

Reflections on Ragamala Painting

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## Introduction

At various times in history, artists have intertwined the art of painting with other forms of art. For example, the Chinese paintings of the Song Dynasty combined painting with the art of poetry, and some Western Baroque paintings worked with the music played in churches to aid in worship (Yee 122; Gardner 651).

But the first works of art to ever merge the three art forms of music, poetry, and painting, was the *Ragamala* paintings of India. *Ragamala* painting is quite a unique form of art in that it successfully combines these three art forms.

This paper will describe many facets of *Ragamala* painting, and describe a specific example of *Ragamala* painting, in what one could call an onion of art. This is because, just as an onion has layer upon layer, art too has many different layers. The layers around a work of art include the artwork itself, its uses, any symbolism in the artwork, the role of the artist, and the background or any traditions that the artwork follows. It also includes cultural and religious contexts as well as social, political, economical, and historical contexts. In this paper, these layers will be addressed starting with an overview of the religious context in Part I, and then moving to historical context in Part II. Part III will address *Ragamala* painting in general and Part IV will give a specific example of a *Ragamala* painting.

Much of the information given in this paper was unknown to the author prior to research. Consequently, the authors' sources listed after the paper heavily influenced the information given. This paper is written with the assumption that the reader also does not have much prior knowledge of the subject.

## Part I: Religious Context

The religious context of the art of India is undeniably important and crucial to understanding its art. In India, religion and art are inseparable; in fact, religion seems to have an impact on every aspect of life in India. The most popular religion in India is Hinduism, and is the one that is most extensively covered in this paper (Anderson 159). Also among India's religions relevant to *Ragamala* art are Buddhism, Islam, and Jainism.

As the focus of this paper is not religion exclusively, it is not practical to explore every aspect of every religion discussed. Information on religion is given here merely for background. The ideas presented here are widely accepted beliefs. As with any belief system, there are variations, and not all people who claim to belong to a religion will agree on all aspects of that religion.

### Hinduism

Hinduism is one of the largest and oldest religions in India. It is tolerant and accepting of other religions, and adjusts to the needs of the people (Ganeri, [Hinduism](#) 8). The basis for Hinduism started around 1500 BC when Aryan people invaded the Indus valley and the Aryan Vedic religion mixed with the native religions of the Indus valley (Ganeri, [Hinduism](#) 10-11). The main god of Hinduism is Brahma, who is believed to be the supreme soul, in and around everything (Ganeri, [Hinduism](#) 16). Brahma represents pure consciousness and bliss, which is perfect and unchangeable (Anderson 159). All other Hindu gods are believed to be manifestations of different aspects of Brahma (Ganeri, [Hinduism](#) 16). This may be a point of confusion for many people. Some say

that Hinduism has many gods, and others say that Hinduism only has one god. Both are actually true. It could be seen as all the many gods are small parts of the larger one god. Brahma is seen as the creator and the god of wisdom, and his wife, Saraswati, is the goddess of art, music, and literature (Ganeri, Hinduism 16).

Another main god of Hinduism is Vishnu, known as the protector of the universe (Ganeri, Hinduism 17). His wife, Lakshmi, is the goddess of beauty and good fortune (Ganeri, Hinduism 17). Vishnu is often symbolized by the lotus flower (Ganeri, Hinduism 39). One belief is that Brahma was born from a lotus flower in Vishnu's navel (Wolpert 88). According to Hindu belief, Vishnu has had several *avatars* (Ganeri, Hinduism 17). An *avatar* is an earthly manifestation or visitation of a god. The first *avatar* of Vishnu was Matsya, a fish, the second was Kurma the tortoise, the third was Varaha the boar, followed by was *Narasima*, a man-lion, then came Parashurama the warrior, then the famous Lord Rama, the hero in the Hindu epic story, the *Ramayana* (Ganeri, Hinduism 18). After that came the favorite Lord Krishna, then Buddha, and last of all is Kalki, a rider on a white horse who is yet to come (Ganeri, Hinduism 17). The different *avatars* supposedly saved the world from destruction. For example, the fish *avatar*, Matsya, is believed to have saved the world from a flood (Wolpert 88).

The third main god of Hinduism is Shiva, the destroyer of the world, who also brings about life and changing of seasons (Ganeri, Hinduism 17). He is usually represented dancing (Ganeri, Hinduism 17). Shiva may be derived from the pre-Aryan Dravidian Lord of Dance, and is believed to possess at least a hundred dances of destruction (Wolpert 78). Shiva is also known as the god of sex, and the generator of life

(Wolpert 76). Shiva's wife, Sati, is the goddess of devotion and her name means the "True One" (Wolpert 78).

Because Shiva deals with destroying and the bringing of life, he may be linked to the belief in reincarnation and transmigration, a circle of life and death that Hindus call *samsara* (Ganeri, Hinduism 14). Reincarnation refers to the belief that a soul can be reborn into a different human body. Transmigration is the birth of a soul into another form, such as an animal's body. Hinduism teaches that one's reincarnation or transmigration depends on the life one has lived. If one has lived a good life, there is progression to a higher life form; if one is bad, then one regresses to a lower life form in the next reincarnation or transmigration. Because of the belief in transmigration, Hindus do not normally eat meat. To be a human would be high on the life form scale, but even then, there was traditionally a caste system to progress through. The highest caste, by tradition, consisted of priests and is called the *Brahman* caste (Ganeri, Hinduism 20). The next lower caste, the *Kshatriyas*, included warriors and nobles, then came the merchants caste called the *Vaishyas*, next was the *Shudras*, who were ordinary laborers, and finally, the *Untouchables*, at the bottom rung (Ganeri, Hinduism 20). It is assumed that the caste system developed as the division of labor became more distinct in Indian civilization, and as the Hindu religion developed, creating hierarchy within the division of labor. It is impossible to advance or regress to a different level of the caste system in a lifetime. One must wait until the next life in order to move on. The caste system may determine your occupation in life and whom you are to marry. Although it is no longer

implemented to its fullest extent, there are still some traces of this tradition left among Hindus, mainly demonstrated in the choice of a marriage partner.

The Hindus' goal is to live a good life so that they may advance to a better life when they are reincarnated. Eventually, after adequate good lives, Hindus believe they will break free of this cycle and reach salvation or *moksha* (Ganeri, Hinduism 14). It is believed that there are four paths to reach *moksha* (Ganeri, Hinduism 15). The Path of Devotion includes prayer and worship of a personal god, the Path of Knowledge entails study and learning with the guidance of a teacher or *guru*, the Path of Right Action requires that a person must act selflessly, and the Path of Yoga includes yoga and meditation (Ganeri, Hinduism 15). Yoga has found its niche in the Western world and many people are familiar with the word *mantra*, which is a word or phrase that is chanted during meditation. The Hindu religion also employs *yantras*, which are visual image patterns used for meditation (Ganeri, Hinduism 27).

The Hindu scriptures are called *Sanatana Dharma*, meaning “eternal law” (Ganeri, Hinduism 8-9). The scriptures include *Vedas* and *Upanishads*. The *Vedas*, the oldest of which is the *Rig-Veda*, are collections of songs, hymns, prayers, and magic spells (Ganeri, Hinduism 28). *Upanishads* are sacred teachings dealing with the relationship between Brahma and the individual (Ganeri, Hinduism 28). These holy writings were written in *Sanskrit*, which means “perfected” (Ganeri, Hinduism 29). *Sanskrit* is an ancient language that is no longer commonly spoken except for during Hindu rituals (Ganeri, Hinduism 29).

Hinduism heavily influences much of Indian art. For example, in Hindu belief, the material world is not real, and the Hindu individual wants transcendence or release from this world, to allow the soul to merge with Brahma through meditation, ritual, and self-control (Anderson 160).

The concept that the material world is not real is also seen in the concept of *maya*: the belief that the world and self are neither real nor unreal, but that reality lies in experience, or what is empirically true (Anderson 163). Art is comparable to the concept of *maya* in that it does not have the same realness as its subject matter but invites the viewer to have an aesthetic experience of emotion (Anderson 163). Because of this, art could be even more real than the physical world. This idea would shock Plato, the Greek philosopher, who thought that artists should be banned because they could only make deceptive imitations of the real, or material, world. With this in mind, many Hindus believe that the purpose of the artist is to clarify man's relationship with Brahma (Craven 224). In India, art is considered superior to other forms of teaching because it provides an experience for the viewer, rather than just increasing one's knowledge (Anderson 164).

Instruction is one of the major purposes of art, according to Indian thinking. The *Vedas* state that humans exist in states of varying perfection, and that humans often misuse their passions (Anderson 161). Hindu art, like religious teachings, is intended to redirect passions towards better uses that lead to the moral betterment of the individual (Anderson 161). However, art is to be distinct from religious teachings in that it should be subtler than a sermon, it should instead increase wisdom through experience (Anderson 163).



Many of the Indian art philosophies developed between the third and thirteenth centuries (Anderson 159). Priests of the *Brahman* caste thought about and wrote down questions about the nature of the reality of art, and if it were part of the real or illusionary world (Anderson 161). In the third century AD, *Bharata*, a collection of writers, established that *rasa* was what gave art its life (Anderson 161). *Rasa* is described as the emotional satisfaction one receives from art (Anderson 165). In the tenth century, Abhinavagupta wrote a Sanskrit commentary, and although what remains is fragmented and is highly debated by scholars, it demonstrates the complexity of Indian art philosophy (Anderson 161).

Some of India's philosophy of art runs contrary to Western values and ideas of art. Sculpture and painting, although highly valued in the Western world as high art forms, are viewed as second rate frozen images of the live drama (Anderson 159). According to Indian philosophy, drama, dramatic poetry, and music are considered the highest forms of art because they involve the dimension of time (Anderson 159).

Another thing that may seem contradictory to Western thinking is the use of the erotic in Indian religious art (Anderson 159). Temples are showered with statues that have erotic imagery. This is not a contradiction in Hinduism. In Hindu beliefs, the pursuit of pleasure, whether spiritual or worldly, is one of the *purusarthas*, or the four main goals of life (Anderson 163). An example of this is classified as *Tantricism*, where an individual identifies with a deity through rituals like the eating otherwise forbidden meat, the drinking of wine, and partaking in ritualized sex (Anderson 164). This is not unusual because goodness and happiness are not separate qualities, according to Hindu belief

(Anderson 167). Delight is considered good for the soul because it brings one closer to Brahma (Anderson 167). Because of this, there is an emphasis in art on emotional pleasure, transcendental excitement, and bliss (Anderson 165).

The *rasa* theory is this: art exists in the emotions and pleasure of the viewer, not in the senses (Anderson 166). It also refers to the approach the viewer has towards art: one must be in the proper state of mind in order to get the right response (Anderson 166). When the viewers are experiencing art, they lose consciousness of themselves and join in the experience in such a way that there is no distinction between the viewer and what is being viewed (Anderson 166). Therefore, in the case of Indian art, what is being viewed is religious in nature, and is believed to elevate the viewer morally (Anderson 166). For example, Indian drama usually has a supernatural hero, and in this drama, the viewer would identify with the actions of the deity (Anderson 167). It is also thought that as the viewer forgets about him/herself, the soul of the viewer merges with Brahma (Anderson 168). In *rasa* theory, there are nine recognized emotional states: happiness, laughter, sorrow, anger, pride, fear, disgust, wonder, and tranquility (Anderson 166; 168). Some say that art reflects four main tastes: erotic, heroic, odious, and violent; with nine taste-moods: love, courage, joy, hatred, fury, pity, terror, surprise, and spiritual peace (Wolpert 161). Whichever system one subscribes to, it is evident that emotions are categorized into a limited number of descriptions. Some emotions are considered more desirable than others if they are less connected to the material world (Anderson 169).

Hindu art is presented in distinct styles. This also lends itself to the viewer to use art as a way to elevate the spirit to Brahma. Most of the Indian art forms are stylized,

using general depictions of subjects as opposed to individualized depictions, to convey that there are universal themes with which the viewer can identify (Anderson 168). For example, when looking at a painting of a woman, the woman depicted is supposed to represent womankind in general.

## Islam

Another important religion to consider in the background of *Ragamala* painting is Islam. Islam holds the belief that there is only one god, not many gods or many manifestations of one god. Muslims call this god Allah and they also believe in the teachings of the prophet, Muhammad (Husain 8). Muhammad set a path for his followers called *Sunna* (Husain 18). In their practices, Muslims must follow the five pillars: *Shahadah*, the declaration of faith stating the belief in Allah and the teachings of Muhammad; *Salaat*, in which they must pray to god five times a day; *Zakaat*, which is giving to charity; *Sawm*, where, during the month of *Ramadan*, they must fast; and finally *Haj*, where they take a pilgrimage to Mecca (Husain 14). The holy book of the Muslims is called the *Quran*, and is believed to be the exact words of Allah (Husain 16). Other holy books such as the Torah and the Bible, which it is claimed they also believe, are not as exact as the *Quran* (Husain 16).

From AD 998 to 1030, India was attacked and captured by the Muslim forces of Mahmud of Ghazna (Husain 10-11). Much of Islam was spread through warfare although there were some more peaceful *Sufi* saints that went about proselytizing (Husain 34).

The way Muslims originally handled art is unique and interesting. The early Muslims would not allow the painting of human or animal figures (Husain 38). This is probably related to the second of the Ten Commandments in the Jewish Torah and the Christian Old Testament which forbids the making or worship of idols in any form (Exodus 20:4). Instead, the painters followed four basic designs consisting of calligraphy, flowers, arabesques, which are based on the natural curves of plants, and geometric shapes (Husain 38).

As one can imagine, with such different core beliefs, there was great tension between Muslims and Hindus. So great was this tension that it oftentimes broke out into warfare. More of this will be addressed later in the historical context part of this paper.

### **Buddhism and Jainism**

Jainism is considered a Hindu sect and was founded by Mahavira in the sixth century BC (Wolpert 32-33). In Jainism, there is a belief that all things, even inanimate objects, are alive (Wolpert 82). As a result of this, Mahavira starved himself because by eating something, he believed he was murdering that thing (Wolpert 82). Those who practice Jainism often wear a mask so that they will not breathe in bugs, and they carry a broom to sweep the path before them so that they would not step on and kill anything (Wolpert 82). It is not uncommon for them to fast to death (Wolpert 82).

Buddhism is a non-violent religion, and its founder, Siddhartha, is considered one of the *avatars* of Vishnu by Hindus (Wolpert 32-33). Buddhism began around the sixth century BC when Siddhartha rejected the Bramanic teachings of the Hindu priests and set out to find the meaning of life on his own (Wolpert 32-33).

## Part II: Historical Context

The historical context can have a profound impact on art. It is also said that art has a profound impact on history. Either way, they are closely connected. The time in history has an effect on how the art is made, which stylistic developments are employed, what the art is used for, and the status of the artist.

There are many different ways that one can present history. One can present it according to topics, themes, cultures, or simply in chronological order. Chronological order may be one of the best ways to see the interplay of different events, be they religious or political in nature, as they happen often at the same time and impact each other. Most of the history that follows is focused primarily about India although other countries are brought in at times.

The story of India begins in the setting of the Indus Valley. It is estimated that the Indus Valley Civilization reached its height, or peak of civilization, around 2500 BC (Ganeri, Hinduism 10-11). The Indus Valley Civilization thrived until around 1700 BC, when it began to decline (Masselos 8). The next period, the Vedic Period, dates from 1500 BC to 500 BC (Masselos 8). In 1500 BC the Aryan people invaded the Indus valley, brought their Vedic religion with them, and mixed their beliefs with the Indus valley religions to form the basis of Hinduism (Ganeri, Hinduism 10-11). These conquering Aryans were fair skinned people and when they conquered, they enslaved the darker skinned natives, whom the Aryans called *dasas* (Wolpert 29). In 1000 BC, the Aryans used iron weapons to expand their territory, and they incorporated the villages that they

overtook into territorial kingdoms (Wolpert 29). Some of the contributions that the Aryans made other than their religious beliefs, include the introduction the horse and the cow to India (Wolpert 29). During this time, between 1500-1000 BC, the *Rig-Veda* and other *Vedas*, which were some of the Hindu sacred texts, were utilized by the Aryan priest, and the caste system was developed (Ganeri, Hinduism 10-11). In 800 BC, *Upanishads*, Hindu scriptures and the last of the Vedas, were composed and passed on orally by the *Brahman* caste (Wolpert 28, 32). Many Aryans adopted pre-Aryan ideas such as reincarnation, karma, and nature worship (Wolpert 28,32).

In the sixth century BC, mini-wars broke out all over India (Wolpert 34). Most of the wars were about land possession of different ruling princes. The princes would release one of their horses to roam the land, and then claim the area where the horse wandered (Wolpert 34). During this time, North India alone was divided into a dozen princely states (Wolpert 34). In 500 BC, Jainism was founded by Mahavira (Ganeri, Buddhism 10-11). Around the fifth or sixth century BC Siddhartha Gautama, the historic Buddha, started his search for the meaning of life, and he believed he found it when he gained enlightenment under a bohi tree (Ganeri, Buddhism 10-11). It is proposed that all these new religions developed in part as a result of discontentment with how India was doing politically with so many wars.

The great Hindu epics called the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* were composed from 400 B.C to AD 400 (Ganeri, Hinduism 10-11). Buddha died in 400 BC and his teachings continued to spread throughout India (Ganeri, Buddhism 10-11). Between 400

and 314 BC, councils gathered to collect the different teachings of Buddha, and the Ravada School was founded after the second council meeting (Ganeri, Buddhism 10-11).

In 326 BC, Alexander the Great crossed over the Indus River into India (Wolpert 34). Alexander's ideas of world unification inspired the people of India to unite together, and in 324 BC, Chandragupta Maurya was established as the leader of the first Indian dynasty that lasted 120 years (Wolpert 34). From 286 to 239 BC, Ashoka Mauraya, ruled as India's greatest ruler (Ganeri, Buddhism 10-11). He converted to Buddhism, and in 250 BC, he sent his children as missionaries to Sri Lanka (Ganeri, Buddhism 10-11). After Ashoka's death, India's unity started to crumble, due to rebellion in the south and invasions from the north (Wolpert 36-37). The dynasty officially came to an end when defeated by a *Brahman* general in 184 BC (Wolpert 37). The period following this was characterized by political fragmentation that lasted for nearly five hundred years, with invasions coming from the Greco-Bactrians, the Persians, and the Scythians (Wolpert 37).

In 80 BC, the *Pali* Canon, also known as the scripture of Theravada, was recorded, whereas before it was passed down orally (Ganeri, Buddhism 10-11). From 100 BC to AD 100, Mahayana Buddhism developed and Buddhism was spread to China (Ganeri, Buddhism 10-11). Images of Buddha began to appear around the second century AD, whereas previous to this, Buddha was only represented symbolically (Ganeri, Hinduism 10-11).

India experienced the Golden age of Hinduism in AD 350-500 (Ganeri, Hinduism 10-11). The Hindu Guptan Dynasty was established from 320 to 550, and was made successful by holding to the ideal of living a simple life (Wolpert 38). This simple life had

to do with a non-intrusive political approach towards the people, which greatly reduced the desire for rebellion (Wolpert 39). Also during this time, Hindu temples were built everywhere, mountains and rivers were deemed sacred, and art was considered to be religiously inspired (Wolpert 39). This time was a time of stability economically as well, due to good trade relations with the Mediterranean (Widdess 22).

Buddhism spread to Korea in 372 and to Japan in 538 (Ganeri, Buddhism 10-11). In AD 571 the Muslim prophet Muhammad was born (Husain 10-11). In 612, Buddhism spread to Tibet (Ganeri, Buddhism 10-11).

In 711, Islam reached India and much conflict and hatred arose not only because of different beliefs, but also because the Muslims were eager for India's gold (Wolpert 40). In AD 1001 Muslims invaded India (Ganeri, Buddhism 10-11) and from 998 to 1030 Mahmud of Ghazna captured the Northwest region of India (Husain 10-11). Eventually the Muslims took on an attitude that gave non-Muslims three choices: either convert to Islam, pay money, or die (Wolpert 41-42).

In the twelfth century AD, Buddhism disappeared from India and Hinduism and Islam became the two major religions (Ganeri, Buddhism 10-11). This is not surprising given the aggressive nature of Muslims and the peaceful nature of Buddhists. In 1191, Zen Buddhism traveled from China to Japan (Ganeri, Buddhism 10-11). Toward the end of this century, the Muslims destroyed a Buddhist university (Ganeri, Buddhism 10-11). From the fifteenth century on, India traded directly by sea with the French, Spanish, Portuguese, and British, and they competed for the control of that trade (Wolpert 44-45).



The Rajput Dynasty was established around 1500 and survived until 1947 (Masselos 12-13). From 1526 to 1530, the Muslim Mughal Empire defeated the Hindu Rajput army (Wolpert 41-42). They remained in control until 1858, when the British took control of India (Wolpert 41-42). In 1570, the Mughal emperor, Akbar the Great, formed his own religion by mixing Muslim, Hindu and Christian beliefs (Ganeri, Hinduism 10-11). The Christian influence could have come from the European traders, although missionaries did not introduce Christianity till sometime later. Some people rebelled under Akbar, calling him a traitor to his religion, but he would rid himself of these rebels, who disturbed the peace (Wolpert 42).

During the seventeenth century, India experienced a golden age of art, and Persian painting was celebrated (Wolpert 42). But this was also a time of turmoil for some Hindus as Aurangzeb, a Muslim ruler, in an effort to return the country to Islam, persecuted Hindus by taxing them and beheading their gurus in the years 1658-1707 (Wolpert 43). Different groups rebelled against him. One group, known as *Sikhs*, believed in a blend of Hindu and Muslim beliefs (Wolpert 43). Another group followed a Hindu leader by the name of Shivaji, who led a rebellion from 1627 to 1680 by using guerrilla warfare (Wolpert 43). At the same time, from 1600-1700, Europeans brought Christianity to India (Ganeri, Hinduism 10-11) and the British established control over the trade with India in 1600 (Wolpert 45).

In 1707, the Mughal Empire started to decline and broke down into different kingdoms (Wolpert 44). This was seen as a golden opportunity for the French who took over in 1746 (Wolpert 46-47). However, that did not last long and the British regained

control in 1757, plundering the land, and killing many people (Wolpert 46-47). Ironically, the infrastructure that was developed in India by the British aided in the unifying of Indian revolt (Wolpert 52). In order to have a unified revolt, Indians had to put aside their differences in order to work together (Wolpert 57).

In 1784, the British again regained political control over India (Ganeri, Hinduism 10-11). In 1869 Gandhi was born (Ganeri, Hinduism 10-11). Gandhi was an important figure who played a major role in trying to liberate India from British rule. In 1881, Buddhist texts were translated into European languages (Ganeri, Buddhism 10-11). In 1947, India gained political freedom from Britain and was split into Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India (Ganeri, Hinduism 10-11). The day of independence is celebrated on the fifteenth of August (Masselos 12-13).

### Part III: *Ragamala* Painting

The interplay between music and painting is fascinating in the example of *Ragamala* painting. The nature and development of *Ragamala* painting will be described, starting with the musical *ragas*, which were developed first, then the poetry, and finally the painting. Different art forms in India, such as dance, poetry, music, painting, and drama, are so connected together in purpose and theme that they tend to be one composite art form that manifests itself in different ways (Sumahendra).

An element that is common to both music and painting is the idea that they express a specific emotion or *rasa*. As discussed before, there are only nine established *rasas*. In addition to *rasa*, there are states of mind called *bhava* (Wolpert 161). There are thirty-three to forty-nine different *bhavas* and these have to do with the time of day, health, and weather (Wolpert 161).

#### Music: the *raga*

There is a lot of spirituality imbedded in the music of India. Music is believed to have been initially created by Saraswati, the wife of Brahma (White 7). Each note on the musical scale is thought to be under the control of various nymphs described in the Hindu epic, *Ramayana* (White 8). Krishna, an *avatar* of Vishnu, is credited with the invention of *raga* music (Wolpert 166). It is said that he invented sixteen thousand *ragas*, but only a few hundred survived and only six are named: *Bhairava*, whose main *rasas* are awe and fear, *Kaushika*, *Diaka*, *Hindola*, whose main *rasa* is love, *Sri raga*, and *Megha*, whose main *rasa* is peace or meditation (Wolpert 166). Most of the *ragas*, which are considered

male, are accompanied by at least two female versions, each known as a *ragini* (Wolpert 166). *Ragas* were used to employ supernatural powers such as charming snakes, causing fire, and bringing rain (White 24).

The music of India can be identified based on open or closed systems. An open system consists of a beginning set, which variations of the music are added onto the set indefinitely (Widdess 31). A closed system would start with perhaps a simple formula and have a limited number of variations (Widdess 31). *Ragas* are considered to be of the open system because they lack a structure that completely restrains the amount of variations that they can have (Widdess 31). *Ragas* do, however, generally have a certain melodic structure (Widdess 29).

The development of the *raga* began between the fifth century BC and the first in AD (White 7). According to one source, a writer named Bharata Rishi set the principles of Indian music and dancing (White 7). Another source says that, in the same time period, a document called the *Natya Shastra*, was written by several people (Sumahendra). It is thought to be the oldest known document that addresses music and drama (Sumahendra). Between the fourth and seventh centuries, Matanga compiled the thoughts of earlier writers and was the first to term the word “*raga*” in the document called *Brahaddeshi* (Sumahendra).

Two major schools developed in the producing of *ragas*. The one in the north was called Hindustani, and the one in the south was called Canatic (White 22). These schools developed distinct styles so that there was no one standard for *ragas* in India (White 22). The system that placed *ragas* together in groups did not develop until after

the Gupta period in 550 AD (Widdess 23). Between the fifth and twelfth centuries, a musical composer named Hanuman came up with a system of *ragas* that consisted of six male *ragas*, with five corresponding female *raginis*, for a total of thirty-six musical modes in a set (Ebeling 28). Another famous musician by the name of Narada, sometimes depicted in *Ragamala* paintings, also came up with a classification for a *Ragamala* musical system (Sumahendra). Between the seventh and the eleventh centuries, a document by name of *Pancham Sar Samhita*, written by Narad, was the first to use the term “*ragini*” (Sumahendra). In the sixteenth century, a Brahman known as Mesakarna compiled a similar system but added musical modes called *ragaputras* that imitated the noises made by humans or animals and were meant to portray characteristics of divinity or aristocracy (Ebeling 28). Another source says that a man named Sarngdev, not Mesakarna, came up with the additional musical modes and animal voices for notes (Sumahendra). It is possible that the different names are referring to the same person. In any case, the animal voices used for the notes are: the peacock, chatak, goat, deer, cock, frog, horse, and elephant, and some of the animal voices may have been incorporated into the imagery of the *Ragamala* painting (Sumahendra).

Before this, there was a system of music called *jati*, which focused on classifying different musical patterns (Widdess 33). The shift from *jati* to *raga* meant a shift from classification to improvisation in the music (Widdess 33). This can be seen in the nature of *ragas*. Each time one is played, even if it is the same *raga*, it will never be played the same again. *Ragas* were devised by theorists, however, and they have an element of inconsistency, which leads to a conclusion that the theorist simply developed a structure

around what live performers would play (Widdess 32). The earliest *ragas* were used in dramatic performances and had an expressive function (Widdess 43). Before the Muslim invasion, *ragas* were no longer associated with drama, but took on a religious function and related to deity, time of day, and astrology (Widdess 44).

*Ragas* usually consist of five to seven notes (Ganeri, Hinduism 40). The word for note is *savara*, which translates as “the shining forth of oneself” (Masselos 280). With these notes, the musician would improvise, basing the improvisation on the emotional mood (Craven 224). The emotions are similar to the ones stated before for art in general. They are: joy, sorrow, anger, laughter, pity, love, fear, tenderness and tranquility (White 24). The Sanskrit root of the word *raga* is *ranj*, which means “to be dyed or colored, especially a red color, to be moved or excited, and be charmed or delighted” (Widdess 40). This is related to the highly emotional purpose of the *raga* as when one is emotional, there is sometimes a reddening of the face or eyes, either in anger or in tears, or extreme fits of laughter (Widdess 40). In order to convey the emotion as accurately as possible, the musician will sometimes look at the corresponding *Ragamala* painting for inspiration (Craven 224). Even though the paintings were done after the music was established, this shows how even a product of an art form will come back and influence the original art form, and how art forms can intertwine influences.

The notes of the scale follow the *jati* system, and have seven primary pitches and corresponding emotions, with the dominant note of the *raga* determining the mood (Widdess 39):

Sa	heroic, angry, amazing
----	------------------------

Ri	heroic, angry, amazing
Ga	pitiful
Ma	erotic, mirthful
Pa	erotic, mirthful
Dha	disgusting, terrifying
Ni	pitiful (Widdess 39)

The notes on the Indian scale are not the same distance apart from each other as one finds in the Western scale (White 17). The Western scale has eight notes to a scale. The Indian scale contains twenty-two notes, including the primary tones and microtones, which are so close together that they may be indistinguishable to the untrained ear (White 17). *Ragas* often employ glissando, also known as the slurring of one note into another that is nearby in pitch (White 25).

The scale did not always have as many notes. During the early Vedic period, only three notes were used for singing (Sumahendra). In the later Vedic period, one more note was added, and later, more notes were added to make the seven primary tones we see today (Sumahendra).

In playing the *ragas*, the emphasis is not on the quality of the tone, but rather the accuracy of the musician in matching the right pitch (White 15). The music consists of a drone chord, played continuously throughout the piece, which is usually made of three notes in the key of the *raga* (White 16).

*Ragas* involve time in more than one way. There is the rhythm of the *raga* as well as the time theory, which dictates at what time of day or what season the *raga*

should be played. The rhythm of the *raga*, having very intricate patterns, has three speeds: slow, medium, which is twice as fast as the slow speed, and fast, which is twice as fast as the medium speed (White 16). Though the time theory is strongly suggested in some cases, it is not always followed or considered mandatory (White 23).

A specific *raga* can be identified by certain characteristics that are specific to that *raga*. Some of these include the combination of musical phrases, ascending and descending notes, and the name given to the *raga* (White 22). The names of the *ragas* are usually derived from the region or people from which the *raga* originally came (Widdess 23). Other characteristics of *ragas* are the combination of scale and melodic dynamics such as strong and weak notes and starting and finishing notes (Widdess 30).

Classical Indian instruments include the *tablas*, a kind of drum; the *sitar*, which is played similarly to a guitar; and the *sarangi*, which is played with a bow, like the cello (Ganeri, Hinduism 40). The drone chord is usually played by a four or five stringed, upright, and gourd instrument called a *tanpura* (Wolpert 167).

### **Poetry: the *dhyana***

The poetry or *dhyanas* were easily developed from music. Any time that music was theorized about or compiled, divine qualities were mentioned in addition to technical information (Ebeling 30). When poetry was written, the poets would use the descriptions of the music to give them a basis for their imagery, although they themselves were not likely to be trained in music (Ebeling 30). Themes that were commonly used in poetry include the *Krishalila*, the theme of divine love in terms of human love, and the *Nayikabheda*, themes of heroes and heroines being in love union or love longing (Ebeling



30). These themes are also found in Indian drama and dance (Ebeling 30). These themes are not limited to Hindu art, but the Muslims would often modify or intensify these subjects according to their tastes (Ebeling 30).

The word *dhyana* means “meditation,” and is a poem that describes a *raga*, a character, be it a god or person, and their actions (Widdess 400). The poetry was very similar to prayer and started showing up around AD 1000 (Ebeling cover). The *dhyanas* were passed down from teacher to student (Ebeling 28). These prayer poems were often used as the text inscribed on the *Ragamala* paintings. The text often describes the virtue of devotion, also known as *bhakti* (Beach 157).

The poems often used symbols and metaphors so that the deity or person, who was the subject of the poem, could be identified with any man or woman (Beach 174). The way this was done was by universalizing the subject and comparing it to other things (Beach 175). For example, teeth could be compared to pearls, and one’s gait to the graceful movements of a swan (Beach 175).

The “*Vasana Viasa*,” in particular is an important poem because its imagery matches *Ragamala* iconography (Ebeling 50). The name of this fourteenth century poem means “The Sport of Spring,” and it deals with the joys and frustrations of lovers in the springtime (Ebeling 50).

The texts used for the *Ragamalas*, taken from the *dhyanas*, are ambiguous in their translations, sometimes adding adaptations from earlier texts (Ebeling 112). The texts are often written in two line sets, or couplets (Ebeling 112).

### **Painting: the *ragamala***

Centuries after the musical modes and poetry were written, there appeared another art form (Ebeling 14). The *Ragamala* painting brings all three art forms of music, poetry, and painting together as the paintings are illustrations of the imagery used in the poems relating to the *raga* (Craven 224). The word *ragamala* means “a garland of melodies or *ragas*” (Craven 224). The word *raga* means “something that colors the mind with emotion” (Craven 224). One can see by the meanings of these words how the painting and the music are so closely related.

The way the *Ragamalas* came about may be related to *aksiptika*. The *aksiptika* is a stage song with words performed during a drama (Widdess 398). This song would relate the characteristics of a deity, or person, and could have been used to teach *ragas* to student musicians (Widdess 178). With this, an association between the *ragas* and the music text that praised the deity was formed so that the *raga* itself was seen as praising the deity (Widdess 178). This association eventually led to the common imagery used for *Ragamala* paintings (Widdess 178).

The *Ragamala* is one kind of miniature painting done from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries (Rowland 343-344). The first *Ragamalas* showed up between 1450 and 1550 and continued to develop for the next three hundred years (Ebeling 14). Before that, in the fourteenth century, followers of Jainism would commission manuscript paintings on palm leaves, called *Kalpasutra* painting, in order to honor saints (Ebeling 30). The oldest *Ragamala* type painting known appeared with illustrations of thirty-six female figures, each with a male deity figure (Ebeling 32). A distinction can be made between the earlier *Ragamalas* and ones that came later: later ones took their iconography

from earlier *Gujarati* painting, had no musical terms associated with them, and took from love poetry and its illustrations, whereas earlier *Ragamalas* may have been more connected with the musical *raga* (Ebeling 32). These paintings often merged folk art with classical tradition (Rowland 343-344). The *Ragamalas* ceased to be painted in the nineteenth century due to the coming of Western influence (Ebeling 17).

The two greatest centers for producing miniature paintings were the Pahari School in the foothills, and the Rajput school in the state of Rajasthan (Craven 222).

The most common subjects depicted in miniature painting are the love story between Krishna, an *avatar* of Vishnu, and Radha, a cow or milk maid; characters from Hindu legends; and musical modes or *ragas* (Munsterberg 12-14). The paintings done in and for the courts of Rajputana are called Rajput paintings, named after a Hindu warrior caste (Beach 2). Rajput paintings were mainly from Rajasthan but also were from areas including Malwa, Bundelkhand, as well as the Pahari because these areas were all ruled by the Rajputs (Ebeling 32). Even though some were not done in Rajputana, they are classified together because of the similar characteristics (Munsterberg 154). These characteristics included brilliant colors, flat shapes, and decorative designs (Munsterberg 155).

Aristocratic people and gods were often depicted in the *Ragamala* paintings. Krishna and Shiva are the gods that are portrayed the most often, though Brahma is seen in the *Khambhavati Ragamala* paintings (Ebeling 50). Krishna is usually depicted with a dark blue complexion, wears a three pronged peacock crown, a saffron colored garment, and is usually seen as the divine lover pursuing a woman (Ebeling 50). Radha, Krishna's

lover, has her life depicted in the *Ragamala* paintings of *Sankarabharan*, *Patmanjari*, and *Ramkali* (Ebeling 50). Shiva is often seen with a bull, a crescent moon in his hair from which the Ganges river flows, a skull necklace, snake bracelets, and as an ascetic, one who abstains from food, drink, etc., sitting in a yoga position (Ebeling 50). Unlike Krishna, Vishnu is rarely seen except when he is merged with the imagery of Shiva (Ebeling 50). Kama, the god of love, is known as the god who lends the lotus flower arrow, seen in the *Vibhasa Ragamala* paintings (Ebeling 50). The lotus flower arrow was used to shoot the cock that would disturb lovemaking, or it was used similarly to Cupid's arrow when shot at a woman, to make her fall in love (Sumahendra).

Though gods are depicted often, it is the aristocratic characters that are most often seen (Ebeling 50). The paintings of the aristocracy are idealized, flattering them with mixtures of divine and human characteristics (Ebeling 50,52). The settings of the paintings often show lifestyles of wealthy females of a ruling family who were served, and sheltered, and who struggled with unsatisfied sexual desires (Ebeling 52).

*Ragamalas* were often put together in book form. The earliest books were manuscript illustrations of narratives (Beach I). There was a split between Hindu and Muslim manuscripts. Hindus had their pages made of talipot palm leaves, the compositions of the illustrations were small and square, and the books were horizontal with wooden covers (Beach I). In the fifteenth century, Jain traders introduced paper from Persia to India, with its advantages of being larger and more durable (Ebeling 32). Though the paper was an advantage over palm leaves, the Hindus did not break the tradition with the introduction of the new material, so the Muslims were the first to take

advantage of paper for their manuscripts. Muslim manuscripts were vertical, like European books, and had a leather cover with paper pages (Beach I). During persecution from the Muslim imperial court, the Hindu books were easy to hide (Beach I).

*Ragamalas* were the most popular paintings made for Hindu patrons during the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries (Beach 41). Muslim patrons, particularly of the late eleventh century, favored Persian text (Beach 5). Hindu and Jain painters under Muslim rule had to abandon their traditional paintings to meet the demands of the wealthy Muslim conquerors, who esteemed illustrated books as a sign of wealth (Beach 5). It was often a case of taking any job available, even if the employer was of a different faith (Beach 174). Because of the *Ragamala*'s romantic subject matter, and frequent depictions of household activities, it is likely that the primary consumers were aristocratic women (Ebeling 14). This is interesting because it has an impact on the development of the *Ragamalas*. The poetry used for the *Ragamalas* was originally used as "gentlemen's literature" and needed to be toned down, with more subtle language, in order for it to be appropriate for women and their moral standards (Ebeling 32).

Because of their love of these books, the Muslims developed libraries and workshops for the books (Beach 5). Akbar the Great, a Muslim Emperor, assembled workshops filled with the best painters and developed what is known as the Mughal style (Ebeling 30). Sometimes Muslim and Hindu painters would borrow subject matter and techniques from each other when times were less tense and more artistically sympathetic (Beach 2). Hindus would imitate the Mughal style, but with their own traditional subject matter (Ebeling 32). Characteristics that distinguished Muslim

paintings from others included realism, volume of the figures painted, separated figures, and more realistic use of space (Beach 162-163,174). In contrast, the Rajput style consisted of flat shapes, inter-connectedness, idealization of figures, lack of empty space, a background as expressive as the figures, and saturated color (Beach 162-163,174).

Obviously, at this point in time, the Muslims were less concerned about the restriction on painting the figures of humans and animals. Muslim rulers started to enjoy what is called the *Bhagavata* series, which tells the story of Krishna and other *avatars* of Vishnu (Beach 6). Of course *Ragamala* paintings and paintings of Krishna were the favorites of the Hindu Rajput rulers as well (Beach 157). *Ragamalas* were valued because they were often used in dowries and as official formal gifts for the wealthy, aristocratic class (Beach 176). The association between ruling power and Muslims became so strong that Hindu Rajput rulers would often commission their *Ragamalas* to follow the compositional models of the Mughal court to show their link to power (Beach 41). This can be seen in the 1700's when Rajput palaces mimicked the Mughal standards (Beach 174). Their painters began to use finer pigments and softer colors for their paintings (Beach 174).

Even though the artists borrowed techniques and subject matter, tradition preserved some of the differences. The progression one would see in Mughal painting is not evident in Hindu *Ragamala* painting (Beach 175). The tradition of Hindu painting calls for a specific way to represent the subject, allowing no inventive freedom on the part of the artist (Beach 175). Though it may have started to lean more towards the natural renderings of the Mughal style in the late eighteenth century, the *Ragamala* paintings still kept with the tradition of their symbolic elements (Beach 193-194).

Perhaps for this reason, some sources claim that *Ragamala* painting was immune to influences (Sumahendra). Painters would keep their own lists of certain systems and would receive instructions from a local musician (Sumahendra). Though the painting may not have had much outside influence, it is stated that India's music was influenced by Iranian and Mughal concepts (Sumahendra).

There are many symbols represented in the miniature paintings. Romance was emphasized with the color red symbolizing passion and the peacock standing for love (Munsterberg 156). A stormy night sky represented the turbulence in the hearts of lovers that were separated (Munsterberg 156). Two earthenware pots seen in a painting symbolized the breasts of a young woman, and the epitome of beauty was symbolized by a lotus flower (Ebeling 52). Peacocks were a display of male beauty and bees represented lovers' passions (Ebeling 52). White birds were associated with rain, and rain was believed to be a precursor to lovemaking (Ebeling 52). Brahman priests, who may be depicted in some paintings, were considered asexual, and were the only men who had contact with secluded aristocratic women (Ebeling 52). The priests would often serve as messengers between lovers (Ebeling 52). A dark blue band at the top of a painting with a wavering white line meant the coming of dawn (Rowland 348). This is one way that the *Ragamala* paintings made reference to the time of day corresponding to the *raga*. A rooster would represent the end of lovers union (Rowland 346). The jungle background symbolized the physical union between man and woman (Beach 157). This idea of romance was also seen in the representations of Krishna and Rhada; they were thought to be the embodiment of romantic love and a symbol of the longing of the soul to unite with

Brahma (Munsterberg 156,163). The story of Krishna and Rhada begins with Krishna as a herdsman and Rhada being married, and she then rejects her husband because she loves Krishna (Craven 222). Along with representing the idea of Krishna and Rhada symbolizing the souls longing for Brahma, many *Ragamalas* portrayed this idea in the characters illustrated as reaction against the Hindu priests' control of interacting with the gods (Beach 157).

Other common things seen in *Ragamala* paintings include rosaries used for prayer, garlands of flowers used for festivities of welcome and farewell, and fans or shades which indicated that the person depicted was of noble status (Ebeling 52). *Pan* or *betel*, which was a sort of refreshment made of tobacco, nuts, spices and lime, that often stained lips and teeth a reddish brown color was also commonly seen in paintings (Ebeling 52).

Romance was not the only thing represented. The colors in the paintings are said to correspond to the notes of the *raga* and convey the same emotions as the *raga* (Craven 224). For example, red would often stand for anger and rage, yellow for the awesome and marvelous, and brown for the erotic (Craven 224).

Another way symbols were present in *Ragamala* paintings is the way the figures were represented. The artists regarded figures in their paintings that were idealized so that they could represent any man or woman (Beach 174). Each of the moods in the *raginis* of the *Ragamala* paintings was believed to depict moods of women universally (Ebeling 50). None of the features showed the characteristics of an individual, like one would see in portraiture. The figures were derived from certain standardized formulas (Rowland 343-344).



Other characteristics of the *Ragamala* painting are seen in their use of space. The spatial perspective is different than that of Western use (Ebeling 46). First of all, the size of an object in the painting does not diminish if it is further away (Ebeling 46). Instead the scale is based on the importance of the object with the most important objects being the largest (Ebeling 46). If architecture is depicted, then it is stylized and shows patterns, and the floors are shown as if seeing them from a birds eye view (Ebeling 46). Doors, beds, animals, and instruments are shown in proportion to the human figures while the architecture is often reduced in size (Ebeling 46). The paintings exhibit horizontal layers with the objects furthest from the viewer placed at the top of the painting and the objects closest to the viewer near the bottom of the painting (Ebeling 46). Natural backgrounds are shown in patterns, and will appear flat if it is left untextured, appearing in flat bands, like a blue band for the sky (Ebeling 46). A yellow band was often left at the top of the painting for the poetic inscription (Ebeling 46).

The *Ragamalas* came in differing sets. The most common one used was the Painters system (Ebeling, forward). This consisted of thirty-six total *ragas*: six male *ragas* each having five wives, and all relating to time of day, season, and emotion (Craven 224). Each of the thirty-six paintings depicted the relationship between a man and a woman, with the natural background used to intensify the human situation (Beach 157).

Other systems, or specific sets of *ragas*, used for *Ragamalas* include the Hanuman system and the Mesakarna system. The Painters system, though followed by more than half of the known *Ragamalas* in existence today, cannot be traced directly to a musical or literary authority, as the other systems can (Ebeling 18-19). This means that

no one knows exactly where the Painters system came from. As for the others, an ancient musical author named Hanuman composed the Hanuman system and the Mesakarna system, by Mesakarna, was used exclusively by the Pahari School (Ebeling 18-19).

Below is a list of the names of the *ragas* in the Painters system with the male *Raga* first and his five wives following. The arrangement of the paintings is similar to the classification of the musical *raga* (Ebeling 14).

Painters system:

*Bhairava:* *Bhairavi, Nat, Malasri, Patman, Jari, Lalit*

*Malkos:* *Gauri, Khambhavati, Malavi, Ramakali, Gunakali*

*Hindol:* *Bilabal, Todi, Desakh, Devgandhar, Madhumadhavi*

*Dipak:* *Dhanasri, Vasant, Kanada, Bairadi, Desvarati or Purvi*

*Megha:* *Gujari, Gormalar, Kakubha, Vibhasa, Bangal*

*Sri:* *Pancham, Kamod or Kamodani, Setmalar, Asavari, Kedar* (Ebeling

18).

Most of the six families represent a season of the year. Of the *Ragas*, the *Bhairav* family represents the hot season, the *Megha* family is the rainy season, and the *Sri* is the cold season (Ebeling 114-116). *Raginis* that are part of other families complete the rest of the seasons. *Nata*, part of the *Bhairav* family, represents winter, *Vasant*, part of the *Dipak* family, is spring, and finally *Pancham*, part of the *Sri* family, represents autumn (Ebeling 114-116).

The names of the *Ragas* themselves suggest imagery that was used in the *Ragamala*: *Vasant* means “spring;” *Hindol* means “swing;” *Sri* means “lord;” *Bhairav*

means that it has something to do with an aspect of Shiva; *Dipak* means “lamp;” and *Megha* means “cloud” (Ebeling 48). Sometimes one can find these images in that particular *Ragamala* painting. Other times the musical *raga* is only reflected in the name assigned to the painting and is not reflected in the painting itself (Ebeling 48).

*Ragamalas* often follow a specific iconography, or pictorial formula (Ebeling 10). This means that a *raga* of one *Ragamala* set will match or look very similar to a *raga* of a different *Ragamala* set, provided that they follow the same system. To follow the tradition of iconography, paintings, especially latter ones, often copied earlier paintings instead of referring back to the original source (Ebeling 54). One can see an example of iconography by looking at the *Sri Ragas* and the similarities seen between them, though they are from different *Ragamala* sets.

The word *Sri* means “lord” or “master,” and the painting shows the lord listening to the aged musician, the legendary Narada (Ebeling 108). Narada’s music is believed to be so powerful that its notes “strike the depths of the soul” (Masselos 284). Narada is accompanied by the horse-headed musician, Kinnara, who is a heavenly being (Ebeling 108). Kinnara is quite an exclusive element to the *Sri Raga*. Without it, the *raga* could be mistaken for other *ragas* (Ebeling 108).

The poem of the *Sri Raga* is as follows:

“Splendidly enthroned, of peerless beauty and lovely as the autumn moon, he sits hearing stories from Narada and Tumvara (Tumbaru, Tumburu?). By the great sages he is called *Srigraga King*” (Ebeling 124).

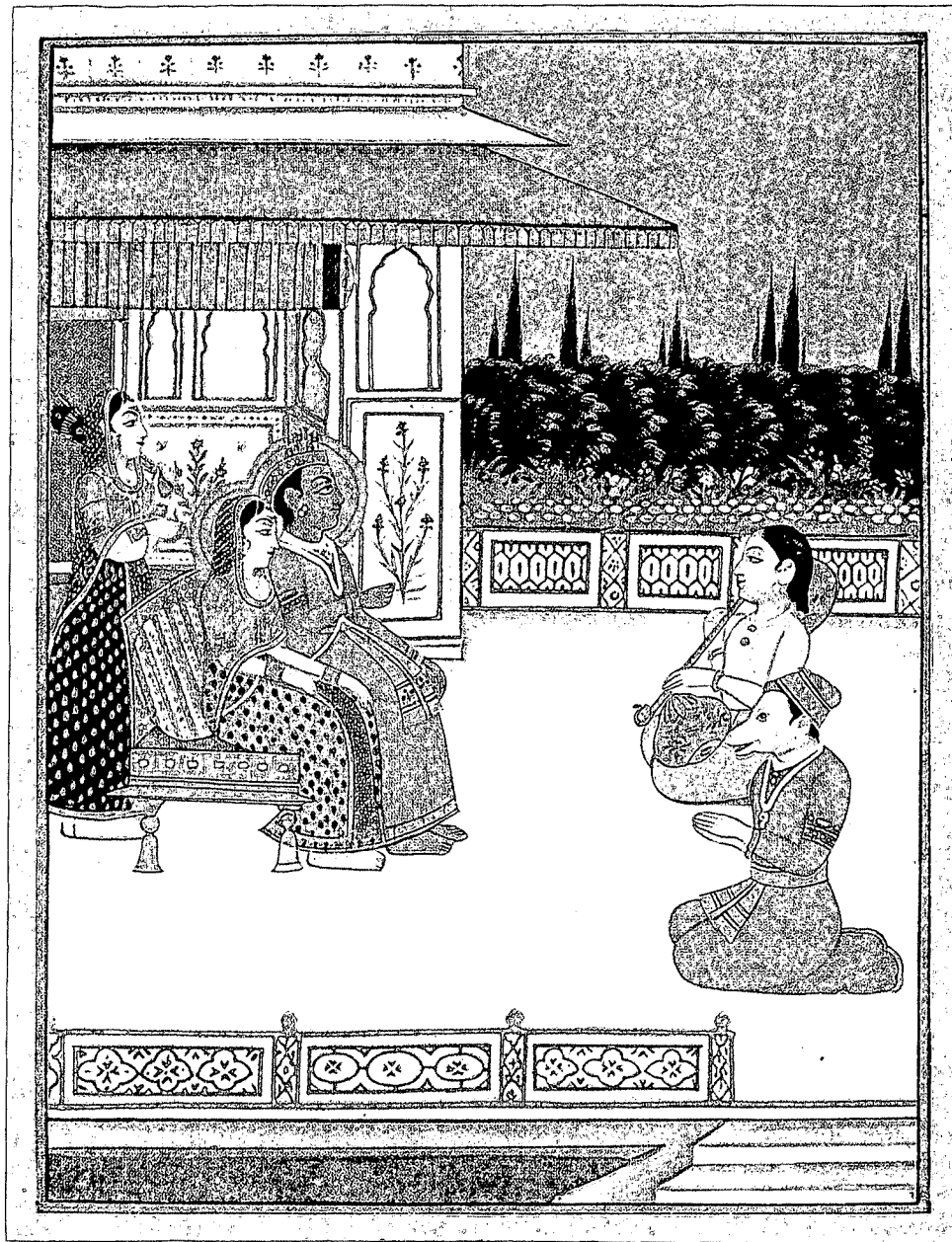


Fig. 1: *Sri Raga*. (Ebeling 109).



Fig. 2: Sri Raga. (Masselos 283).

There are three groups of iconographies, or symbolic traditions, dealing with the subject matter depicted. The categories are: love fulfilled in union, love longing in separations, and activities of the court and households of the patrons (Ebeling 15). These categories of subject matter groupings are related to what is known as *Nayika*. The *Nayikas* are generally descriptions of the subject matter and describe the contents of more than one Ragamala painting. The *Utka Nayika*, described as “she who expects and yearns for her lover,” is seen in the *Todi*, *Gauri*, *Gunkali*, and *Kakubha Ragamala* paintings (Ebeling 48). The *Khandita Nayika* is described as “she whose lord has spent the night away and she bitterly reproaches him in the morning,” and is seen in *Ramkali Ragamala* paintings (Ebeling 48). *Abhisarrika Nayika*, known as “she who expects her lord and waits on her lord prepared,” is seen in *Gormalar*, *Gujari*, *Kamod*, *Tanka*, and *Patmanjari Ragamala* paintings (Ebeling 48).

There are three different iconographic traditions, meaning there are different symbolic styles of painting. The first and longest lasting tradition was called the Rajasthani tradition, another shorter lived tradition was the Amber tradition, and the Pahari tradition was based on a different system of *ragas* than the others (Ebeling 15).

As stated before, the artist often worked for an employer who was a different faith because of the need for a job (Beach 174). This would indicate that the artist may have been poor and had low status in the society. A clue to the status of the artist may be contained in the colophons. Colophons, inscriptions found at the end of manuscripts, though they are rare for *Ragamalas*, contained information such as the origin, date, place, painter, poet, and patron (Ebeling 10). Colophons often included the name of the artist

who painted them, even if the artist was a slave (Beach 233). This reinforces the idea that the artist had a low position. Yet at the same time, by including the name of the painter in the colophon, it shows that the artist was proud of his work. The painters were often craftsmen who were very gifted in the area of painting but had little expertise in music or the poems they were illustrating (Ebeling 14). This resulted in the mistakes of mismatching the inscription with the painting and variations in the development of the iconography (Ebeling 14).

There were other problems with matching the *Ragamala* paintings with the musical *raga*. As stated before, the painters were not always very knowledgeable about music due to the time constraints (Ebeling 16). Music was often learned by rote and practice, making it hard to remain true to specific ways of representing the musical mode in pictorial form (Ebeling 16). Also, there were no records of performances, no set notation for writing music down, and with *ragas* varying every time they are played, it was hard to have a set musical standard that could be easily transferred to painting (Ebeling 15-16). Some sources say that not even the colors used in the paintings correspond to the notes or emotions of the musical *ragas* (Ebeling 16).

Whatever the case, there are some structural similarities. Both the painting and music follow certain rules: the painting follows an iconography and the music follows a set scale (Ebeling 16). Both have embellishments on the rules: the painting has its local style, and varies from painter to painter, and the music has its improvisation (Ebeling 16).

*Ragamalas* were made by first drawing out the composition in pencil, then outlining it in red with a brush, then covering the entire surface with white priming made

of starch paste, and then redrawing the main lines in black (Rowland 343-344). The background was then painted and finally the figures were painted (Rowland 343-344). In order to follow the tradition of the iconographic or picture formula, the painters would sometimes copy older paintings by tracing over them (Ebeling 15).



## **Part IV: *Asavari Ragini***

The earliest *Ragamalas* known were found in Chawand, a city that was seized in 1568 by Muslim powers (Beach 118). Chawand is located in Mewar, the oldest and southernmost state of Rajasthan, and was ruled by a warrior race known as the *Sisodiyas*, or “sons of kings” (Ebeling 38). The story of this place and time is interesting and surrounds the *Asavari Ragini* with a sense of drama.

This *Ragamala* painting was created in 1605 by a Muslim painter known as Nasiruddin, less than forty years after the city had been taken by the Muslims (Beach 118). During the three attacks on the old capital of Rajasthan, Chitor, all of the Hindu men died, and the Hindu women died by sacrificing themselves by fire (Ebeling 38). When all of the Rajputs fell to Mughal rule, only the state of Mewar stood up against the Muslim oppression and kept on fighting (Ebeling 38).

It was during this time of turmoil that *Ragamala* paintings were born (Ebeling 38). After Chitor was destroyed, Chawand became the new capital and was established under the Hindu leadership of Prattrap in 1577 (Ebeling 38). Chawand was chosen as the new capital because it was located in the mountains, making it a good hiding place (Ebeling 38). Mewar finally fell to Muslim power in 1613, and a new era of peace and prosperity was ushered in (Ebeling 38).

The *Ragamala* text below, used for this particular painting, was originally written by a poet by the name of Kasyapa, (sometimes called Kilakasyapa) (Ebeling 118). His

poetry was the literary basis for many of the Rajasthani traditions and their iconography (Ebeling 118). There is not much known about this poet (Ebeling 118).

The exact text on this painting is translated as follows:

“On the summit of the sandal wood mount, robed in the plumes of a peacock, with a splendid necklace strung with peals and ivory, the variegated one drawing to herself from the sandal wood tree the serpent – the proud one wears it as a bracelet, (her body) ablaze with dark splendor” (Ebeling 126).

Nasiruddin was slightly influenced by Mughal style, which would make sense, since he was a Muslim, but otherwise, this painting is a pure example of *Ragamala* painting (Ebeling 38). It is interesting, given the historical background of Chawand, that this artist produced this painting in this city. Being a Muslim, he was painting in the hideout capital of his former enemy. In a forty-five year gap between the capture of the city and the downfall of the state, it seems that Chawand was not severely destroyed, for painters were commissioned by wealthy patrons of that city. One could infer that they did not have to spend large amounts of money on rebuilding the city; therefore they had enough money to spend on painting.

This *Asavari Ragini* is part of a set that accommodates forty-two paintings instead of the usual thirty-six, with six *ragas* each having six *raginis* instead of five *raginis* (Ebeling 159). This *ragini* belongs to the *Sri* family as described previously (Ebeling 18). This *Ragamala* set is the most widely known because of its beauty and

flawlessness (Ebeling 159). Though this was a large set, there are only twenty-six paintings from the original set known in existence today (Ebeling 159).

The *Asavari Ragini* is linked to a jungle tribe near Chawand, Mewar, known for their snake charming practices (Ebeling 116). The subject matter of the *Asavari Ragini* identifies it as being free from Mughal influences (Masselos 298). It is said that this painting, even though it is done by a Muslim, is distinctly of a Hindu style (Masselos 289).

The snake charming references come from a cult that still exists today and worships the snake god with offerings of rice, milk, and turmeric powder (Masselos 300). These charmers are called *Savaras*, and live in the jungle (Masselos 300). The woman in the *Asavari Ragini* symbolizes the awe and fascination for snakes (Masselos 300). Her skin is blue, like many of the depictions of Krishna, either because of ashes that she has smeared on her skin, or because the color is an indication of the tribe which she belongs (Masselos 300).

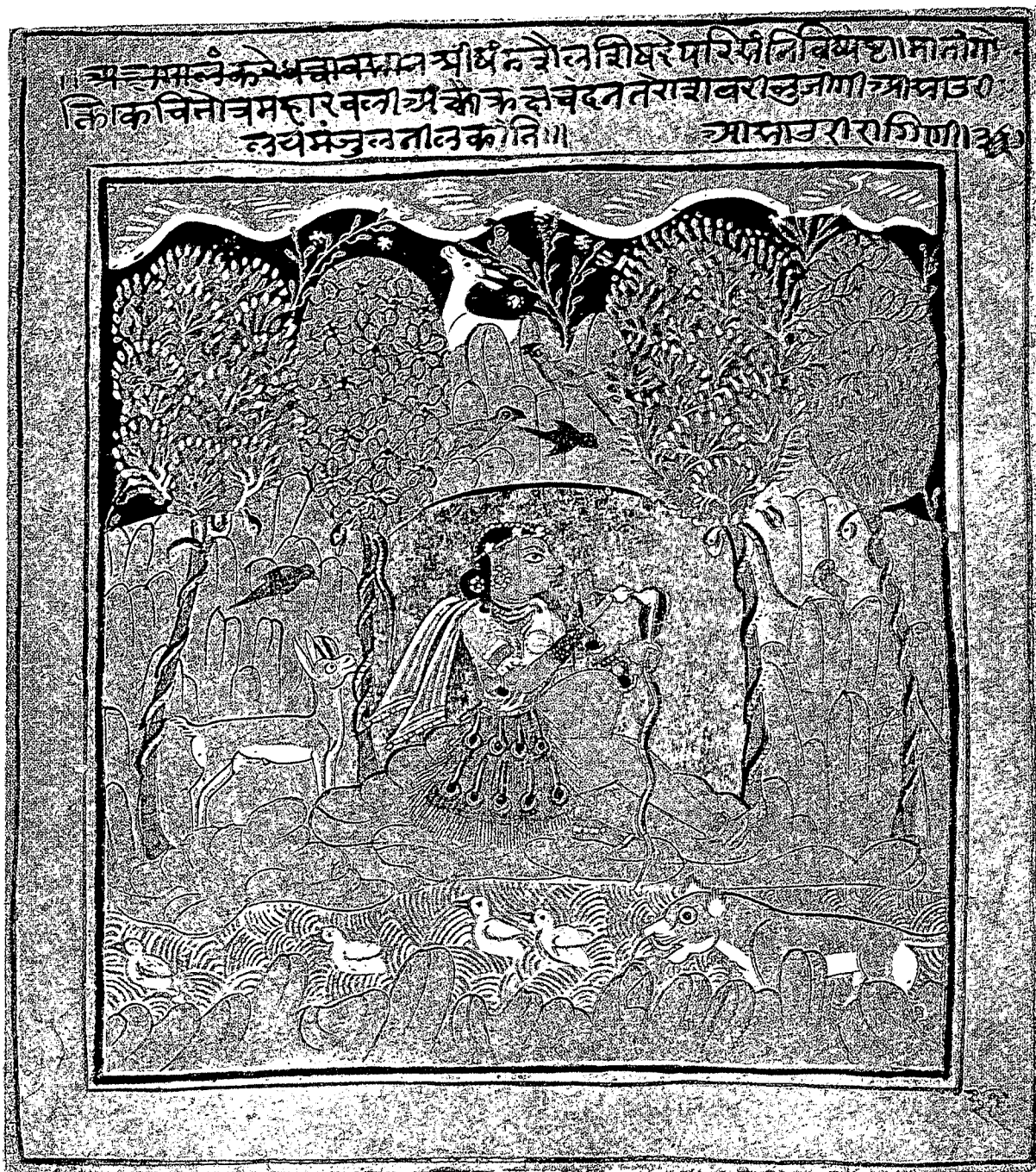


Fig. 3: Asavari Ragini. (Ebeling 117).

**Conclusion:**

It is apparent that *Ragamala* painting is unique. However, it would not seem so unique if one were unaware of the religious, social, political, and historical context surrounding it. The context gives the painting added depth. The religious ties are so strong that the painting would lose much of its purpose and function if it were not for Hinduism's belief that art aids in elevating one's soul. Without the social context, one would not know whom the figures depicted, for whom the paintings were made, and by whom they were painted. The political context places the paintings in a world of alternating peace and turmoil. Perhaps the most interesting context is the historical, watching the transition of one art form to another, and the final compilation of art forms resulting in the *Ragamala* painting.

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