

The Art of Shringara: Revisiting the Kishangarh School of Rajasthani Painting

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Abstract

This article revisits the Kishangarh School of painting at its artistic peak under the patronage of Raja Sawant Singh (reigned 1748–57), an ardent devotee of Lord Krishna. Under his guidance and patronage artist, Nihal Chand painted mostly on the theme of Radha-Krishna. Raja Sawant Singh visualized himself as Krishna and a lady called Bani Thani, a singer-poetess at Kishangarh court as his Radha. She had exquisite facial features which gave birth to a new aesthetic idiom, which included a high forehead, arched brows, drawn-out beautiful eyes and a sharp chin below thin lip. What followed was creation of some very iconic artworks which are much admired among art lovers. Bani Thani became something of a legend as she inspired landmark paintings of a prince and his muse in different settings which were close to being illustrations of the poetic works of Raja Sawant Singh, which he had penned in his devotion to Lord Krishna. The article traces the history and context of this style of the Kishangarh School, a sub-school of the larger Marwar School of Rajasthani painting.

Keywords: Rajasthani painting, Kishangarh, Kishangarh School, Bani Thani, Radha-Krishna, Marwar School, Rajput painting, Shringara

Introduction: What makes up the Kishangarh School?

The Kishangarh School is a sub-school of the Marwar School of Rajasthani painting which evolved in the royal courts of Rajputana in northern India, mainly during the 17th to 19th century. The term Rajput painting is also used, but this includes the Pahari schools (of the hilly regions of Upper Punjab, now in Uttarakhand) and Jammu [1]. The area of Rajputana also included parts of Central India. It is now mostly in the state called Rajasthan after the Indian Republic was formed in 1950. The Rathors of Jodhpur were an important Rajput clan; they carved out principalities or *Rajwade* like Bikaner, Idar, Ratlam, Jhabua and Kishangarh. There was a variety of subjects for the content in Rajasthani painting, Shiva-Parvati, Radha Krishna, ballads, portraits of the ruling family, their daily activities, and scenes from the Hindu epics among others. *Shringara* is a very important quality of the Kishangarh school of painting, and the images included as examples from the works of Nihal Chand from the mid 18th century seem to be soaked with it. *Shringara* which is full of love and beauty as we know, is one of the nine 'rasas' or essences in Indian aesthetic theory[3], the others being *Hasya* (laughter), Karuna (sorrow), *Raudra* (anger), *Veera* (heroism/courage), *Bhayanaka* (terror/fear), *Bibhatsa* (disgust), *A*

dbutha (surprise/wonder), *Shantham* (peace or tranquility). These *rasas* make up the elements that comprise the aesthetic experience. The theory of *rasa* is attributed to Bharata Muni, a sage-priest who may have lived sometime between the 1st century BC and the 3rd century CE. The ninth rasa of *shantham* was added later on. He is the author of the *Natya Shastra*, a treatise on dramatic theory and other performance arts.

A new aesthetic: Who was Bani Thani?

Bani Thani was a singer and poet in Kishangarh in the time of Raja Sawant Singh (r.1748–1757). She was the muse for a new idiom in Kishangarh painting. Bani Thani means a *decked-up lady*. She became a source of inspiration for a series of artworks attributed to artist Nihal Chand made around 1750 where she is depicted as Radha along with Sawant Singh portrayed as Krishna. Her features may have been the model for the Kishangarh facial type [3]. She was a singer employed by Bankavatji, stepmother of Raja Sawant Singh. He was impressed with her because of her beauty and voice. She became his mistress in 1735, and probably later one of his wives. Bani Thani was painted as highly stylized but beautiful as Radha. Her features include arched, sharp eyebrows, lotus-like elongated eyes, thin lips and a pointed nose and chin. She looks pristine wearing a transparent veil, elaborate pearl jewelry and *mahawar* on her hands. The image in Figure 1 is a truly iconic one and has gone down in India's art history. Many paintings were made with her as the muse with stylized features. Most of them are from the Radha-Krishna theme as Raja Sawant Singh was a great devotee of Lord Krishna. He was a poet and well versed in Sanskrit, Persian and Hindi (2). After he abdicated the throne, the couple retired to a life in Vrindavan, a place associated with the life of Lord Krishna where he had spent time with Radha and other *Gopis* or cowherd maidens who were smitten with him. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* says

“the school is clearly distinguished by its individualistic facial type and its religious intensity. The sensitive, refined features of the men and women are drawn with pointed noses and chins, deeply curved eyes, and serpentine locks of hair. Their action is frequently shown to occur in large panoramic landscapes” [3].

There have been paintings made previously in Kishangarh, mostly portraits of rulers like Hari Singh (ruled 1629-43), son of Kishan Singh, who founded Kishangarh in 1609 on the bank of the Gundaloo Lake, the 8th son of Udai Singh of Jodhpur. Also, a painting of Raj Singh (1706-48) hunting a wild buffalo was executed. A painting of Sahasmal (1615-18), the successor of Kishan Singh was probably made by Bhavani Das during the second decade of the 18th century. But they were influenced mostly by the Mughal School; Hari Singh had also sought military service of the Mughals (2). However, with Nihal Chand and a new idiom, the result was the creation of new artworks which are now iconic Radha-Krishna paintings. It is mentionable that Nihal Chand was from a noble family, his great grandfather having served as a minister under Man Singh (1658-1706) [2].



Figure 1: Bani Thani as Radha, Kishangarh School, circa 1750, National Museum, New Delhi, India.

Stylized artworks – an amazing discovery

Kishangarh had Bhavani Das, a painter in the early 18th century. He had been a mentor to Nihal Chand and had worked in the Mughal atelier. But it was a historical event, when an Englishman, Eric Dickinson who was a Professor of English at Mayo College at Ajmer visited Kishangarh, much later, in 1943. He discovered in a palace collection the stylized Kishangarh School of artworks, mostly executed by Nihal Chand. The collection discovered by him was exhibited at the National Museum, New Delhi and the art world got to see a new style of Rajasthani painting[2]. The school is notable as mentioned for its elongated stylized pointed eyebrows, lotus-like elongated eyes and pointed chin under thin lips, a form strongly reminiscent of Indian sculpture. Kishangarh was much influenced by Bundi painting in its use of lush vegetation, striking skies, sense of movement and Mughal painting in its use of side-profile portraits. The school's style is typical with a distinct face type reserved for Radha-Krishna. Pearls are well used as ornaments. The elements of *Bhakti* or

devotion and *Shringara* which includes love and beauty mingle to create a very special world in Kishangarh painting. Eris Dickinson reminisced,

“...the world of every day was blotted out as deeper and still more deep I was drawn into that strange exotic paradise of the followers of Vallabha, the devotees of the Radha-Krishna cult...while the paintings more and more resolved themselves on marvels of Indian poetry, lyrics that extolled select moments of the day and night, exquisite pauses in time, in which arrested thus we seem to be spectators of the fullness of existence” [6]

Religious theme – the Radha Krishna idiom

Raja Sawant Singh was a member of the Vallabhacharya sect devoted to Krishna, due to which religiously themed paintings flourished in the court under his patronage. Vallabha was a Telugu Brahmin who had moved to Rajasthan and founded the cult of Shrinathji in the 15th century. The paintings of Kishangarh School are characterized by religious fervour and this might have been the reason why the portraiture of Bani Thani is believed to have been inspired by the figure and persona of Radha. Bani Thani herself wrote verses in praise of Krishna as ‘Rasika Bihari’. Raja Sawant Singh guided Nihal Chand to represent the ‘Lover and the beloved’ very aptly. The stylistics of the artworks’ content feel like illustrations of Raja Sawant Singh’s poetry and devotion to Lord Krishna and Vrindavan where he yearned to be in person. He wrote under the pen name ‘Nagari Das’ between the years 1723 to 1731, the *Manoratha Manjari*, *Rasika Ratnavali* and *Bihari Chandrika* in which he yearns for Lord Krishna [2]. It is clear that the paintings commissioned were out of a strong “bhakti” element, but the artworks depict ‘shringara’ at its best owing to its theme. In fact, the Hindi ‘shringara’ literature inspired Rajput artists with ‘verses for pictures’. The ‘Krishna Lila’ has inspired love poetry; “whenever love is spoken of, it is the love of Krishna and Radha manifest in other bodies and it is almost always their figures that are represented in paintings” [1]. The famous ‘shringara’ literature includes Jayadeva’s *Gita Govinda* (*Sanskrit*), Keshavdas’ *Rasikapriya* and *Kavipriya*, Bhanudatta’s *Rasamanjari* which are not just well-read and even well illustrated. Few more artworks by Nihal Chand which were inspired by Radha-Krishna theme, made during the mid-18th century under the patronage of Raja Sawant Singh are elucidated here for a better understanding of the ‘shringara’ component and its magic.

Figure 2 depicts Radha-Krishna strolling in a lush palace garden; the ‘gopis’ or milkmaids who have hidden themselves are talking to each other. Radha and Krishna seem to be enjoying moments of inexplicable togetherness holding hands, moving within the green foliage.

“Today, there is a colourful night in the Kunjas of Vrindavan, please enter! Shri Radha, the colourful bride, and Shri Krishna, the colourful beloved who are in fact the reservoirs of unlimited bliss”, says Bani Thani [5] alias Rasika Bihari.



Figure 2: Krishna and Radha strolling in a palace garden, circa.1760, Kishangarh School, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, San Francisco, U S A.

Figure 3 is a painting where Krishna seems to be in a very tranquil moment with his beloved Radha on a marbled terrace. She is beautifully dressed with pearl jewelry, in an orange 'ghagra choli' with a dark diaphanous 'odhni' over her head. The blue-skinned Krishna wears an off-white garment and a splendid head-dress with pearl necklaces, a 'sarpech', turban with an aigrette and jewelry. Both have serpentine locks of hair as seen in the side profile.

"Shri Radha says to Sri Krishna: If your eyes are like the dark rain-filled clouds of the month of Shravan then mine is the heaviest thundery clouds on top of them. If your eyes are the wish-granting tree that appeared on earth in this age of kali then mine are the peacocks that sit on that tree. If your eyes are like the bright moon up on high but mine

are the *chakora* bird that sits in waiting for that moon's rays. Your eyes are My eyes and My eyes are Yours, but Your eyes are the thieves that have stolen mine away", says Nagari Das, Raja Sawant Singh in his *Chootak Kavita* [5].



Figure 3: Krishna and Radha, Opaque watercolor and gold on cotton, circa 1750, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, U S A.

Figure 4 depicts Radha-Krishna on a boat on the Yamuna River. They are accompanied by *Gopis* who are seen talking to them and two of them are seen talking to each other seated behind them. The sky is dramatic with the sun setting amidst clouds. The palaces and shrines along the Yamuna form the backdrop. The lower register of this unique artwork shows Radha-Krishna alone leaving the others behind. They are in a grove standing around a *Kadamba* tree. Krishna is holding aloft a garland of white flowers, brought for Radha.

"Being overjoyed with love, contemplate on that form of the divine couple while losing the awareness of your body, when they are walking on the bank of the Yamuna producing a sweet musical sound of jingling of anklets", Nagari Das, Raja Sawant Singh in Manoratha Manjari [5].



Figure 4: Krishna and Radha in the boat of love, Kishangarh School, circa 1755, National Museum, New Delhi, India.

Figure 5 shows Radha-Krishna along with *Gopis* in a pavilion. Krishna's arm is around Radha as he sits along with her. A *Gopi* is giving a garland to her companion who stands with another, another pair stand behind Radha-Krishna inside the pavilion holding a fly-whisk while another pair is outside. There is a verdant backdrop in the composition.

"When will I enter inside the lush Kunjas of Vrindavan, when looking at it, my heart will be ecstatic and drown in the nectar of love of the divine couple?", says Nagari Das, Raja Sawant Singh in Manoratha Manjari [5].



Figure 5: Krishna and Radha in a pavilion, circa the 1750s, Allahabad Museum, Prayagraj, India.

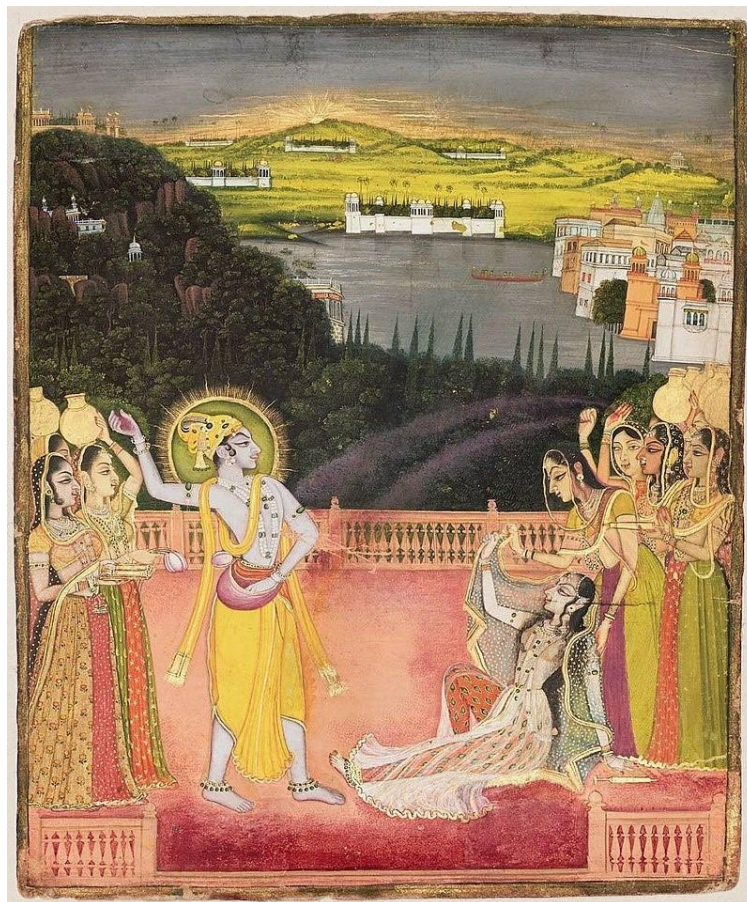


Figure 6: Krishna celebrates Holi with Radha and the *Gopis*, circa 1750–60, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, U S A.

Figure 6 shows Krishna enjoying the festival of Holi with Radha and other 'gopis'. Krishna is throwing *Gulal* (pink coloured powder) at Radha. The other *Gopis* hold *Gulal*, pitchers, also *pichkaris* or water guns with coloured water. Radha is also in the act of throwing colour. A semi-lit sky, lush vegetation, palaces and shrines along the river Yamuna form the backdrop. 'Gulal' envelops the scene of frolic. In fact, it is believed the festival started with Radha-Krishna as Krishna wanted to 'colour' the fair-skinned Radha to be more like him.

"That form of the divine couple [Shri Radha Krishna] dwells in my heart, which is bestowing the sweetest nectar amid flowery groves of Vrindavan and performing "Nitya Keli" [amorous pastimes]". Nagari Das, Raja Sawant Singh in Yugal Ras Madhuri [5].

The Kishangarh school had other artists like Amar Chand along with Nihal Chand, Nanaq Ram and Surat Ram under rulers Raja Bahadur Singh (1748-82), Joshi Savairam under Birad Singh (1782-1788) and Ladli Das under Kalyan Singh (1798-1828). However, the school lost its vitality after Raja Sawant Singh left for Vrindavan with Bani Thani. He died in 1764 followed by Bani Thani a year later, ending a wonderful era of Radha-Krishna painting. The Gita Govinda was painted in 1820 at Kishangarh but the same magical quality was lacking in the efforts of later artists [2].

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