

Original article

Stylistic Development of Ragamala paintings in 17th Century Mewar

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Abstract

This paper examines the stylistic development of *Ragamala* paintings in 17th-century Mewar, contextualising artistic explorations within political factors and patronage. The state of Mewar is known for its resistance against the Mughals, a defiance also reflected in its art. The narrative painting style in Mewar, rooted in the indigenous *Chaurapanchasika* style, resisted adopting the Mughal visual idiom for most of the 17th century. This study discusses the origins of the Mewar school of art, exemplified by one of the earliest folios, the Bhairavi Ragini from the 16th century, and traces the evolution of this art form in conjunction with political developments. The emergence of a distinct Mewari style began with the Chawand *Ragamala* of 1605. By 1628, a 'mature Mewar' style developed under artist Sahibdin, who assimilated diverse influences to create a unique local style. However, after Sahibdin, there was a decline in artistic innovation. During the reigns of Rana Raj and Jai Singh (1652-98), the school progressed little, continuing along the trends set by Sahibdin. The Gem Palace and Boston *Ragamalas* later emerged as significant works due to their innovative reinterpretation of the *Ragamala* theme. By the end of the 17th century, while court art and portraiture thrived, traditional subjects like the *Ragamala* remained conservative and were less influenced by Mughal styles. This study posits that Mewar's *Ragamala* paintings highlight Mewar's cultural resilience and selective adaptation of external artistic elements.

Keywords: Mewar miniature painting, *Ragamala*, Artist Sahibdin.

Introduction

Painting was the prime cult of creative consciousness in Rajput Rajasthan (Beach, 2008, p. 41). Following successive waves of Mughal influence in the 16th and 17th centuries, local Rajput schools in Rajasthan started assimilating elements of Mughal style to varying degrees (Welch, 1999, p. 335). The painting style of the Rajput court during this period of change tells us a lot about their beliefs, values, and political stance. Prior to the strong secular influence of the Mughal

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court, Hindu court painting was predominantly religious in nature. A central theme of love, human or divine, is seen in all illustrated narratives and texts in 17th century Rajput courts (ibid).

Ragamala paintings, the single most popular text illustrated by Hindu patrons (Beach, 2008, p. 41), are the meeting point of three forms of art – painting, music, and poetry (Glynn, 2011, p. 13). *Ragas*, or musical melodies theorized and catalogued around the first century CE, had been a subject for poets who personified these musical modes in their poetry. From the 16th century onwards, these poems were illustrated in albums called *Ragamalas*, or garlands of musical modes (Ducrot, 2009, p. 16). The depiction of each *raga* or musical melody has a planned iconography and representation that is replicated in a similar scheme (Andhare, 1987, p. 23). There are varying formats of the *Ragamala* sets, but the most popular one in Rajasthan is composed of 42 folios containing the illustration of 6 *ragas*, and each *raga* has 6 *raginis*. Like music and dance, *Ragamala* paintings were meant to evoke specific moods and emotions. The *Ragamala* text metaphorically explores the relationship between a worshipper and the divine through romantic imagery (Beach, 2008, p. 45). Each painting in this complex narrative conveys emotions such as despair, longing, or peacefulness (Glynn, 2011, p. 31). During social gatherings with music and dance, these paintings added visual and intellectual enhancement and were passed among the guests for perusal. The *Ragamala* paintings were particularly popular in the women's quarter (zenana) of princely courts due to the central theme of romantic love (The Met Museum, 2014).

This paper will trace the development of traditional narrative illustration, specifically *Ragamala* paintings, during the 17th century in the most powerful of all Rajput states, Mewar. The study will first discuss the origin of the Mewari painting style through a detailed review of historical and visual sources, followed by a chronological analysis of the development of *Ragamala* paintings in 17th century Mewar. This paper aims to contribute to the understanding of how cultural and political influences shaped the unique artistic expressions of the Mewari school and to highlight the significance of *Ragamala* paintings in the broader context of Rajput art traditions.

Origins of the Mewar Style of Painting – *Chaurapanchasika*

The foundation on which early Mewar painting was developed was the *Chaurapanchasika* style. The most prominent of early Rajput paintings are the illustrations of an erotic poem, *Chaurapanchasika* (c.1525-50) (Fig. 1) that came to name the style of painting associated with it (Beach, 2008, p. 8). The geographical origin of the manuscript is highly disputed⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾, however, the *Chaurapanchasika* style is often considered to be early Mewari style of painting or the origin of the Mewari style of painting (Wangu, 2003, p. 124) (Beach, 2008, p. 8).

Indigenous Indian painters and painting traditions were not focused on the direct portrayal of naturalistic elements to represent a specific moment in history. Instead, they aimed to capture a perpetual mood or moment in eternity through artistic means. This was achieved using line, shape, positioning, and the juxtaposition of colours to elicit emotion in the viewer (Wangu, 2003, p. 124). With dynamic brushwork and a naïve sense of composition and figural arrangement, artists in these vivacious paintings portrayed vigorous symbolism (Lerner, 1985, p. 144).

The *Chaurapanchasika* style is characterised by flat forms of figures seen in profile and a bright colour palette dominated by primary colours. In this style, space is used metaphorically and

does not accurately portray the physical setting. The primary focus for artists was to illustrate the narrative; architecture and foliage in the paintings are highly stylised and primarily serve to provide a visual setting that enhances the narrative and heightens emotions (Wolpert, 2006, p. 379). The verse that is illustrated in every folio is prominently placed atop a strong yellow border on each folio^(iv). Faces are depicted in a standardised profile view with prominent wide eyes, or 'fish eyes', and taut lines, both of which are derived from the Western Indian school of painting (Fig.2)^(v). To understand the nuances of this style, we will examine the Bhairavi *ragini*, the sole surviving folio of the earliest *Ragamala* series of court quality.



Figure 1: Painting from the Chaurapanchasika, probably Mewar, (c. 1525-50), Opaque watercolour on paper, (NC Mehta collection, Lalbhai Dalpatbhai Museum, Ahmedabad). Picture Source: Wikimedia Commons

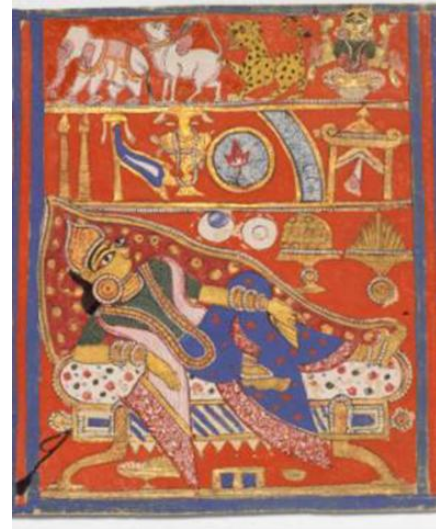


Figure 2: Devananda's Fourteen Auspicious Dreams Foretelling the Birth of Mahavira: Folio from a Kalpasutra Manuscript, Gujarat, Jaunpur, (1465 CE), Opaque watercolor on paper: 4 5/8 x 11 1/2 in. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) Picture source – metmuseum.org

Early *Ragamala* folio from Mewar, possibly 1520-1540

This vibrant scene of the Bhairavi *ragini* (Fig. 3) depicts a heroine worshipping at the shrine of Lord Shiva, shown in his aniconic *linga* form. The Sanskrit verse at the top of the painting describes the Bhairavi *ragini* as 'fair complexioned, worshipping *Sankara* (Shiva) in the crystal temple by the lake, offering lotuses and songs with rhythmic accompaniment' (Topsfield, 2007, p. 30). The early morning *raga* is portrayed with a mixture of erotic tension and devotion by the early Rajput artist. The seated *Bhairavi*, with cymbals in hand, has her rapt attention on the flower decorated *linga* (Sodhi, 1999, p. 117).

The emotional charge of the painting is highlighted by bold contrasts in large areas of colour and surface pattern; particularly, the vibrant contrast of deep red and olive green and the chequered patterning on textiles. The architectural finial on the shrine, a *makara* (crocodile) holding a flag, symbolises Kama, the god of desire (Beach, 2008, p. 90). The lotus flowers growing

in the pond enhance the beauty and fertility of the heroine, adding to the *rasa* or mood of the scene.

The composition of the painting is divided into horizontal registers and is simplistic; the rectangular planes imply a sense of recession, although there is a lack of perspective in the painting. The pond with a row of lotuses and ducks occupies the foreground. The heroine and the *linga* shrine form the middle ground; the heroine stands out distinctly against the passionate red background used in the main frame of action in the painting. The atmosphere is depicted by looming hills and just a blue-rimmed sky with clouds above a high curved horizon in the background. The figure exists on a flat plane and can move neither nearer nor further away from the viewer due to the lack of perspective.

The artist does not adhere to conventional rules in determining the size of objects and alters scale for convenience (Goswamy, 2016, p. 417). For example, the lotus flowers in the pond are large, whereas those decorating the *linga* are much smaller. The figure is disproportionately large compared to the architectural elements in the image (Beach, 2008). The physicality of the female figure reflects traditional Indian standards of the time – enormous breasts, tiny waist, and large hips (Williams, 2007, p. 112). This style mirrors the Hindu worldview as the depictions are not based on living models but on ideals drawn from nature and verse, such as ‘breasts like ripe mangoes’ and ‘head shaped like eggs’ (Kossak, 1997, p. 7, 8). The lively hand gestures and graceful dance-like poise of the figure showcase agility in the painting. The costume is stylised; her ruffled petticoat protrudes below to form an exaggerated point, akin to her transparent *odhni* (scarf). The black pompoms and checkerboard patterning in clothing are very characteristic of this style (Topsfield, 2007, p. 30).

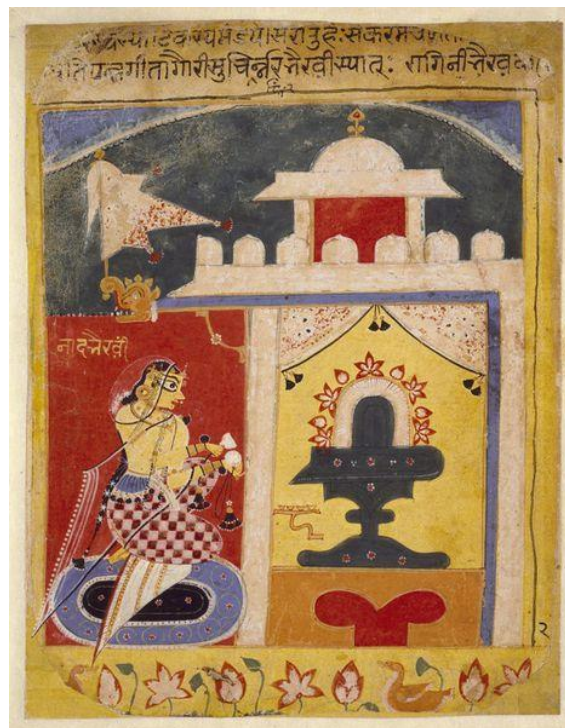


Figure 3- Painting, *Bhairavi Ragini*, devotee worshipping at shrine, Rajasthan, possibly Mewar, (c. 1520-1540). (Victoria and Albert Museum, London) Picture source: Victoria and Albert Museum

Chawand *Ragamala* - 1605

Around the 1600s, Rajput states were allying themselves with the Mughals and Rajput painters and patrons were beginning to actively engage with the Mughal style of painting, however, the court of Mewar remains an exception (Aitken, 2010, p. 6). The Mewar court came to epitomise Rajput bravery and valour with rulers such as Rana Pratap Singh (r.1572-97). His refusal to bow down to the Muslim Mughal rule made him a legend in the Rajput lands. He saw himself as the flag bearer of Rajput bravery and dynastic purity, and exhausted resources to maintain the independence of his kingdom during his lifetime (Beach, 2008, p. 118). At this troubled transition time in Mewari history, pictorial inventiveness was very much alive, as we see the beginning of a distinctive Mewari style of painting being developed in the dated manuscript of the time.

The 'Chawand *Ragamala*' of 1605 serves as an extremely important manuscript in tracing the history of Mewari painting as this is the earliest manuscript with a colophon from this region (Andhare, 1987, p. 50). Made in a town south of Chittor, Chawand served as Rana Pratap and his successor's temporary capital (Beach, 2008, p. 42) after Chittor was seized by Mughal forces in 1568 (Guy, 2011, p. 98). The colophon names the artist as Nasiruddin (Nasaradi) and does not hold information about the patron, but many scholars believe it to be the ruler, Rana Amar Singh (son of Rana Pratap) or the nobles from his court (Guy, 2011, p. 98). The Islamic name of the artist interestingly indicates the inclusion of Muslims in the Mewar court during times of war with the Mughals (Ducrot, 2009, p. 54).



Figure 4- Nasiruddin (artist), Painting of Asavari Ragini from a *Ragamala* series, Chawand, (1605). Painted in opaque watercolour on paper (Victoria and Albert Museum, London). Picture Source: Victoria and Albert Museum

Despite the political conflicts, Mughal painting conventions had been known to the artists in Mewar in early 17th century due to the circulation of artists that trained under the Mughal court. Artist Abd al- Samad from Akbar's atelier gathered and trained many Indian artists to produce the magnanimous *Hamzanama*; these artists were released on the completion of the manuscript and scattered across the courts of India looking for patronage, spreading the Mughal visual vocabulary and techniques as well (Beach, 2008, p. 117). We see a few elements from Mughal manuscripts in the Chawand *Ragamala* validating that Mewari artists were aware of the Mughal style. Nasiruddin's paintings were not unconventional at the time as he followed the precedent *Chaurapanchasika* style and format seen in the Bhairavi *ragini* (Fig.3), that the Mewaris were familiar with. However, Nassiruddin adds new elements to this folk- style art to make it his own. The facial features are less angular than the previous style and the clothing, although still angular, seem to have softened (Fig. 5) (Beach, 2008, p. 118). His fresh rhythmic treatment of rocks, trees, water and skyline seen in the Asavari *ragini* (Fig. 4) is unprecedented.

The overlapping lobed rocks reflect Persianate/ Mughal influence (fig 6,7). The basket-weave water is adopted from Jaina manuscripts (fig.8,9). Space also has more complexity (Beach, 2008, p. 118) and an attempt at showing perspective and depth is seen through a goat beyond the rocks. However, the composition of the painting follows the rules of the *Chaurapanchasika* style where the painting is divided into vertical registers (fig 5) (Guy, 2011, p. 99).

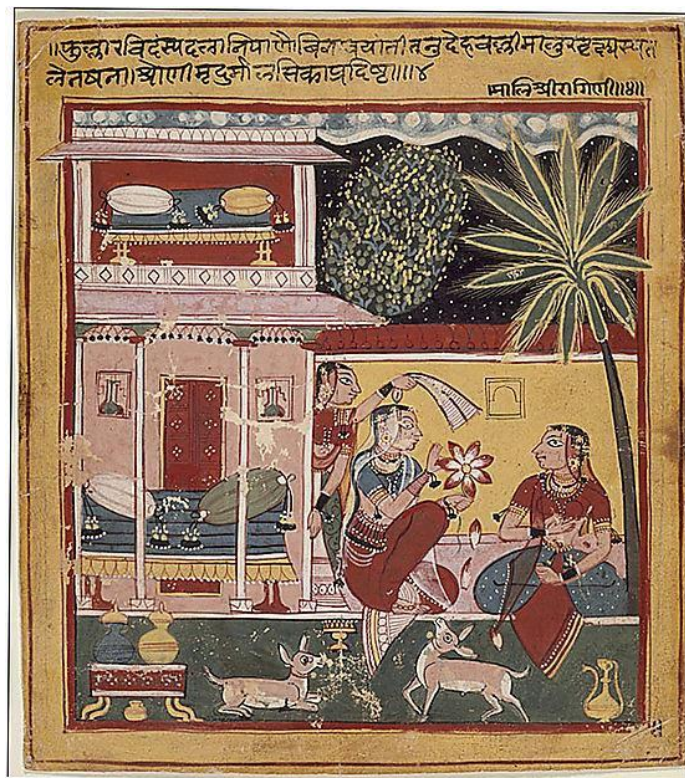


Figure 5 - Nasiruddin(artist), Malashri Ragini: Folio from the Chawand *Ragamala* Series, Chawand, Mewar, Rajasthan (1605), Opaque watercolour on paper (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) Picture source -<https://metmuseum.org/>

While Mewari artists drew heavily from pre-Mughal styles, other contemporary Rajput kingdoms interested in reaffirming their alliance with the Mughals often sought artists and

inspiration from the Mughal court. At Bikaner, Jodhpur, Bundi, and Amber, patrons bought Mughal paintings, hired Mughal artists and sent their own painters to train in Mughal techniques of painting (Beach, 2008, p. 41). For example, let's have a look at the commission of Ratan Singh, the ruler of Bundi who had submitted to the Mughals. Chunar *Ragamala* (fig.10) commissioned by him was completed by three students of Persian artists Mir Sayyed Ali and Abd al' Samad from Akbar's court (The Met Museum, 2014) The painting style is not derived from the early Rajput style seen in *Chaurapanchasika* but the Mughal manuscript, *Tutinama* from the 1560s (fig.11). The architectural setting is similar in both the manuscripts with special depths depicted through diagonal lines. The sumptuous textiles, decorative carvings, tiles, carpets with floral arabesques, and ponds with paddling ducks in the composition are standards taken from Mughal and Safavid paintings (Welch, 1999, p. 344).



Figure 6- Insert of Figure 4, Nasiruddin (artist), Painting of Asavari Ragini from a *Ragamala* series, Chawand, (1605). Opaque watercolour on paper (Victoria and Albert Museum, London). Picture Source- Victoria and Albert Museum



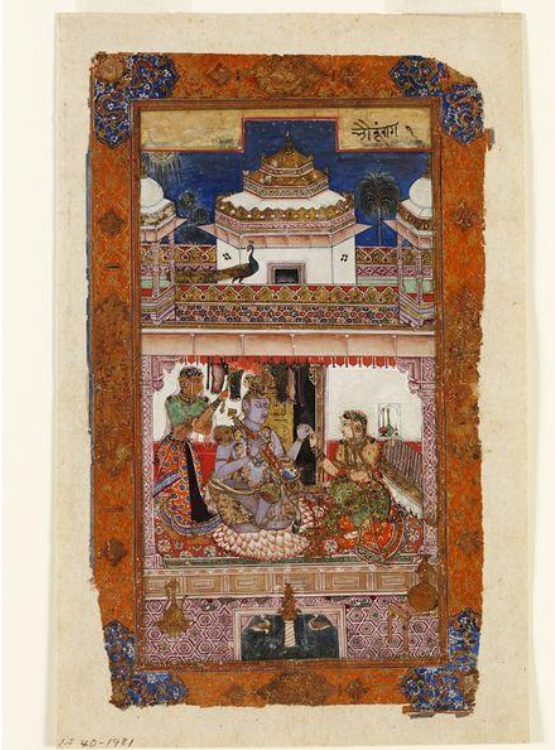
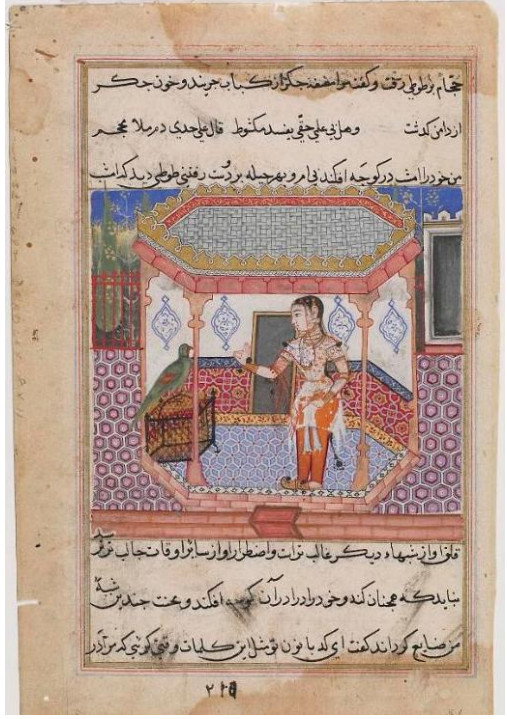
Figure 7- Insert of Painting, Hamza, killed in battle at Mount Uhud, is beheaded and mutilated, illustration from the epic romance the *Hamzanama*, gouache on cotton, Mughal, (c.1562-1577). Opaque watercolour on paper (Victoria and Albert Museum, London). Picture Source- Victoria and Albert Museum



Figure 8- insert of Figure 4, Nasiruddin (artist), Painting of Asavari Ragini from a *Ragamala* series, Chawand, (1605). Opaque watercolour on paper (Victoria and Albert Museum, London). Picture Source: Victoria and Albert Museum



Figure 9- Insert of Master of the Devasano Pado Kalpasutra (active late 15th century), Three Monks Fording a River: Folio from a Kalpasutra- Kalakacharyakatha Manuscript, Gujarat, possibly Patan (c.1475). Opaque watercolor, ink and gold on paper, Image (recto): 4 1/2 x 2 3/4 in. (11.4 x 7 cm) Image (verso): 2 7/8 x 1 13/16 in. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) Picture source: www.metmuseum.org

	
Figure 10 - Bhairava Raga from the Chunar Ragamala, Chunar (1591), Opaque watercolor on paper. Photo source- Beach (2008) pg 80	Figure 11- Folio from the Tutinama, Mughal Dynasty, Reign of Akbar, ca. 1565-1570, Mughal school, Opaque water colour, ink and gold on paper, H x W (painting recto): 9.6 × 10.1 cm (3 3/4 × 4 in) (Smithsonian) Picture source: https://asia-archive.si.edu/

Surrender of Mewar to Mughal Power - 1614

Mewar could not withstand the Mughal forces for long and in 1614, Rana Amar Singh (r.1597-1620) was forced to submit to imperial power. (Beach, 2008, p. 118) Fortunately, the Sisodias of Mewar had generous terms of surrender which led to a few decades of peace and cordial relations with the Mughals. Rana Amar Singh's son, Rana Karan Singh (r.1620-1628) visited the imperial palace in Ajmer and became close friends with Prince Khurram, later known as Shah Jahan (Topsfield, 2007, p. 22). His proximity to the Mughal court meant that he was familiar with imperial manuscript illustrations. His tenure saw a synthesis of the popular Mughal and local Mewar styles of painting; however, an aesthetic balance was not achieved. A few *Ragamala* paintings from this period including Malashri *ragini* (fig. 12) showcase a clumsy hybrid, where figures are rendered in the popular Mughal style, but composition and colours follow the local style (compare with fig 5). This transitional style seen here anticipates artist Sahibdin's *Ragamala* of 1628 (Topsfield, 2007, p. 60).



Figure 12 - Malashri ragini, popular Mughal style, (c 1620-25). (Palace library, Jodhpur) Picture source- Topsfield (2007), pg 56

Sahibdin's *Ragamala*- 1628

Sahibdin was a prolific and accomplished master who transformed the Mewar school of painting from a "primitive-folk style into a sophisticated art," as described by Edith Tomory (Moi, 2009, p. 147). Building on the style set by Nassiruddin, Sahibdin developed what is known as the mature Mewar court style, which came to dominate Hindu court painting in Rajasthani and Pahari courts. The relation with Nassiruddin might have been deeper as some believe the two artists might have been related (Topsfield, 2007, p. 60). Nevertheless, Sahibdin absorbed the rich colour palette and emotional intensity showcased by his predecessor. He continued the early Rajput approach to spatial rendering. Sahibdin's career is closely associated with the reign of his patron, Rana Jagat Singh I (r.1628- 52). Long years of peace under Jagat Singh led to the blossoming of painting ateliers in Mewar as the keen patron commissioned an enormous volume of paintings (Beach, 2008, p. 119).

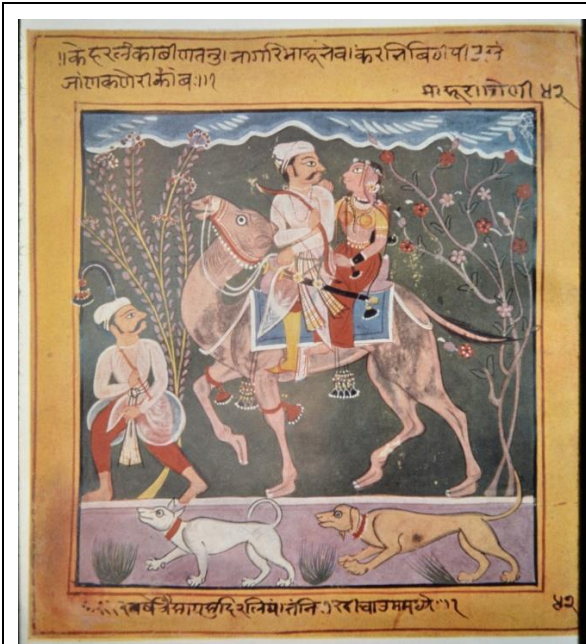


Figure 13- Nassiruddin(artist), Maru ragini, Chawand, (1605) (Kanoria collection, Patna) Picture source- Topsfield (2007), Pg

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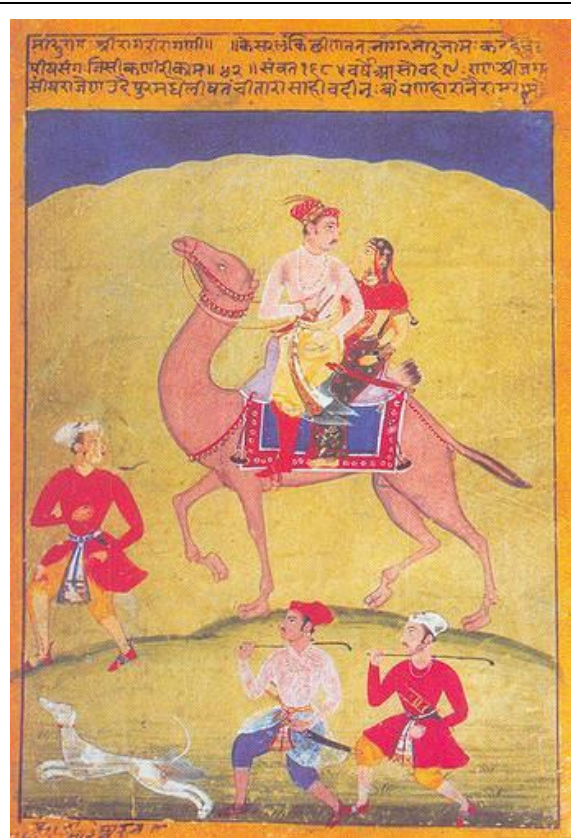


Figure 14- Sahibdin (artist), Maru ragini, Udaipur, (1628). (National Museum, New Delhi) Picture source- Topsfield (2007), Pg 61

The extent of Sahibdin's innovation is noticed when comparing his Maru *ragini* folio (fig.14) with that of the Chawand *Ragamala* (fig 13). The taller format of the page borrowed from Mughal examples allows him to open up the composition with naturalistic grass. A group of running assistants and saluki hound show the Mughal court art influence as well. The eyes of the figures have lost their enlarged and staring quality, a departure from early Rajput painting. (Topsfield, 2007, p. 61). He brought new naturalism to his portraiture and introduced shading in the faces to make them look three dimensional. Mughalesque attention to detail, realized in the accurate depiction of costumes (white *jama*). Clothing is no longer angular and is depicted true to the nature of fabric; the softness and transparency of the fabric is visible (Guy, 2011, p. 105). Shading under the armpits, characteristic of Mughal painting during late Akbar – Jahangir period is evident (Fig. 15, 16) (Chandra, 1981). While horses and elephants are painted naturalistically, birds and other animals still follow the western Indian idiom (Guy, 2011, p. 106). In figure 17 from the same series, new palace architecture of Udaipur (the lake pavilion, Jagmandir, completed by Rana Jagat Singh) is reflected in the architectural element of the white cupola roof flanked by twin pavilions.

The aesthetic achievement of this manuscript is considerable. Even though it lacks the perspective and fineness of finish that late the Mughal school has, its glowing colours attractive stylization and decorative treatment to the landscape have a charm of their own (Chandra, 1981).



Figure 15 – Insert of figure 14. Sahibdin (artist), Maru ragini, Udaipur, (1628). (National Museum, New Delhi) Picture source- Topsfield (2007), Pg 61



Figure 16 – insert of Portrait of the Emperor Jahangir (painting, recto; calligraphy, verso), folio from a manuscript, Mughal court (17th century). Ink, opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 27.3 x 17.2 cm, Harvard Museums. Picture source- www.harvardartmuseums.org

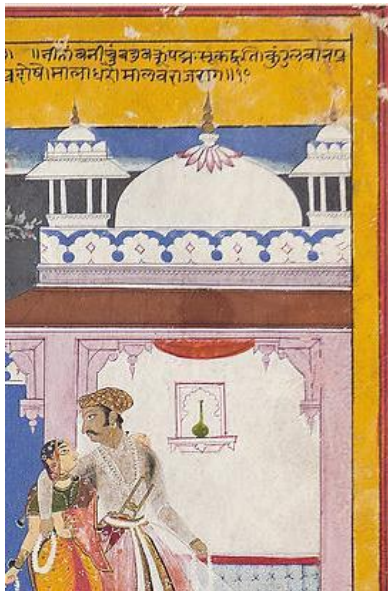


Figure 17 - close-up of Malavi Ragini: Folio from a *Ragamala* Series, Udaipur, Mewar, Rajasthan, (1628), Sahibdin (artist), Opaque watercolor on paper (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) Picture source- <https://metmuseum.org/>

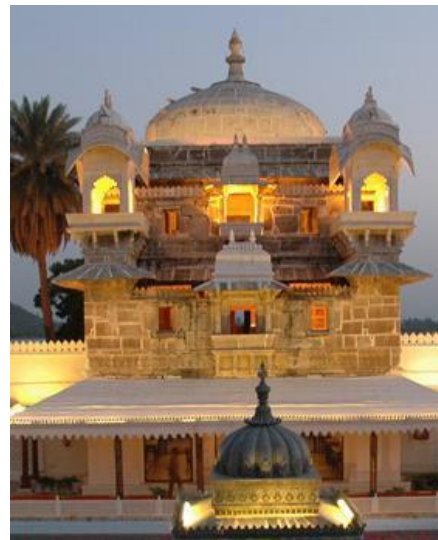


Figure 18 – photograph of Jag Mandir, On an island of Lake Pichola, Udaipur, 17th century, Yellow sandstone and marble, Picture source- tourism.rajasthan.gov.in

From his painting style, it is clear that artist Sahibdin received formal training in the popular Mughal technique. It is unclear whether he obtained this training at a sub-imperial court like Ajmer or in Udaipur itself, under a popular Mughal master patronized by Rana Karan Singh. However, his command over composition, confidence with the bold colour palette and success in depicting intense emotive moods tells us that he understands the genre and probably grew up in Mewar. By looking at Malavi *ragini* (fig 19) of the same manuscript, it can be said that the emotional expressiveness of the early Mewar style is preserved while Mughal finesse and detailing is introduced. The colour palette is softer and influenced by Mughal styles, yet the use of primary colours in blocks retain the indigenous essence of the painting (Topsfield, 2007, p. 61). It is seen that all pictorial components such as paired pots, erect Cyprus trees, flowering foliage- all heighten the mood of the painting depicting the prince and his lover entwined as they enter their bedchamber. Despite the accommodation of a few Mughal elements, the painting style is largely a development on the Nassiruddin's style. This resistance to change and affinity to traditional depiction seen in the art was deliberate as Mewari rulers took pride in their past glory and success.

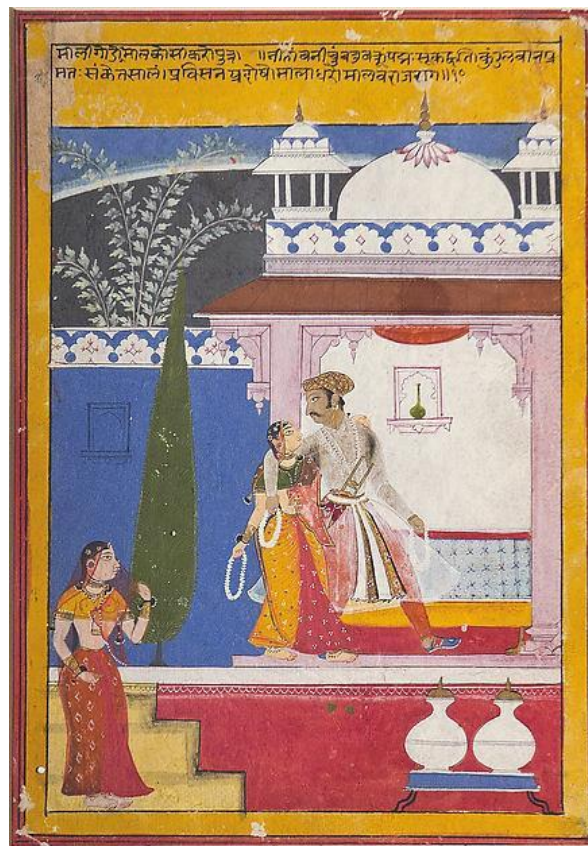


Figure 19 - Sahibdin (artist), Malavi Ragini: Folio from a *Ragamala* Series, Udaipur, Mewar, Rajasthan, (1628). Opaque watercolor on paper (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) Picture source - <https://metmuseum.org/>

Death of Sahibdin - Mid- 17th century

After examining the *Ragamalas* from the years 1540, 1605, and 1628, we observe that the anticipated gradual progression of Mughal influence does not occur in a clear, step-by-step

manner. Notably, a retreat in style is seen in the 1649 Ramayana, which is attributed to Sahibdin and his contemporary Manohar. In Fig 20, by Manohar, the horizontal folio, flat colours and composition along with a schematic composition seems to recall the stylistic norms of the Chawand *Ragamala* (Beach, 2008, p. 120). Manohar is an artist trained in the traditional style of painting with confident clarity in design and vivid palette of colours, however, he lacks Sahibdin's innovativeness in composition (Topsfield, 2007, p. 76). Sahibdin's death in the mid-17th century marked a significant loss in technical skill and creative energy. For a couple of decades, the Mewari artists were satisfied with the propagation of the style set by Sahibdin and Manohar, and no single artist was able to emerge with his improvisational ability or interpretative flair (Topsfield, 2007, p. 88). However, one manuscript that was able to stand out during this period is the Gem Palace *Ragamala*.



Figure 20 – Manohar (artist), Illustration to the Ramayana, Udaipur (c.1649). Opaque watercolor on paper, (Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai). picture source- Chandra, unpaginated

The Gem Palace *Ragamala* - 1660's

The Gem Palace *Ragamala* of 1660's derives its style for artist Manohar. In the series, artistic freedom in the interpretation of the *ragas* or *ragini's* is noticed. For example, in the Maru *ragini*, the lovers, Dhola and Maru are shown dismounted from the camel, rather than in the saddle (as it was depicted earlier in Fig 13,14). This marks a reversion to the archaic simplicity of perception. The black background with white wavy skyline seen in the Chawand series sees a revival in this series. The depiction of the interior chambers in several paintings takes up the whole width of the painting (fig. 21). This teamed with a varied colour palette of intermediate colours such as pink, mauve, pale yellow and orange show the influence of a resident Deccan atelier present in Udaipur at the time. (Topsfield, 2007, p. 90).

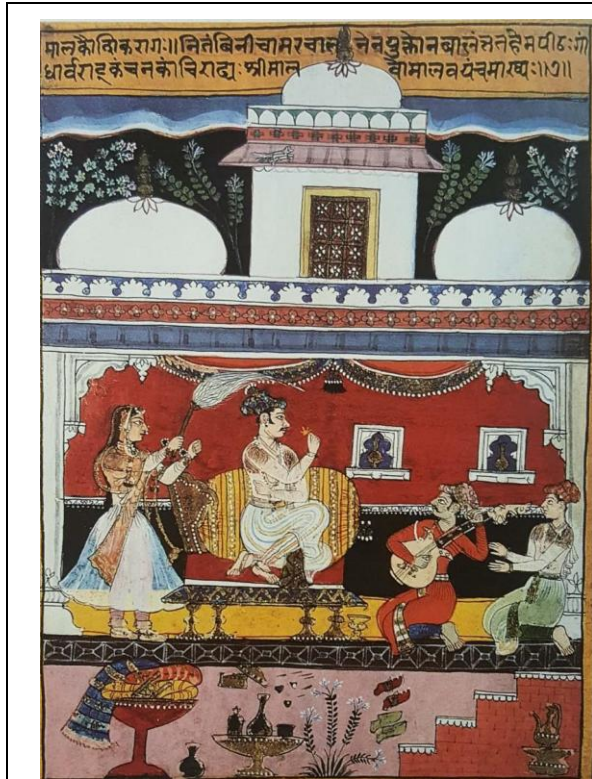


Figure 21 -Raga Malkaus from the Gem Palace Ragamala. Udaipur, (c. 1660). (National Museum, New Delhi) Picture source: Topsfield (2007), Pg 90

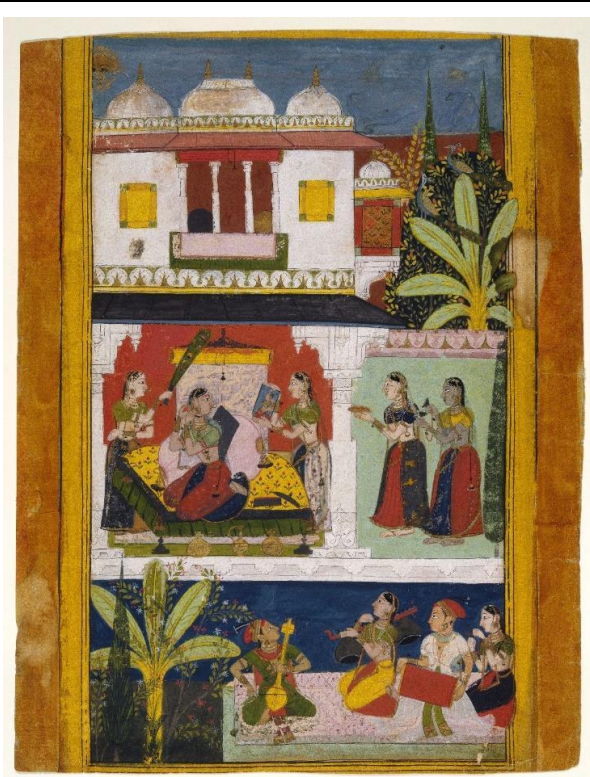


Figure 22- Belavala Ragini, Page from a Dispersed Ragamala Series, (c. 1680). Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, sheet: 14 15/16 x 11 1/2 in. (37.9 x 29.2 cm).)Brooklyn Museum, A. Augustus Healy Fund and Frank L. Babbott Fund, 36.253) Picture source- Brooklyn Museum

By the middle of Raj Singh's reign, artists adhered to Sahibdin's broad conventions but with less adept composition and a drier execution. The harsh outline of faces with accentuated dimple lines began to appear, a characteristic trait of the artist Mun, the leading artist of the 1680s (fig. 22). The deterioration of quality was probably due to the high demand for narrative manuscripts in the 1670s – 90s. The collaborative mass production started to take place, with careless execution, vacuous composition (Topsfield, 2007, p. 96).

Boston Ragamala- 1690's

The next ruler, Rana Jai Singh (r.1680-98) was weak and lacked any particular interest in the arts. The lack of direction and technical deterioration towards the end of the 17th century might be reflective of Jai Singh's apathy as a patron during his last years. At the end of his reign better artists had begun to lend their talents to the new rising genre of portraiture, leaving narrative illustration to coarser hands (Topsfield, 2007, p. 86). After the robust Gem palace set, Udaipur patrons and artists showed little interest in the reinterpretation of the well-worn genre of *Ragamalas*. The sole exception to this is the so called 'Boston *Ragamala*' (fig.23) of 1690- 1700 (Topsfield, 2007, p. 100). In the Boston *Ragamala*(1690-1700), a distinct resemblance between the

male figure in the manuscript and young Amar Singh II (r.698- 1710) suggests that the hedonistic ruler might have been the patron(Fig. 24). The style has an unusually tall format; the mainly three-tiered compositions of this series display imaginative composition and visual reinterpretation of a few *ragas*^(vi). These paintings do not lack charm and creativity like the other *Ragamalas* of late 17th century. Unusual architectural settings^(vii) preside over this series, but animals and trees such as plantains and cypresses are depicted in the familiar Sahibdin style. This shows that even at end of the 17th century, individual Mewari artists could bring freshness to familiar material (Topsfield, 2007, p. 100).

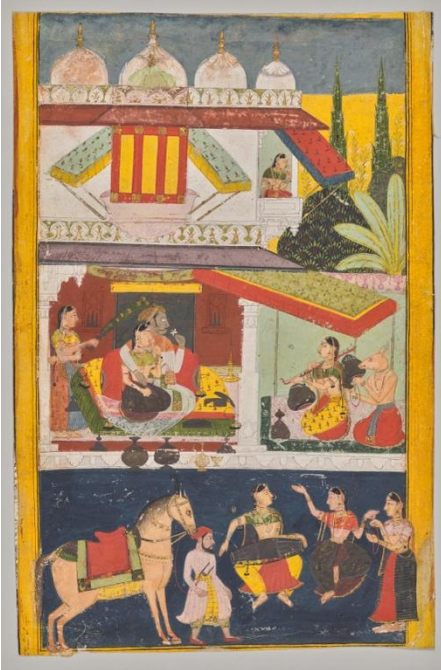


Figure 23 - Shri raga, Udaipur, (1695).
(Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio). Picture
Source- <https://www.clevelandart.org/>

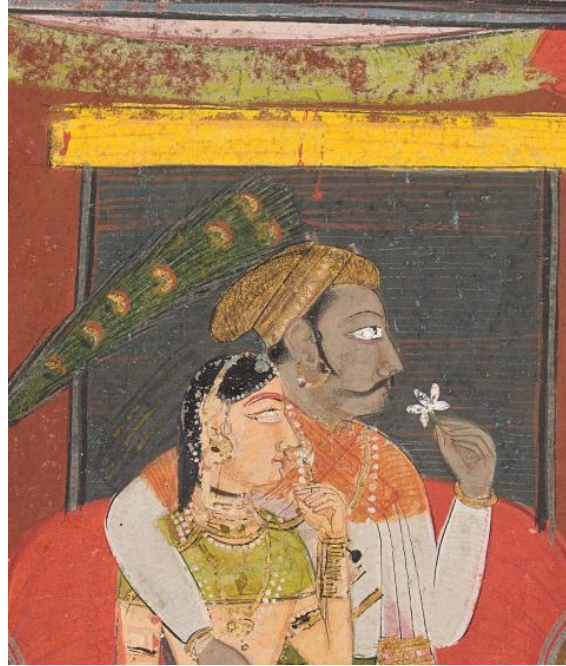


Figure 24 – Insert of Figure 23. Shri raga, Udaipur, (1695).
(Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio). Picture Source-
<https://www.clevelandart.org/>

Diverse influences - 1700s

By 1700, Mewari artists were working in response to a large variety of paintings traditions such as Mughal, Deccan, and European (Aitken, 2010, p. 6). Under Amar Singh II, the conservative stance was dropped in Mewari painting and architecture. His reign saw the commissioning of numerous portraits and court life depictions (Aitken, 2010, p. 35). Even as the courtly painting tradition of Mewar began evolving and increasingly incorporated Mughal painting techniques and conventions^(viii), this did not transfer fully to the painting of poetic subjects such as the *Ragamala* (Aitken, 2010, p. 24).

It is possible that Mewari's considered the Mughal idiom inappropriate for traditional Hindu subjects. Despite a static stylistic approach, the production of *Ragamala* sets thrived, fuelled by their popularity as dowry items and official gifts (Beach, 2008, p. 176). The appeal of *Ragamala*

paintings extended beyond the noble courts, resonating with a broader audience that appreciated and cherished the theme. Consequently, these paintings attracted a much wider circle of patrons than just court aristocracy. From the available evidence, we know that paintings were also commissioned in Mewar by patrons unconnected to the ruling house ^(ix) (Chandra, 1981). High demand for narrative sets led to a degeneration in painting quality, turning art production into a routine where artists often copied earlier works. Although a large volume of art was produced in the 18th century, it lacked the charm of earlier works (Moi, 2009, p. 148).

Conclusion

The evolution of *Ragamala* paintings in 17th-century Mewar reflects a nuanced interplay between cultural resilience and artistic innovation. This study reveals that despite the pervasive Mughal influence across Rajputana, Mewar resisted adopting the Mughal visual idiom, striving instead to maintain and develop a distinctive identity rooted in its own heritage. The deliberate preservation of this style underscores a broader cultural assertion against Mughal hegemony. The Chawand *Ragamala* of 1605 marked the beginnings of a distinct Mewari style. By 1628, a high point in Mewari art was reached with the development of the "mature Mewar" style by artist Sahibdin, who assimilated diverse influences to form a distinct local style. During this period, the artist was innovating within the pre-existing aesthetic drawn from the *Chaurapanchasika* style. However, post-Sahibdin, Mewari *Ragamala* paintings saw an evident decline in artistic innovation and quality. During the reigns of Rana Raj and Jai Singh (1652-98), little progressive development occurred, and the school continued along the trends set by Sahibdin and his contemporaries. The *Ragamalas* of the later 17th century, such as the Gem Palace and Boston *Ragamalas*, stand out from this period due to their fresh take and reinterpretation of the *Ragamala* subject. They also exemplify selective adaptation of influences, as these series still followed the earlier stylistic tenants. By the end of the 17th century, court art and portraiture saw a rise in Mewar. However, traditional painting subjects such as the *Ragamala* remained conservative throughout and did not experience the Mughal influence that courtly paintings did (Beach, 2008, p. 182). It can be argued that this was due to the traditional and narrative nature of the paintings, which made the Mughal idiom seem inappropriate for such art.

Future research could fruitfully explore how these socio-political dynamics specifically influenced artistic decisions at the Mewar court. A comparative study with other Rajput states like Bikaner and Amer, which more openly embraced Mughal artistic norms, could further elucidate the unique trajectory of Mewar. Additionally, investigating the role of patronage, both royal and non-royal, in shaping the stylistic directions of paintings could uncover deeper insights. This paper has focused solely on the development of *Ragamalas* in Mewar; further research could explore the visual depiction of other narratives or court paintings in Mewar.

Notes

ⁱ *Rasikapriya*, *Bhagvatapurana* and *Ragamala* paintings are few narratives that were illustrated

ⁱⁱ This is called the painter's system *Ragamala* set.

- ⁱⁱⁱThe region between Agra and Mewar is what most scholars attribute the *Chaurapanchasika* style to.
- ^{iv}The strong yellow border with Sanskrit verses in Devnagari script inscribed in black ink on top of the folio is seen in this style
- ^vContemporary Jain manuscript painting
- ^{vi}For example: Khambavati *ragini* is interpreted as a divine wedding ceremony complete with gods and courtiers
- ^{vii}For example: In Desavarari *ragini*, the heroine is seated in a pavilion, set in a garden pool with lotuses
- ^{viii}As this was a genre of paintings adopted from the Mughals, they contained the Mughal naturalism
- ^{ix}Colophon found in one *Ramayana* manuscript dated 1649 was painted for one Acharya Jasavanta

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