

**A Garland of Melodies: Reimagining Ragamalas through the Collection of Salar Jung Museum,
Hyderabad**

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A Garland of Melodies: Reimagining Ragamalas through the Collection of Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad

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Abstract

This article is about understanding and reimagining a special category of miniature painting called 'Ragamala' painting. It is a special genre of Indian painting. It is the pictorial representation of an Indian musical mode or melody which is called a 'raga'. The Indian 'ragas' as musical modes convey a certain 'bhava', an emotion or mood. This has been visualised in Ragamala paintings which translates as 'garland of ragas' or a string of musical modes or melodies. The Indian Schools of painting have produced several paintings sets of the ragas; including 'raginis' which are supposed to be the wives/females of the Indian male ragas. The paintings are varied and represent the mood it is supposed to depict as per the *raga* or *ragini* and are thus a symphony of colour and sound. Tracing the history of this category of painting from India the many examples in this article from the collection of the Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad, will make it easier to reimagine, rediscover, recognize and fully appreciate aspects of this fascinating genre of Indian painting.

Keywords: Ragamala painting, Indian painting, miniature painting, Raga, Ragini, Salar Jung Museum.

Indian miniature painting – a journey from wall to paper

Indian painting started a long time ago with pre-historic rock art and includes murals, miniature paintings and modern Indian art if one classifies it very broadly. In ancient India, the murals made depicted characters and episodes from the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. The 2nd- 3rd century produced the Ajanta paintings, the 4th-5th century saw the Bagh paintings. Miniature painting which started in India around the 7th century evolved from wall spaces to a smaller realm like the palm-leaf, cloth, bark, parchment and paper. They are executed using natural substances like vegetables, minerals, indigo, conch shells, precious stones, gold and silver for the pigments. This exquisite art form flourished during the 16th to 19th century under royal patronage and faded by the mid-19th century. The earliest paintings to survive are from the Pala dynasty of East India; from the 10th century. Illustrations are seen in Buddhist texts like the *Astahasrika Prajnparamita*. In Western India, the 12th-century Jaina miniatures of the *Kalpa Sutra* have survived. The 15th century illustrations of Hindu themes from Western India and 16th century from Eastern India have survived. Emperor Humayun had brought Persian artists for the Mughal

atelier with him when he returned from exile in 1555. The Mughal miniature painting flourished under Emperor Akbar with illustrated translations of the Hindu epics into Persian. Also, the heroic feats, ceremonies and missions of the royals were documented by Mughal artists, the painting style with a clear Persian influence. Many Indian styles were influenced by the Mughal school including Rajput, Pahari and Deccan. Miniature paintings have represented various themes which include illustrations of the *Geeta Govinda*, *Rasikpriya*, *Rasamanjari*, *Krishna-leela*, *Nayikabheda*, royal lifestyles, Ragamala, episodes from the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, *Barahmasa* relating to seasons, animals and flowers among others [4].

Ragamala paintings – a garland of melodies

Ragamala paintings flourished during 16th to 19th centuries. A unique category within miniature paintings, made in sets of 36, it is a blending of art and classical music. Ragamala paintings form a series of illustrative paintings based on the 'garland of ragas' or Ragamala, depicting various Indian musical modes, the Ragas. With the introduction of paper, royals and noblemen both Hindu and Muslim, commissioned miniature paintings including Ragamalas. The *Natyashastra* of Bharata from the 2nd century is an early treatise on fine arts and describes Indian musical theory; also covers dance and drama [5]. Technically speaking a *raga* has been defined as "a permutation and combination of notes or frequencies illustrated by melodic movements which are capable of producing a pleasant sensation, mood or an emotion in the mind of the listener". There are six main *ragas* and each 'raga' has five *raginis* or wives and 8 'ragaputras' or sons. The 6 main ragas are Bhairava, Dipaka, Sri, Malkaunsa, Megha and Hindola. Bhairava is depicted as a form of Lord Shiva, Malkaunsa or Malkos is a human lord and his *raginis* are thought to be dyed in the colour of love. During the 14th century and later, musical literature included a description of the *ragas* in short Sanskrit verses called *dhyana* (meditation). This highlighted the characteristics of the *raga* giving them a distinct personality. This led to the *raga-ragini* system and saw the growth and profusion of Ragamala painting on various media. Ragamala paintings show the *raga* as a human, divine or semi-divine being. The themes cover *shringara* and *bhakti* among others, with the *raga* or *ragini* name inscribed along with the *dhyana* or the verse. [3]. O.C. Gangoly in his magnum opus on 'Raga and Ragini' published in 1935 says that... 'Raga is something that hinges the mind with some definite feeling, a wave of passion or emotion' [1] The Sanskrit or Hindi verse or Persian content sometimes written behind a painting or on top, were relevant to the image and *raga* being visualised.

Ragamala paintings were created in most schools of Indian painting, as Pahari Ragamala, Rajput Ragamala, Deccani Ragamala, and Mughal Ragamala paintings. This form is thus a depiction of music in art, a symphony which creates a different experience for the viewer gazing upon it, especially if he knows or understands the musical modes. A Ragamala

painting is called a 'ragachitra' in Indian vernacular. Medieval miniatures captured the combination of colour and music to produce paintings of timeless value. Almost every school of miniature painting has produced 'ragachitra'; Mughal, Malwa, Bundi, Kotah, Mewar, Bikaner, Kangra, Basholi, Kullu, Chamba, Bilaspur, Jammu and the Deccan.[5]

History of Ragamala painting – varied influences

Ragas are believed to have emanated from the throat of Lord Shiva himself (from the trinity of Gods in Hinduism) and from rituals.....writes Dr Daljeet...the very basis of Indian classical music is the 'theory of Ragas'. Raga is the basis of Indian tunes and melodies. The root word is *ranja* meaning dyed in colour. Sage Bharata opines that music should be performed so as to colour the hearts of all beings. The dyeing of sound with the colours of music is *ragchitra*. Each raga has its own intonation, hours and perspective. Ragamala paintings connect with the viewer through colour, the 'raga' which is otherwise conveyed only through sound or vocals.

Different texts on Indian music have influenced the Ragamala paintings. In the 6th century text, "Narada Shiksha" the *ragas* were first mentioned. The ragas were described in 'Brihaddesi' of Matanga during the 7th/8th century. The iconographic vision of the ragas was elucidated in the 8th century 'Ragasagara' by Narada and Dattila. In 1131 A.D 'Manasollasa' by Someswaradeva is an important text. The 'Sangitaratnakara' composed between 1212 and 1247 A.D by Sarangadeva who was associated with the Yadava dynasty of the Deccan; is a landmark text on Indian musical theory. Amir Khusro, Sufi poet in the court of Alauddin Khilji (r. 1296 to 1316); added to the repertoire of *ragas* while introducing Persian and Arabic elements. The 'khanqas' of Sufi saints saw many Ragas and Raginis in the music therein. Rana Kumbha composed 'Sangita Mimansa' in 1450. Meshkaran Mishra compiled a treatise Ragamala on Indian music in 1509. Pundarik Vitthal wrote 'Sadraga Chandrodya' in 1590, which dealt with both the northern and southern Indian systems of *ragas* and classification of *ragas*. The Mughal emperors Akbar, Jahangir, Shahjahan and Muhammad Shah patronised music. Miyan Tansen is from Gwalior where the *dhrupad* tradition was started by Man Singh Tomar, the ruler of Gwalior. Tansen had written a text on Ragamala but no one could find it. Man Singh Tomar composed 'Man Kautuhal' which was translated to Persian by Faqir Khan in the 2nd half of the 17th century. Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's non-encouragement of music and painting led many artists and musician to provincial courts of Rajasthan, Deccan and Eastern India. But Muhammad Khan (r.1719 – 1748) revived music and the *khayal*, a composition was established. 'Sangita-darpana' by Harivallabha was compiled in 1673 in Hindi.[5] The paintings were made paying attention to detail like time of day and season; thus, giving a visual form to a *raga* which is abstract in form. Ragas have been conceived as human beings, male and female. The paintings have been made using colours to depict moods, emotions, and symbols to depict *ragas* and *raginis*. Though it is not clear when this genre of painting began, there are 130 known sets from different schools. Some scholars say that the

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Ragamala happened with the lyrical *Kitab-i-nauras* composed by Sultan Ibrahim Adil Shah II (r. 1580-1626) wherein the ragas are written about and few visual images are elaborated. Between the mid-17th century and 18th century the Deccan school produced many Ragamalas. Many museums like City Palace Museum, Jaipur, National Museum, New Delhi, Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad, Allahabad Museum, Prayagraj, Raza Library, Rampur, Govt Museum, Alwar, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Berlin Museum of Indian Art, Berlin have Ragamala paintings in their collections. Ragamala paintings are there at Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi and British Museum, London [5].

The texts of Narada, Harivallabha and Meshkaran have been followed by different schools along with their own innovations while making Ragamala paintings. The colours used in the image are used to create the ambience of the melody conveyed through the *raga*. The *raga* represents emotions and expresses sentiments or *Bhavas* as mentioned; the *ragaputras* emerged from different emotional situations. The aspect of *shringara* is an important one in Ragamala paintings. Shringara includes love and beauty. It is one of the nine *rasas*. The various *ragas* stand for the language of the soul, the anguish of sorrow, joy, the tumult of passion, the thrill of expectation under the throes of love-longing, the pangs of separation and the joys of union.



Figure 1: Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad.

The Salar Jung Museum collection – a rich repertoire

The Salar Jung Museum and Library at Hyderabad is an 'Institution of National Importance' declared by an Act of Parliament of India in 1961. Founded in December 1951 at 'Dewan Deodi', the ancestral palace of an illustrious family of Hyderabad, the Salar Jungs, were prime ministers to the rulers of the erstwhile Hyderabad State in the Deccan. The main collection of artefacts of the museum, books and manuscripts of the library has been meticulously done by Nawab Mir Yousuf Ali Khan, Salar Jung III.

The museum has Western, Far Eastern, Middle Eastern, African and Indian art objects in its collection. These include paintings, chandeliers, furniture, carpets, porcelain, bronze, marble, ivory, glass, wood and textiles. The Indian miniature paintings collection is rich and noteworthy. The museum has Jaina Kalpasutras, Mughal miniatures, Deccan miniatures, Rajasthani and Pahari paintings as well. The repertoire of Ragamala paintings is within its miniature painting collection of various schools. The paintings from the Deccan school dominate the collection. There are a good number of Ragamala paintings from Rajasthan, a few from Central India and Mughal school of paintings as well [2].

The following images depict a few select Ragamala paintings with explanation about the *raga* or musical mode it represents. There are Todi *ragini*, Madhu madhavi, Asavari, Sri, Nata, Vibhas, Gauri, Megh malhar depictions among many others in the collection at the museum. The paintings depicted here give us a glimpse of the collection. We start with *Kakubha ragini*.

Kakubha has been described thus –

Figure 2 depicts *Kakubha ragini*, a wife of Megha Raga, is a heroine deserted by her lover. *Kakubha* wanders around in a grove with two peacocks. Sometimes a companion is shown with her. The peacock may be symbolic of the absent beloved. A raga of pathos. The painting below shows the heroine holding on to an overhanging flower branch of a tree, maybe *kadamba*. A verse about her says –

"Wearing robes of yellow and having fine tresses of hair, she weeps in the woods when she is made miserable by the voice of the cuckoo, Kakubha very much frightened looks hither and thither [1]"



Figure 2: Kakubha Ragini, painting from Rajput School, probably Bundi, dated to 18th century.

Sri Raga is one of the main *ragas* in Indian musical systems, shown in Figure 3, named after Goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Sri Raga is an early evening melody associated with winter intended to evoke a contemplative and devotional mood. This illustration of Sri Raga is set on a riverside terrace just after sunset and depicts the king listening to a *kinnara* – *Tumburu*, a celestial musician playing on cymbals and a musician-singer playing the tambura. An attendant is seen standing with a flywhisk behind the king. A verse to Sri says –

"His body bluish in hue is marvelously built... he is always graced with the company of Goddess Lakshmi. He sits on a throne of gold and before him Narada sits playing on his vina... he has decorated himself with a garland of flowers. And also ornaments set with jewels. Sri raga is thus conceived in sentiment of whom all learned men sing praises [1]"

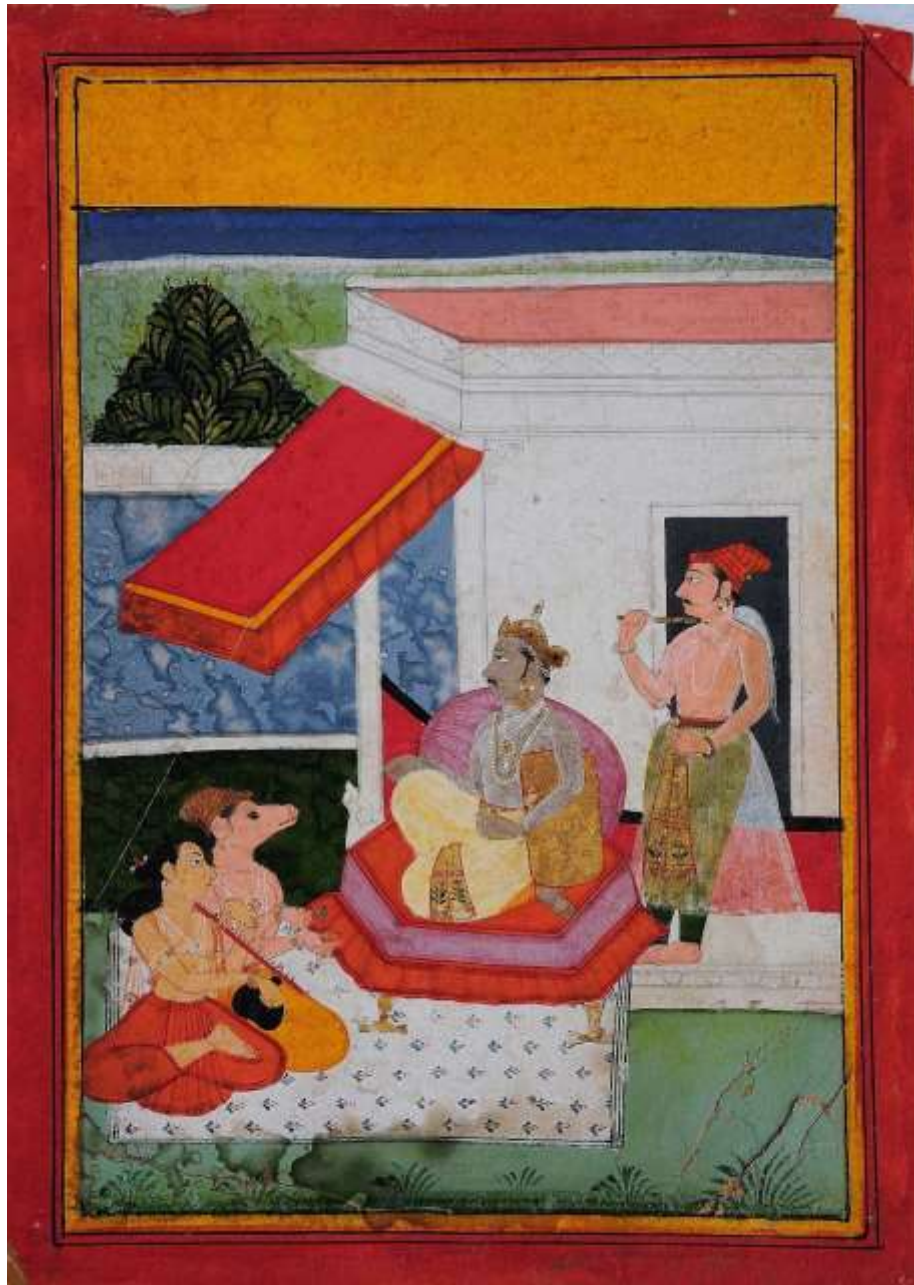


Figure 3: Shri Raga, painting from Udaipur, dated circa 1775.

This painting in Figure 4 illustrates the musical mode Khambavati Ragini, one of the wives of Malkos, the raga is associated with autumn. It is to be played in the early evening. The painter in the depiction of the melody portrays Khambavati as a beautiful young woman performing a fire ritual to the four-headed god Brahma, the creator of the Hindu trinity of Gods. A verse related to Khambavati says –

"Desiring a boon, the woman offers up a coconut with folded hands, she makes offerings to Brahma and gazes again and again on the image [1]".



Figure 4: Khambavati Ragini, painting from Malwa, dated to circa 1680.

The *ragini* in Figure 5 is described as a lady preparing to meet her lover, and here she is shown looking in a mirror held by her *sakhi* or companion and fixing her earrings. An attendant holds a flywhisk behind her while a lady musician plays on her instrument. The ambience is one of hope and expectation. The Vilaval Ragini is a morning *raga*. A verse describes her thus –

"Having indicated to her beloved the place of tryst, she decks and shows off her person. Every moment she prays to the God of love, Vilavali has the complexion of a blue lotus [1]"

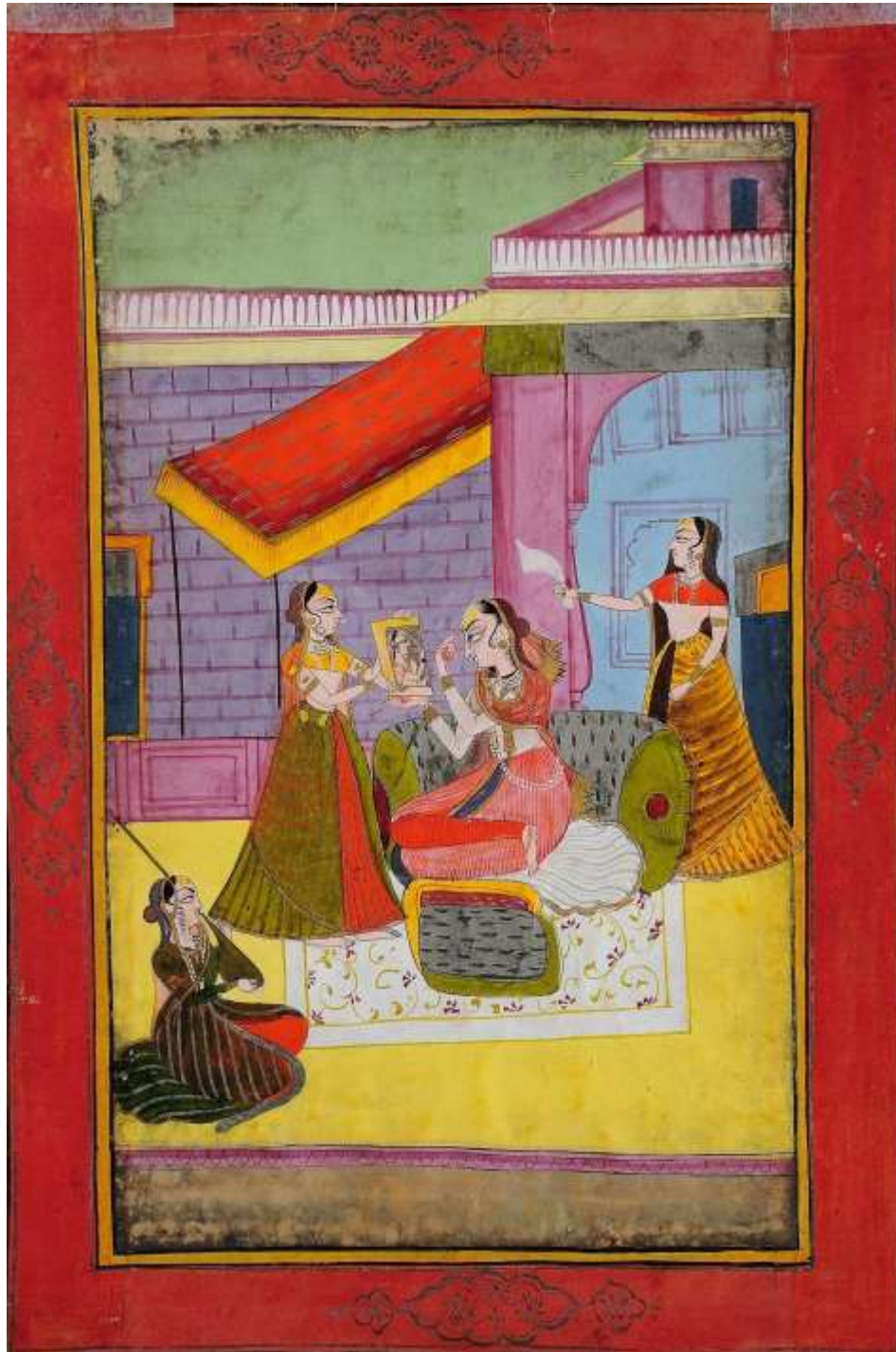


Figure 5: Vilaval Ragini, from Jodhpur, dated to the 18th century.

Nata Ragini is from the main Raga Hindol and depicts a scene in a war field, as depicted in Figure 6. There is a warrior on a horse who has subdued one of his opponents who is

lying on the ground. He is fighting with the other in the depiction. The character of Nata is martial. A verse on Nata says –

"With his hand placed on the neck of the horse effulgent like the gold, his body is red with blood. He is called Nata and the very image of rage [1]".

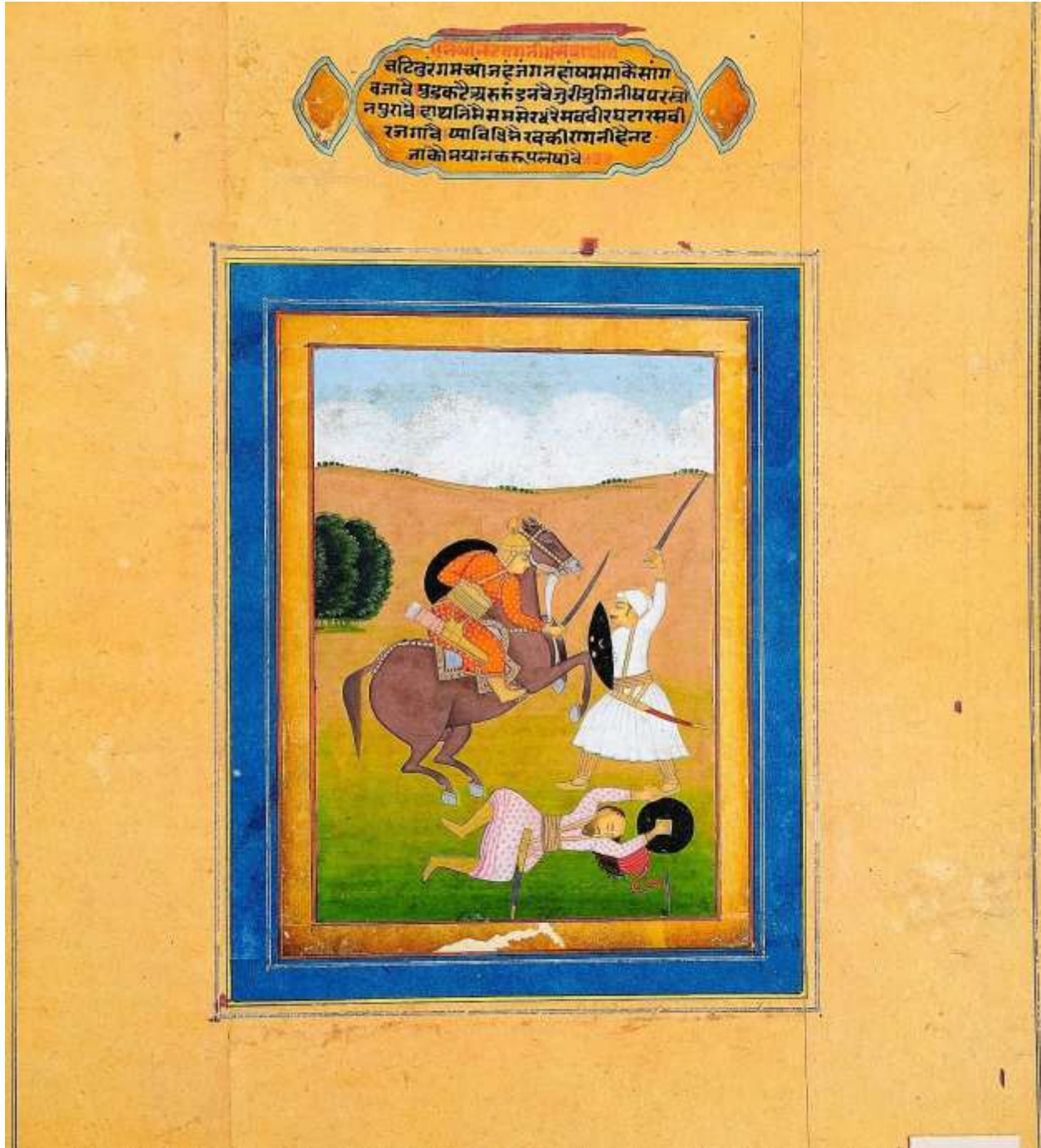


Figure 6: Nata Ragini, painting from a Rajput School, dated to the 19th century.

Ragini Todi, the wife of Raga Malkos is portrayed as a lovelorn *nayika* or heroine searching for her lover in the forest or grove, depicted in Figure 7. The deer is a symbolic representation of a companion to the desperate *nayika*. They are mesmerised by her music as she plays the Todi *ragini* on her instrument. Here the deer include an antelope and two doe who are with her. A verse to Todi –

"Her slim body is radiant as the frost or the kunda flower, and is smeared with the paste of saffron and camphor. She beguiles the deer in the woodlands, carrying her vina, such is a Todika [1]".

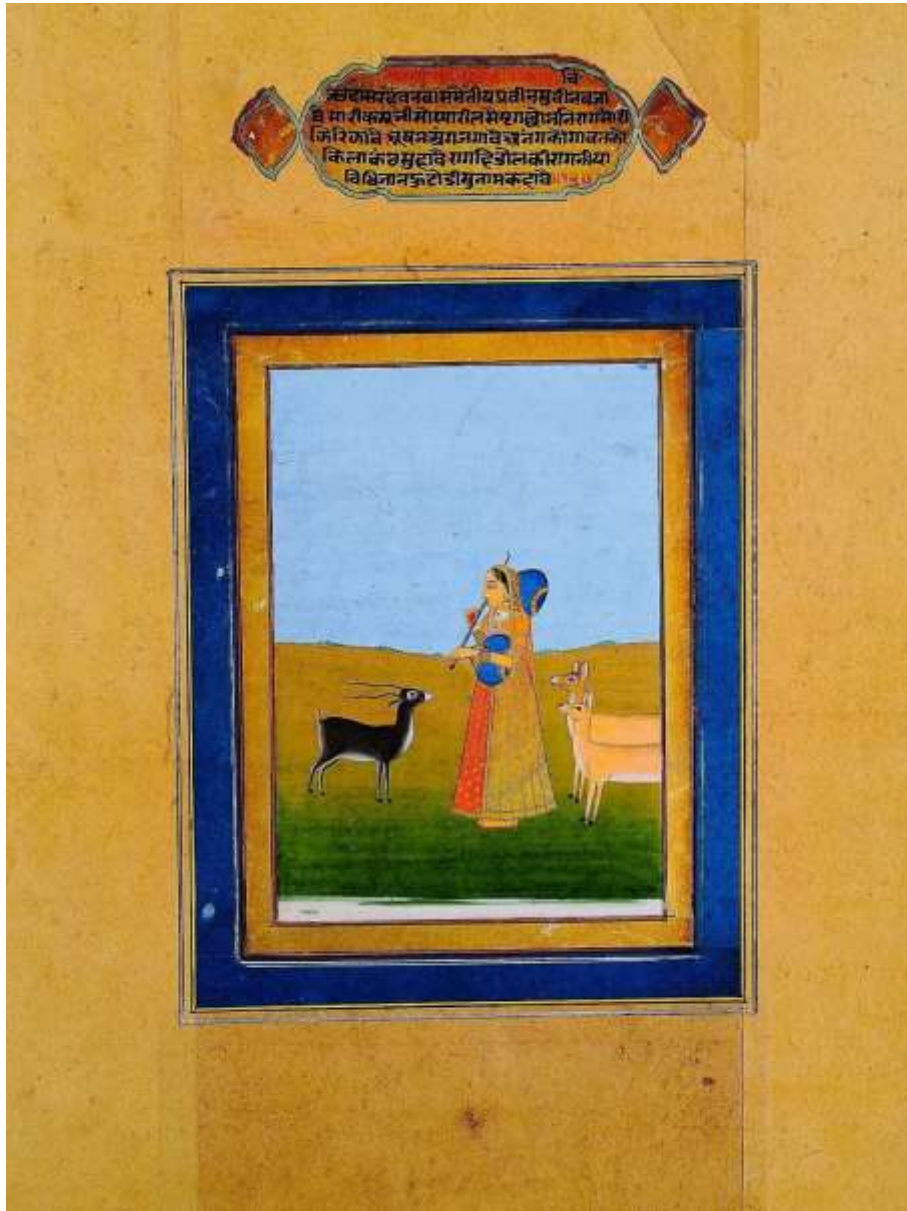


Figure 7: Todi Ragini, painting from a Rajput School, dated to the 19th century.

Megh Malhar is a Hindustani classical raga. The name derives from the Sanskrit word Megh, meaning cloud. Legends say that this *raga* has the power to bring out rains in the area where it is sung. It is of the main rag Megha. The miniature painting depicts dark, dense clouds with lightning personifying the raga which signifies the advent of monsoon. Krishna is with Radha and a band of lady musicians, all *gopis*, the cowherd girls, painted as enjoying the arrival of monsoon. Figure 8 depicts Megh Malhar. A verse on Megh malhar –

"His body blue like lotus is filled with cupid..His beauty captivates the heart of young damsels...His wrap is more shining than the moon beam. His waist is tied up by yellow silk robes. Under the stress of his ripe and precious youth, his smiles light up his moon-face. This is Megha Malhar, the picture of great glory. The sight of gathering clouds gives him deep pleasure [1]".



Figure 8: Megh Malhar raga, painting from the Deccan, dated to the 19th century.

Vibhasa Ragini of Megha malhar is commonly represented by a man firing an arrow at a rooster to stop it from crowing at dawn and awaken his lover. Here a peacock is shown perched on the roof and the lovers still seem to be in dalliance. The depiction is as in Figure 9. A verse on Vibhasa ragini reads thus-

“Wearing white robes, fair in complexion, and of radiant beauty. His cheeks beaten with the slowly swinging ear pendants. At early dawn, ringing with the voice of the cock, Vibhasa ragini is pictured as the beautiful form of Cupid himself” [1].

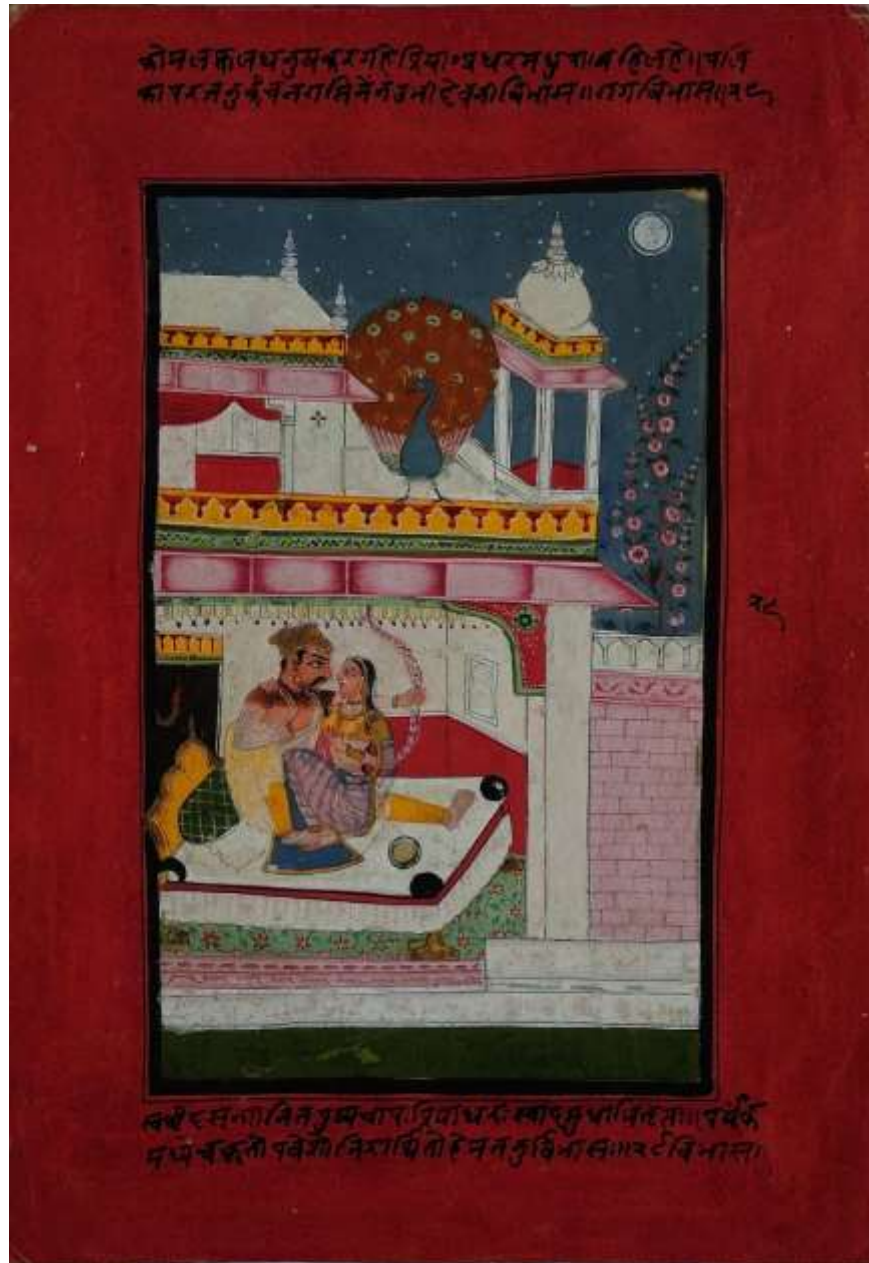


Figure 9: Vibhasa Ragini, painting from Bundi, dated to the 20th century.

This painting in Figure 10 and 11 is of a woman waiting for her lover, a sense of joyous anticipation is heightened by the time of day, early evening and by the rain and lightning that characterize the monsoon season. The woman is startled by the lightning. A verse about Madhu madhavi says –

"A beautiful damsel with a body filled by youth stands dressed in the courtyard, she is dressed in blue and wears a necklace and other toilettes. Her yellow bodice is indeed very attractive, she is startled by the flash of lightning and in fear she flees into her chambers with surprise in her eyes. This is Madhu madhavi, the ragini of Hindola who captivates our heart [1] "

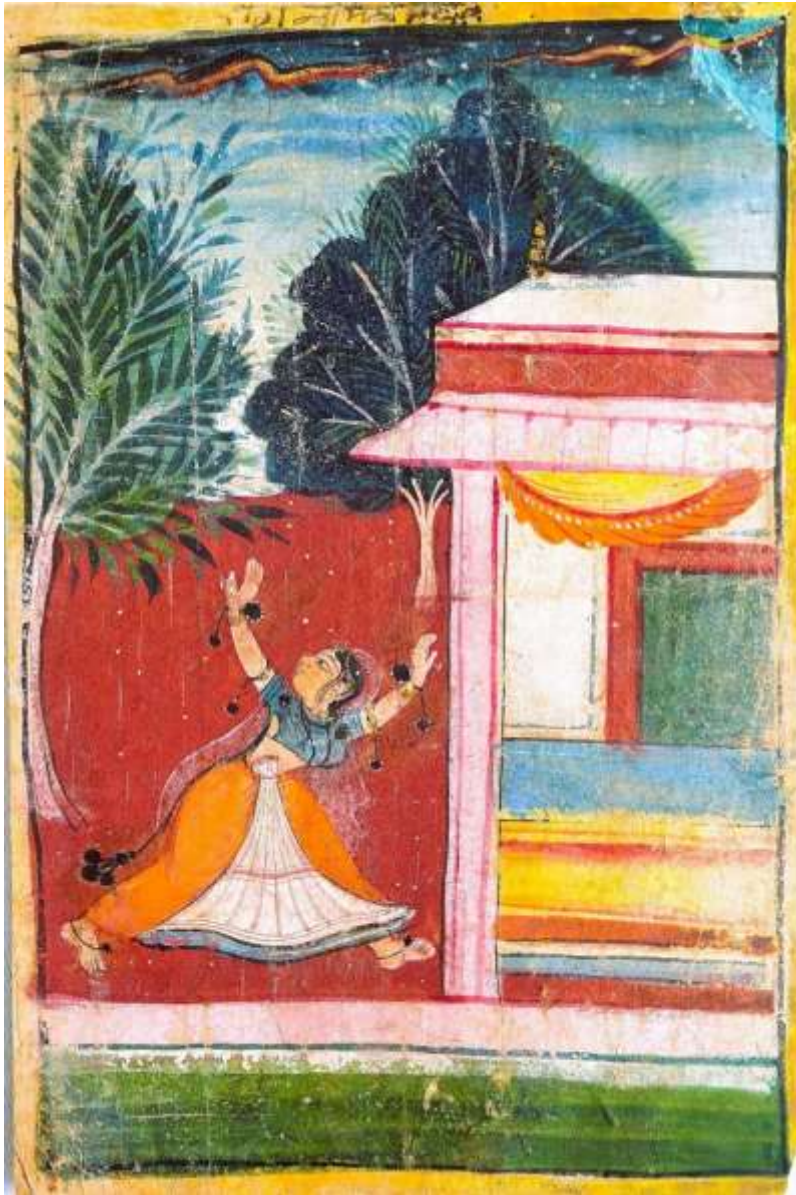


Figure 10: Madhu Madhavi Ragini, painting from Mughal School, dated to circa 1650.

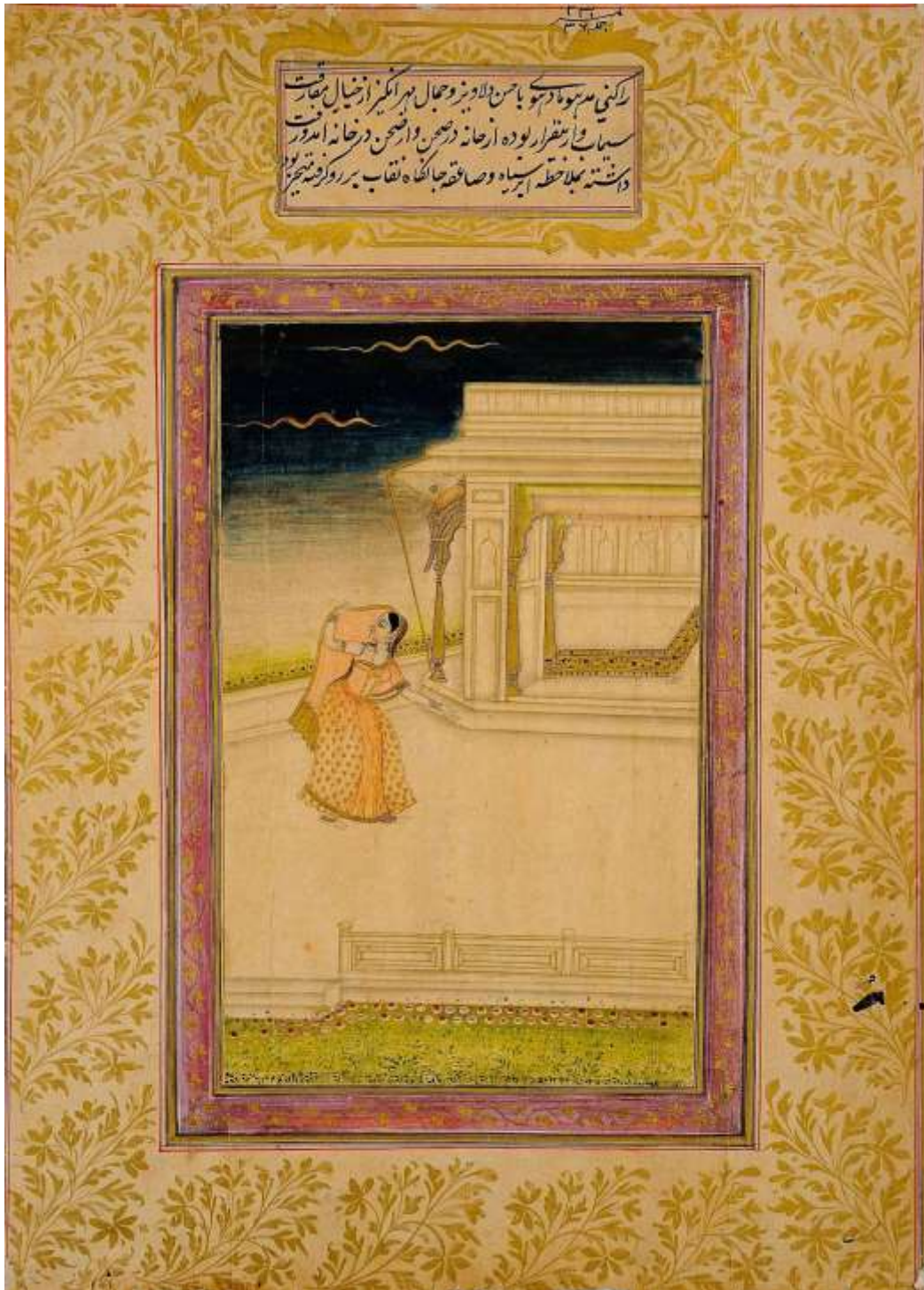


Figure 11: Madhu Madhavi Ragini, painting from the Deccan, dated to early 19th century.

The essence of Kamodi Ragini is *viraha*, the pain of solitude and longing. Kamodi is a woman who adorns herself, creates a flower-garland, and waits all night for her lover. A

garland is symbolic of the tryst of love. Here in Figure 12, she is shown with a peacock who may be representing the absent beloved. A verse to Kamodi says of her –

“The fine haired lady wears a yellow robe. She weeps in distress by the voice of the cuckoo in the woods, she looks about in mighty terror, Kamodika recalls her beloved [1]”.



Figure 12: Kamodi Ragini, painting from Jaipur, dated to circa 1800.

We can thus correlate the *raga* with the *chitra* as we have seen in these *ragachitras*. An amazing symphony indeed of ‘painted melodies’ of Indian music. Long live the Ragamala!

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[7]. Images of paintings (Figure 2-12) are Courtesy, Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad, Telangana State.

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