

DOI 10.25712/ASTU.2518-7767.2015.01.002

PAHARI MINIATURE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the study of miniature painting in the Himalayas – the Pahari Miniature Painting school. The author focuses on the formation and development of this artistic tradition in the art of India, as well as the features of technics, stylistic and thematic varieties of miniatures on paper and embroidery painting.

Keywords: fine-arts of India, genesis, Pahari Miniature Painting, Basohali style, Mughal era, paper miniature, embroidery painting.

Bibliographic description for citation:

Handa O.C. Pahari miniature schools. *Iskusstvo Evrazii – The Art of Eurasia*, 2015, No. 1 (1), pp. 25-48. DOI: 10.25712/ASTU.2518-7767.2015.01.002. Available at: <https://readymag.com/622940/8/> (In Russian & English).

Before we start discussion on the miniature painting in the Himalayan region, known popularly the world over as the Pahari Painting or the Pahari Miniature Painting, it may be necessary to trace the genesis of this fine art tradition in the native roots and the associated alien factors that encouraged its effloresces in various stylistic and thematic varieties.

In fact, painting has since ages past remained an art of the common people that the people have been executing on various festive occasions. However, the folk arts tend to become refined and complex in the hands of the few gifted ones among the common folks. Such people stand out distinctively among the masses as the accomplished ones in different arts and crafts, and when that expertise becomes hereditary, those families are identified in the community with the particular art or craft. In that process, there have been the chitraire – the painters, bataihre – the masons, the Sunar – the goldsmiths, kanghaire – the surgical operators, tarakhan – the carpenters, lohar – the blacksmiths, etc. According to a popular tradition about the origin of professional guilds, Vishvakarma – the Divine Craftsman – had four wives. Each of them gave birth to a son. Each of those inherited different skill from their parents and passed those to their descendants. Thus, the professional guilds of the chitraire, kanghaire, tarakhan and lohar came into existence. Undeniably, these professional communities have been here as a part of the interdependent Pahari society since ages. That would affirm the little-known and least appreciated fact that a separate guild

of professional painters also existed in this region much before the advent of the Persian style of painting in India. While the common people depended upon their inherited improvisations for their needs, the elite people and the rulers requisitioned the services of the *chitraire* on various ritualistic or ceremonial occasions (Fig. 1).



Figure 1.

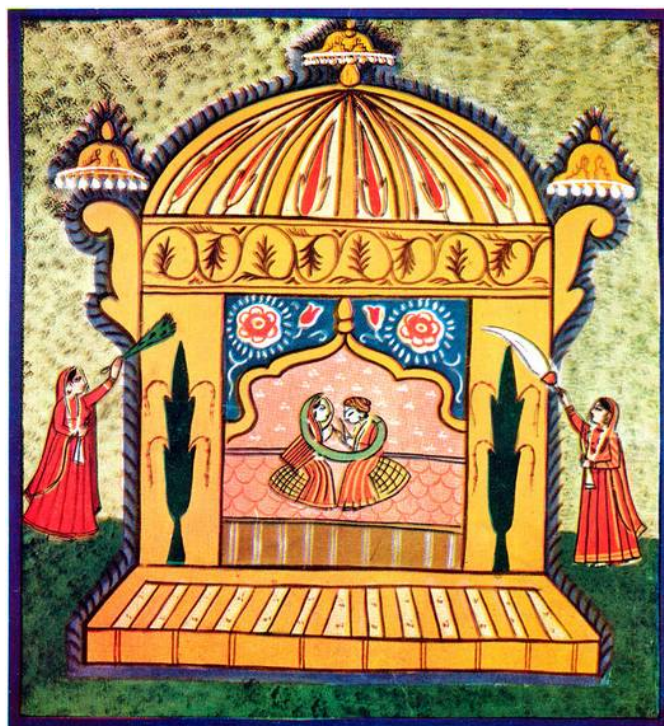


Figure 2.

That patronage to the proficient *chitraire* gave rise to the hereditary institution of artists. Under royal patronage, a few of the *chitraire* families were elevated to a higher social position in recognition of their artisanship, so much so that some Brahmin families also adopted painting as profession. In this regard, the names of Pandit Seo of Basohali and Pandit Gahiya Narotam of Mandi are notable ones. However, the family of Pandit Seo was degraded to the *tarakhan* caste for having adopted painting as a profession [Goswamy, 1998. P. 58]. There are still *chitraire* families at Gagal-Rajol, Purana Kangra and Samloti villages in Kangra district, but most of them have abandoned their hereditary occupation for the better prospects in other vocations, but a few are still continuing with their inherited occupation to supplement their income. There are also instances of some rulers taking up painting as hobby. In this regards, mention may be made of Raja Amar Chand of Kahlur (Bilaspur), Mian Basant Singh of Arki and Pritam Shah of Garhwal.

Thus, we find that the *chitraires* performed an important role of catering to the religious-aesthetic needs of the people. They embellished and auspicated the houses of their patrons with traditional wall paintings on different ceremonial occasions. However, for the drawings and paintings executed for the ritualistic or ceremonial purposes were not made of large size, but confined to a manageable frame to vouchsafe its the ritual sanctity. Possibly, the reduction of the epic *chitrashala* into *kauhara* (a connubial painting) marked an attempt towards the miniaturisation in painting executed on the wall, which for functional convenience was later transferred to cloth or paper so that it could be preserved for future use (Fig. 2).

As may be inferred from the extant frescoes of Ajanta and the murals at Nalanda, the wall paintings in the Indian mainland were executed on extensive formats, but the wall decorations in the Himalayan interiors were executed in different panels to confine those in the mana-geable frames. For that peculiarity, one need not look for an extraneous influence of the Mughal court. Executing artwork in panels has been an ages-old practice in the hills, as may be evidenced from the carved wooden panels and frames of the Lakshana Devi temple at Brahmaur, Shiv-Shakti temple at Chitrari and Markula Devi temple at Udaipur and many other ageless wooden temples in the interiors. Possibly, miniaturisation in the art woodwork was the innovations of the local artisans for the practical convenience, which eventually reflected on the wall paintings for maintaining the sanctity and dignity of the subject. That consideration also demanded that the painting was executed at a respectful height from the floor [Randhawa, 1959. P. 15]. That consideration remained intact in the wall paintings executed to depict religious and feudal court scenes under the influence of Mughal courts. Thus, we find that the trend towards miniaturisation was not borrowed from outside, but evolved from within.

The 'primitive Pahariminiatures' were made on the handmade paper, known as the Sialkoti kagaz, by using self-prepared mineral or vegetal colors. Those miniatures inherited their themes, style and technique from the wall-paintings, which also were made by using self-made mineral or vegetal colors. Those miniatures were commonly executed in horos-copes, Shiv-chautris, etc. for the accomplishment of rituals and occasionally for auspicious purposes much before painting became a thing of joy and pride for the rulers and nobles (Fig. 3).

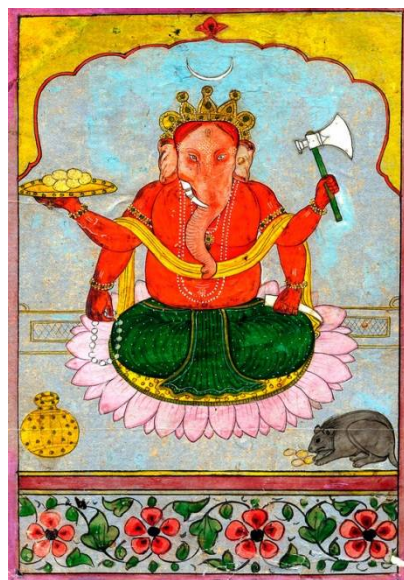


Figure 3.

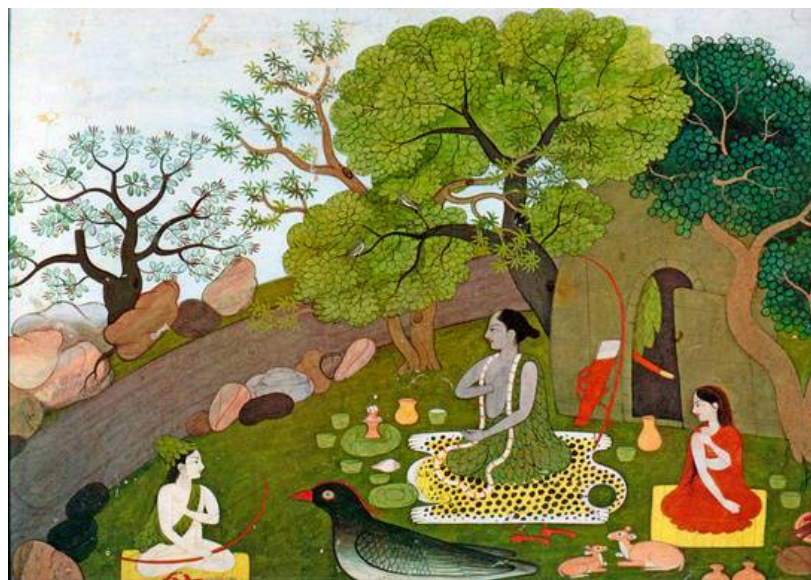


Figure 4.

Some of such old horoscopes were preserved in the Himachal Lok Sanskriti Sans-than, Mandi (Himachal Pradesh), but after the death of Chandar Mani Kashyap in September 1999, the fate of that institution is not known. Preparation of the kauharas, horoscopes and Shiv-chautris was scrupulously a traditional art, bearing canonical authentication and religious sanctity, for which no alien involvement could be admitted. On the other hand, figural depiction has been a strong Islamic taboo. That essential religious polarity was a very potent factor to thwart any alien impact on the sanctimonious traditional art. Therefore,

the simplistic assumption that the miniaturisation in Pahari painting was introduced under the Persians influence, as is commonly believed may not be reasonable. Further, a protracted discussion among the scholars about the origin of Pahari Painting has been going on. Some attribute its origin to the Indo-Persian or the Mughal art, but from the foregoing discussion, the origin of this art in the native soil may be a logical conclusion for, nothing can grow and flourish, especially the art, unless congenial and conducive environment is available.

The echo of Bhakti movement in the outer Himalayan kingdoms ushered in a new era of religio-aesthetic experience. The vernacular art under the influence of that movement tended to become refined, but that did not exceed beyond what may be defined as the primitive sophistication. The chitraires attempted mythological themes to meet the religio-aesthetic aspirations of their patrons (Fig. 4).

Therefore, it may be reasonable to infer that the tradition of painting in the folk form already existed in the outer Himalayan kingdoms much before the 16th century, the hypothetical date of the origin of Pahari Painting. However, the painting could not flourish as a fine art under the prevailing traditional societal setup, which rated painting, and for that reason all other art-mediums, as lowly activity. An instance of excommunication of Pandit Seo, as noted earlier, may be an example to the point.



Figure 5.

Nevertheless, the local rulers, overwhelmed by the culture of the imperial Mughal court, started encouraging painters. Thus, the art of painting, and music as well, attained a coveted distinction in the outer Himalayan princely courts, setting a stage for assimilation of the Indo-Persian technical and stylistic influences. Those influences lent grace, sophistication and definite identity to the traditional painting, and a newer art-style was born. Nevertheless, it was not only the feudal incentive that assisted fusion of two art styles; the contemporary socio-

cultural ferment was also equally responsible for that transformation. Probably, under the prevailing religio-cultural circumstances, the vernacular painting had also imbibed certain finer nuances of its own in the art expression. The early Basohali paintings unmistakably affirm that assumption. In this context, the observation of M. S. Randhawa that 'If Age and Area Hypo-thesis has any meaning, it also indicates that this style is quite ancient; otherwise it would not have been so widespread' [Randhawa, 1959. P. 15] is significant. Infact, about the 16th – 17th century, the so-called Basohali type of paintings inspired by the Bhakti movement were being turned out almost everywhere in the feudal centers west of Satluj under the patronage of local rulers and nobles. Those early paintings may be identified from the preponderance of folk elements, generally characterised by the flat two-dimensional planes, regardless of visual perspective; the flat sweeps of primary colors with a profusion of the passionate reds; large lotus-shaped eyes, pointed noses and narrow lips on the puffy faces, deliberate distortion of the fleshy limbs, etc. These paintings are normally framed in the glowing red frames (Fig. 5).

However, the primitive intensity so vigorously reflected by the sweeping hot and passionate colors in the early omnifarious Basohali type of paintings of this region became mellowed by the delicate use of soft colors in the proper Basohali painting. The fish-like eyes, receding foreheads and aquiline noses were indicative of a gradual departure from the folk bearing to sophistication (Fig. 6).

That process of sublimation continued under the influence and inspiration of imperial Mughal ateliers until the traditional bold art diction assimilated qualities of a 'fairy world', characterised by the mellowness and refinement in the sensuous lines and soft and dreamy pastel shades. When Aurangzeb Alamgir (CE 1658-1707) ascended to the imperial throne at Delhi, the imperial atelier fell in bad days. The Emperor was a zealous Sunni Muslim and extremely puritanical in temperament. He despised arts, especially the music, which created a sense of insecurity among the professional artist at Delhi. In search of safer haven and green pasture, many of them moved out to the western Himalayan kingdoms, where they not only found refuge, but also a respectable livelihood as artists. The kings and nobles readily patronised them. That situation facilitated direct contacts between the local painters and their displaced counterparts of the Mughalateliers, which further refurbished Pahari School of Painting.



Figure 6.

Thus, not only a new art-style emerged in the western Himalayan hill kingdoms under the Indo-Persian influence, but also the very basic concept about this art was transformed. Both, the soul and structure of painting underwent metamorphism. While in the past, religious belief-system rooted in the universal welfare was the motive force, in its new version, the painting indulged in the illusory romanticism for the sensuous pleasure of the elites (Fig. 6).

Commissioning, acquisitioning and gifting of paintings became a status symbol for the kings, princes and nobility. That necessitated preparation of more than one copies of the same painting. For that purpose, the master painter prepared a perforated stencil on parchment, locally called the charba. More copies of the same miniature could be prepared by his assistant under his instructions and guidance. Significantly, all miniatures were made on the handmade Sialkoti kagaz (Paper prepared at Sialkot, now in Pakistan). Attimes, that paper was also made locally. The artists prepared their own colors and brushes. For colors, artist depended on the minerals vegetal sources that they meticulously prepared themselves. However, some mineral colors were also procured from outside. Those colors were mixed with the animal glue, but the whole process was extremely complicated and difficult.

Under those elite patrons, the art of painting attained new heights and it culminated into the art-style that could stand out singularly on the merit of its sensuous beauty and poetic expression. However, having with drawn to the seclusion of palaces and courts at the zenith of its glory, it lost hold of its roots. That factor became one of the main reasons for the untimely demise of that glorious art tradition, besides the new wave of socio-cultural resurgence under the western influence. Thus, having remained dominant for three centuries from the 16th to 19th, it collapsed almost abruptly. Even today, a few painters of the traditional families supplement their livelihood by painting, but they do not prepare the miniatures in the traditional manner, but either fake them or prepare immature and clumsy copies for the market. A few of them in Kangra and Chamba area also prepare traditional kauharas and bang-dwaris for their traditional patrons. With this broad background about the origin of Pahari Paining, let us know about it in a bit detailed manner.

The Pahari Painting in its various forms – miniatures, murals and 'embroidery-painting' or rumals – marks an important milestone in the history of Indian Art, nay World Art. Only a few art-movements can rival it for its glorious inning of long three hundred years, thematic vastness, fluent and lyrical lines and the tonal serenity of its pastel shades, all giving a subtle feeling of ethereal lightness and delicacy. The vastness of geographical area that this art movement commanded in the foothills of western Himalay in various princely kingdoms is also equally significant. From Poonch in Jammu & Kashmir in the extreme west to Garhwal in Uttaranchal in the east, this art movement spanned across the kingdoms of Jammu, Basohali, Chamba, Nurpur, Guler, Kangra, Mandi, Kullu, Bilaspur, Arki, etc. Except the kingdoms of Jammu and Basohali, which form parts of Jammu & Kashmir, and Garhwal is the western segment of Uttarakhand, all other kingdoms are now form a part of Himachal Pradesh. All these states, viz. Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand now form the western part of the Union of India. Since, the rulers of these kingdoms belong to the Rajputs; the school of painting that flourished in their kingdoms also came to be known as the Rajput Paining in the earlier works on the subject. However, it has also been known as the Himachal School of Painting, because the majority of capital-centers of this school now form parts of Himachal Pradesh state. In the earlier works, it has also been defined as the Kangra Painting, for the evidences of this art moment were initially discovered in Kangra

area. However, lately this art style has commonly been defined as the Pahari School of Painting or simply the Pahari Painting, for all the centers of this school were located in the pahar (i.e., mountains) of the western Himalayan region. However, the irony of Pahari Painting has been that its different sub-schools have been identified with the capital centers, where those flourished, and not with the stylistic peculiarities of the different artists, despite the fact that many of the Pahari painters worked at different places at different times. Thus, the works of the same artist have been identified differently. Under that feudalistic bias, the names of most of the painters of Pahari painting are lost in obscurity. Besides, due to this ambiguity, many works of Manaku, an artist of Guler in Kangra have been attributed to Molaram of Garhwal [Handa & Madhu Jain, 2003. P. 22-25] and a fictitious school of Garhwal Painting established.

Pahari Painting could not have been so rich and flamboyant had the Vaishnav Bhakti movement not inspired it with an array of endless themes, which could express all conceivable human moods and emotive situations. Besides the Vaishnav literary works, the Shaiv and Shakta classics also provided numerous themes to the Pahari Painting (Fig. 7).

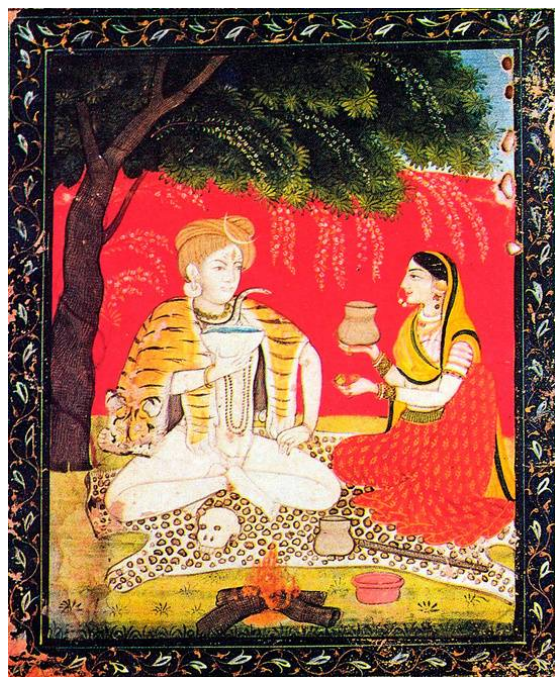


Figure 7.

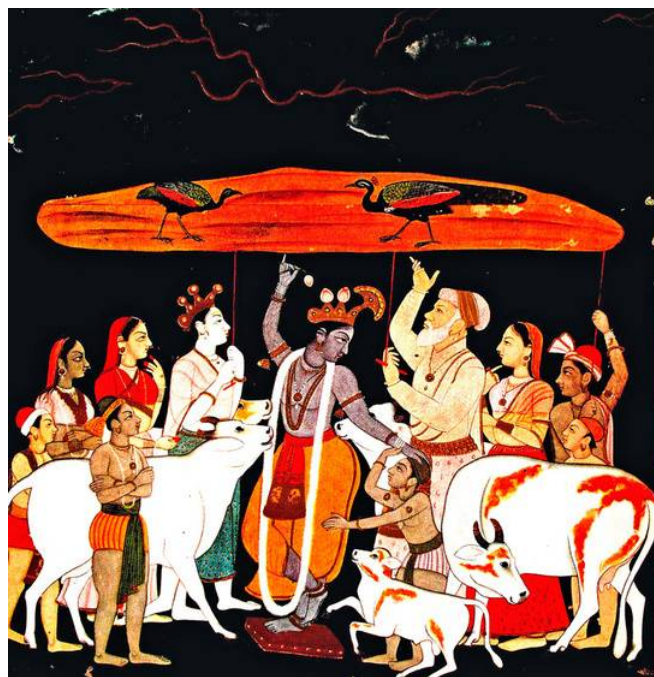


Figure 8.

However, the Vaishnav movement centered on the Krishna bhakti (devotion) provided such colorful and romantic wings to this art that it could soar to the ethereal heights of aesthetic experience. The themes and contexts drawn from the classics, like Jayadev's Geet-Govind, Bihari's Bihari-Satsai, Keshavdas's Barahmasa and Rasikpriya, Bhanudutt's Ras-manjari, Meshakarn's Rag-mala and scores of other poetic works on romanticism were given lavish visual expressions by many painters, working at different places. Besides, the Ramayan, Mahabharat, Bhagwat Puran, Devi Mahatmya and many other classics and innumerable other works provided very stimulating themes to the Pahari painters (Fig. 8).

Apart from these, Pahari painters also painted themes drawn from the day-to-day rural life, court scenes. One of the interesting peculiarities of the Pahari Painting is that the artist has very intimately and sensitively incorporated the environment and landscape of his own

surrounding as the background of the main theme. That intimate relationship of the artist with his work eloquently expresses his fondness for his own village or surrounding.

The movement of Pahari Art did not remain confined only to the miniature painting made on the handmade paper, known as the Sialkoti kagaz, but the walls of palaces, temples and houses were also embellished by the enchanting murals. These murals, executed in panels, mostly depict themes drawn from religious texts, besides themes drawn from Nayaka-bhed, Rag-mala, etc. are also depicted in these. In many murals, secular themes have also been depicted. These murals may still be seen at various places in different states of conservation, but most of these are now in precarious condition at Jammu, Basohali, Chamba, Damtal, Nurpur, Dada-Siba, Daulatpur, Nadaun, Tira-Sujanpur, Mandi, Kullu, Arki, Nalagarh, Paonta, Dehradun, Kankhal, Saharanpur, etc. Interesting murals also existed at Bilaspur, Auhar, Nahan and Paonta. In most of these places, those are now either verging on extinction or are now extinct due to human neglect. Some murals in Rang Mahal of Chamba were removed from the walls by the experts of the National Museum at New Delhi for being displayed in that museum. Some retrieved murals are also displayed at the Bhuri Singh Museum at Chamba and the Himachal State Museum at Shimla.

Another medium of artistic expression, inspired by the miniature painting, has been the 'embroidery-painting'. Since, the earliest and the finest pieces of the 'embroidery-painting' were discovered at Chamba, these came to be known as the Chamba Rumal instead of Pahari Rumal, in the same manner as the entire school of Pahari Painting was identified as the Kangra Painting in the beginning by the scholars, as already noted. In fact, that type of art-embroidery work was being done since the 18th century in Chamba and at several other places in the western Himalayan foothill region, where different sub-schools of Pahari Painting flourished. Therefore, it may be appropriate to define it as Pahari Rumal than Chamba Rumal. Significant among those were the capital towns of the Jammu, Basohali, Kangra, Mandi, Kullu and Kahloor (Bilaspur) kingdoms. While, that art-tradition is still survives in a much debased and modified form in Chamba under the token patronage of the State Government of Himachal Pradesh, it has become almost extinct elsewhere under the changed socio-economic scenario.

The earliest specimens of art-embroidery on cloth in the style of miniature painting was found at Basohali, belonging to the mid-18th century, during the reign of Raja Amrit Pal (CE 1750-1776). That art might have developed at Basohali out of the anterior tradition of the folk embroidery. The type of embroidery that emerged at Basohali and the adjoining area of Jammu under the feudal patronage came to be known as the Dogra embroidery to differentiate it from the Chamba Rumal. In the days of Amrit Pal, Basohali had emerged as an important centre of art and commerce that attracted the embroiderers from Kashmir Valley. The insecure political conditions at Basohali under his successor, Vijay Pal (CE 1776–1806) drove artists and artisans to the safer places in the neighboring hill kingdoms. Consequently, the art of embroidery effloresced more vigorously in Kangra under the patronage of Maharaja Sansar Chand (CE 1775–1823) and in Chamba under Raja Raj Singh (CE 1764–1794). Both of those rulers wholeheartedly encouraged and patronised the arts and crafts in their kingdoms. During that period, the folk-art of embroidery also took a sophisticated turn at Chamba under the royal patronage and it emerged in a very refined and elegant form as the Chamba Rumal, to vie with the Chamba Painting. Some of the finest embroidered rumals were produced at Chamba during that period. The art of

embroidery further developed at Chamba on the lines of miniature painting under the elite people and successive rulers to such an excellence that such works being done elsewhere looked inferior. Nevertheless, the development of the school of art-embroidery at Chamba was not an isolated phenomenon. The influences of the art-traditions proliferated in the neighboring kingdoms of Basohali, Kangra, Bilaspur and Mandi kingdoms where also that art flourished, but could not match with the artistry of Chamba Rumal.

The Pahari Rumal was a joint creativity of the miniature painters and embroiderers. The 'drafting' or 'drawing' for the rumal was done by the skilled miniature artist, while the embroiderer did the needlework. The miniature artist not only outlined the theme on the rumal, but he also provided instructions about the use and distribution of colors. Thus, every element of the embroidery reminisces about the miniature painting. Even the treatment of border, with the meandering foliated creepers, is strikingly similar to the miniature painting, especially those in Kangra style. Even some of the Chamba Rumals look closer to the Kangra style miniature rather than to the one of Chamba style (Fig. 9).



Figure 9.

The influence of miniature painting on the embroidery is very profound in such works where the ras-mandal themes have been embroidered. The ras-mandal has been the most popular theme for the embroidery work, possibly for the reason that it provided a most suited and convenient circular composition on a square rumal. The other favorite themes on the rumals are the Krishna-lila and the scenes from Mahabharat and Ramayan, the Ganesh-puja, the Dashavatar, the Dasha-Mahavidyas, etc. Among the secular subjects, the marriage and hunting scenes, the nayaka-bhed the chaupad-play (dice play), etc. have been the popular ones.

The embroidery in the early rumals was accomplished by the double-run small stitches, in which inter-embroidered silver threads for eyelids and ornamentation, etc. were also used in certain cases. The stitches become longer with the dohara-tankha, i.e., the double satin-

stitches with the obverse and the reverse of the embroidered surface of a rumal appearing similar [Handa, 1998. P. 122-131].

For centuries, the Pahari art-movement remained shrouded in mystery until Metcalf discovered some specimens of Pahari miniatures in Kangra in the beginning of 19th century. However, it was Anand K. Coomaraswamy, who pioneered serious study on the subject in about the first decade of the 20th century. The trail blazed by him was followed by many scholars and connoisseurs of Indian art. Among those, the names of O. C. Ganguli, J. C. French, W. G. Archer, Robert Reiff, Mukundi Lal, M. S. Randhawa, Karl Khandalavala, B. N. Goswami and many others deserve particular mention. All these scholars wrote in English. For that reason, most of the non-English speaking connoisseurs of art remained not much aware of this art moment that remained confined to the secluded corner of Himalayan region. The first ever comprehensive study in Hindi was done jointly by K. L. Vaidya and O. C. Handa. Although, the contribution made by these eminent scholars in the field has been very significant, yet, with the exception of B. N. Goswami, all of them have dealt Pahari Painting with the strong feudalistic bias, and their writings look like the extension of the regional political history rather than the appreciation of art. From those works, one may get the idea of exploits of the hill rulers, but not about the artists who produced those splendid works of art. Prof B. N. Goswami deserves credit for discovering many unknown miniature painters from places that were earlier unknown.

In our age of social resurgence, there is need to rediscover the Pahari masters, like Pandit Seo, Nainsukh, Kama, Manaku, Joharu, Nikka, Ramlal, Fattu, Purkhu, Kushan Lal of Guler-Kangra, Kripali, Devidas, Golu of Basohali, Laharu of Chamba, Muhammadbax (Muhammadi) and Gahia Narotam of Mandi, Kishan Chand of Bilaspur and many others. No doubt, the old painters and other artists glorified their royal patrons in their works, but that was their necessity for survival. The writers on art do not have such compulsion, and it is for them to free themselves from the feudalistic mindset.

The reason for that feudalistic bias of the earlier writers on Pahari Art may not be far to seek. Most of the early writers on the Pahari Art were the highly-placed bureaucrats, who felt amply rewarded by exploring the feudal treasures. They conveniently raised the whole superstructure of scholarship on the Pahari Painting on the feudal support and patronage to explain the origin and development of painting in the hills, without bothering for what laid with the commoners in the hills. When such a patronage could not reasonably be found out, the circumstances were fabricated for that purpose. No doubt, the feudal patronage has certainly been responsible for the development of painting in the hills. In that context, the name of Maharaja Sansar Chand (CE 1775--1823) emerges as the greatest patron of arts. Those were the years, when arts and crafts had touched highest watermark in Kangra. Nevertheless, the overemphasis on the feudal patronage may not be reasonable, and in certain cases certainly untrue, as about the so-called Garhwal Painting [Handa & Madhu Jain, 2003. P. 28-33]. In fact, the common people in the towns and villages were also the lovers and connoisseurs of paintings in their own humble manner. I vividly remember that my father, uncles and relatives had a good collection of miniatures with them. I still remember a fine miniature of Gaj-Lakshmi, which we used to worship on the eve of Diwali. The oil paintings of Muhammadbax, Gahia Narotam and other unknown painters could be seen almost in every prosperous family of the town. In the early fifties, the curio-hunters and antique dealers from Hoshiarpur and Amritsar could be seen in the town looking for gotta-kinari, old jewellery and

miniatures. I remember Jagdish Mittal meeting people in Manditown in search of miniatures during my adolescent days of early fifties.

The tragedy of that feudalistic bias has been that the Pahari miniatures are defined more as the antiquities rather than the works of art. The museums and the rich houses, through the good offices of those bureaucrats-turned-scholars of art acquired most of the royal collections. However, the paintings in the possession of common people slipped into the hands of antique dealers at throwaway prices, who later made fortunes by offering them to the museums. Consequently, while a few old miniatures may be found today with some of the royal and noble houses, no miniature painting is available with the common people. The hype for old miniatures and antiquities generated by that situation has of late encouraged clandestine business by the well-organised nexus of the antique dealers and the new generation of the 'miniature painters' in the hills. Although, these 'modern painters' have lost their traditional moorings, yet some of them have done well in reproducing old miniatures and using modern materials. I personally know a few painters who still 'copy' the old miniatures in the traditional Pahari style, but mostly with modern synthetic colors on the bleached handmade paper-sheets procured from the old basis. They take care not to inscribe their names on them. The copies so made are smoked and soiled to impart antique touch. Those 'fakes' find way to the private and public collections through the antique dealers and fetch handsome price. That is how the trade in 'fakes' flourishes and the 'copyists' earn far more being 'dead' than what they would earn by being 'alive'.

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Received: June 19, 2015.