The popular themes of the Basohli paintings are the portraits of local rulers, the Hindu gods, figures from Hindu mythology, Radha-Krishna, Madhava-Malati love themes and themes from the Bhagavata Purana. The paintings themselves are mostly painted in the primary colours of Red, Blue and Yellow. One of the most popular themes in Basohli painting particularly during the reign of Raja Kripal Pal was the Rasamanjari written by the poet Bhanu Datta. A Basohli Rasamanjari series was illustrated by Devidas, a local painter of Basholi belonging to the Tarkhan community, which produced many skilled artists.

The latter half of the 18th century is the glorious period for Kulu style paintings. The paintings are based on simple themes showing rural backgrounds without human figures in them. Kulu-Mandi area is inspired by the local tradition.

The Kangra style reached its pinnacle with paintings of Radha and Krishna, inspired by Jayadev's Gita Govinda.³ Though the main centre of Kangra paintings are Guler, Basohli, Chamba, Nurpur, Bilaspur and Kangra. Later on these styles also reached Mandi, Suket, Kullu, Nalagarh and Tehri Garhwal and now are collectively known as Pahari painting.

Pahari paintings have been widely influenced by the Rajput paintings, because of the family relations of the Pahari Rajas with royal court at Rajasthan. One can also see strong influence of the Gujarat and Deccan paintings. With the emergence of Bhakti movement, new themes for Indian Pahari paintings came into practice. The influence of late Mughal art is evident in the new Kangra style. During the mid-18th century, a number of artist families trained in the late Mughal style apparently fled Delhi for the hills in search of new patrons and more settled living conditions.

Guler has the longest tradition in the art of painting. Subject matter of these miniature paintings are Bhagavata, the Gita Govinda, the Bihari Satasai, the Baramasa and the Ragamala.

Kangra represents the most glorious phase of Pahari art. The Ain -i-Akbari also gives interesting account of Kangra.⁴ Kangra is situated in the eastern part of Himachal Pradesh. J.C. French, a British Scholar and a member of the Indian Civil Service visited kangra in 1930

and collected Pahari Paintings.⁵ The Kangra School became widely popular with the advent of Jayadev's Gita Govinda, of which many extant manuscripts feature exquisite Kangra illustrations. This style was copied by the later Mughal painting, many of whom were patronized by the Rajput rulers who ruled various parts of the region.

Kangra paintings were influenced by the Bhagavad Purana. They portrayed incidents and scenes from the life of lord Krishna. The other popular themes were the stories of Nala and Damayanti and those from Keshavdas's Baramasa. In Baramasa (the Twelve Months) paintings, the artists tried to bring out the effects of seasons round the year on the emotions of human beings. The Kangra painters used colours made of vegetable and mineral extracts. Fattu, Parkhu and Kushana were important artists of this School. Kangra painting reveals a deeper meaning when it is contemplated in its cultural perspective and context. Love was the principal theme of Kangra miniatures Rasikapriya, the great poetic work of Keshavadas, was Kangra artists chosen theme. In Radha and Krishna, they discovered not only the highest model of a loving couple or those of Nayika and Nayaka, but also various emotional and sensual situations. The Radha -Krishna theme also served their devotional purpose and provided an inherent symbolism. Led by this love cult Kangra art also illustrated romances like Sassi-Punno, Heer-Ranjha and Sohni-Mahiwal.

Bilaspur town of Himachal witnessed the growth of the Pahari paintings around the mid-17th century. Artists made illustrations of the Bhagavata Purana, Ramayana and Ragamala series.

The late 17th century witnessed Chamba paintings. It derived its name from a princess Champavati, a daughter of Raja Sahila and a tree with fragrant golden flowers champaka or chamba as it is known in the hills.

Chamba paintings are quite similar in appearance to Mughal style of paintings, with strong influences of Deccan and Gujarat style also. The Chamba paintings are very authentic and informative social documents of the history of those times. Bhuri Singh Museum at Chamba is named after the illustrious King Raja Bhuri, who had contributed his family compilation of paintings to the museum. The themes used in this style of paintings were religious, such as legends of Radha Krishna, lord Shiva-Parvati, Rama Darbar, Yashoda and Krishna etc. Romantic ambiances of the rainy season in Chamba have also been painted in various moods and styles.

Garhwal Paintings originated in Himachal. In Garwal paintings, passionate romance was treated with innocent grace. Jammu paintings are well and vigorously designed with peculiar sloping forehead and very large eyes. Silver and gold were used. Beetle wings represent jewellery.⁶

Mandi, situated in Himachal, witnessed the evolution of a new style of paintings under Raja Sidh Sen. Mankot paintings of Jammu and Kashmir bear a resemblance to the Basohli type, with vivid colours and bold subjects. In the mid-17th century, portraiture became a common theme. With time, the emphasis shifted to naturalism and subdued colours. Nurpur paintings of Himachal Pradesh usually employ bright colours and flat backgrounds. However, in the later periods, the dazzling colours were replaced by muted ones.

Sikh School of painting was the last phase in the development of the Pahari painting. The paintings originated in the days of Maharaja Ranjit Singh who was a liberal patron of arts. Apart from the ruler, many rich merchants and religious leaders commissioned painters to carry out paintings on diverse subjects.

Themes represented in Pahari paintings were the stories and antics of Krishna, The Shaiva-Shakta themes were supplemented by poetry and folk songs of Lord Krishna and Lord Rama, Love and devotion. The love of man for woman or of woman for man, symbolized by Krishna and Radha in the relation of lover and beloved, illustration of great epics, puranas, the depiction of Devi Mahatmya, the life of Krishna as expressed in the poetic works the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa and the Gīta Govinda, Hindu myths, hero-heroine and rāgamālā (musical modes) series, portraits of hill chiefs and their families, Radha-Krishna and Madhava-Malati love themes and themes from the Bhagavata Purana, Gopies with Krishna, women with Krishna, god and goddesses, fight scene, dance by gopies and women, love scene were dominantly painted.

Rasaleela can be seen in most of the paintings, Krishna playing with women called gopies or gopikas and Radha. Krishna was painted in blue colour with yellow dress. They painted this couple as eternal lovers, rejoicing the moments of love. Bathing scenes of women (gopies) in the lake of village are famous in which Krishna steal the clothes and climbed up the tree and gopies without clothes comes out from the water pond and asked Krishna to give their clothes back. Argument scenes between Krishna and radha and gopies, meeting scene in the jungle, playing scene, having food in the forest, killing of devils, cow feeding in the jungle and playing

with the cows were general themes. Mythological themes and themes from epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata. Shringar illustrating the delicate graces of women portraits. Portraits, huntings scenes, toilet scenes and festivals such as Holi, love stories namely Madhu Malti and stories of Nala and Damayanti. While the painters of Guler depict women in the absence of their lovers in their painting and the painters of Kangra mainly revolve around the theme of feminine beauty and grace.

Paintings executed on the basis of texts like Bhagwad-Purana, Geet-Govinda, Sursagar, Rasikpriya, Bihari-Satsai, Nayika-Bheda and Rag-Ragini were the main heritage of the Kangra and Basohli styles. Chamba is known for its typical and distinctive women figures endowed with the most charming looks. Red and blue dominate a Chamba miniature. Chamba is outstanding in its technique of artistically mixing colours and amplifying their visual impact.

Pahari Artists were excellent in drawing Women figures which have natural fragrance and are shown engaged in everyday activities like singing, cooking, working in the field, asking crows about the arrival of their lovers or enjoying the monsoon.⁷ As it was remarked that beauty of works of art results from harmonious blending of these sets of elements, some existing in reality and some supplied by the mind.⁸

Some Rasamanjari miniatures are evidently from an extensive series illustrating some treatise on nayaka-bheda.⁹ Ramayana was illustrated in both in Basholi and Kangra styles. The eight Nayikas and Baramasa were favourite themes of Kangra painters. The popular love tales of the Punjab, Hir Ranjha, Mirza, Sahiban and Sohni-Mahinwal are often illustrated by the Kangra artists.¹⁰ However elite Rajput women were not individually identified as particular women because they were hidden behind the wall of pardah, instead they were physically indistinguishable, sharing one archetypal, stylistically determined face.¹¹ In some paintings women are represented as heroine Radha seated on Chawki, while Krishna presses her feet or combing her hair. Radha looks pride and self-confident. The scenes created to accommodate the meeting of romantic love are poetical as well. The equivalent of harems, zanānās were palaces built for Lady's where only Princes and kings were allowed and it was because of women's restricted visual access that palace garden scenes were the most popular.¹² In both portraits and court scenes elite faces do not have expressions, they do not communicate with

the viewer's gaze, and they do not encourage the viewer's personal, intimate response.¹³ These may be considered imaginative scenes; however court painters actually represented the hobbies of these royal ladies, such as smoking huqqa, playing Holi or couples embracing in the garden pavilion.¹⁴

Radha and other goddesses were the only named women in imagery; she also represents an ideal of beauty.¹⁵ A frequent animal linked with women's sexual desire is the long-necked bird such as the swan, goose and crane; these are used to illustrate the sexual nuances of the simple scene.¹⁶ Several paintings attributed to the Guler painter Nainsukh picture a woman who appears to be a queen, bearing many of thematic, compositional and emblematic prerogatives of rule.¹⁷

Women waiting beneath a banana tree or a Cyprus tree for her lover, pouring her heart to a pair of bucks are some of the favorite scenes. In some Pahari paintings the peacock assumes the role of lover or the hero. With nightfall, even the peacock retreat into the groves to enjoy the company of their beloveds. The dark night outside and the raging storm within heightens the pangs of separation. The flashes of lightening in the dark cloudy sky signify union. The flight of the pair of cranes (symbolizing flight of lovers), a pair of parrot sitting on a banana tree (symbolizing sexual urge), a young girl carrying earthen pots (symbolizing fertility), all unravel the riddle of women's mind.¹⁸

The Themes on Krishna with Radha displays the Rajput's traditional "adherence to old Indian ideals of physical beauty. The idealized Rajput woman is displayed in profile view wearing the tradition sari decorated extensively with patterns and colours, she is a lighter skin tone, is ornamented in jewelry, and has the emphasized facial features. As with all aspects of Rajput aesthetics, it is clear that this tradition of makeup continues from India's oldest caste, the Koli, used kajal as a cosmetic. It is noteworthy that even Krishna displays the idealized facial features that equaled beauty in Indian culture, participating in the same tradition, albeit less subjugated than Radha.¹⁹

These elegant birds extend their long necks as if "raised in hopeless yearning.²⁰ As in many other examples, the male gaze of the woman is meant to satisfy the male viewer with the very inference to sexuality. The man's place is perhaps filled by the stretching of the elegant bird's neck; this is a symbol of unfulfilled sexual desire.²¹

There is a striking contrast between these named individuals and the nameless Lady ideals in the paintings that they owned pardah accustom that shielded women from the eyes of all but a select few men, prevented painters from portraying elite women as individuals. Here is little question that pardah was a serious hindrance. However, it was not an insurmountable obstacle. A notion of women's portraiture did exist and it was neither in conceivable, nor strictly forbidden to depict real women in paintings.²²

The heroines are shown with well-fitting blouses and ghagras or petticoats. But their blouses reach waist levels, contrary to the bodice shown in Basholi paintings, which covers only the cups of the breasts. Dupatta or the well-embroidered orhini or head cover on the head reaches the knees. These heroines also wear ornaments, while the clothing has a translucent Mughal feature. The heroines are shown with well-fitting blouses and ghagras or petticoats. But their blouses reach waist levels, contrary to the bodice shown in Basholi paintings, which covers only the cups of the breasts. Dupatta or the well-embroidered orhini or head cover on the head reaches the knees. These heroines also wear ornaments, while the clothing has a translucent Mughal feature. In the case of Basholi paintings, there is a positive hint of masculinity, even in the Lady figures. In the paintings of Nurpur, the elegantly dressed tall women have long limbs. In this style, the trees are chiseled into domes and shaped structures as if decorated deliberately.²³

In representation of women Basholi Painting depicted women with large eyes with other features like bold drawing, use of beetles wings for showing diamonds, strong and contrasting colours, narrow sky, the red border and monochrome background,. Figures were often depicted in rich costumes with stylized faces and large bulging eyes. Basohli paintings evolved by fusion of Hindu mythology, Mughal miniature techniques and folk art of the local hills. In these paintings the faces of the figures painted are characterized by the receding foreheads and large expressive eyes shaped like lotus petals.

Guler painting both in portraiture and composition explores the mystic beauty of feminine world. It is marked by liquid grace and delicacy. The drawing is delicate and precise. Subject matter of these miniature paintings are Bhagavata, the Gita Govinda, the Bihari Satasai, the Baramasa and the Ragamala. The style of these paintings is naturalistic, delicate and lyrical. The women in these paintings are particularly delicate with well-modeled faces,

small and slightly upturned nose and the hair done minutely.

In Kangra painting, the faces of women in profile have the nose almost in line with the forehead, the eyes are long and narrow and the chin is sharp. Shringar (the erotic sentiment) is considered as the focal theme of Kangra paintings. The subjects seen in Kangra painting exhibit the taste and the traits of the life style of the society. The love story of Radha and Krishna was the main source of spiritual experience, which was also the base for the visual expression. The other popular themes were Gita Govinda by Jayadeva and Bhagavata Purana. Feminine figures are depicted very beautifully in these paintings with soft and refined facial features. Kangra paintings are known for the lyrical blending of form and color. Kangra paintings depict the feminine charm in a very graceful manner. The figure of youthful coy nayika (heroine) seen in Kangra miniatures is an ideal physical type which is slender and elegant, radiating infinite charm, sensitiveness and refinement. Facial features are soft and refined. The women figures are outstandingly beautiful. Apart from women beauty, landscapes, countryside, rivers, trees, birds, cattle, flowers etc. are meticulously portrayed in these paintings.

Kulu-Mandi paintings are mainly inspired by the local traditions. The style is marked by bold drawing and the use of dark and dull colours. The style followed in the series Ragamala, the Bhagawad Purana and Madhu-Malti. Human figures are short but not heavy. They seem to be slow moving and their wide open eyes give them a doll like look. The costumes of women are also different from other style of pahari paintings, particularly in the treatment of scarves (odhanis), which is worn in different way. Women dresses are often dotted. The awful Devi forms acquire further impetus in Mandi style by excessively and mystically used black, red and blue colours in their deepest tones.

The Nurpur paintings are characterized by tall women who have long limbs particularly below the waist and are always elegantly attired.

In totality, Pahadi paintings represented women in various spheres like, Lady eating paan offered by an attendant, Shuklabhisarika: Lady awaiting her lover by moonlight, Abou Ben Adhem attended by angels, the heroine admiring herself before a mirror, the heroine in a swoon, birth of Krishna in prison, Holy Family, Shiva and Parvathi, Sita in Ashok Vatika, Naradh with Rukmini, Shiva with Parvati, Vishnu and Lakshmi on the serpent

of eternity, Radha Scolds an errant boy, Vangali (Bangali) Ragini, portrait of a lady, Trinity with their Consorts, Gods and Goddesses, Krishna Seated on a Horse, Kama Pidita Nayika, A relaxing lady, Devotees and Yogini, Krishna Milking a cow, A lady with rose, Ragini Bhairavi, Madonna with baby Christ, Dana Lila, Swadhina Patika Nayika, Utkanthita Nayika, Krishna and Radha, a lady smoking hukka, the descent of Ganga, Rama Darbar, a lady seated on chowki, lady with yo-yo, Illustration from Devi Mahatmya, Madhu Malati Theme, Goddess Worshipped by gods, Sita Swayamber, a noble with his consort, a lady with a wine cup, Royal lady enjoying a smoking, a young woman with a "hukha", A lady on a marble terrace, a royal lady, a lady exciting a parrot, a lady with a pair of pigeon, Krishna and Yashoda, marriage Party, Ganapati with two Lady attendants, Raja with His Rani, Portrait of a princess, Ladies Offering Prayer in the Shiva Temple, Lady Watching the Clouds, a lady at a Toilet, Mahisasurmardini, Nayika Playing on Veena, Virhani Nayika, a lady with bird, Rama Lakshmana and Sita, Woman writing Love letter, etc.

Generally Women were depicted with a background of two-dimensional architectural constructions, crowned with pavilions or domes against brilliant colours with background of bright red, yellow, green or brown. Women were painted with elegance and grace, with softened and refined facial features. Pink and peach colours used to paint the body women. Women are illustrated with round faces and small and deep eyes, bunch of long hair, stout physique and pleasant mood and adorned with various ornaments like necklaces, anklets, bangles, earrings etc.

Thus we find variety of themes in which women were depicted in Pahari paintings representing royal women, common women, mythological themes and themes from popular literary texts, etc. which is very essential not only just to bring women back on fabric of Medieval Indian history, to know their life style, but also because of the need to re-evaluate a whole world of women's experience which they had in the past.

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