

THE ART OF CAPTURING IMAGINATION IN CONTEMPORARY PAHARI MINIATURES

Dr. Nirupama Singh ¹  

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Visual Arts, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Daramshalla, India



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Corresponding Author

Dr. Nirupama Singh,
nirupamasingh17@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The idea and concept of Pahari miniature paintings ideally revolve around the narration of a historical story from a native region in Indian traditions. These paintings are a blend of Bhasholi and Kangra miniature paintings. The artists belonging to this field painted historical subjects of their local areas such Radha-Krishnaji, Saraswatiji etc. These Pahari miniatures flourished from the second half of the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth century in the Himalayan foothills. It was the simplicity of Basholi in poetic lyricism and refinement of Kangra in the ingenuity of the artist's style that made these paintings so popular. In Pahari paintings, the manifestations are mostly figure based and illustrations are used for narration. Pahari miniature artists constructed paintings using traditional and stylistic methods but in the contemporary era, the subject-matters of their paintings are changed as per the contemporary times and techniques.

This paper demonstrates the thematic narration of the artists on contemporary subjects in contemporary Pahari miniature paintings. This research is an attempt to bring a logical clarification on account of imagination in the Pahari miniatures.

Keywords: Contemporary, Imagination, Miniature, Narration, Poetic, Pahari

1. INTRODUCTION

Pahari style of miniature paintings progressed and flourished during the second half of the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth century in the Himalayan foothills stretching from Punjab, Garhwal and Jammu to Almora where they were popularly known as Pahari groups of miniature paintings. These paintings are an attractive and perfect amalgamation of the natural beauty of this region and the allure of the Court of Delhi. They are recognized for their application of soft touch, calmness, lyricism, extemporaneity, and intrinsic symbolism, sense of composition, detailed work, and portrayal of human sentiments [Lal \(2015\)](#). Pahari's school of paintings narrates Indian mythological and religious stories. Pahari paintings can be notable

from the Mughal Style in their simplicity as well as novelty and from Rajasthani painting in their lyrical Quality [Lavanya \(2019\)](#). The main centers of Pahari paintings were Basholi, Guler, Kangra, Chamba, Mandi Kullu, Bilaspur, Jammu, Nurpur, Gharwal, Kashmir, etc. This art was majorly practised by the artists who had migrated from other regions to the hilly areas of Northwestern India [Lal \(1968\)](#).

The colours and surfaces used in the painting are prepared by the artists themselves. The colours are usually of low intensity when they are used in making the landscape view of Himachal Pradesh. The viewpoint is naturally drawn by the artists, the lines are refined and are delicately drawn by miniature brushes. The depiction of faces is shown in the profile that is dominated by large and passionate eyes. The colours are vivid such as ochre yellow, brown, and green that are strikingly predominant. A typical technique is the portrayal of traditional costume jewellery that is done by thick applications of colours, raised drops are shown by white paint through the brush technique with green emeralds. In the present era, artists move towards improvisation as per picturisation of themes evolving around them. The fusion of contemporary and traditional miniature remains the main interest of the artists where they portray traditional form with contemporary subjects in traditional technique [Goswamy \(2011\)](#).

2. PAHARI MINIATURE PAINTINGS IN CONTEMPORARY APPROACH

Artist Suresh Kumar was born into a family of people who have been devoting their lives to painting. He belongs to the region of Rajol, belongs to District Kangra, Himachal Pradesh. He grew up witnessing how paintings have been the only way to earn bread and butter for the family. For the past 25 years, he has been dedicated to the art of Pahari miniature paintings to maintain financial stability for himself as well as for his people around. The colors used in these miniature paintings are prepared by the artist on his own through locally available materials. The painting shows a beautiful flavour of colours and artistry through the Sarus crane behind the dark clouds which is the tallest flying bird. It has a predominantly grey plumage with a naked redhead, upper neck, and pale red legs. These birds are social creatures, found mostly in pairs or small groups of ten and usually fly towards the right side in the upward direction. On the right, a banana tree can be seen, and a peacock is singing while watching the clouds over the tree. The peacock seems to enjoy the blissful essence of nature and time.

In [Figure 1](#), A monk is painted in red cloths and is portrayed in a dancing position as Buddha showers his almighty blessings upon him amidst the clouds behind. The Buddha figure adds a calming and peaceful approach to the painting through its sculptural value while the clothes of the monks can be seen all rhythmically swaying in the breeze. The inspiration for the painting is taken from the Guler school of art and that is visible in the painting. Actually, Guler artists were skilled in Mughal style of painting, which has a delicacy and spirituality of feeling that also marked by liquid elegance and delicacy. The drawing is delicate and accurate. The colours which emphasize cool blues and greens are handled with proficiency [Kumar, S. Interview, \(2022\)](#). The Buddhist prayer flags are also seen on the green ground. The dark clouds and umbrella under the Banana tree signify that it is the time of the rainy season [Randhawa \(1959\)](#).

Figure 1**Figure 1** Blessing of Buddha, 4x6', Acrylic on Canvas,2021

In the view of this painting ([Figure 2](#)) one can easily make out that it is related to covid-19, the pandemic that affected the entire globe. In the painting, the artist has portrayed pilgrims' sights at the top of a bus such as Trimurti (three-headed Shiva representing creation, protection, and destruction), a statue carved at Elephanta cave number 1, Lion Capital of Ashoka at Sarnath from Mauryan time, the statues having masks on their faces. Behind the bus, Manimahesh Kailash peak or Chamba Kailash is painted which is surrounded by white clouds. The HRTC bus can be seen standing at Mani Mahesh Depot, inside which Radha and Krishna are seated. They are painted in the Guler style of miniature art. As mentioned, the painting shows the pandemic times therefore both of them are shown wearing masks and following the social-distancing norms. The romanticism between both of them is depicted in the way how Radha is looking through her front camera at the face of Krishna sitting behind her. The inspiration to make this painting is drawn from Bihari's *Sat Sai* which gave the reference for lyrical representations of romantic love. Artist's journey to Mani Mahesh is a symbolic representation of Covid-19 as the situation reflects the idea of death and struggles faced by people to keep up with their survival in the times of pandemic. When the world was hit by a destructive time people realised the importance of life and survival, as to how their existence matters so much to their families and friends. The loss of loved ones and their lives gave the world a mirror check to start valuing their presence on this planet and being thankful for it. The harsh truth of life, that one day it will end has made the artist realise that nothing is immortal and the only path towards salvation is through the blessings of Lord Shiva.

The painting '*Kunju Chanchalo-I*' highlights the local legendary renowned love story of Kunju and Chanchalo in which Chanchalo badly desires to meet Kunju. The painting has vivid descriptions of nature and monuments that are coloured with a lot of variations [Kumar, S. Interview, \(2022\)](#). We can see the grey mountains of Chamba, the historic temple of Laxmi Narayan and Rang Mahal which are surrounded by lavish greenery, Chamba Choyan, an old banayan tree illustration in

the background, and a Sarus crane (symbolizing flight of lovers) flying in the cloudy sky.

Figure 2

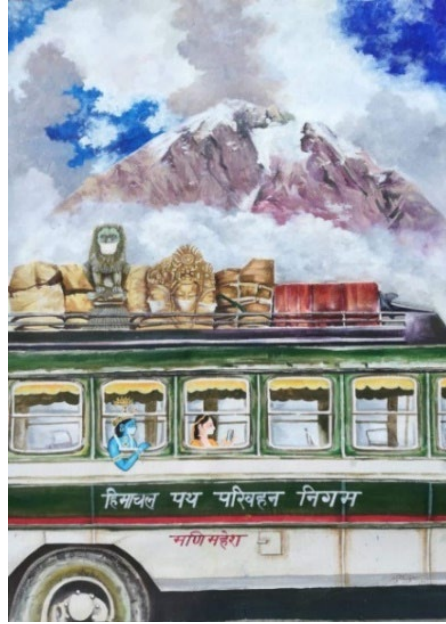


Figure 2 Mani Mahesh ki Yatra, Acrylic on Paper, 22x30", 2020

Figure 3



Figure 3 Kunju Chanchalo-I, Acrylic on Paper ,22x30", 2020

On the left side, we can see River Ravi painted in grey colour in which the image of fishes is made beautifully. In this Pahari miniature, the story of Kunju leaving for war is painted where he has presented the artist painted a gift in the form of a silver button that is given as a memorial to Chanchalo [Kumar, S. Interview, \(2022\)](#). Here, Chanchalo can be seen in traditional dress-Chola-Dora [Banerjee \(1994\)](#) (traditional dress Worn by men of the Gaddi tribe in Himachal Pradesh, 'Chola' is a long woollen coat that covers the knees. Dora is usually multi/ black in colour paired with Chola) and Kunju draped in the traditional Chola Dora, wearing a hat with peacock feathers. Besides that, the Jhunju Rana bird and grey francolin are also depicted in the foreground. The wise choice of colours; white, orange, and blue in the sky blend

properly to give a very romantic feeling of calmness. Parrots are shown flying in the sky, and on the lavish green tree, the monal bird is painted in blue colour. In pahari paintings the intense forest shown with birds forms a romantic backdrop. In most of the paintings, the whole background is filled with flowering trees and shrubs. In like style, the lush green landscape with delicately rendered foliage and hills in the distance is something that the artist pulls out of his repertoire of forest landscapes but the feeling of freshness of observation never really fades from the mind. We can simply say that in this painting, Srinagar Rasa and Shant Rasa are shown by the artist and the essence of that is coming to the surface vibrantly and beautifully [Figure 3](#).

In the [Figure 4](#), a scene of dark thunderous clouds can be seen in the background that is pleasant to the eyes of the spectator. The couple of Paphia (Cuckoo) and Peacock can be seen enjoying and relishing the weather. Due to the thunderstorm, the trees are bent towards the left side and the river Ravi can be seen in the muddy water in its full bloom [Randhawa \(1963\)](#).

In the middle, a pomegranate tree can be seen dancing and flowing in the direction of the strong wind. The gushing and vigorous movement of leaves in the tress suggests the idea that the storm is a wild one. Under the tree one can observe a brown coloured Hukka placed on the carpet, some earthen pots (symbolizing fertility) just near to Gadi dog (local breed), and goats and sheep on the left side. On the right side, two Sarus cranes crane (symbolizing flight of lovers) can be spotted near the couple.

Figure 4



Figure 4 Khunju Chanchalo-II, 12x16", Tempera Vasli

The observer can see the mother and child of Baboon hiding from the pangs of the storm. Behind the couple, four beautiful trees are painted in which the mango one is shown to have abundant fruits loaded on itself. The intricately rendered miniature painting is composed of a lovely landscape of lush green flora and folk hutments portraying the tranquil beauty of Himachal Pradesh [Kumar, S. Interview, \(2022\)](#). In some Pahari miniature paintings, the peacock believed the role of lover or the hero. With nightfall, even the peacock retreat into the groves to enjoy the companionship of their beloveds. The dark night outside and the strong storm within amplify the strong emotional feeling of separation [Lavanya \(2019\)](#). The blazes of lightening in the dark cloudy sky signify union [Dehejja \(2002\)](#).

It is a moment of quiet togetherness, of silent holds, of unspoken feelings of tender thoughts that are being conveyed by the warmth of a loving touch. It is a

sweet embrace, commitment closeness, an assurance of long-lasting love, a promise that the precious love will forever be protected and will stay. Khunju is seen holding a handmade umbrella made of bamboo and leaves, whereas Chanchalo is illustrated in traditional costumes with ornamented jewellery. She is trying to cover her head cause of the rain and her clothes are shown breezing because of the strong wind. [Banerjee \(1986\)](#).

On the antique paper of vasli, the artist has played well with the colours and art to portray a commendable scene of Lord Ram and Lord Hanuman. The artist portrays the arrival of Ram at Jakhu. On the left side in the foreground a milestone illustration is done that indicates that the Jakhu temple is just 1 kilometre away. Jakhu Temple has an interesting legend behind it. It is said that a deadly arrow wounded Lord Rama's brother Lakshmana when He was fighting the fight with the devil king Ravana. In [Figure 5](#), A priest diagnosed Lakshmana & said that he needed a particular Sanjeevani herb from the Himalayas to cure Lakshmana. Lord Ram can be seen riding the white decorative horse giving hints of royal and elite culture. Lord Rama is in yellow dhoti, wearing a crown which is engraved with precious stones [Kumar, S. Interview, \(2022\)](#). On the right hand, we can see Lord Ram holding the strap of the horse. On the left, we can see Lord Hanuman portrayed in a welcoming position and holding *Gada* in his right hand. It is visible that antique burnt umber and burnt sienna are utilized to make the painting.

Figure 5



Figure 5 Ram's Arrival at Jakhu, 2.5x2.5', Acrylic on Canvas, 2020

In this painting ([Figure 6](#)), Rama-Sita is shown sitting on the throne. In this miniature, the use of blue and white colour represents and symbolizes peace and calmness. All three figures are painted in profile, in which Lord Hanuman is shown making the portrait of Lord Ram and Sita. The blooming of lotus on the ground and shrubs on clouds gives this painting a surrealistic approach that revolutionizes human experience that maintains a balance in a rational vision that asserts the power of the unconscious and thoughts. In this painting, one can easily see that the artist elaborates on fantastical spaces or dream-like that could never be possible in reality. It is an attempt to articulate what occurs deep in a person's brain. The colour scheme of the painting is similar to Kangra miniature paintings. Even the trees, plants, faces of figures, flowers, and clouds are in realistic and lifelike approach, focusing heavily on nature. The colors used in the making of the Kangra paintings are made out of vegetable extracts and other naturally made substances. Kangra artists rarely use artificial colors in their paintings. The colors red, yellow, and green

can be seen throughout the paintings due to their brightness. Similarly, artist also portrays this painting in nature colors of hues red, blue, green, yellow and these have maintained the brilliance, even after a long time. Painting depicts ideas and values which contemporary life in society, sentiments and passions pictured in the language of brush and color making our experience rich and sensibilities sharp. Miniatures are shaped in religious faith as they depict Puranic tales and stories from Ramayana with imaginative approach in minute detail. Thus, one can observe that this painting is a mixture of Kangra miniature and surrealist paintings. Suresh Kumar would not need to discard the traditional style that he practiced but to incorporate significant changes in it some different approach has to be adopted. Though it is hard to include new approaches with the old ones, but it is equally important to step up with the trend. Changes as major as the one which took place in the art of the Pahari miniature paintings in the rise of naturalism because of the colors used symbolically, or we can say what is happening around us in contemporary times have given a new perspective and dimension to the art as well as to the skill-set of the artists.

Figure 6



Figure 6 Hanuman Making the Portrait of Ram-Sita, 1.5x2.25', Acrylic on Canvas, 2021

The painting titled “Crow’s Augury” is painted by the artist Sarthak Varshney in 2021. This 11.5x15.3cm painting is finished in Acrylic & Sketch pens on handmade paper. Artist stated that crows have always been known to some extent for their inimitable sense of insight, knowledge, and mental perception. That is why the artist painted crow in this painting and correlated letterbox with crow. He also said that Crows react to events with typical behavioral patterns, therefore by noting the character of the response one may learn the nature of the incident so that information can reach to us through post. The inspiration for this painting has been taken from “Nayika paintings” of Pahari Miniature [Varshney, S. Interview, \(2022\)](#). The word ‘Nayika’ not only means heroine but also suggests the idea of a devoted and passionate lover in Indian Art who represents various shades of love. In this painting, Nayika is shown waiting for the message and arrival of her lover. In [Figure 7, Singh \(1982\)](#). The artist has refashioned this painting and hung a letterbox in place

of Nayika which is metaphorically playing a sense of humour and satire. Years back these letterboxes were hung everywhere on the paths and streets of the cities to drop letters.

Figure 7



Figure 7 "Crow's Augury", 11.5x15.3cm, Acrylic & Sketch Pens on Handmade Paper, 2021

Interestingly, in the current scenario with the change in technology and time, these letterboxes are now covered with dust and sand. This brings the observer to the question as to why these boxes in this time are depicted in the painting. These boxes have now become a symbol of nostalgia and give us a sense of the time when we are not so much developed and hung onto technology. In the current times, things have changed and evolved, letterboxes have been replaced by social media, and if we have to give a message or share things with someone, we can easily do Whatsapp or e-mails, etc. The artist was originally from Kurawali, Uttar Pradesh which is a plain area and then he migrated for studies in the hilly area. The change in space is the source of inspiration for this painting. The letterbox in these times has become a useless entity and its presence plays the role of satire in the contemporary era. The artist has also tried to emphasize the metaphysical state of mundane objects. In the older days when people used to go to work and study the only method to stay in touch with family and friends was to convey their messages through letters. The concept of personification is well described through these letterboxes as now they are old, and the fading of their colour talks about their survival and existence.

3. CONCLUSION

The daily commercial artists might remain in the same loop of content with the practice of endlessly repeating what they had done in earlier years, but the thinking of the artists somehow has changed with time. Contemporary times have imbibed and realized the idea of how important it is to change with time but also to keep up with the traditional methods to not lose a touch with them as traditions are something that describes us and make us stay with our roots. Through the survey and interviews this research concludes that the Pahari miniature paintings of Himachal Pradesh are reaching heights in the art field, as in present times, Miniature

artists have replaced old themes and are now illustrating contemporary subjects but in traditional techniques. These narrative miniature paintings are only concerned with the realities of life happenings. The ethos of experimentation, expansion, subject matters, surrealist approach, and adjustment within the confines of a style appears in the contemporary miniature paintings of Himachal Pradesh.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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