Sacred and Secular: Rajput Miniatures of the 17th - 19th Centuries

La Salle University Art Museum

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Sacred and Secular Rajput Miniatures of the 17th-19th Centuries

La Salle University Art Museum
September 29th – December 15th, 1985

On loan to Hofstra University
February 6th – March 21st, 1986
In Celebration of the Festival of India

this year, La Salle University is joining Hofstra University in presenting an exhibition of Rajput miniatures. Both institutions are thus joining several dozen other museums across the United States to pay homage to the ancient culture of India and to highlight the cultural relations of our two countries.

This exhibition would not have been possible, however, without the generosity of Dr. Alvin Bellak, who has donated to the La Salle Museum over recent years a fine collection of Indian miniatures. When we asked him recently to explain, especially for our students, how he had become interested in this fascinating form of Eastern art, he sent us the following explanation:

I came upon Indian miniatures some ten years ago. For reasons still not understood, a friend suggested that I see some wonderful pictures at an oriental rug dealer's shop in Pine Street's antique row in Philadelphia. I went, I saw, I fell in love, and I bought the lot. The dealer barely knew what he was selling; I surely knew not what I was buying.

I then set out to learn about this new love. I was not previously a collector of art, nor did I consider myself a natural aesthete. I ferreted out the very few dealers, curators, museums, and private collectors who were active in the field. The more I searched, the more I learned and the deeper became my love. There was a whole world of exotic art with strange themes, vibrant colors and unique forms to be discovered and enjoyed.

The pictures in this exhibition and others in the Museum's collection are the majority of my early purchases. I learned much from these pictures and it seemed fitting that they be placed where others could learn from them also.

With a special word of gratitude, then, to Dr. Bellak—as also to the Rare Book Department of The Free Library of Philadelphia for the loan of several fine examples of Mughal painting—we are delighted to offer the present exhibition.

Daniel Burke, F.S.C.
Director
La Salle University Art Museum
India is today the largest democracy and the second most populous nation in the world. But the century and a half of British rule, the recent focus of a number of films and television series, has received perhaps too much attention, considering it represents such a brief moment in Indian history. For India's heritage can be traced back to the civilization of the Indus Valley in 2500 B.C., one of the earliest in the world.

In the millenia since that time, a dominant influence on the art of India and its social life in general (as in the caste system) has been Hinduism. For the Western mind trained in the logic of its own monotheism, the mysterious cults and complex theology of Hinduism remain a difficult and a largely unexplored terrain in religious experience.

The political history of the sub-continent is also complicated. Among several alien dynasties who ruled part of India in its long history, the most important for the background of the present exhibition were the Mughals. Seeking territory for new settlements in the sixteenth century, Mughal or Mongol or Mogul conquerors from Central Asia (mostly Turkish Muslims whose first emperor, Babar, claimed descent from Genghis Khan and Tamerlane) invaded India and established rule by 1526 A.D. The Mughal Empire held sway until 1757 over the many princely feudal states which comprised Northwestern and Central India, areas from which most of the miniatures in this exhibition came. The extent of their control, however, varied considerably in the areas, and they never attempted to supplant the prevailing Hindu culture and art with their
own Islamic traditions. Consequently, despite a fair degree of cross-fertilization between Mughal and native Indian artists, two distinct styles emerged simultaneously—Mughal and Rajput. By the nineteenth century, British rule had replaced Mughal dominance, and India became part of the British Empire until it achieved its independence soon after the assassination of its popular leader, Mahatma Gandhi, in 1948.

Even before his death, political differences led to a partitioning to form West and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) for Muslim Indians. Throughout Mughal and British rule, in India, each of the semi-independent states and their smaller fiefdoms (many of which had existed since the ninth century) maintained their provincial ruler or "Raja", courts, religious cults, mythology, customs, and dialect. The great cultural as well as geographical diversity of these states accounts for the growth of distinct schools of native Indian miniature painting. Although it assumed its basic style during the seventeenth century, Rajput miniatures drew inspiration from a long tradition of Indian painting which can be traced back to the Buddhist cave painting of Ajunta in 200 B.C.

Despite the basic differences between Rajput and Mughal miniatures, common characteristics exist. The miniature style of the Mughals, and by transference the Rajputs, was heavily indebted to the tradition of Persian miniature painting (Persia was part of the Mughal Empire in the thirteenth century), especially its technique, color, lack of spatial definition, stylized flat surface patterns, and abundance of exquisitely rendered detail. Miniature artists were for the most part anonymous craftsmen (though scholarship continues to identify individual artists) in the court workshops of their noble patrons, the Hindu "Raja" or the
Mughal sultan. Thus, with the exception of local folk paintings, miniatures were commissioned for the eyes of the ruling nobility and their sumptuous court retinue and were never intended for popular consumption by the masses of poor subjects who dwelt outside the palace confines.

As with European Medieval and Persian miniatures, Indian miniatures originated as manuscript illumination. However, painted images eventually became independent of the text, and were placed in books or portfolios to serve as pictures for contemplation and enjoyment by the chosen few. Subjects common to both Mughal and Rajput painting were the ruler, consorts, concubines, their everyday pleasures and adventures, their lavish ceremonies, hunts, chivalrous romances, and their military battles with rival clans. Scholars have concluded that preliminary sketches and basic outlines for the miniatures were probably executed by a principal draftsman, while the final painting, particularly the broad areas of color, was often added by another artist.

More specifically, Rajput painting, which makes up the majority of works in this exhibition, was produced in two states of northwestern India: Rajasthan and Punjab, in the Himalayan Hills, each of these states with smaller territories developing their own characteristics (see map). Although strongly influenced by Mughal miniatures, Rajput painting evolved a style which was clearly distinctive. Very sensuous, rhythmic lines, symbolic use of vibrant color, and relatively flat, simplified patterns characterize all Rajput miniatures. Thus, compared to Mughal painting, Rajput forms are less naturalistic, more spontaneous; and hence significantly more expressive. This more
subjective approach, which appeals primarily to the Hindu's emotion rather than his intellect, is appropriate to much Rajput painting: illustrations for Hindu love poetry, for musical modes (Ragamala series), and for the imaginative and exotic exploits of the many Hindu deities. Of the Hindu triad—"Brahma", the creator, "Vishnu", the preserver, and "Shiva", the destroyer, it is the latter two and their innumerable personifications, incarnations, and attributes which are pervasive subjects in Rajput art. Although the visualizations of each deity vary from locality to locality, the favorite god for all Hindus and consequently a focus for many of their miniatures was "Krishna", the eighth incarnation of Vishnu, divine and consumately ideal lover, pastoral hero, and preacher of the Bhagavad-Gita (The Lord's Song).

On the other hand, Mughal art reflects Hindu influence. After conquering India, Mughal emperors imported Persian miniature artists for their courts. These artists in turn trained resident craftsmen who brought characteristics of native Indian schools to their work. But in this synthesis of Persian miniature painting with indigenous Rajput painting, the desire to capture a realistic appearance of things led artists to turn away from the two-dimensional space and flat surface patterns associated with the Persian style. The realism in Mughal painting was, moreover, influenced by the naturalism inherent in European art, brought to the court by Jesuit missionaries and European traders. Thus, when compared with Rajput images, the more precise, literal, and naturalistic rendition of Mughal forms (apparent here in
Nos. 7-8, and 34-38) was better suited to the secular genres which dominated their works: scenes of court life of the Mughal sultan and accurate portraits of those in his retinue. It should be noted, too, that although Muslims have never been permitted to depict religious images pertaining to their Islamic faith, western Biblical and Hindu religious subjects appear frequently in Mughal miniatures.

The present exhibition draws upon a collection of Indian miniatures which have been donated to the La Salle Art Museum in recent years by Dr. Alvin Bellak, an important collector of Indian painting in Philadelphia. If the selection here offers a cameo view of the pageant of court under the rajas and sultans, it may also give some insight into spiritual values which still prevail in India today. Together with some ninety other exhibitions and performances throughout the United States which constitute the Festival of India this year, it may suggest the long, rich, and incredibly varied heritage of this important nation.

Caroline Wistar Curator
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Antique Indian sculptures in the exhibition have been kindly provided by the Jaipaul Galleries, 1610 Locust Street, Philadelphia, and are available for purchase.
CHECK LIST

With the exception of those marked with an asterisk, all of the miniatures were given to the La Salle University Art Museum by Dr. Alvin O. Bellak.

The medium is gouache (watercolor mixed with gum arabic to make the mineral pigments opaque) unless otherwise mentioned.

The principle area of India is listed first, followed by the provincial school within the area (see map).

1. * Rajasthan, Jodhpur School, late 18th century
   Maharajah Abhai Singh of Jodhpur
   Smoking a Hookah
   0-1977-4

2. Rajasthan, unknown school, 18th-19th century
   A Seated Raja Holding a Flower
   82-0-62

3. Rajasthan, Jodhpur School, late 18th century
   Krishna, Accompanied By A Yogi
   Holding a Vina (musical string instrument)
   84-0-114

4. Rajasthan, Jaipur School, early 19th century
   Two Ladies and Two Priests Present
   Offerings to an Image of Krishna in the
   Shri Nath-ji Temple
   84-0-129

5. Rajasthan, Mewar School, c. 1720
   Marharana Sangram Singh with His Two Sons
   82-0-56
6. Rajasthan, Mewar School, late 17th century

Krishna and Two Ladies in a Palace Interior

82-0-143

7. Mughal, probably painted at Delhi, c. 1740

The Persian Emperor Nadir Shah Holding a Sword, Seated on a Carpet of a Garden Terrace

84-0-123

8. * Mughal, early 17th century

Portrait of a Courtier

Brush drawing

0-1977-2

9. Rajasthan, Bikaner School, mid 18th century

Mahishasura Mardani: Durga, the goddess destroyer of the buffalo demon

82-0-64

10. Rajasthan, Bikaner School, c. 1775

Two Priests Attend an Image of Krishna (Shri Nath ji)

84-0-108

11. Rajasthan, Bikaner School, c. 1750-75

The Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan (ruled 1627-1658) Seated on a Throne While Three Ladies of the Court Pay Their Respects

84-0-106

12. Rajasthan, Bikaner School, late 18th century

Shri Raga: A Prince and Lady Seated on a Terrace with Two Musicians

Illustration from a Ragamala (a series of paintings, based on musical modes identified by different time of the year, day, and a particular mood.

84-0-143
13. Rajasthan, Mewar School, early 18th century

A Lady Dressed in European Fashion, Seated on a Throne Drinking Wine

84-0-140

14. Punjab Hills, c. 1860

Four Acrobats - from a Ragamala series

84-0-146

15. Punjab Hills, Sikh School, c. 1830

A Seated Hindu Prince Smoking a Hookah

The Sikhs, who have recently been seeking a more independent stand for the Punjab state, represent along with the Christians, Buddhists, Jains and Parsis one of the influential minority religions in India today. Their objection to the Hindu caste system led them to found their own religion in the 15th – 16th centuries, a combination of the Hindu and Islamic faiths.

82-0-67

16.* Punjab Hills, Kangra, early 19th century

"Visit to a Holy Man." Scene from the Hindu epic, The Ramayana

0-1977-3

17. Punjab Hills, early 19th century

Vishnu Saves The King of the Elephants

81-0-70

18. Punjab Hills, 19th century

The Elephant God, "Ganesha" - remover of obstacles, god of auspicious beginnings and sometimes considered the son of Shiva and his consort Parvati

82-0-99
19. Punjab Hills, Nurpur, c. 1770-86

Krishna and His Consort, Radha

84-0-107

20. Rajasthan, Sirohi School, 18th century

A Lady Brings a Garland of Flowers to Two Lovers Seated in a Palace Interior

84-0-153

21.* Rajasthan, Jodhpur, late 18th century

Ragini Kamod (describes the mood of minor Hindu musical mode)

Preliminary Brush drawing pounced for transfer

77-0-8

22.* Rajasthan, Kotah or Bundi, first half of 18th century

Lady Peering over Shoulder

Ink with touches or orange wash

77-0-9

23. Punjab Hills, Kanagra School, late 18th century

"Shiva" his consort, "Parvati," and vehicle - the Bull, Nandi

Brush drawing with black and orange pigment

The unity and multiplicity of the gods, Shiva and Vishnu, was often conveyed by portraying them with one body but with many arms, legs, or heads.

84-0-133

24. Central India, Malwa, early 18th century

Cross-section of a Palace with Seated Figures
From the Bhagavata Purana (a collection of commentaries on Indian Scriptures)

82-0-72
25. Rajasthan, Sawar, c. 1700
   Two Princes Seated, Holding Lotus Buds
   82-0-61

26. Punjab, Sikh, early 19th century
   A King Seated on a Throne Holds a Formal Audience
   (Durbar) with his courtiers
   84-0-152

27. Rajasthan, Sirohi School, c. 1700
   A Seated Prince Eating with Two Maids
   Illustration from a Ragamala series
   82-0-101

28. Rajasthan, Mewar School, c. 1850
   Two Priests Attending an Image
   of Krishna as Shri Nath-ji
   84-0-130

29. Rajasthan, perhaps Sirohi School, early 18th century
   A Prince and Maid in a Palace Chamber
   Greeted by a Man and Boy
   Illustration from a Ragamala series
   84-0-136

30.* Rajasthan, Mewar School, c. 1740
   Warriors Fighting on a Hillside with
   Courtiers and Maiden Seated in Discussion
   84-0-136

31. Rajasthan, Kotah, c. 1940
   Rama Enthroned with Sita as He Receives Hanuman
   (Draftsman's color key for the miniaturist painter)
   0-1979-1
32.* Eastern India, Banares, 1st quarter of the 17th century

The Monkey and Bear Troops of Rama in Combat with Ravanna's Army of Demons

The Ramayana - heroic Hindu epic which exemplifies the triumph of good over evil as demonstrated by the adventures of "Rama" (the seventh incarnation of "Vishnu") against the demon king, Ravanna.

o-1977-5

33. Rajasthan, Raghogarh School (near Mewar), early 18th century

Raja Dhiraj Raj of Raghogarh Seated with a Lady on a Terrace, Two Maids Attend

84-o-121

The following miniatures were lent by The Rare Book Department, The Free Library of Philadelphia.

34. Persian, Herat School, late 15th or early 16th century (late Timurid Period)

Yusuf (Joseph) Summed by Zulaykha (Potipher's wife) to serve at a feast

35. Mughal, Shah Jahan School, 1st half of 17th century

Mughal Palace

36. Mughal, Awrangzib School, late 17th century

Emperor Awrangzib (ruled 1658-1707) Riding on One of his State Elephants

37. Mughal, Shah Jahan School, 2nd half of the 17th century

A Court Lady Leaving the Palace Grounds at Night

38. Mughal, Shah Jahan School, 2nd half of the 17th century

A Prince Offering Drink to a Lady