



RAINBOW OF COLOURS – THE PAHARI MINIATURE PAINTING”

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Indian miniatures are in the art world a class by themselves. ‘Miniature’ generally refers to a painting or illumination, small in size, meticulous in detailing and delicate in brushwork¹. Indian Miniature Painting has a long history of over thousand years and presents a comprehensive record of the religious and emotional feelings of the Indian people. These paintings show the Indian genius in its pure form. Its inspiration is rooted in the people’s hearts, keeping close to their poetry, music and drama. The great merit of this art is the exquisite delicacy of drawing with decorative details. The artists of these miniatures used bright colours with tempera effect and display an unusual understanding of colour combinations.

Miniature art form made its debut in the 10th century. The earliest of miniatures are found painted on palm-leaves and their themes relating to Jainism and Buddhism. The palm-leaf paintings seem to have developed between 10th to 12th centuries. In the 14th century, palm leaf was replaced by paper and to earlier colours were added new mineral colours and pigments. Paper, with its tougher, smoother and better pigments absorbing surface almost revolutionized the entire art scenario².

Early miniatures are divided as Pala and Jain and later as Rajasthani, Mughal, Pahari and Deccani. The painting style developed around the lower hills of Himalayan range is known as Pahari art school. It found patronage in the Rajput princedoms of the Punjab (now Himachal Pradesh) and Garhwal hills. It developed during the late seventeenth centuries and flourished down to the nineteenth. The precision of a Mughalized realism and a symbolism derived from classical and medieval literature were combined, the sublime and sensuous were lyrically woven together. Besides, the beauty of the local landscape played an important role in some of the great works painted in the Pahari ateliers¹.

The four principal centres of Pahari painting were, namely, Basohli on river Ravi, Guler on river Banaganga, Chamba too on Ravi and Kangra on river Beas. Pahari miniatures are known for their soft touch, serenity, lyricism, spontaneity, and inherent symbolism, superb sense of composition, minute details and deep feeling for human emotions. ‘A.K. Coomaraswamy’ expounding on Rajput painting, presented seminal ideas which are also valuable for appreciating the Pahari Schools:

..... their ethos is unique: what Chinese art achieved for landscape is here accomplished for human love Rajput Art creates a magic world where all men are heroic, all women are beautiful and passionate and shy, beasts both wild and tame are the friends of man, and trees and flowers are conscious of the footsteps of the Bridegroom as he passes by. This magic world is not unreal or fanciful, but a world of imagination and eternity, visible to all who do not refuse to see with the transfiguring eyes of love. (Rajput Painting, 1916, Page 7)¹.

Pahari paintings are basically decorative oriental art. They are indeed a rainbow of colours. The aesthetically arranged colour scheming of these paintings is a visual treat for the viewers. In the illustrations of Vaishnava themes, the backgrounds with hillocks,



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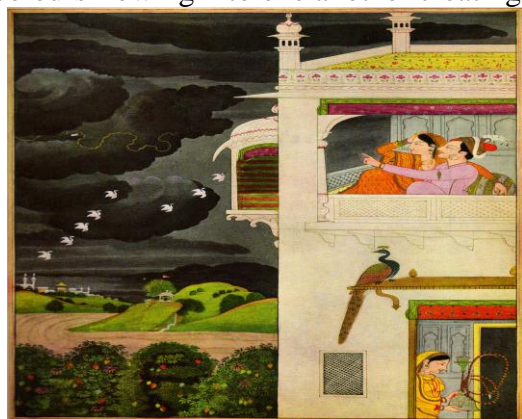


gushing rivulets, green meadows and a variety of flowering trees and creepers were painted. A beautiful painting of 'Krishna dallying with cowherd maidens' based on the poetry of Jaideva's Gita – Govinda depicts a composition of multiple figures in bright colours against a scenic background².

Krishna dallying with cowherd maidens Basohli, about 1730

The subject matter of Pahari paintings is figure based. Although Pahari art flourishes at places of great natural beauty, the artists were not inspired to paint the landscapes just for the sake of depicting the beauty of nature. In traditional Indian art, including Pahari paintings, nature serves as a backdrop for human emotions and subtle changes of moods were often expressed through nature acting as the backdrop and accordingly colours were used. Even when paintings on seasons known as Baramasa Paintings, are made, nature is depicted only in relation to human beings³. In such paintings, the change of human behaviour according to seasons is a primary method of indicating seasonal changes and the composition of appropriate colours is immensely helpful in achieving this.

In Pahari miniature painting artists had used bright colours like red, yellow, blue and green in abundance. Colours have been used symbolically. Yellow is the colour of spring season, light of sun and ripeness of mangoes. It also symbolizes warmth of Indian Spring Season and eagerness of lovers. Blue is the colour of Lord Krishna and of clouds. Red is the colour of love. These main colours are used in contrastive manner in perfectly balanced naturalistic landscapic background in the paintings. Even the painted main figures (Nayaka and the Nayika) are often sharply contrasting yet they blend in to create an artistic harmony. The paintings are in opaque tempera technique, so colours flowing into one another creating a



Lovers watching rain clouds, Kangra, about 1780

Merging effect that we find in water colours is not found here. The artists carefully chose the colours that created pleasant contrasts. Monsoon clouds instead of merging into one another were painted in flat shades of grey and black, one overlapping the other. This effect is splendidly depicted in the painting 'Lovers watching rain clouds' in Kangra kalam⁴. The paints were very often applied in a uniformly flat manner with excellence, thus proving that flat application of colour can effectively create an aesthetic appeal.

Basohli initiated Pahari art by illustrating literary classics like Rasa – Manjari, Ramayana and Gita – Govinda and abstract themes like Ragamala. Square format, a background usually consisting of double storey building structures with elaborate shikharas, lotuses used as a 'must' and various other decorative elements characterize a Basohli miniature. It is famous for its far bolder use of



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colours. A richly imaginative painting of ‘Ragini Dhanasri’, in Basohli style shows a lady holding the branch of a tree and carrying a



Ragini Dhanasri, Basohli, about 1720

lotus bud as she yearns for her absent lover. It is spring and the exuberant mood of nature is in contrast with the suffering of the woman⁴. Nature is shown in its full glory, flora and fauna. Blossoming flowers are shown in bright colours on a pleasant green background.

The paintings attributed to the Guler style are endowed with exceptionally delicate colouring, fine draughtsmanship, an unusual refinement of lines and a sensitive treatment of landscape. All these characteristics of Guler style are present in the painting ‘God adoring Lord Vishnu’¹. In both, portraiture and composition, the Guler art wondrously explores the mystic beauty of the feminine world. Guler miniatures are as delicate as Mughal miniatures, but the feeling that a Guler miniature breathes is different from what a Mughal miniature does.



God adoring Lord Vishnu, Guler, 1780

Chamba is known for its typical and distinctive female figures endowed with the most charming appearances. Red and Blue colours dominate a Chamba miniature. Chamba is outstanding in its technique of artistically mixing colours and amplifying their visual impact.

Mandi acquired a great distinction in Devi’s Tantrik cult. These forms of the Devi acquire further impetus in the Mandi style by excessively and mystically using black, red and blue colours in their deepest tones.

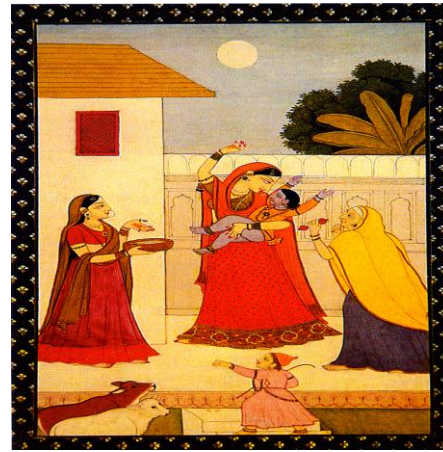


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Kangra represents the most glorious phase of Pahari art. The scenic setting of Kangra inspired the painters to paint in delicate harmonies. The rounded hillocks, with little blobs of green paint shaped like trees may be recognized as simplified landscape motifs. Kangra miniatures vibrate with realism, are endowed with natural emotions and their colours seem to echo with softness of music². The use of primitive colours- red, yellow and blue, plain or decorative fine borders, carefully brushed jewellery, neatly laid buildings and richly relieved landscape balanced with contrasting



Krishna demanding the moon from mother Yashoda, Kangra 1780

colours and consisting of superbly treated nature – trees, leaves, flowers, shrubs, birds and hills, are attributes of Kangra art. Glorification of female beauty, in all its charming details is other peculiar trait of the Kangra painters. In the painting ‘Krishna demanding the moon from mother Yashoda’ the feminine beauty and the use of primitive colours can be seen.

All the Pahari miniature paintings are generally presented with borders that are sometimes painted with decorative motifs with pleasing forms. They compliment the ornate nature of Pahari Schools of Art and often done in golden paint also.

In its few inches length and width the canvas of a Pahari miniature is seen translating into its lines and colours the legends of ages, faith of generations, eternal yearnings of those who were in love, glow of youthful faces, serenity of soul, sublimation of temporal aspirations, dimensions of tiny human efforts, emotions of pain and pleasure, and all that scripts and lingual media would have covered volumes to express. Thus it can be said that the delectable and charming use of colours provides a distinctive place to Pahari Miniature Paintings in the world of art.

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