John Yeon Collects: Indian Painting

Quest for Beauty: The Architecture, Landscapes, and Collections of John Yeon

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Classical Indian paintings bear no resemblance to the genres of painting familiar to Western audiences from museums, public spaces, or art galleries. Never intended to be hung on walls, these intimate pictures were meant to be held at arm's length and savored in solitude or with a companion. Originally formatted in series, either in loose portfolios or albums, these paintings are intimately bound with a reverence for the written word, from a time when books were a thing of wonder.

Western collectors, long accustomed to valuing realism as the measure of virtuosity, were slow to awake to the pleasures of Indian painting. The iconography, filled with deities from the Hindu pantheon or figures from literary classics, was daunting, and the vivid palette was considered harsh. Ironically, it was only when modernism liberated critics from their preference for realism that Western collectors learned to "read" the visual language of Indian paintings. This is an art form with its own conventions, in which close observation of nature exists side-by-side with stylization of forms, and flatness can convey perspective and depth.

Curated by Robert J. Del Bontà, Ph.D.

Religious Painting

India is home to many religions and offers the devotee a vast array of gods, ranging from local nature spirits to powerful and sophisticated deities that have been the subject of oral literature and visual art for centuries. One of the earliest works in Yeon's collection consists of three folios from a manuscript related to Jainism, a religion propagated by a historical figure of the fifth century BCE. Others relate to blue-skinned Vishnu, the Preserver in Hindu tradition, and Krishna, Vishnu's cowherd avatar and epic hero.

The story of the monk Kalaka

From a loose-leaf manuscript of the *Kalakacaryakatha*
India, Gujarat or Rajasthan, ca. 1500
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

From the top:

Kalaka rides out and meets the monk Gunakara
Kalaka meets with the Sahi king
The Destruction of the She-ass Magic

The *Kalakacaryakatha,* or Story of Kalaka, is a popular narrative among followers of Jainism, one of the three major religions of India. From at least the early fifteenth century, many manuscripts of the text were illustrated on paper and donated to temple libraries.

These folios from a loose-leaf manuscript depict various episodes in the tale:

> At top, Kalaka rides out on his horse and meets the Jain monk Gunakara, who so impresses him that he too becomes a monk.
>
> In the central folio, Kalaka has learned that his sister was abducted by the evil king Gardabhilla, and travels to the west to meet with a Sahi king to plead for help.
>
> In the bottom folio, Sahi forces attack the evil king's capital city. Gardabhilla had a magical she-ass whose bray would kill anyone who hears it. Kalaka instructed the army to shoot arrows into its mouth before it can let out its awful sound, as seen at the entrance to the circular fort.

Illustrated Jain manuscripts such as this one are among the earliest Indian paintings extant today, excluding murals painted on the walls of ancient cave temples. Created for Jain pilgrimage centers in Gujarat and Rajasthan, these tiny masterpieces delight the eye with the vibrancy of the emphatic lines, the vivid colors, and the intricate details in textile patterns. Most of the figures are shown in profile with a projecting further eye, an unusual convention found only in these West Indian manuscripts. An exception is the figure of the Sahi king, who is consistently shown in three-quarter profile: his portrayal is based on an earlier painting style found in Islamic Egypt. Gujarat was under control of an Islamic dynasty when this work was created, and presumably local artists had access to imported Mamluk paintings.

Liberation of the king of the elephants

Possibly from a *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* series
India, Rajasthan, Bundi, ca. 1770
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

While wading in a lotus pond, the king of the elephants is trapped by an alligator. The elephant prays for release, waving lotus flowers with his trunk in a display of devotion to Vishnu. Vishnu speeds down from the heavens on his eagle Garuda; at the last moment, he jumps off and tosses his *cakra* or discus, cutting off the head of the demon. The discus, shown as a white circle, is seen several times as it arcs from Vishnu's hand toward the alligator's throat. Three witnesses observe the miraculous rescue: a human devotee, standing in the lotus-filled lake; an ascetic, seated on the bank with his hands continually raised in the air; and a goddess, seated in a flying pavilion of lotus blossoms.

This painting may have been made as one of a large series of pictures illustrating the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,* a central text in the Hindu tradition that reveres Vishnu.

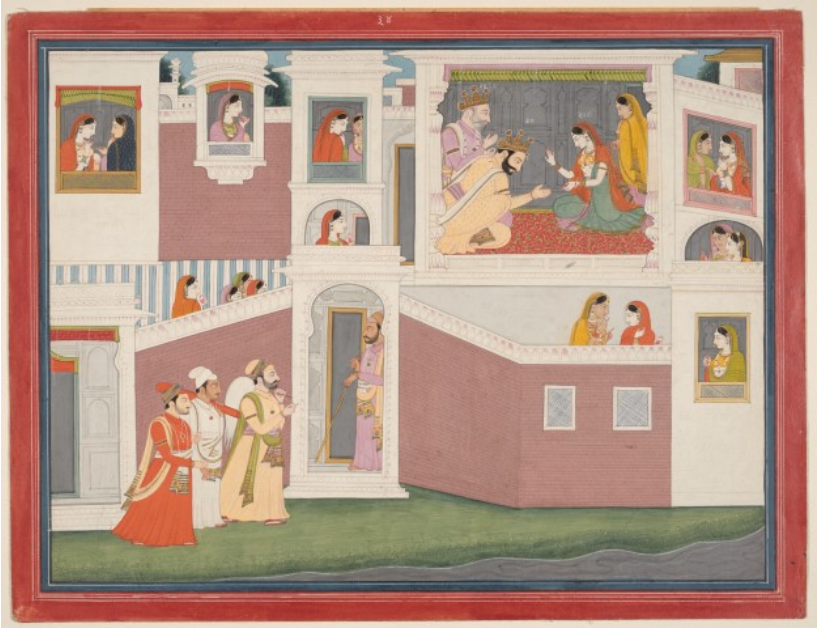
Vishnu in his many forms

From a *Sahasaranama* series
India, Rajasthan, Mewar, Udaipur, ca. 1680–90
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

This work is from a series of devotional images relating to the 1008 names for Vishnu. Here, it appears that he is being described in relation to two other principle Hindu deities, Brahma, the god of creation, and Surya, the sun god. Vishnu appears three times, twice with blue skin and holding his usual four attributes (discus, conch, club, and lotus) and once in a glowing golden oval. The other four figures are devotees. Each of the figures is isolated against the mottled black background, with no attempt to unite them in an overarching narrative.

As the capital of the ancient Rajput kingdom of Mewar, Udaipur was home to a thriving school of painting from the mid-sixteenth century until modern times.

Kamsa begs forgiveness of Vasudeva and Devaki



Possibly from a *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* series
India, Himachal Pradesh, Kangra, ca. 1790
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

This complicated composition reflects an equally complicated moment in the life of Krishna, one of the many avatars of Vishnu. The tyrant Kamsa—seen here at the upper right, with black beard and crown—heard a divine prophecy that his sister Devaki's eighth son would kill him. He imprisoned his sister and her husband, Vasudeva, and slaughtered their male children as they were born. Through the intervention of the gods, the eighth child, Krishna, was spirited away to be raised by cowherds. A girl child was substituted for Krishna, and when Kamsa came to kill her, she took her true and terrifying form as an eight-armed goddess and informed him that his doom was certain, for Krishna had been born. Kamsa then came to beg Devaki and Vasudeva for forgiveness, in the moment portrayed here. Much later, Krishna would return to kill his evil uncle, fulfilling the prophecy.

Krishna venerated as a cowherd

India, Rajasthan, Nathadwara, early 19th century
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

On first viewing this painting may appear to be a simple pastoral scene of Krishna and his brother Balarama —both avatars of the god Vishnu —taking cows out to pasture. However, Krishna's elaborate costume identifies him as Shri Nathji, a form of Krishna as a child, venerated in the town of Nathadwara. The principal icon of Shri Nathji in Nathadwara is thought to have self-manifested from stone; that is, it is not considered to be a man-made image. The image is treated as a living child and venerated through daily rituals in which he is awakened, dressed, and fed. The scene illustrated here refers to the third of the eight *darshanas* or viewings with the god, in which he is adored as a cow-herder.

Nathadwara flourishes as the center of Shri Nathji worship to this day.

Krishna and his followers hide from a storm

From a *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* series
India, Himachal Pradesh, Kangra, ca. 1790–1810
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

Lightning flashes in the dark sky and rain pours down in torrents. Pink rivers have uprooted trees, and snakes slither through the waters. The calm at the center of this storm is a snug cave, where Krishna and his followers—his brother, Balarama, and several cow-herders as well as cows and calves—have taken shelter. Krishna seems to be telling a story to pass the time. This charming scene illustrates an episode found in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, one of the "great histories" of the Hindu tradition.

The pastel tones seen here are typical of paintings made in Kangra, a tiny principality nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Visual Poetry

Krishna is also protagonist in a large corpus of poetry composed during India's medieval period (12th–17th century) in either Sanskrit—the classical language of ancient India—or contemporary vernaculars. Literary masterpieces such as the *Gita Govinda* or the *Rasikapriya* emerged from the *bhakti* movement in Hinduism, which emphasized personal devotion. The many moods of Krishna's love play with his partner Radha become a metaphor for an intense relationship with the divine.

Love Play of Radha and Krishna

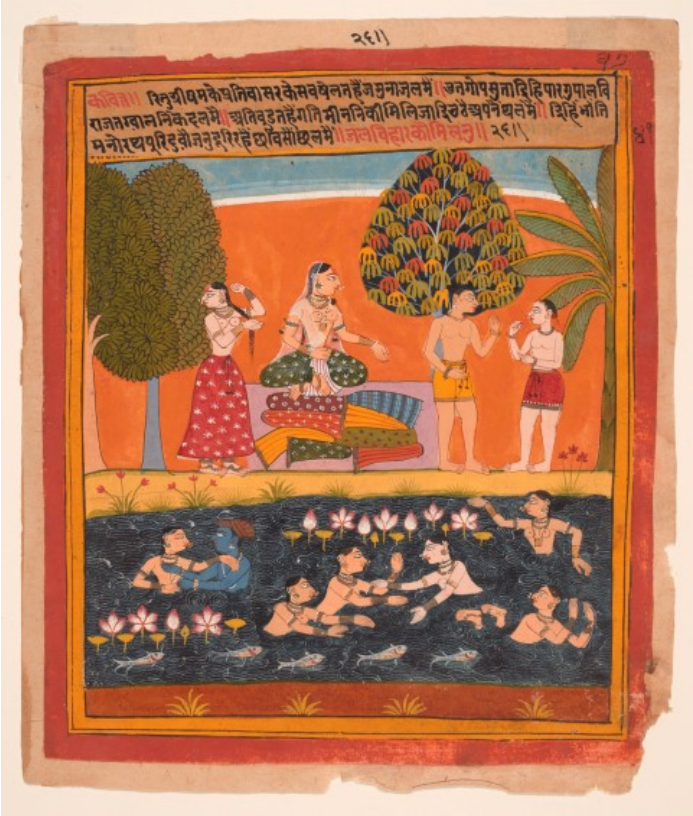
From a *Rasikapriya* of Keshava Das series
India, Rajasthan, Mewar, Udaipur, 1635/45
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

Keshav Das (active 1580–1601) composed the *Rasikapriya* in 1591. The verses, describing types of male and female lovers, became widely popular and were frequently illustrated. This scene and an adjacent work are from an early series done in Udaipur, center of the Mewar state and a flourishing art center.

> *One day Vrishabhanu's daughter* [Radha] *and Murari* [Krishna] *decided to hide in the forest and engage in reverse love play. Fully immersed in each other and groaning with pleasure they were fully enjoying each other. During the amorous activity Radha's sapphire-studded pendant tied around her neck with a black thread was moving and it seems as if Surya and Saturn were swinging.*

Text from Harsha V. Dehejia, *Rasikapriya: Ritikavya of Keshavdas in Ateliers of Love*, New Delhi, 2013, 1.20.

Water sports of Radha and Krishna



From a *Rasikapriya* of Keshava Das series
India, Rajasthan, Mewar, Udaipur, 1635/45
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

This verse is a description told by one of Radha's friends called *sakhis*.

> *A sakhi speaks to another sakhi:*
>
> *In the summer months Radha and Krishna would engage in water sports. Krishna would be on one shore and Radha on the opposite shore, each with their cowherd friends. They would sport on their side of the river and then with the speed of fish they would meet in the middle and then come out of the river. In this way they satisfy their desires and remain out of the public gaze.*

Text from Harsha V. Dehejia, *Rasikapriya: Ritikavya of Keshavdas in Ateliers of Love*, New Delhi, 2013, 5.37

Krishna adorns Radha with a *tilak*

From a *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva series
India, Maharashtra, Aurangabad, ca. 1650
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

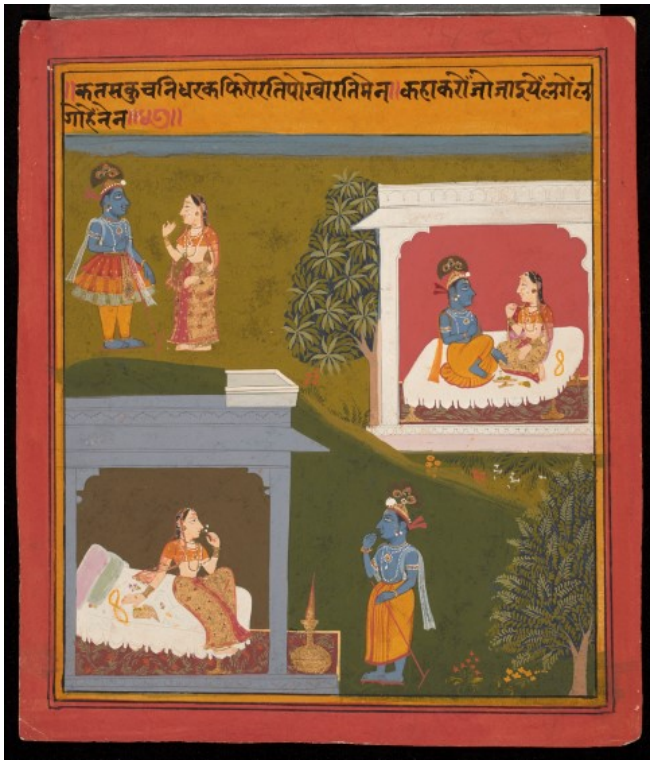
Jayadeva's twelfth century *Gita Govinda* (*Song of the Cowherd*) is an important work contributing to the development of the *Bhakti* tradition in Hinduism, which focuses on a personal relationship with the god Krishna. In Jayadeva's verses, which would have been sung, the relationship between Radha and Krishna is a metaphor for the devotee's direct engagement with the divine.

Here, in an idyllic pastoral setting, Krishna and Radha sit on a bed of lotus blossoms by a stream. In delicate foreplay, Krishna places the *tilak* or *bindi* on Radha's forehead. The gesture is reminiscent of a Brahman priest acknowledging a devotee's offering to the god. The two birds above also mimic the meeting of the two lovers or the soul's union with the godhead.

> Radha speaks to Krishna
>
> *Make a mark with liquid deer musk on my moonlit brow!*
> *Make a moon shadow, Krishna! The sweat drops are dried.*
> *She told the joyful Yadu hero, playing to delight her heart.*

Text from Barbara Stoler Miller, ed. and trans., *Love Song of the Dark Lord*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1977, 12th Part, 24th song, verse 16, p. 124.

Admonishing the faithless lover



From a *Sat Sai* of Bihari Lal series
India, Rajasthan, Mewar, Udaipur, 1719
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

The *Sat Sai* or Seven Hundred Verses was composed by Bihari Lal (1595–1663) for the Maharaja of Jaipur. One of the masterpieces of Hindi literature, the *Sai Sai* relates encounters between with lovers—sometimes, although not always, the god Krishna and his most important paramour, Radha. Here, the pair appear three times in different settings.

> *Her taunt to her faithless lover:*
>
> *Strange you feel abashed*
> *after all your affairs, lover!*
> *need you feel reproach when,*
> *each time you're bewitched by a girl*
> *you can throw the blame*
> *on your fickle eyes?*

Text from Krishna P. Bahadur, trans., *Bihari The Satasai*, New York, 1990, his no. 255.

The grief of parting

From a *Sat Sai* of Bihari Lal series
India, Rajasthan, Mewar, Udaipur, 1719
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

Krishna and Radha again appear as the lovers in this painting from a famous series illustrating the verses of the *Sat Sai*. The imagery in the poem involves the strong contrast of feelings felt by the woman, who lies listlessly on her bed. *Magh* is the coldest month of winter, and the *lu* winds blow in June, the hottest season.

> *What one of her companions said to another:*
>
> *When a wayfarer come from his village said*
> *'Even in the chilly Magh nights*
> *the scorching lu winds blow there.'*
> *he guessed without being told*
> *that his wife,*
> *though burning with the grief of parting*
> *was still alive.*

Text from Krishna P. Bahadur, trans., *Bihari The Satasai*, New York, 1990, his no. 414.

Ragamala painting

Music, poetry, and the visual arts were part of an indivisible continuum in classical Indian art. *Ragamala*, literally "a garland of melodies," are musical modes associated with various seasons, times of day, and moods. In verse and paintings, the ragas and their wives (*raginis*) and offspring are personified as heroes and heroines (*nayaka* and *nayika*). Love, in its many turns and phases, is a constant theme in *ragamala* paintings.

Todi ragini

From a *Ragamala* series
Central India, Malwa, ca. 1680
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold? on paper

This painting is from a well-known *ragamala* series. Todi carries a *vina* (a lute-like instrument) as she walks through a forest with a companion, surrounded by wild animals. Deer are common to the iconography of Todi, but here the artist has added a tiger and birds, including a peacock, to the assemblage of creatures enthralled by her music.

In a series of couplets ascribed to the poet Kashyapa, the *ragini* is described as follows:

> *The Nayika walks lonely with her vina in hands amidst the trees of the forest, surrounded by deer which she has fascinated with her play.*

Text from Klaus Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting*, Basel, 1973, p. 122

Malashri *ragini*

From a *Ragamala* series
India, Telingana, Hyderabad, ca. 1760
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

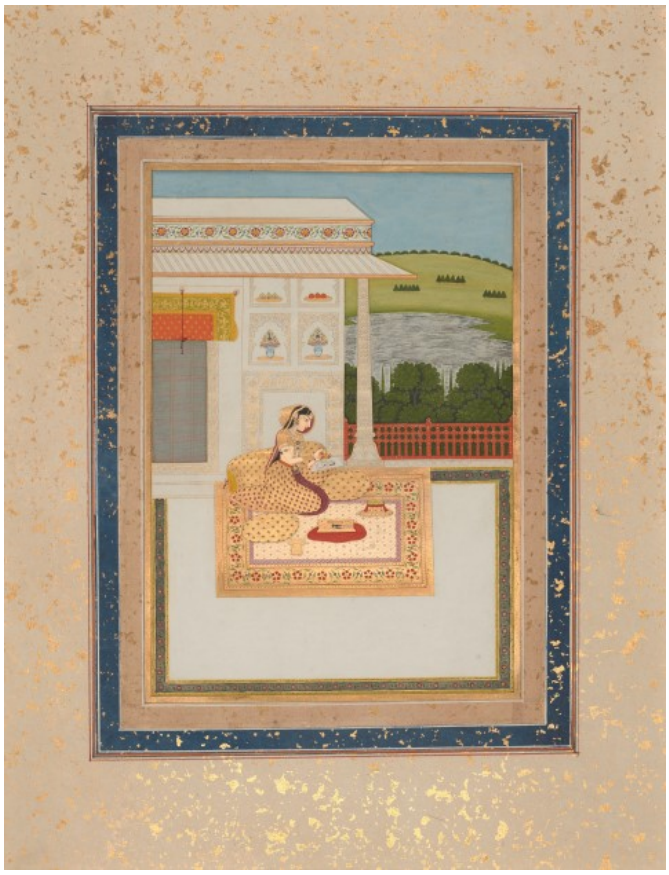
Malashri is usually seen sitting holding lotuses while pining for her absent lover. Here, as in the adjacent painting of Dhanashri, the young heroine is seated on the terrace of an elegant marble palace.

In a popular series of couplets ascribed to the poet Kashyapa, the *ragini* is described as follows:

> *Blown lotus petals in hand, creeper like in bodily grace, and in her beauty gentle—beneath the fruit tree, she is said to be Malashri.*

Text from Klaus Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting*, Basel, 1973, p. 120

Dhanashri *ragini*



From a *Ragamala* series
India, Rajasthan, Kishangarh?, 19th century
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

Dhanashri is usually depicted in the act of sketching a likeness of her absent lover. Here, in an interesting twist on the theme, the sketch in her hand is that of a woman. Everything about the setting, from the elaborately detailed marble architecture with designs in inlaid colored stone to the sumptuous carpets and gold brocade bolster, bespeaks the highest standards of taste and extravagant wealth.

In a popular series of couplets ascribed to the poet Kashyapa, the *ragini* is described as follows:

> *Dark as the durb-leaf, charming, and—drawing board in hand—limning the beloved, the girl lets fall drops of tears.*

Text from Klaus Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting*, Basel, 1973, p, 122.

Megha *raga*

From a *Ragamala* series
India, Rajasthan, Mewar, ca. 1700
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

One of the male modes in *ragamala* sets, *Megha* or "cloud" *raga* sits atop an elephant who cavorts in a storm. Some of the *ragas* and *raginis* are associated with the rains, since the monsoons are anticipated to end the hot season and are a time for love.

In a series of couplets by an unknown poet, the *raga* is described as follows:

> *With a complexion like the blue lotus and a face like the moon, he is dressed in yellow and is sought by thirsty cuckoos. With bewitching smile he sits on the throne of clouds. He is one amongst heroes, the youthful melody of cloud (Megha raga).*

Text from Klaus Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting*, Basel, 1973, p, 128.

Portraiture and Genre Scenes

Portraiture, which we may define in this context as images clearly intended to depict a single and unique historical person, emerged relatively late in Indian history. It first appeared at the imperial court of the Mughal dynasty (1526–1857), where emperors documented their achievements by commissioning portraits of their courtiers and illustrated biographies of their own lives. Later, the practice of portraiture was adopted by many Hindu rulers of smaller states under Mughal rule. Similarly, pictorial representations of scenes of daily life as a subject in its own right spread from Mughal ateliers in Delhi or Agra to principalities throughout India.

Lovers Caught in the Act

From an unidentified story
India, Himachal Pradesh, Kangra, ca. 1810
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

This humorous painting illustrates a theme found in many popular Indian narratives, imagined as tales recited by parrots or mynahs to women as moral admonitions. Here, the unfaithful wife clearly has been annoyed by the mynah, as we see its decapitated form on the ground, where she threw it out the window. Her lover is eagerly climbing a ladder up to her room, entirely unaware of the husband who, probably warned by the parrot on his saddle—will soon bring an end to his wife's philandering.

The actors are all clearly delineated, set against solid grounds of color, and the story is quite easy to read. The complicated architecture at the tope left suggests the distracted thoughts of the irate husband.

A Princess Out Riding

India, Rajasthan, Marwar, Jodhpur?, 1825-30
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

A princess or courtesan rides out into the countryside in an elegantly equipped horse-drawn chariot, accompanied by her friends. One woman acts as charioteer and holds a cup and a flask, offering her a drink of wine, while two other ladies ride along with a hunting dog in pursuit of two rabbits.

Although this painting might have referred to a specific person, the women are depicted in a highly stylized matter. Artists would not have had access to ladies of high rank, since a strict separation of the sexes were common in the royal houses of Rajasthan.

Maharana Bhim Singh and Retinue

India, Rajasthan, Mewar, Udaipur, dated VS 1848/1791 CE
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

There are hundreds of paintings depicting the Maharanas of Udaipur on horseback in procession with their retainers. Here, the Maharana Bhim Singh (1768–1828, reigned 1778–1828), whose exalted status is indicated by his golden halo, is portrayed draped in silk and pearls astride his magnificent and equally bejeweled stallion. His ten retainers, depicted in a smaller scale as befits their lower status, carry various emblems of princely status, including a *huqqa* or water-pipe for the ruler to have a smoke. The large round black standard with an image of the sun in its center is a symbol of the royal house of Mewar.

Kumpawat Chatar Singh-ji on horseback

India, Rajasthan, Marwar, Jodhpur?, ca. 1720-30
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold? on paper

The Kumphawats were one of the important clans among the Rathor rulers of Marwar, a state located in the western part of Rajasthan. The subject of this portrait is identified by an inscription on the back of the painting. Chatar Singh and his horse pose stiffly against a fiery orange background, with a stylized sky above. The formal stasis of their poses is relieved by the artist's choice to make the horse's tail and one hoof extend beyond the painted border, a touch that lends a monumental quality to the portrait.

Abhimanyu Battles the Kauravas

From a Mahabharata series
India, Himachal Pradesh, Kangra, ca. 1800-10
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper

This scene illustrates a battle from the Mahabharata, an ancient and revered epic poem. The narrative revolves around a dynastic dispute between two branches of a royal family, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Abhimanyu, seen here as the crowned prince in a chariot at the center of the composition, was the son of Arjuna, a semi-divine Pandava warrior who figures as the protagonist in the tale.

On the thirteenth day of the battle between the clans, Abhimanyu rushed into the fray, expecting the rest of the Pandavas to follow, but the Kauravas quickly closed ranks to encircle the boy. Abhimanyu fought boldly and inflicted injuries on many of his enemies, but in the end he was killed, while his uncles looked on helplessly.