







SPECTACULAR NARRATIVES

THE ART OF STORYTELLING IN INDIA

WINTER CATALOGUE 2023

Prahlad Bubbar

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THE ART OF STORYTELLING IN INDIA

WINTER CATALOGUE 2023

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INTRODUCTION

SPECTACULAR NARRATIVES

PRAHLAD BUBBAR

Storytelling is an integral part of human culture, transcending time and space. It allows us to connect with our past, present, and future. In India, the art of storytelling has been a prominent feature in various artistic mediums, from ancient manuscripts and religious texts to folk tales and contemporary visual narratives. From the rich narratives of Indian paintings to the evocative moments captured by photographers, the power of storytelling transcends mediums, generations, and borders. Each artwork, each photograph, is a window into a different story, a unique perspective, and an opportunity to connect with the narratives that have shaped India's past and continue to shape its future.

Miniature paintings exemplify precision and detail. They depict tales from Indian mythology, courtly life, and poetic verses. The lush colors and fine details in these artworks bring stories to life, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in the narratives they convey. The emergence of photography in India brought about a new way of storytelling. Photographers began to document everyday life, historical events, and the diverse culture of the country. Each photograph became a window into a particular moment or a unique perspective on life.

As you navigate this digital exhibition catalogue, we invite you to embark on a journey through time, culture, and imagination. "Spectacular Narratives: The Art of Storytelling in India" celebrates the remarkable diversity of storytelling in Indian art and photography, reminding us that stories are the threads that weave together the tapestry of Indian culture.

In the 19th century, the advent of photography marked a transformative era for India, capturing its diverse landscapes, cultures, and people in ways that had never been possible before. The medium, which arrived in the subcontinent with the British colonial presence, not only served as a means of visual documentation but also played a crucial role in shaping narratives and storytelling.

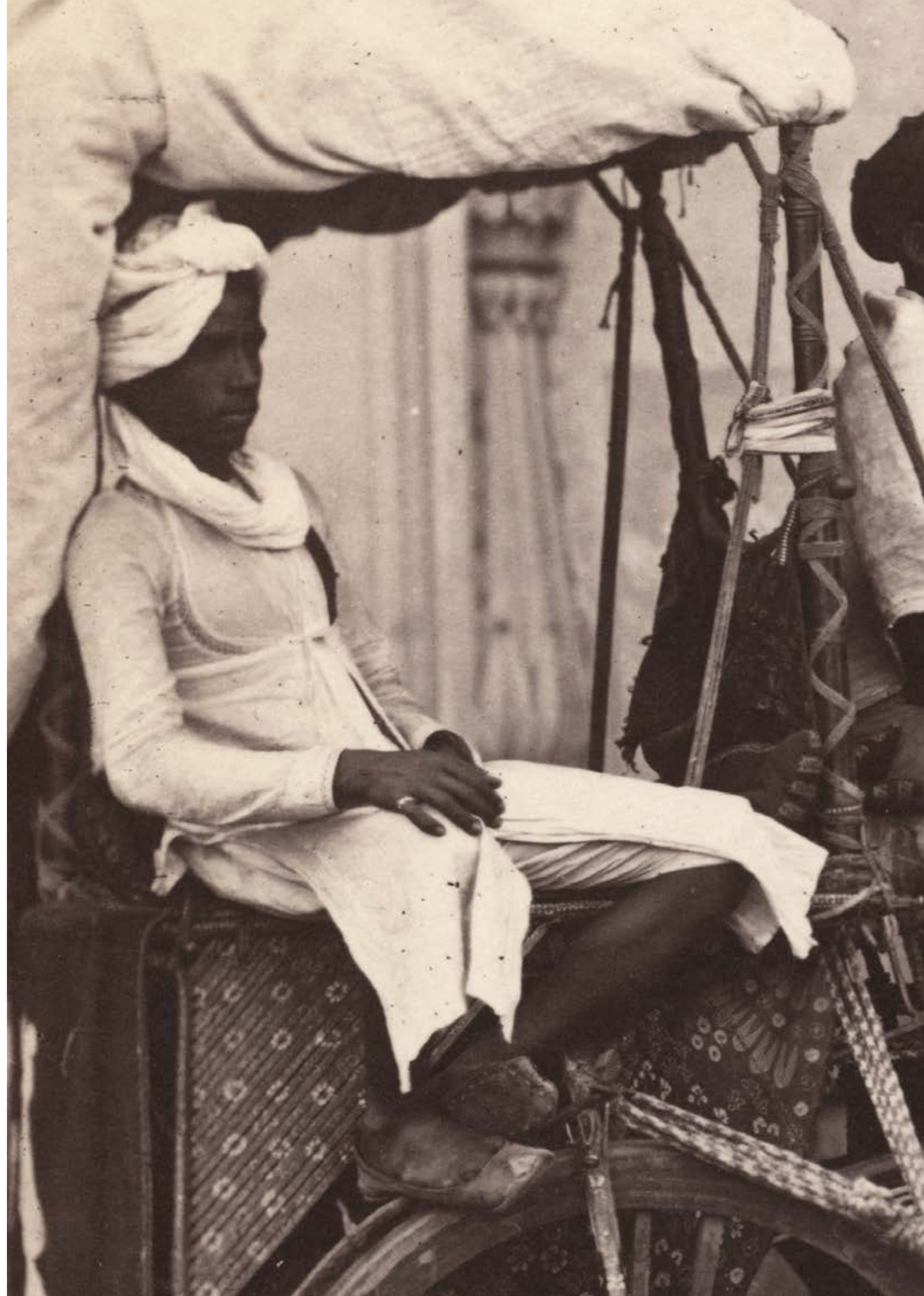
Oral histories intertwined seamlessly with the visual narratives captured by the lens. Photography, while a powerful medium on its own, often complemented and enriched the oral traditions that had long been a cornerstone of Indian storytelling. Photographs became more than static images; they evolved into tangible records that echoed the tales recounted by generations. The juxtaposition of oral histories with the captured moments in photographs created a unique interplay, fostering a richer understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics of 19th-century India. As families gathered around these visual storytellers, narratives unfolded, breathing life into frozen frames, and connecting the past with the present in a continuous thread of storytelling and cultural legacy.

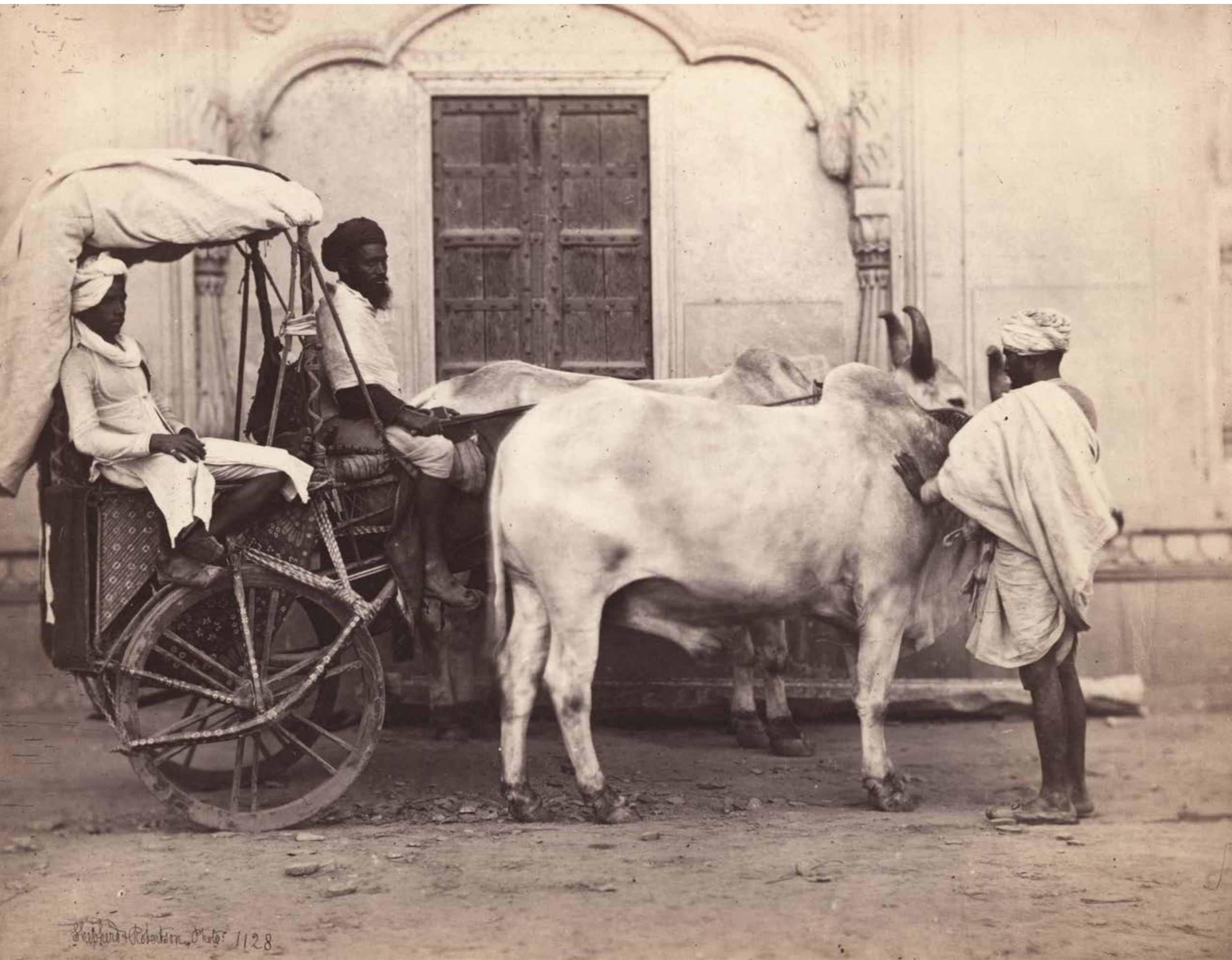
As photography gained popularity, studios began to emerge across major Indian cities, catering to a burgeoning middle class eager to have their portraits taken. These portraits became a form of personal storytelling, reflecting the aspirations, social status, and cultural identities of the subjects. The images often depicted individuals in traditional attire, surrounded by props that symbolised their profession or social standing, creating a visual narrative that went beyond mere representation. The photographer's studio, adorned with European furniture, elaborate backdrops, and rich drapery, became a transformative space where identities were crafted, and status proclaimed. They often became family heirlooms, carrying within them the spoken stories of ancestors, societal norms, and cultural customs. These visual artifacts served not only as documentation but as repositories of narrative heritage, bridging the gap between spoken and visual traditions.

Photography also played a crucial role in shaping the Western perception of India. The works of Samuel Bourne, another prominent 19th-century photographer, showcased the picturesque landscapes of the Himalayas and the architectural marvels of cities like Varanasi. Bourne's images, often characterised by their composition and technical precision, presented a romanticised view of India that appealed to the Victorian sensibilities of the time. Through these visual narratives, the West was introduced to a mystical version of the subcontinent.

In addition to studio portraits and landscapes, narrative photography began to emerge as a powerful medium for storytelling. Photography was employed to tell stories of daily life, societal norms, and cultural practices.

The photographs from this era act as windows into the past, preserving moments lost in time. Unlike in Europe, where photography faced scepticism regarding its artistic merit compared to painting, in India, it was considered one of the "fine arts." Early practitioners recognised photography as a medium to paint with light and shadow, drawing on diverse influences to transform image making into a creative vision. The legacy of 19th-century Indian photography remains a testament to the convergence of art, technology, and culture during a period of significant change and exploration.





1.

**SHEPHERD & ROBERTSON
BULLOCK CART, DELHI**

Delhi, India, 1863
Albumen print, 00.0 x 00 cm

PROVENANCE:

London Art Market, 2001.
Prahlaad Bubbar.



2.

NARAYAN VINAYAK VIRKAR,
STUDIO PORTRAIT OF AN INTELLECTUAL

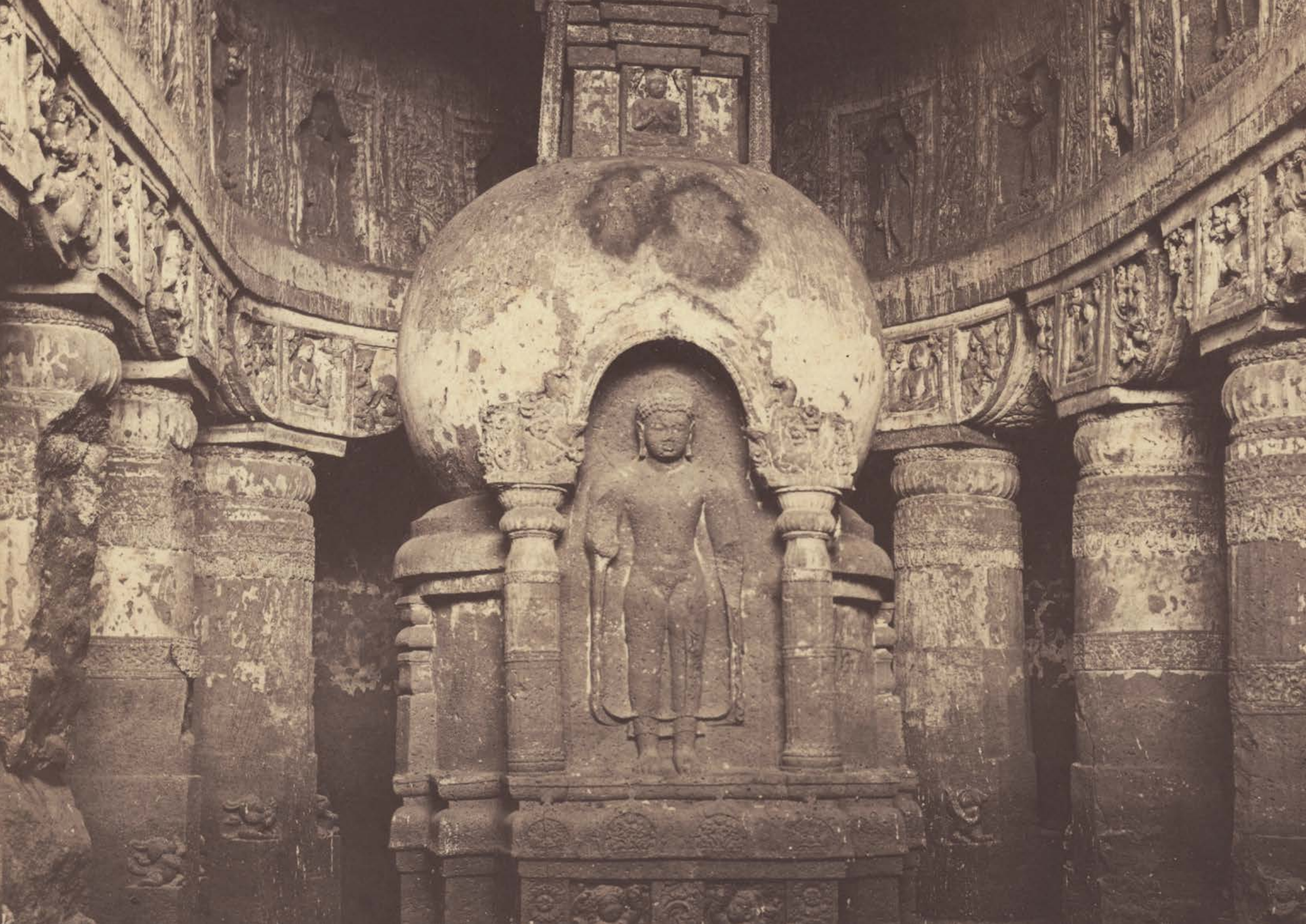
India, 1918

Albumen print, 00.0 x 00 cm

PROVENANCE:

London Art Market, 2011.







3.

SAMUEL BOURNE,
AJANTA, INTERIOR OF CAVE
NO. 9

India, 1869

Albumen print, 19 x 24.3 cm

PROVENANCE:

Gujral Collection, Germany.

4.

NICHOLAS & CO.,
PANORAMA OF THE SEVEN PAGODAS [MAMALLAPURAM],
NEARER VIEW OF THE LEFT PORTION OF THE CARVINGS [ARJUNA'S PENANCE]

India, circa 1880
Albumen print, 23.3 x 28.5 cm (left), 23.3 x 28.7 cm (right)

PROVENANCE:

Gujral Collection, Germany.





5.

MADRAS CLOTH MERCHANTS

Madras, India, circa 1875
Albumen print, 20.7 x 26.5 cm

PROVENANCE:

London Art Market, 2004.
Prahlaḍ Bubbar.



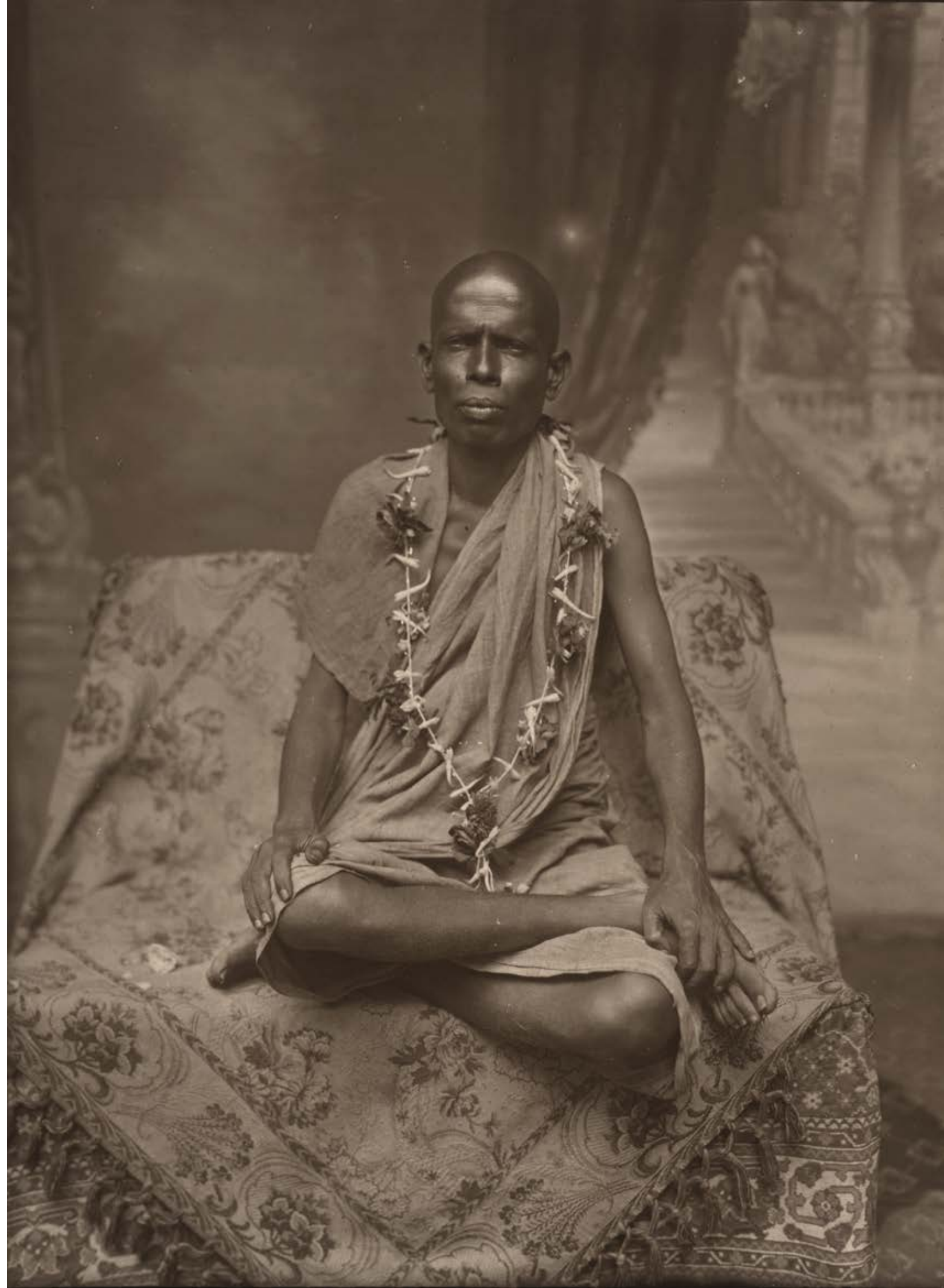
6.

AN ASCETIC IN YOGIC POSE

India, late 19th century
Albumen print, 00 x 00 cm

PROVENANCE:

London Art Market, 2004.
Prahlad Bubbar.



AN ASCETIC AND HIS DOG

Sitamau. Madhya Pradesh, Central India
Late 18th century
23 x 17cm

This rare portrait of a Hindu ascetic with his dog comes from the Sitamau, in central India, where a vibrant school of painting flourished in the late 18th century. In this painting, an ascetic, or vairagin, is shown sitting on the floor and carrying only the most basic paraphernalia such as a small volume of readings (probably the yoga sutras, the Puranas, tantras, Jain texts written by sages such as Samantabhadra and texts from the Buddhist Pali tradition), a walking stick, minimal jewellery (a bracelet, necklace, and a hooped earring) as well as minimal corporeal cover around his waist and encircling his drawn-up legs, highlighted by a single yogapatta or meditation band used by the ascetic to keep his limbs in a position of rigidity during contemplation.

The ascetic does, however, have with him a loyal canine companion, here shown prostrate at his feet. This single sentient being signals an interest in spiritual pursuits and to reflect on the material world around the artist, a pictorial tradition that became popular in India and Iran beginning in the sixteenth century. The ascetic and his dog are shown in a stark environment where the imprint of buildings and modernity contrast sharply with the basic pursuits of the wandering figure.

The artist has rendered the portrait with great purity of line as the curving contours of man and animal express pliability and ability to adapt, unlike the hard linearity of concrete behind them. A single water jug is seen at the side of the monk, perhaps a concession to his sanitary needs. The ascetic is wholly concentrated on the ideas before his reddened eyes, the subject of his absolute focus and demonstrating great psychological depth.

With delicate precision we observe the fleshy humanity of the man as the artist has dexterously applied shading and the faintest touches of colour. The lips are emphasized with a touch of red as are the cheeks. Other features such as the auricular elements and the wonderful volume of wavy hair on his head are handled with enormous refinement. The

dog is given a subtle humanisation in character: with his front paws crossed in repose, the animal gazes off into the distance, alert and curious. His slender but energetic frame curves along the back and culminates in the graceful coil of the tail. A single encircling collar around the neck reveals its domesticated status and echoes the simple yogapatta seen on his master.

Yogis and other types of ascetics are found in Mughal illustrated historical manuscripts showing encounters recorded in Mughal histories between the emperors Babur, Akbar and Jahangir; and also in individual album paintings. From the Mughal point of view more or less all Hindu ascetics were classed as yogis since they all practised bodily asceticism of some kind or another. The Mughal concern with naturalism towards the end of the reign of Akbar to some degree accounts for what appears to be the accuracy of the early Mughal images of ascetics and yogis. Early Mughal pictorial representations of yogis have as Jim Mallinson points out (Mallinson, "Yogis in Mughal India") enormous value as historical documents on account of the accuracy and consistency of their detail, overwriting in many instances what can be gleaned from the conflicting literary traditions. It is obvious, he writes, that a variety of traditions shared ascetic archetypes and freely exchanged doctrines and practices.

A painting of another ascetic with a dog can be found in the collections of the Yale University Art Gallery, Acc. No. 2017.127.2. Ex Collections Doris Wiener, New York and Paul F. Walter, New York

PROVENANCE:

Private collection UK. 1970s





REFERENCE

Ascetic with a Dog
 Mughal India, ca.
 1600–1620
 Pencil, opaque watercolor,
 and gold on paper,
 17.78 × 10.16 cm
 Yale University Art Gallery,
 Inv N.2017.127.2



RUSTAM FIGHTS AKVĀN DĪV

Scene from the Shahnama
Mughal, 18th Century
Opaque watercolour and gold on paper, 39 x 27 cm



The Shahnama (Book of Kings) of Firdausi is a great Persian epic of almost sixty thousand rhyming couplets. It narrates the story of the rulers of Iran from mythical beginnings up until the conquest of Iran by the Arabs, and the coming of Islam. This epic captured the imagination of generations of people and illustrated manuscripts of it were produced across regions and time. Therefore there is no one standard edition, and there exist many variations of it. There are however, various iconographic elements that make characters and scenes easy to identify no matter which manuscript one is looking at.

In a key episode of the Shahnama, a scene from which is depicted here, Rustam sets out to kill the demon Akvan who first appears before him in the form of a large and powerful wild ass. Rustam chases him on horseback for three days and three nights but every time he approaches Akvan, he conceals himself using magic. Finally when Rustam grows tired and falls asleep, Akvan cuts the piece of earth on which Rustam is resting, and lifts him up to the sky, asking him if he would like to be thrown on a mountain or into the sea. Knowing the demon's evil ways fully well, Rustam asks to be thrown onto the mountain and as he had expected, he was thrown into the sea instead. He manages to save himself and locate his horse, Rakhsh after which he confronts Akvan once more. On this occasion he manages to snare him with a lasso and beheads him.

The moment in the story when Rustam is flung into the sea by Akvan, is depicted here by the painter. Rustam, who plays on the psyche of the Div and manipulates him, lands in water as he had hoped. He is shown reaching out for his sword as he intends to attack the Div. He is dressed in a tiger skin coat and a leopard helmet as per iconographic convention. He also wears elaborate armour, carries a shield under his arm, a sword and has a quiver full of arrows on his hip. The Div Akvan is shown as an ugly demon with long hair, blue eyes, black lips, an elephant's head and a mouth

full of tusks. His body is purple, his nails long, and he has horns on his head. He wears nothing but a bright orange skirt with a belt made of bells. Another large bell hangs on a chain around his neck.

The artist has paid great attention to depicting the scene in line with the story and conformed to iconographic norms. The painting is composed in bright hues—oranges, greens and blues, which are a very Indian feature and noted in paintings from Kashmir and the Punjab region in this period. The rocks hint at the pinkish Mughal type but have clearly undergone phases of evolution. The illustration of the scene occupies more than half of the page of this Shahnama manuscript. The poetry is written in black ink in four columns, in nasta'liq. These columns are separated by double inter-columnar divisions. The episode/ section heading, also in nasta'liq, is written in red at the centre above the painting. The entire composition, including the text and image, is framed by a thin gold border.

After the sacking of Delhi by Nadir Shah and the decline of Mughal power, artists from the court dispersed to many provincial centres. This period of the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century saw these artists assimilating the Mughal style with regional elements and the paintings of regions such as Kashmir and Punjab are testimony to this.

PROVENANCE:

Private collection, UK, 1950s to 2015.





9.

A PRINCESS WITH TWO ATTENDANTS

Mughal India, 18th century
Opaque watercolour and gold on paper
00 x 00 cm

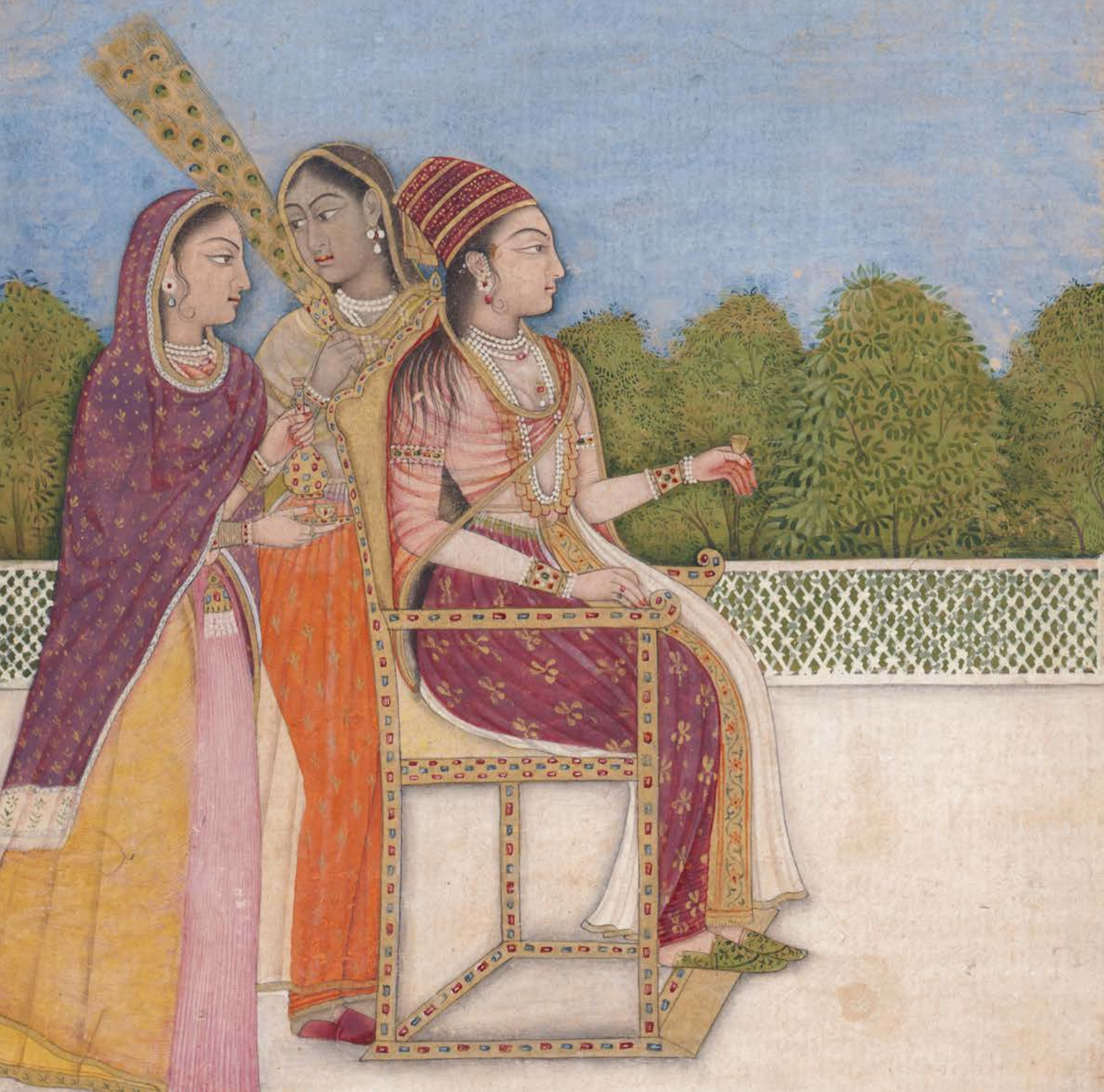
In the vibrant tapestry of India's artistic heritage, 18th-century Mughal painting stands as a testament to the grandeur and sophistication of the Mughal Empire. The present captivating portrayal of courtly life encapsulates the essence of the era. This painting, created during the zenith of Mughal artistic brilliance, features a prominent princess seated on a magnificent throne, flanked by two equally resplendent attendants.

The central figure, a woman of regal demeanour, commands attention with her dignified presence. Seated on an ornate throne adorned with gemstones, she epitomises the grace and authority of Mughal royalty. Her attire, richly embroidered with gold and silk threads, reflects the opulence of the Mughal court, showcasing its affluence and cultural refinement. To the left of the princess, two court women stand in attendance, their gazes directed towards each other, balancing the flow of the composition. Their garments, though slightly less adorned than that of the princess, still bear the unmistakable mark of Mughal elegance. The artist masterfully captures the subtle nuances of the expressions of the ladies, and with delicate brushstrokes he depicts the intricate details of their jewellery. The wonderful fan made of peacock feathers further emphasises the luxurious lifestyle of the Mughal elite.

The background of the painting unveils a picturesque setting — a white-fenced porch overlooking a sprawling landscape dominated by majestic trees. The porch serves as a stage for the unfolding drama of courtly life, its white hues contrasting sharply with the vivid colours of the characters, symbolising the connection between the opulence of the court and the tranquillity of the outdoors.

The composition of the painting adheres to the principles of Mughal art, characterised by its meticulous attention to detail, harmonious proportions, and a keen sense of balance. The artist employs a skilful use of colour, with vibrant hues contrasting against more subdued tones, creating a visually striking composition. Beyond its aesthetic appeal, the painting offers a glimpse into the societal dynamics of the court. The princess is depicted as a symbol of authority and sophistication. The attendants, though secondary in prominence, play a crucial role in highlighting the hierarchical structure of Mughal society.

PROVENANCE:
Private collection, UK, 1950s to 2015..





10.

KRISHNA SUBDUES KALIYA, THE SNAKE DEMON IN THE YAMUNA RIVER

Kangra, Punjab Hills, India, Circa 1820
Opaque watercolour and gold on paper
24.5 x 18.5 cm

In this superbly refined and masterfully composed early 19th century painting, in a dramatic moment known as Kāliya Nāga Mardan, Krishna dances triumphantly over the subdued serpentine body of Kāliya and the moment is captured as Kāliya's wives beg Krishna for mercy and forgiveness. In extraordinary detail, the artist focuses the viewer on the dramatic scene playing out in the foreground but also establishes with great sensitivity the atmosphere and environment that played background to this mythological event.

The dramatic interplay between Krishna and the wives of Kāliya is rendered in extraordinary chromatic variation – the large but defeated body of the venomous semi-divine being, Kāliya, is seen on the bank of the Yamunā River; pale and flaccid, his large serpentine body remains subdued as Krishna stands atop his multi-headed form. Dressed in a vivid gold dhoti, Krishna stands bare-chested and holding a small lance; his crown, topped with peacock feathers, can be seen resting on the branches of a nearby solitary Kadamba tree.

After hearing of the terror that Kāliya imposed upon the people of As Krishna stands triumphant on Kāliya's head, Kāliya's wives come and pray to Krishna with joined palms, worshiping him and praying for mercy for their husband. Kāliya recognized the greatness of Krishna and surrendered, promising he would not harass anybody again. Krishna pardoned him after performing a final dance upon his head. The celebration of Nāga Nathaiyā or Nāga Nṛitya is associated with this particular tale.

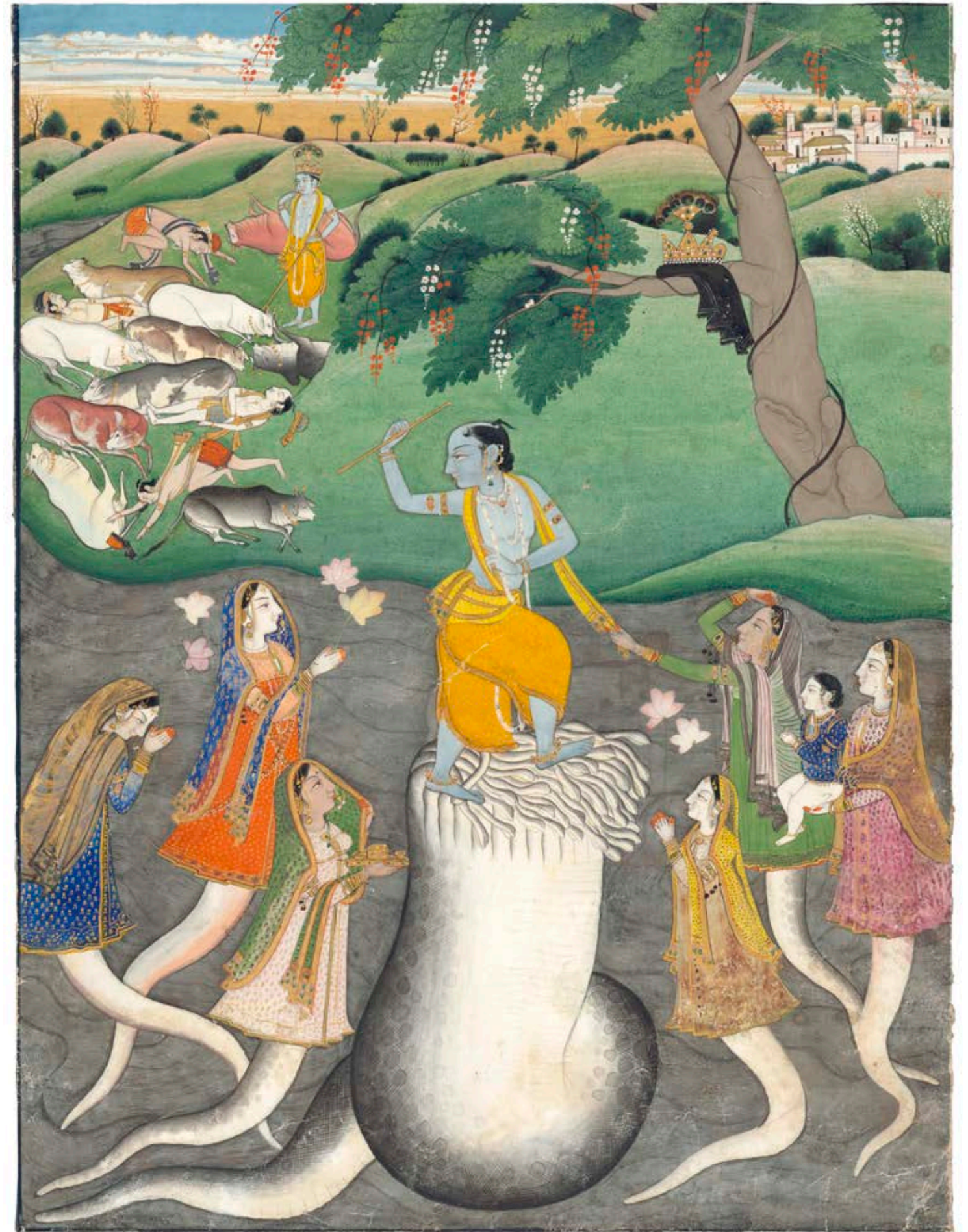
The wives of Kāliya are given dignified form and, although their bodies are those of serpents, their human extended form is illustrated with great beauty and refinement. The all wear the colourful equivalent of choli tops over long lehenga or pavada skirts and, on top, dupatta scarves. All praise, venerate or implore Krishna as hands are held in prayer or in offering of flowers and the innocent company of a young child in the arms of its mother.

In the background of the tableau lie the cowherds and their cows after having drunk from the pool poisoned by the serpent Kāliya; the postures assumed by men and beasts lend the scene a certain surrealistic quality. Beyond this scene further in the background, past the verdant rolling hills, we observe the nearby town of Vrindavan.

The legend behind this refined painting is one of the great legends of Indian mythology and in which Kāliya is subjugated by Krishna after Krishna comes to the defence of the people of Vrindavan and after terrifying the sage Durvasā, who had come as a guest of Rādhā. Krishna challenges Kāliya, is momentarily ensnared in his serpentine coil but frees himself and regains the upper hand by proceeding to jump on all of Kāliya's heads so as to release the poison in the snake and stop him polluting the Yamunā. In the end, Kāliya is exiled into Pātāla, much to the celebration of the people of Vrindavan.

PROVENANCE:

Conrad Harris Collection, UK, 1970s-2019.





A SERIES OFFIFTEEN RAGAMALA
DRAWINGS

Attributed to the Sirohi Master (active ca. 1670-1690)
Sirohi, India, circa1680
Drawing with red ochre pigment on paper

These elegant preparatory drawings for a group of ragamala paintings are rendered in sindhuri qalam (sanguine), and this is evident from the writing on its surface, which would have served as instructions for the painter for the colours to be used. These drawings, with their fluid lines of the Indian brush, are particularly fine examples from the Sirohi Master and the iconography and style of ragamalas from the kingdom of Sirohi, which are usually simple, immediate, and bold compositions, with imagery often spilling into the borders edge, as is seen here. The figures have small faces with full cheeks and pursed lips.

The fluidity of line in these sketches are characteristic of the finest Rajput works, and testimony to an assured understanding of form and iconography. In addition, drawings give an opportunity to the viewer to examine the technique and draughtsmanship that underlies the paintings.

Under the rule of Akheyraj II (1620-73) and his grandson, Bairisal (1676-97), Sirohi saw a thriving and vibrant painting atelier. Most paintings done in the Sirohi style are ragamala manuscripts, making it evident that this subject was a favourite. This preference for ragamalas extends beyond the production of manuscripts, as ragamala imagery profusely decorates the upper cornice of a room in the Sirohi Palace. Unlike most other schools that followed a prescribed iconography, the Sirohi school made use of employed local, popular musical names for some of their images.

A ragamala or ‘garland of flowers’ is an illustration of various musical modes of Indian music. Each drawing or painting illustrates a poem that evokes the mood of a specific raga. These poetic verses usually describe the sentiment or mood that is associated with each raga, while suggesting the time of day or night as well as the season when they are to be performed.

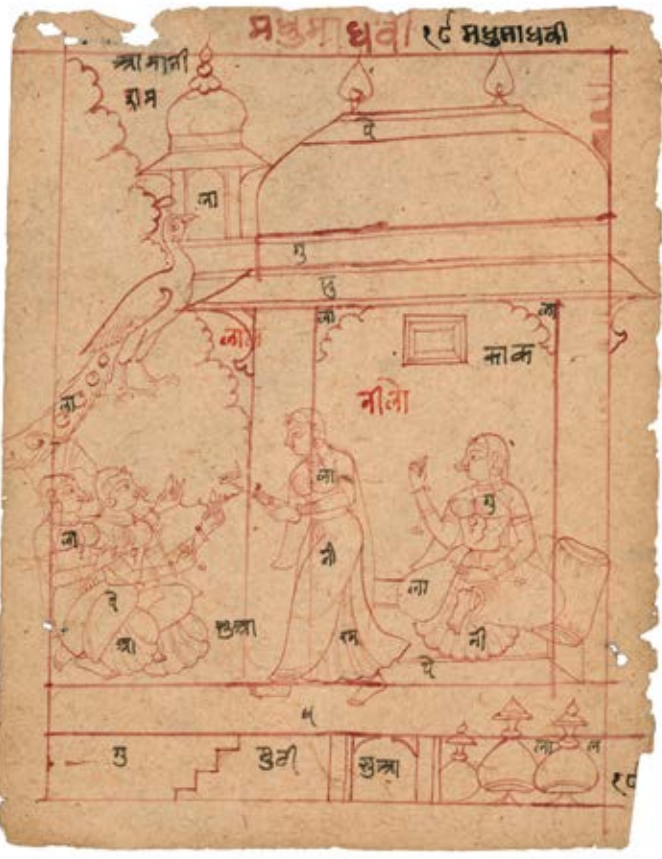
The enjoyment of ragamala painting was a cultivated and multisensory experience. In sumptuous royal palaces, the elite of India’s princely states would gather in intimate settings, surrounded by food, wine, and music, to share the experience of viewing paintings. Ragamala paintings were illustrated to accompany specific musical modes called ragas.

Both the paintings and their musical modes evoked specific moods (bhavas) and emotional responses (rasas). These small hand-held paintings were intentionally intricate and complex. They possessed fine details, such as delicately applied strands of gold, and held clever allusions with meaningful imagery, which could only be appreciated by a sophisticated observer, called a rasika. The first known ragamala paintings appeared around 1475, decorating the margins of Hindu manuscripts with images of deities associated with the music. A century later, the paintings typically depicted human beings whose actions embodied the moods of musical modes. This art form grew in popularity and became a favorite of India’s aristocratic warrior class known as the Rajputs, as well as by the regionally dominant Mughal Empire. By the 18th century, regional iconographic and thematic variations had developed, and each Rajput state sponsored its own artistic practice.

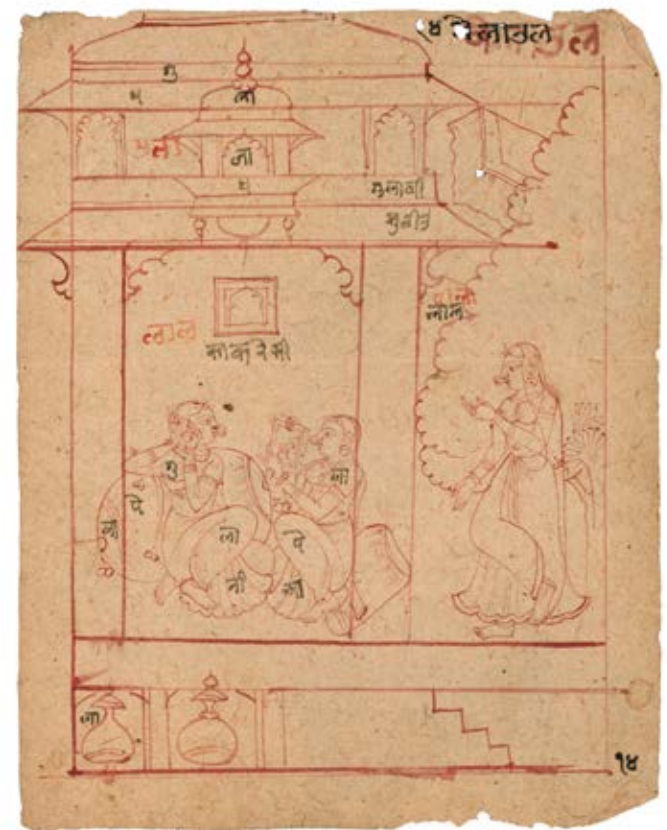
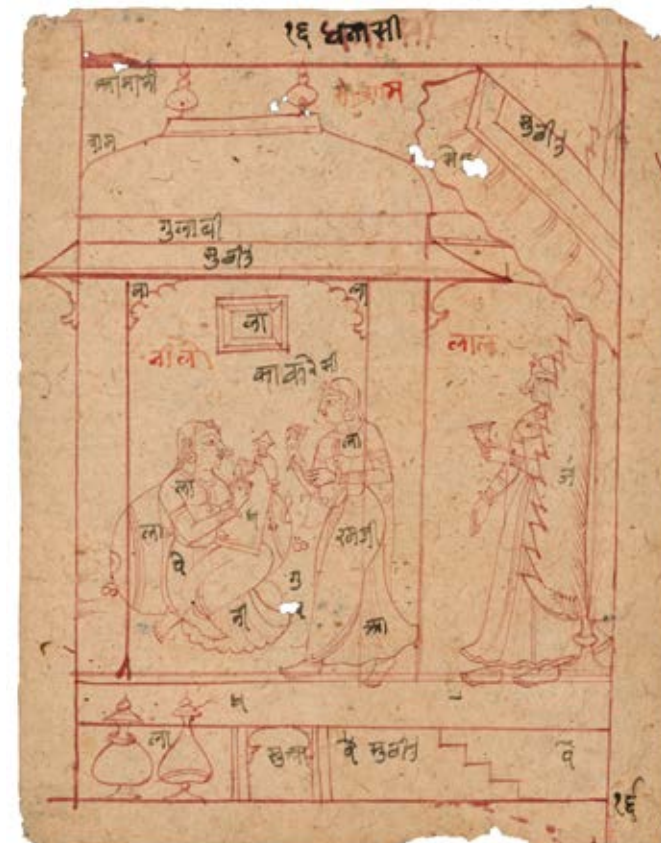
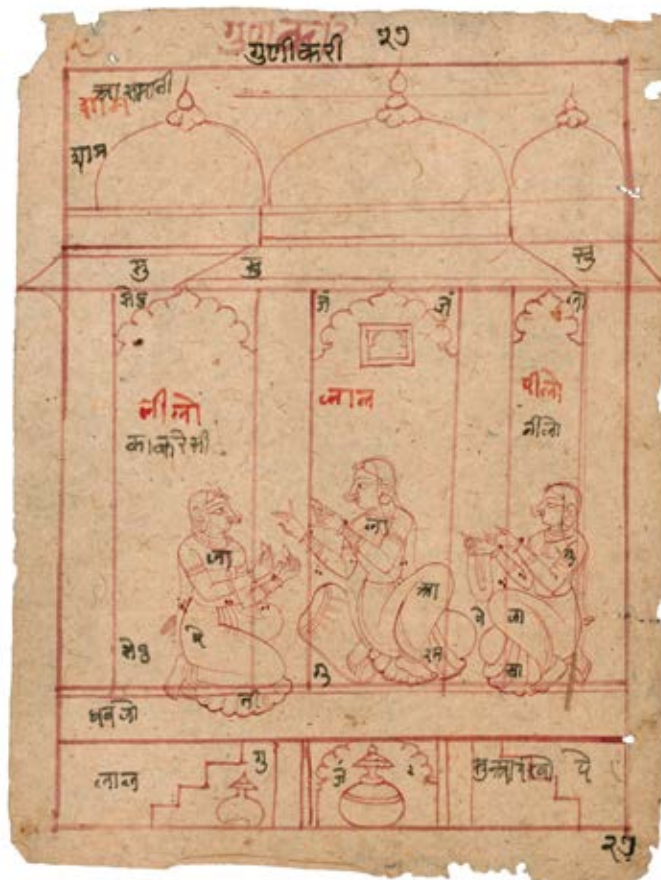
Each raga is a musical mode that demands or excludes certain notes and then lets the musician improvise freely within those imposed limits. Over time the primary modes were classified as ragas and their sub-modes were termed as raginis. The music inspired music scholars, poets and painters who were moved to personify the modes, giving them visual form. These modes of music have existed for centuries, and the names and classifications of the ragas vary considerably by region and time. This multiplicity defies easy categorization, but the variety is the natural outcome of an adaptive and inventive musical tradition.

Commissioning a ragamala was a sign of a patron's cultivated taste and refined pleasures. As patrons traveled with their beloved objects, regional styles and imagery began to merge. Ragamala paintings were widely popular in India only to decline in the 19th century with the rise of British rule and the loss of aristocratic patronage. However, the musical modes (raga) of Indian classical music remain popular into the present day.

PROVENANCE
Private Collection, UK.
Claudio Moscatelli Collection, UK.







20.7 x 16 cm

In this preparatory sketch for the Maru Ragini, we observe the king and queen (Dhola and Maru) shown riding on a camel back in desert background. The fluidity of their garments is emphasized in its lightness and transparency while numerous adornments are used to highlight their prosperity and social position. An attendant is seen proceeding ahead of the camel while carrying a lance and is shown in motion by the graceful separation and flex of the legs. The camel is also shown in running position and fully decorated according to status of riders.

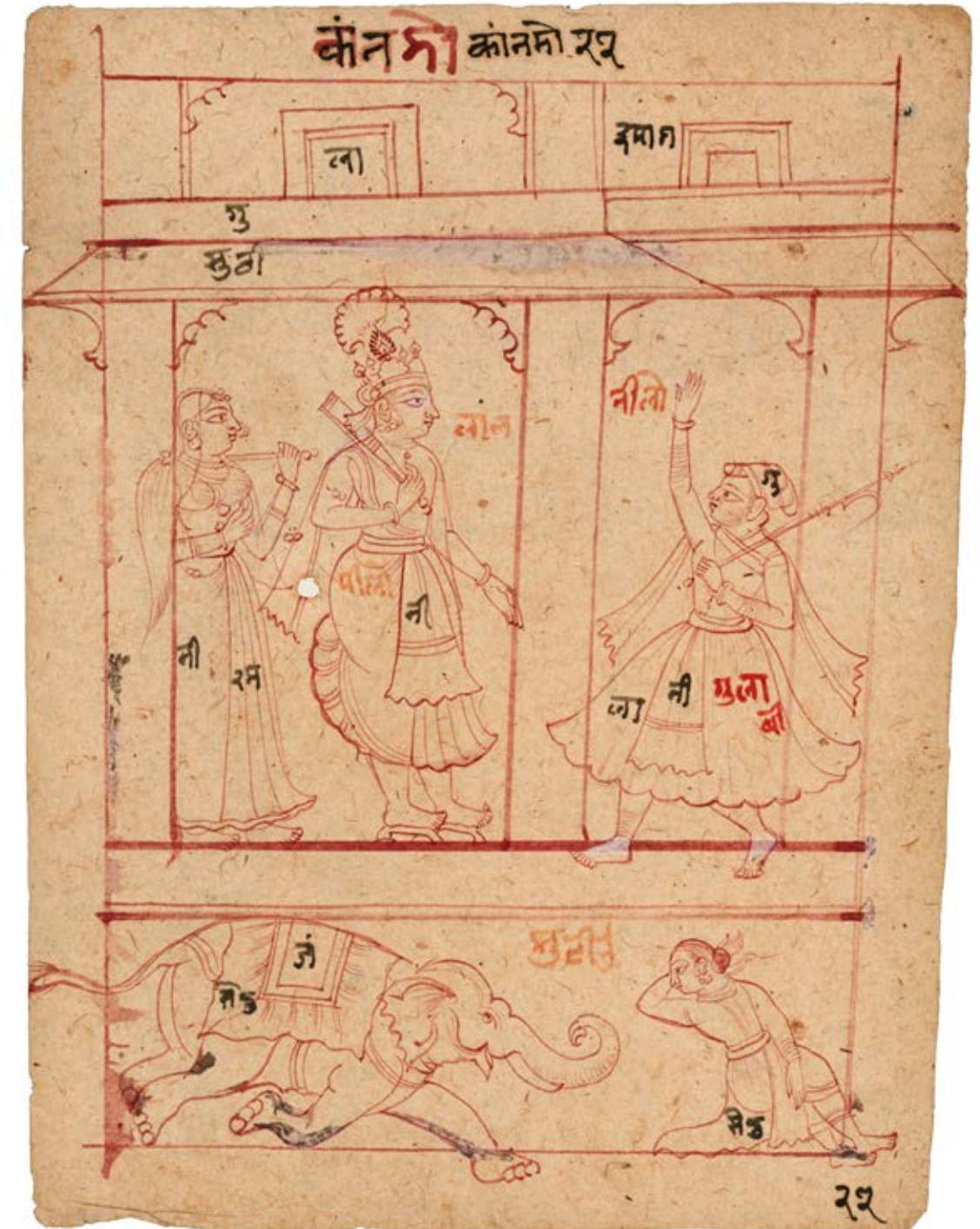
In the background, several trees and shrubs are shown to follow the contours of a hilly horizon and to show winding surfaces. Both the male figures are shown wearing turbans of mughal style on their heads while the queen is wrapped in a simple shalwar.

KANADA RAGA

20.4 x 16.2 cm

In this preparatory drawing for the representation of the musical mode, Kanada Raga, we observe the elegant and fluid hand of the master as a prince, standing with an attendant behind him, holds a vina (or veena), a stringed musical instrument from the Indian subcontinent, while he is approached by a musician also holding a vina of a slightly different form. They both stand below the roof of a roofed colonnade. The graceful flow of their garments and the delicate articulation of limbs are the trademarks of the great Sirohi Master.

Below them, on a separate register, a princely warrior has shown his valour by slaying an elephant, often depicted blue-skinned like the god Krishna. Indeed, this raga may have originated as a hunting melody but, as Andrew Topsfield has noted, elephants were too highly valued in India to be hunted in this way, so the subject may allude to the Bhagavata Purana story of Krishna's defeat of Kunalayapida, the demonic elephant sent by the wicked king Kamsa to kill Krishna before he enters the arena at Mathura, where he slays Kamsa's champion wrestlers, then Kamsa himself.



307.



जा

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20.4 x 15.8 cm

In this remarkable preparatory drawing, the ruler is seen sitting in a complex architectural setting that incorporates Mughal elements into secular art, as seen in the white domed architecture and interest in conveying some sense of spatial depth. This volumetric dimensionality is also emphasized by the appearance of a tree behind the musician, who holds a stringed instrument, probably a kamanche, on his shoulder in order to pick the strings. Equally, a female attendant is partly seen traversing the space as she moves forward behind a column with libations. The work also references the fall harvest festivals, a time for relaxing and celebration.

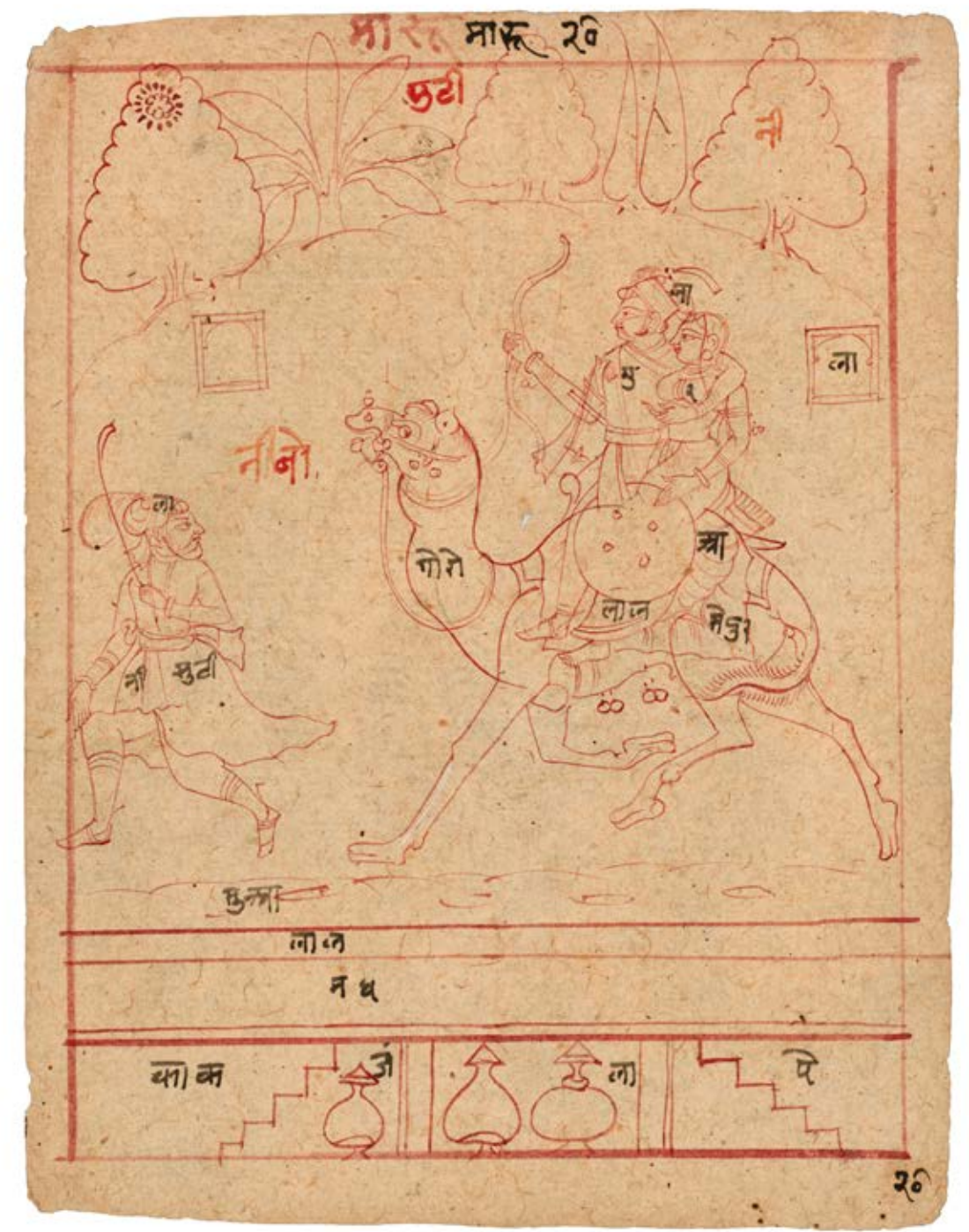
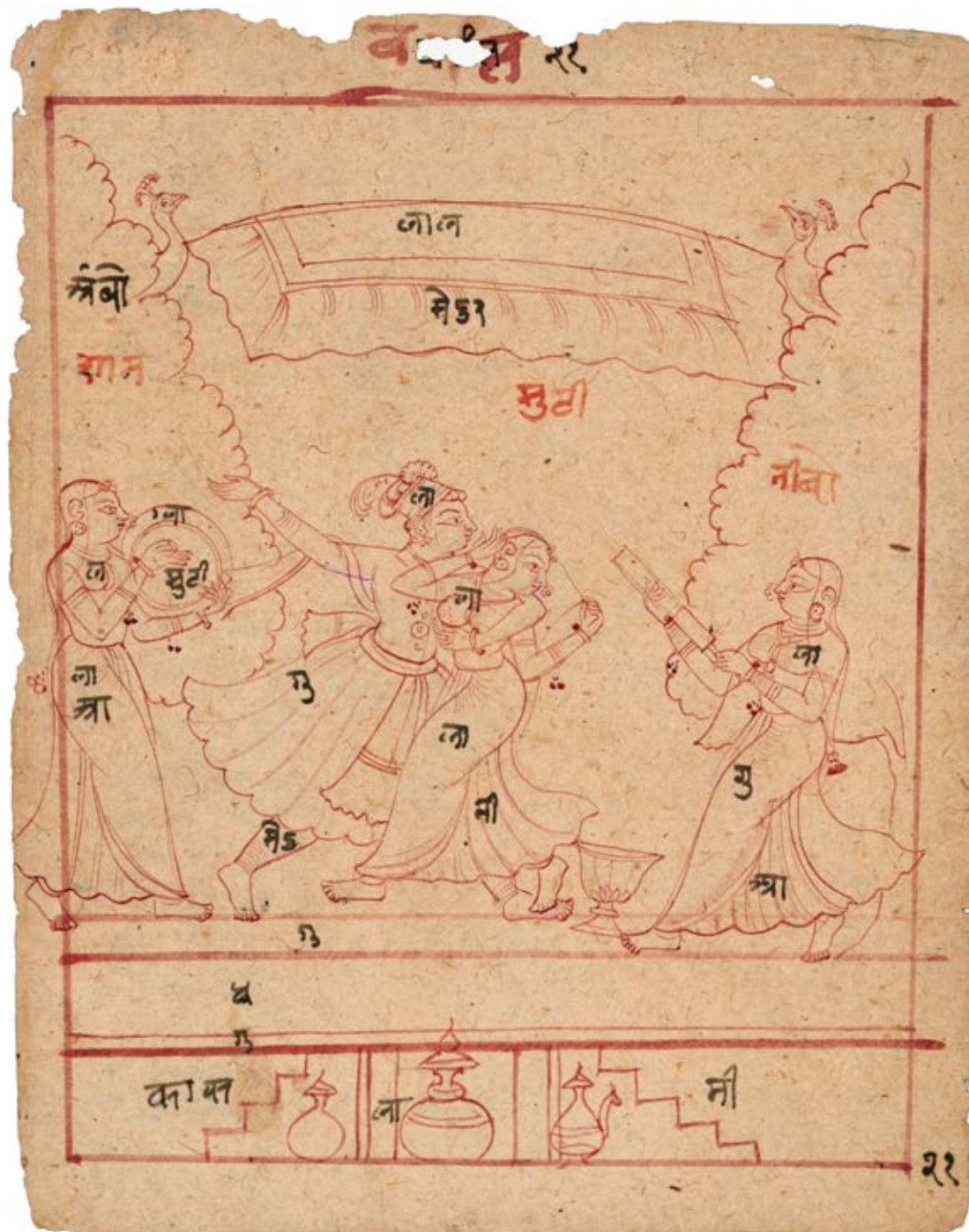
The pulsating energy and sophisticated geometry of this preparatory drawing present the Sirohi school at its finest: the artist shifted the emphasis to the two leaping deer in the lower register, which helps to contrast and enliven the rigorous architectural grid with calligraphic flourishes and inserted witty illusions, such as a golden window into the black night sky beyond it.

VASANT RAGINI

20.4 x 15.8 cm

In this masterful sketch, Vasant (spring) is evoked by the dancing nobleman playing the role of Krishna in celebration of the coming of spring, witnessed by the flowering plants in the foreground, the flowers in the nobleman's headdress, and the golden vessel for flowers at the feet of the dancers.

The allusion to Krishna is secured by the appearance of two peacocks in the upper register, each holding opposite ends of a banner and these emblematic birds are closely associated with the playful god, and the circular grouping created by the female musicians accompanying him; together, they consciously recall Krishna's *rāslilā* dance with the gopis. Here, Krishna dances to the beat of a drum and a stringed instrument, possibly a *tanpur*, played by women standing at either side of him. The flowering trees above the figures are iconography consistent with the *ragini*'s association with spring festivals celebrating the coming abundance.



12.

A GROUP OF SIX SHADOW PUPPETS RELATED TO THE RAMAYANA

Maharashtra, Western India, 19th century
Pigment of leather

This group of six delicate and outstanding shadow puppets invites myths to come to life. Historically, India has a long-lasting tradition of storytelling and narrative, with stories being passed down from one generation to the next over hundreds or even thousands of years. Each generation adds or changes something in the story, making this a living art.

This love for narrative was strongly supported by illustrations, small theatres, shadow puppets, and the presence of the storyteller. Itinerant storytellers were highly respected and refined their craft to high art. Their performance often combined images, shadow puppets and speech, in an engaging theatrical display. Handling the puppets with bamboo sticks to animate the figures, they narrated mythic stories, rich and complex narratives with a multitude of characters, such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

The style of the imagery in our fascinating group of puppets, with the figures displaying distinctive bulging eyes, is closely related to the 'Paithan' painting tradition, several examples of which can be seen in the Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. nos. IS.18-29. 1991). This is an expressive pictorial style with great graphic qualities and scenes full of life, where the paintings themselves were related to the performance of storytelling.

These colourful shadow puppets represent figures from the Hindu epic Ramayana. Rama is likely the standing crowned man with abundant jewellery. The man with similar features but more humble clothing who is seen with a bow and arrow is either Rama or his brother Lakshmana in battle. The figure with the head of a monkey could be Hanuman or one of the Vanara kings.

Similar shadow puppets can be found at the British Museum Collection (As1972.13.6, As1967.04.1), the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Acc. nos. 1970-77-6, 1970-77-8).

PROVENANCE:

Private collection, Cambridge, UK.







AN INDIAN PRINCESS
Height: 113 cm



RAMA
Height: 145 cm



HANUMAN OR A VANARA KING
Height: 115 cm



A PRINCESS OR DANCER
Height: 110 cm



A VANARA KING
Height: 100 cm



RAMA OR LAKSHMANA WITH A BOX AND ARROW
Height: 90 cm





REFERENCE

Shadow Puppet: Probably a princess. India, 19th century. Watercolor on leather, wood, 81.3 x 52.1 cm. The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Acc. No. 1970-77-6.



REFERENCE

Surasa demon. Andra Pradesh, India. Shadow puppet made of hide with movable arms and legs attached to a central stick; coloured red, blue and cream. Height: 132 cm. The British Museum, As1972,13.6.

FIVE HEROIC PAITHAN ILLUSTRATIONS OF HINDU EPICS

Maharashtra, India, mid-19th century
Opaque pigments on paper
Largest: 29.5 x 42.3 cm; smallest: 28.9 x 41 cm

From 19th-century Maharashtra, these five exceptional illustrations offer a captivating journey into the rich tradition of Hindu epics, providing a profound insight into the enduring power of storytelling in India. During the mid-19th century, Western India witnessed a remarkable period of artistic expression, giving birth to captivating illustrations that vividly brought Hindu epics to life.

The paintings showcase the artists' meticulous attention to detail, their expert use of line and brushstroke, and their dedication to preserving the rich cultural heritage and mythology of the region. The scenes depicted are possibly inspired by the Jamini Ashvamedha episode of the Mahabharata. Hindu epics have always been a cornerstone of India's cultural heritage, inspiring and narrating stories for generations. These illustrations featured large figures and a vibrant palette of primary colours, outlined boldly in black strokes. They drew inspiration from the timeless narratives of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as local myths.

Although initially known as "Paithan" paintings, the name of the town where they were first found, this style of paintings actually bears resemblance to South Indian painting styles and shares ties with painted textiles and leather-puppet traditions of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

These paintings played a vital role in India's storytelling tradition, particularly in the context of chitrakathi performances. Chitrakathi performances are a traditional form of Indian storytelling that rely on visual aids, including painted scrolls or "chitrakathis," to accompany spoken narratives. Originating in Maharashtra, they are deeply rooted in the region's oral storytelling traditions. Members of the Chitrakarathi caste created these paintings and narrated the stories during public performances while traveling through the western Deccan. The term

"chitrakathi" roughly translates to "one who tells stories through pictures."

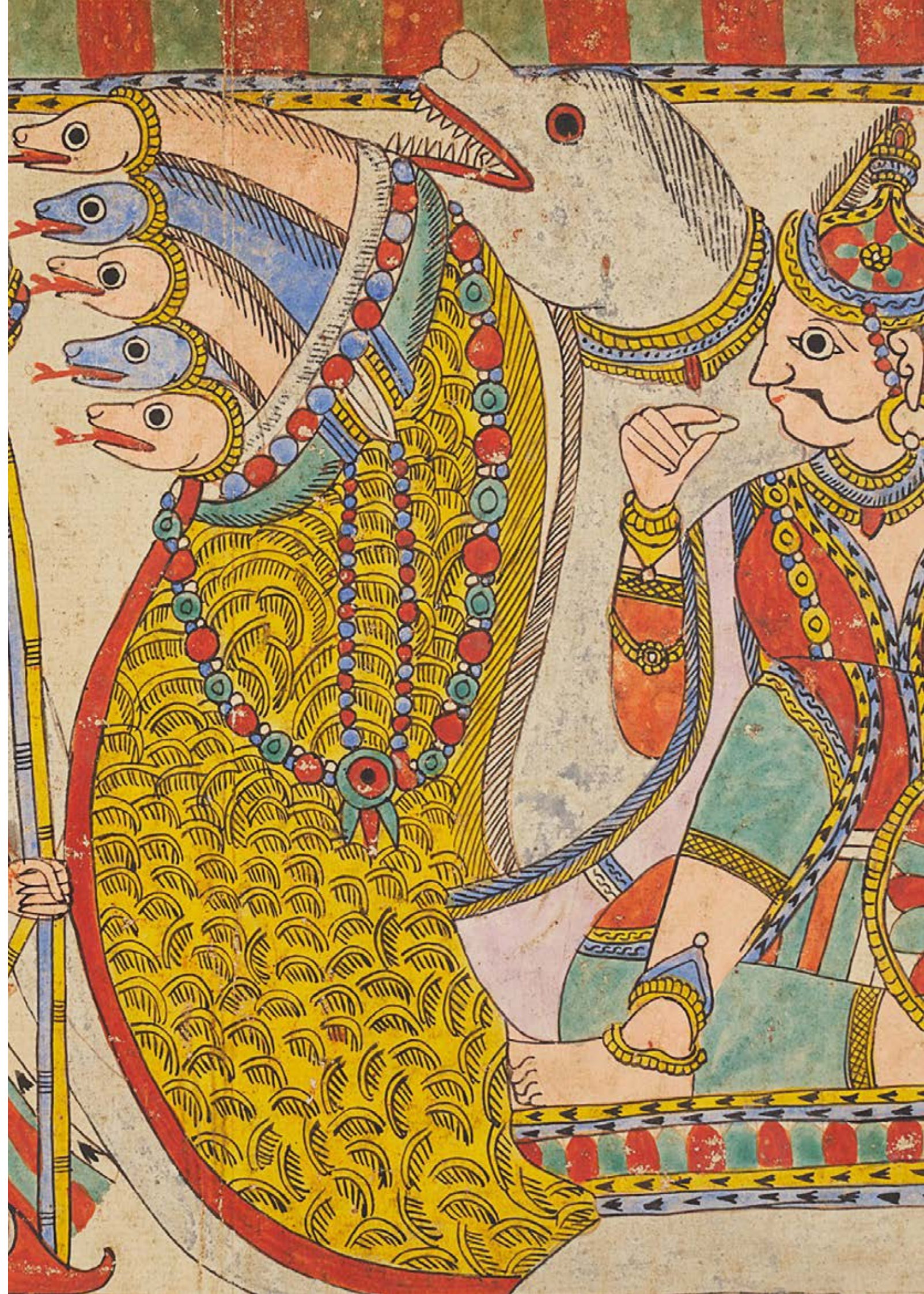
With their vivid narratives and striking imagery, these five paintings emphasise the timeless significance of India's epic tales and the artistry and individuals that brought them to life. They represent the convergence of art and narrative, showcasing the Chitrakarathi artists' skills and dynamism, and serving as a testament to the storytelling landscape of 19th-century India.

PROVENANCE:

Collection of George McFadden, New York.
Private Collection, London, 2021.

REFERENCES:

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A.U. Chitrakathi: Folk Painting of Paithan. Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum, 1996.





HORSE SHYAMKARNA BEING LED BY
VRISHAKETU

This artwork captures a sense of divine grace as the sacred horse Shyamkarna is elegantly guided by Vrishaketu, creating a visually arresting representation of a revered moment in the epic.



WARRIORS CHASING THE HORSE LED AWAY BY PANDAVAS

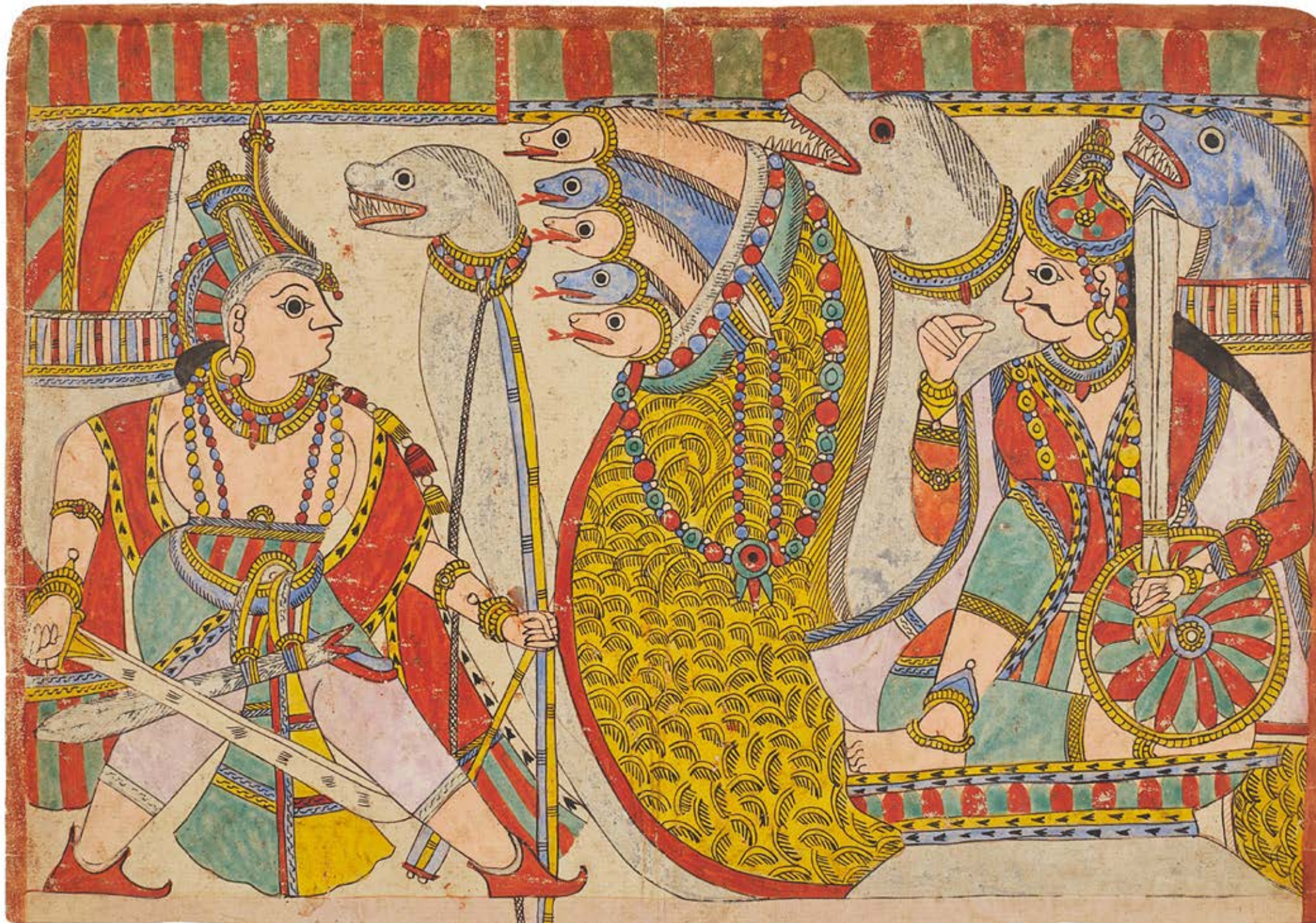
This beautiful composition exudes an aura of urgency and determination as Pandava warriors relentlessly pursue the holy horse, illustrating the unyielding spirit and significance of this event.



FLEET ATTACK

Fleet attack immerses viewers in a dramatic battlefield, where Babhruvahana courageously attempts to secure the sacred horse amidst a fierce assault by the Pandavas. The scene pulsates with action, highlighting the heroism and valour of the characters involved.





TWO SCENES FROM THE BABHRUVAHANA
BATTLE AGAINST ARJUNA AND
VRISHAKETU

These two illustrations likely depict Babhruvahana's epic clashes with the legendary Arjuna and Vrishaketu. The presence of mongooses (Babhru) symbolises his vahana, adding layers of symbolism to the artwork, making it not only a visual narrative but also a representation of deeper philosophical themes.





REFERENCE

Paithan Painting
Deccan, Karnataka,
19thC(early)-20thC(early)
Painted paper, 29x 41.2 cm
British Museum Collec-
tion, Inv N. 2007,3014.11



REFERENCE

Paithan Painting
Deccan, Karnataka, 19th
century
Painted paper, 43 x 31 cm
British Museum Collec-
tion, Inv N. 2003,1013,0.5



14.

AN ILLUSTRATION TO THE BHAGAVATA PURANA

Attributed to Manaku of Guler
Guler, Punjab Hills, India, Circa 1740
Brush drawing on paper, 20 x 30.5 cm

The present drawing is from an unfinished Bhagavata Purana manuscript attributed to Manaku of Guler. The son of the artist Pandit Seu and older brother of Nainsukh, Manaku was a member of one of the most celebrated painter families of the Pahari Hills. In their extensive research on the artists of this region, B.N. Goswamy and E. Fischer have attributed three major sets to his name: 'The Siege of Lanka Series' (from a Ramayana circa 1725), the Gita Govinda (circa 1730) and this Bhagavata Purana. The manuscript was an ambitious project consisting of hundreds of folios incorporating scenes with little iconographic precedent. They reveal Manaku's consummate skill as a draughtsman, translating text to image, creating arresting compositions and animated characters. While the early folios are fully painted, the majority remain as brush drawings.

In this remarkable drawing, we observe a scene from one of the twelve cantos of the Bhagavata Purana (translated as 'the history of the devotees of Vishnu'), one of Hinduism's eighteen great Puranas (Mahapuranas). In this scene, the artist has delicately rendered five kings standing at the edge of a river as a meandering line on the ground seems to suggest. They stand close together, demonstrating a sense of common purpose and filial spirit.

The five monarchs are shown dressed in traditional sarongs, or dhoti, which are gathered and tied around the waist to reveal the calves and feet. All the kings move their hands upward and held together in an attitude of devotion and prayer except for the last character in the group, who holds a small vessel and spoon in his hands. The last of the five kings is rendered in a remarkable dynamic style, seemingly turning his head to view his companions and then forward again so that all stages of the movement of the head are seen as fragmentary instances of the same movement. It follows that the hands would also move in the different stages of engagement with the utensils.

The different characters are given individual features such as beard styles and coiffures so that their individuality is highlighted. On top of their heads, they all wear similar crowns where sharp hoops lead to three pointed extensions, each decorated with circular ornaments, possibly pearls. At their wrists, bracelets can be observed.

Composed in Sanskrit and available in almost all Indian languages, the Bhagavata Purana promotes bhakti (devotion) to Krishna, integrating themes from the Advaita (monism) philosophy of Adi Shankara, Vishishtadvaita (qualified monism) of Ramanujacharya and Dvaita (dualism) of Madhvacharya. The Bhagavata Purana, like other puranas, discusses a wide range of topics including cosmology, astronomy, genealogy, geography, legend, music, dance, yoga and culture.

As it begins, the forces of evil have won a war between the benevolent devas (deities) and evil asuras (demons) and now rule the universe. Truth re-emerges as Krishna, (called "Hari" and "Vasudeva" in the text) – first makes peace with the demons, understands them, and then creatively defeats them, bringing back hope, justice, freedom, and happiness – a cyclic theme that appears in many legends. The twelve cantos feature a cast of different characters: the avatars of Vishnu, notable devotees, and notable demons and villains.

PROVENANCE:

Private collection, Lahore, 1960s.
Private collection, London.

PUBLISHED:

B.N. Goswamy. *Manaku of Guler: The Life and Work of another great Indian Painter from a small Hill State*. Museum Rietberg Zurich in collaboration with The Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh. Zurich: Artibus Asiae, 2017. Page 480, pl. B253.

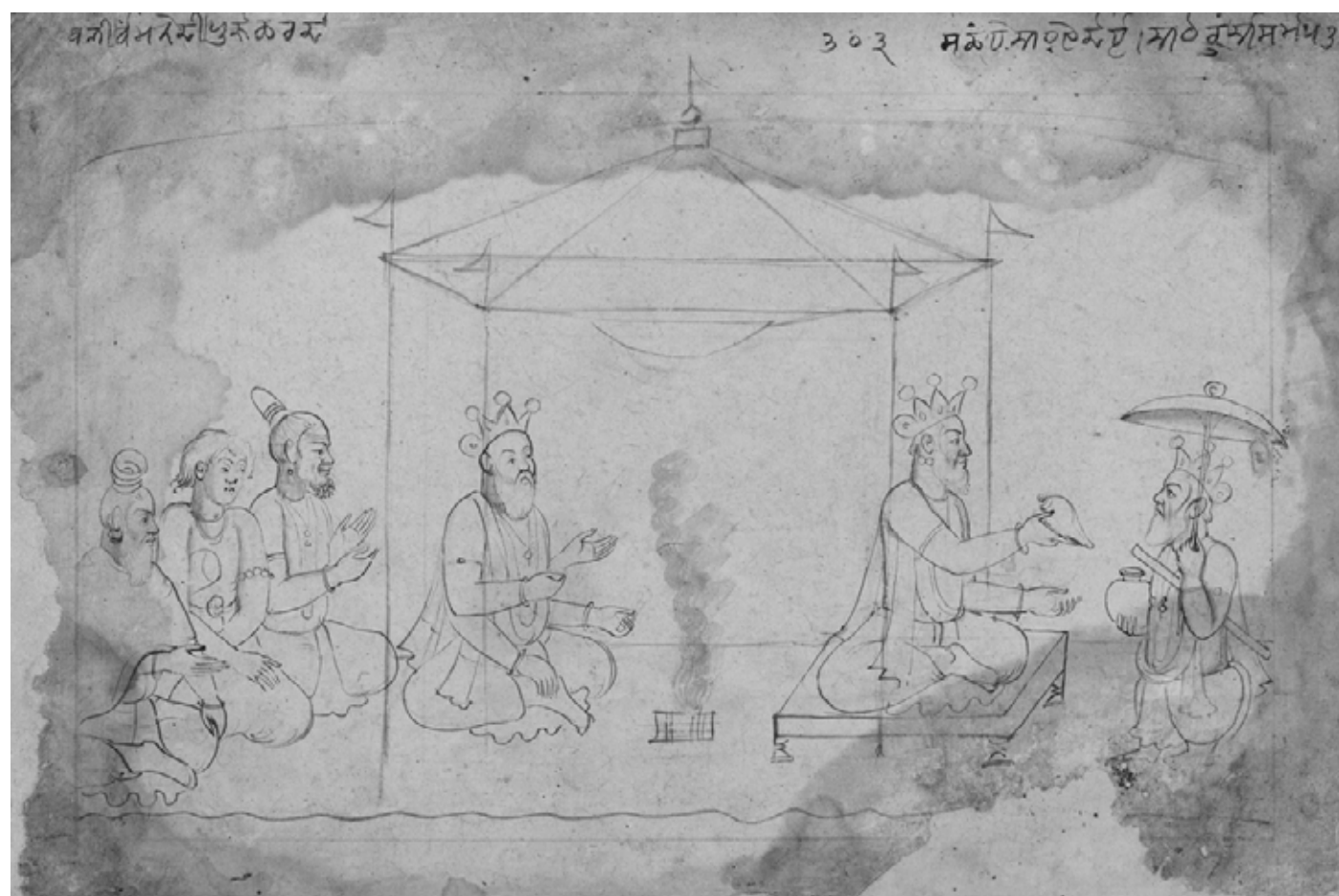
कीचसमुद्र उपर वडोमंडल

दुसमपुत्रुर्त्तव

४८

महंजपुत्रीयार पंहुम





REFERENCE

Vali welcomes Vamana
 Folio from the small Guler
 Bhagavata Purana series
 Attributed to Manaku of
 Guler
 Guler, India, circa 1740
 Brush drawing on paper,
 22 x 32.2 cm.
 Gift from Eberhard and
 Barbara Fischer
 Museum Rietberg, Zurich,
 Inv. no. RVI 1500

A COLLECTION OF 12 EXUBERANT PAINTINGS OF HINDU GODS

Company School, Patna, circa 1800-30
Opaque watercolour on paper, 21 x 16.5 cm each

Each painting is inscribed on its verso with a description of the depicted deities, in the hand of an Englishman.

These 12 paintings of Hindu gods from the Patna School of painting, created circa 1800-1830, are a remarkable collection that provides a glimpse into Hindu mythology and spirituality, serving as windows into the Hindu pantheon.

Not only masterful works of art but also cultural artifacts, these artworks reflect the blending of Indian and British influences during the colonial era. The inscriptions on the verso of each painting, written by an Englishman, provide a unique layer of historical context, shedding light on the cross-cultural engagement of the time. The Patna School, deeply connected to the Company School style, played a pivotal role in the cross-cultural exchange of art during the British colonial period. Artists in this School often worked for Indian patrons or officials of the British East Indian Company. The fusion of different artistic traditions resulted in a distinct visual language that is evident in these paintings.

This collection of paintings showcases exceptional linework, free and intuitive. The colour palette, rich in primary colours characteristic of this type of paintings, further allows for the intricate detailing to shine through. Each painting portrays a scene featuring a Hindu god or group of gods. Narrative and storytelling are key to understanding Indian culture and thought. Oral histories became sacred stories, and the artists are indistinguishable from storytellers. These intricate compositions exemplify the interrelations of art and text, artist and narrator, creator and creation.

Similar paintings can be found in the British Museum Collection, such as Inv. N. 1992,0410,0.1.43.

PROVENANCE:

Private Collection, UK, first half of the 20th century.







VISHNU AND GARUDA



SHIVA



THE GODDESS GANGES



GAJA LAKSHMI



GANESH, AS THE MASTER OF KNOWLEDGE, IS THE SON OF SHIVA



KALLEE

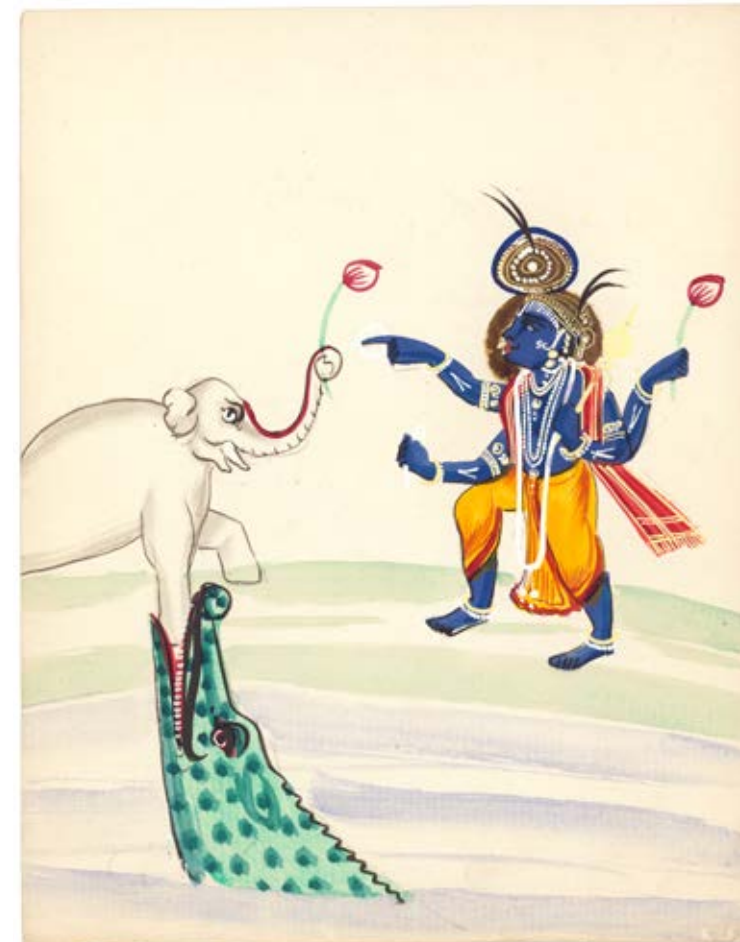




RAM AND SITA



RADHA AND KRISHNA



VISHNU, THE GOD OF PRESERVATION



HANUMAN



BHAIRAVA



THE GODDESS DURGA







16.

MORAKUTI PICHHVAI FRAGMENT WITH A GROUP OF PEACOCKS

Kota, Rajasthan, India, circa 1830-40
Pigments on cotton with gold, 140 x 86 cm

This extraordinary example of the Pichvai genre of Indian textiles known as a Morakuti Pichvai, named after a village near where Radha was born, shows the influence of court painting from the kingdom of Kota, where the graceful rendering of peacocks is refined, expressive and executed with rich and varied pigments, a fitting tribute to the dance of Krishna and Radha, his consort. The pichvai is bordered by a striking upper register of rolling waves, their curving crests marked by foam and a deep blue chromatic of the sea while the left border is characterised by a series of flower forms, their form alternating between those with white petals and those with a golden yellow hue. Between them we observe curling stems and lanceolate forms.

On a vibrant orange backdrop followed by a dense vegetal background of leaves and an occasional flower bud, two groups of peacocks (*Pavo cristatus*) adorn the central visual stage of the pichvai as they dance in representation of Krishna and Radha. On both registers, a central male peacock is distinguished by the rich and iridescent chromatic of his open feathers, known as a 'train', while, flanking it are a group of female 'peacocks', technically known as peahens. The vibrant blue and/or green feathers of the male are hard to look away from as they are fully extended (their bright feathers are designed to impress females during the mating season). The rounded marking in each feather is also known as an 'eye' for the ocular features that they so closely resemble.

In the upper grouping, a secondary peacock can be seen moving towards the right edge while a group of six peahens surround the main male, attracted as they are by his display of glorious feathers. The artist has captured the remarkable details of these peafowl, including their distinctive crest, which consists of long shafts that stick up from the bird's head and carry small clusters of feathers on top. The crest feathers on the males are typically blue, while those on the peahens are usually brown or tan. The birds are also distinguished by their eye markings, where both genders have distinct white markings above and below their

eyes, but the markings below the female's eyes typically match their skin colour, so they cannot be as easily seen as they can on males.

On the lower register, the grouping is slightly different – one central peacock is seen standing regally in the centre with two peahens flanking him on either side while, below, two pairs of peacocks move in the foreground. On both upper and lower register, the main peacock is shown in parallel motion as one clawed foot is left on the ground with the other raised in the process of moving forward.

Morakuti pichhvais depicting peacocks dancing are used during the monsoon season, or varsha ritu, and were associated with a special cult of Krishna worship known as Vallabhacharya, fusing abstract metaphysical concepts derived from Vedanta philosophy with more lively aspects of human love through elaborate rituals. Known as Morakuti, they are named after the village in Vraja near the birthplace of Radha. Their dance, the courting of the peahen, mimics the dance of Krishna and Radha. Krishna is also known as 'morapriya', for his love of peacocks. Their beauty and confidence ultimately reflects that of Krishna, the divine lover.

Pichwai (pichvai) painting originated over 400 years ago in the town of Nathdwara near Udaipur in Rajasthan, India. Intricate and visually stunning, pichwai paintings, made on cloth, depict tales from Lord Krishna's life; they are part theatrical backdrop, part religious icons, they are made manifest by the celebratory spirit and desire to surround Krishna with all the luxuries and comforts available, rooted in the tenets of the sect. Common subjects found in pichwai paintings are Radha, gopis, cows and lotuses. Festivals and celebrations such as Sharad Purnima, Raas Leela, Annakoot or Govardhan Puja, Janmashtami, Gopashtami, Nand Mahotsav, Diwali and Holi are frequently depicted in Pichvais.

PROVENANCE:

The Gujral Collection, Germany, 1960s-2014.



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