

# Gods, Kings, and Lovers: Courtly Painting from India

**IN EARLY MODERN INDIA**, every ruler of note commissioned and collected “miniature” paintings. These delicately rendered watercolor compositions on paper delighted the senses and glorified the sitter. Portraits represent royalty as unblemished, all-powerful, and semidivine. Kings and even queens bear golden auras—an evocation of their supposedly celestial status. Illustrations for sacred texts also blurred earthly and heavenly realms. Depictions of Krishna show the blue-skinned deity in magnificent gems, pearls, and sumptuous regalia reminiscent of courtly costume. As the divine lover, he flirts with his favorite, Radha, while members of the royal retinue dance and play music around them. Gods and kings mix and merge in the idealized world of courtly painting.

Drawn entirely from the Mead’s permanent collection, this exhibition explores the essential role of painting in the lives of India’s elites, looking especially at the convergence of human and divine in nine exquisite works created for Muslim and Hindu patrons between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The portraits and narrative illustrations on display exemplify the refined tastes cultivated by courtly connoisseurs across the subcontinent. Such paintings circulated freely among India’s royalty. They also traveled as gifts from one ruler to another, while painters themselves moved from court to court to carry out commissioned work. The resulting confluence of artistic styles speaks to the complex, intertwined nature of these royal networks.

Organized by Yael Rice, Visiting Assistant Professor and Robert E. Keiter ’57 Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Art and the History of Art, with assistance from Chen Jiang, Class of 2015, this exhibition is made possible with generous support from the David W. Mesker and Hall & Kate Peterson Funds.

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Unknown artist  
India (Rajasthan, Amber)

**Prince Ram Singh of Amber**, ca. 1660–1670  
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper

Gift of Dr. Frank L. Babbott (Class of 1913)  
AC 1957.33



The Kachhawaha rulers of Amber (later Jaipur) enjoyed close ties with the Mughal family, through marriage and other alliances. Many adult male members of this Hindu Rajput dynasty also served at the more politically dominant Mughal court. This intimate proximity had quite visible consequences. For example, this extremely fine portrait of the teenaged Kachhawaha prince Ram Singh (d. 1688) employs the strict profile format and highly detailed manner associated with mid-seventeenth-century Mughal painting, even though it was executed by an artist working in Amber. Through artistic emulation of this kind, Rajput subjects sought to appear more like their overlords. Ram Singh's elite status is also communicated through his luxurious silk **jama** (stitched coat) and **patka** (sash), gold sword hilt, and many pearls, emeralds, and rubies. As **raja** (king) of Amber, Ram Singh would serve under the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707), who appears in a painting on display nearby.

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Unknown artist  
India (probably Delhi)

**Emperor Aurangzeb at the Shrine of Mu'in al-Din Chishti in Ajmer, Rajasthan**, early 18th century  
Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper

Gift of Doctor and Mrs. Frank L. Babbott (Class of 1913)  
AC 1963.4



The shrine covering the gravesite of Mu'in al-Din Chishti (d. 1236), a revered Sufi (Muslim mystic), is one of the most popular pilgrimage destinations in India. This **nim qalam** (half-tone) painting shows the gold-nimbused Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) presenting a donation to the custodians of this famous shrine, an event that most likely took place during his 1679–1681 military campaigns in Rajasthan. An ostrich egg, an auspicious symbol of life and rebirth, hangs over the saint's grave, while in the painting's lower registers throngs of military personnel (on the left) and colorfully garbed courtiers (on the right) gather in attendance. Minute Persian inscriptions identify the two young pearl-and-gem-adorned men as Aurangzeb's sons Bahadur Shah and A'zam Shah. This nostalgically retrospective painting may date from the former's brief reign, from 1707–1712, a period that many historians believe marks the beginning of the Mughal dynasty's political decline.

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Unknown artist  
India (probably Delhi)

**Mughal Prince on Horseback**, early 18th century  
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper

Gift of Doctor and Mrs. Frank L. Babbott (Class of 1913)  
AC 1963.5



Hailing originally from central Asia, the Mughal dynasty dominated the political landscape of the Indian subcontinent for three centuries, from the early sixteenth until the middle of the nineteenth century. This Muslim family claimed to be semidivine, as indicated by this portrait of a Mughal prince with a golden halo. The figure's effortless command of the rearing stallion further underscores his supernatural nature, while the elaborate costume, jewelry, and other adornments—even the horse has been decorated with a rich, salmon-hued henna dye—convey his royal status. Distinctive features such as the full beard, large ear, and sideburn curl suggest that this is a depiction of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's son Bahadur Shah (d. 1712), who also appears in a painting on display nearby. Bahadur Shah would ascend to the throne in 1707, at the age of sixty-three. In this magisterial portrait, which was probably painted only a few years earlier, he is portrayed as a virile young man.

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Unknown artist  
India (Delhi)

**Mughal Woman Holding Flowers**, ca. 1730  
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper

Gift of Alban G. Widgery  
AC 1967.36



Male artists were seldom permitted visual access to female members of India's royal courts. For this reason, representations of women tend to be fairly generic, while portraits of princes, emperors, and male courtiers are much more individuated. In typical fashion, the woman in this painting is portrayed as an anonymous, idealized beauty, though her golden halo and elaborate jewelry hint at her royal status. The format of the composition also draws from a standard imperial image type developed at the Mughal court in the early seventeenth century. Known as **jharokha** (balcony) portraits, these paintings show the emperors giving public audience from a palace window or balcony. Where contemporary **jharokha** paintings depict Muhammad Shah (r. 1719–1748) holding the mouthpiece of a hookah, the woman here cradles a vase of flowers. Colorful blossoms abound on the textiles and building and in the garden surrounding her.

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Unknown artist  
India (Uttar Pradesh, probably Lucknow or Farrukhabad)

**Majnun in the Wilderness**, second half of the 18th century  
Opaque watercolor on paper

Gift of Alban G. Widgery  
AC 1967.47



The story of Layla and Qays's unrequited love is an allegory for the mystic's desire for union with God. The star-crossed sweethearts meet as youths, but being from rival clans they are forbidden from marrying. As a result of their forced separation, Qays goes crazy, retreats into the desert, and becomes known as Majnun ("mad one"). This painting shows the emaciated, unkempt Majnun seated under a large tree. Sympathetic animals gather in pairs around him, while a crowd of concerned visitors approaches from the left. Majnun, meanwhile, appears otherwise preoccupied, no doubt with thoughts of his beloved.

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Unknown artist  
India (Rajasthan, probably Jaipur)

**Baz Bahadur and Rupmati at the Hunt**, mid-18th century  
Opaque watercolor and ink on paper

Gift of Alban G. Widgery  
AC 1967.49



Like many famous romances, the quasi-historical tale of Baz Bahadur, the Muslim ruler of Malwa, and the Hindu singer Rupmati ends in tragedy. The two met and fell in love while Baz Bahadur was hunting outside his capital of Mandu, in central India. Not long after, the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) invaded Malwa, and the lovers became separated. While Baz Bahadur was soliciting help from neighboring allies, Rupmati poisoned herself to avoid capture by the enemy army. Works like this one, which shows the sultan and his wife at the hunt, became especially popular at India's royal courts during the eighteenth century. Because the Mead painting is largely unfinished, the artist's hand—including his delicate underdrawing and masterful shading—is still visible. His alterations and erasures are also evident. In some places, for example, he used a thin layer of white paint to mask his errors.

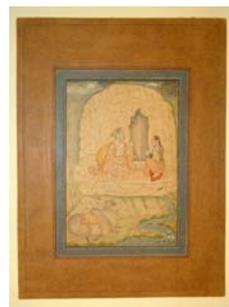
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Attributed to the “Stipple Master”  
India (Rajasthan, Mewar region, Udaipur)

**Shiva and His Family in the Mountains**, ca. 1705–1715  
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper

Gift of Alban G. Widgery  
AC 1967.51



The great Hindu god, Shiva, sits with his wife, Parvati, and his bull **vahana** (mount), Nandi, before a cave that holds a trident and crescent moon, two of the god’s attributes. The mountainous landscape recalls the holy family’s Himalayan abode atop Mount Kailash, but it may also reference the sacred Amaranth Cave, in Jammu and Kashmir, where Shiva is said to have revealed to Parvati the secrets of life and the universe. An anonymous artist called the “Stipple Master”—because of his distinctive use of dots and short strokes—probably painted this work while serving at the court of Amar Singh II (r. 1698–1710) in Udaipur, Rajasthan. Since the Stipple Master is best known for his intimate portraits of Amar Singh, this painting may also be a representation of him, though depicted here in the guise of Shiva. Hindu and Muslim rulers often claimed to enjoy close proximity to divinity.

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Unknown artist  
India (Himachal Pradesh, Kangra)

**Krishna and Radha Celebrate Holi**, ca. 1775–1780  
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper

Gift of Alban G. Widgery  
AC 1967.56



Krishna, one of the ten **avatars** (manifestations) of the Hindu god Vishnu, was raised by humble foster parents in a cow-herding village near the forest of Vrindavan. There he spent much of his youth enchanting the **gopis** (female cowherds) with the celestial sounds of his flute playing. They all pined for the Krishna, but it was Radha who would become his favorite. She and the blue-skinned deity are the centerpiece of this remarkable painting created in or near Kangra, home to the court of Raja Sansar Chand (r. 1775–1823) and a renowned family of painters. It shows the colorful celebration of the springtime festival Holi. Many of the revelers spray each other with tinted water, while others dance and play music. Krishna, wearing his characteristic yellow **dhoti** (unstitched cloth) and peacock-feather crown, has eyes only for Radha, however. Their passionate, mutual devotion is a symbol of the union of the human and the divine.

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Attributed to Purkhu (active ca. 1780–1820)  
India (Himachal Pradesh, Kangra)

**King Ugrasena Receives Krishna and Balarama on the Eve of Their Departure for Dwaraka**

Page from a dispersed series, probably of the **Harivamsha**  
(Lineage of Krishna), ca. 1800–1820  
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper



Bequest of Alban Widgery  
AC 1968.13

This large painting shows the reception of the Hindu god Krishna and his brother Balarama at the Yadava court of the white-bearded king Ugrasena, whose throne Krishna had helped recover from the tyrant ruler Kamsa (also Ugrasena's son). Bustling scenes of packing and loading unfold around them. Inscriptions on the painting's reverse explain that the Yadavas are preparing to relocate to the sacred city of Dwaraka, in anticipation of a great war that will soon plague the region.

The painter Purkhu departed in significant ways from the earlier generation of artists associated with the depiction of Krishna and Radha on display nearby. His figures, for example, are squat, and complex architectural settings tend to dominate. As head of the royal painting workshop at Kangra, Purkhu oversaw the production of a large number of religious works, like this one. He is also known for his sensitive portraits of his patron, Raja Sansar Chand (r. 1775–1823).

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