

# The Thematic Study of Basohli Paintings

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## ABSTRACT

The paper is about Basohli, which was among the earliest centres of 'Pahari' painting developed in the 17th and 18th century in the hill States of Jammu and Punjab. This paper shows how the paintings representing the ancient tradition of folk art, are associated with Hindu mythology, and Moghul technique. This style of painting is completely distinguished by its vibrant colours, simplicity, frankness and passionate approach.

**Keywords:** Basohli, pahari, rasa, ragas, paintings

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## DISCUSSION

About hundred kilometers south east of Jammu on the bank of river Ravi is situated the sleeping town of Basohli, once an affluent and prosperous hillstate of the Dogra Chieftains, commanding respect among its neighbouring states mainly due to its strategic position. Slowly and gradually it became popular due to the treasure of invaluable paintings it possessed through the members of the royal family as well as their kith and kins. Situated on the plateau of the lower Shivaliks was a beautiful palace of the Dogra feudal chieftains the ruins of which still recall the splendour of its times. The Basohli School of art, which flourished during the seventeenth Century onwards, has its unique place in the history of the painting of India. The first mention of Basohli painting is in the annual report of the Archaeological Survey of India for the year 1918-19 published in 1921.

Basohli Paintings have an individuality of their own, and they are easily distinguished from Kangra and Rajasthani paintings. Though they lack the subtlety, delicacy and refinement of the Kangra style, they have vigour and the quality of simplicity. The painter states all the facts clearly in the boldest and broadest manner. The poetic themes of Rasamanjari and Gita Govinda are expressed with serene simplicity, the artist achieving the maximum of expression with the minimum of means. The approach is, however passionate rather than sentimental. Some of the paintings are no doubt much too simple and tend to be bald and deficient in mystery. However, all schools of painting are to be judged by their best creations, and the best specimens of Basohli painting possess a quality of frankness, vitality and vigour which is not seen elsewhere. In the eleventh century along with the rise of the vernaculars of North India, such as Bengali, Punjabi and the various dialects of Hindi, from the secondary Prakrits, we notice the rise of popular Vaishnavism in the cult of Rama and Gopala Krishna. It was however in the sixteenth century that Krishna worship became popular in Northern India.

The central inspiration of Basohli painting, like other Rajput painting, is Vaishnavism. The devotional poetry of the saints and mystics of the sixteenth century found visual expression in paintings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Basohli painting embraces the vast range of Hindu religious thought and mythology, in which we find the

collective wisdom of an ancient, anonymous and many-sided civilization. There are a number of paintings of Vishnu and his ten incarnations. There are two series of Ramayana paintings, one painted at Basohli and the other at Kulu.

Banu Datta's Rasamanjari, written in the fourteenth century, was a favourite text with Raja Kirpal Pal of Basohli. The text is a treatise on 'rasa', or the flavor of love, and deals with Nayaka-Nayika-Bheda, or the classification of heroes and heroines. Nayaka Nayika paintings deal with the theme of love, and they will continue to enchant people so long as humanity exists on this planet. They reflect the eternal human sentiments, the love of man for woman and of women for man. Utka Nayika, the expectant heroine waiting patiently for the arrival of her lover, will continue to move all men who have experienced the devotion of woman. Who will not admire the courage and faith of the Abhisarika, who goes out in the dark night ignoring its terrors to meet her beloved? The Abhisarika also reminds us of the last journey of the soul in the darkness of death in search of God, the source of life, the Ultimate Essence which absorbs the soul after the period of separation in the sojourn of life.

The text of Bhagavata Purana, which deals with the life of Krishna, was very popular with the Pahari Rajas. There are two complete series of paintings illustrating the anecdotes from Bhagavata Purana, one painted at Mankot and the other painted at Tira-Sujanpur, the capital of Maharaja Sansar Chand. In the twelfth century, Jayadeva wrote the great Sanskrit love-poem, Gita Govinda, the song of Krishna, the cowherd, which has been compared to Solomon's Song of Songs. Jayadeva's poem with its intimate love pictures achieved wide popularity throughout India, and Gujarati, Moghul, Rajasthani, as well as Pahari artists translated into line and colour its passionate stanzas. It was, however, at Basohli in 1730 that a complete series of colourful illustrations to the Gita Govinda was painted.

The delightful theme of Baramasa, the twelve months of the year, attracted the attention of later artists, who painted in a refined style which approximates the Kangra style in spirit and delicacy. This style is illustrated in the Baramasa painting showing the rainy season. Whether it is Rasamanjari, Gita Govinda, Bhagavata Purana or Baramasa, the inscription is provided by Krishna and his loves.

There are also a number of Ragamala paintings in Basohli style, illustrating the musical modes, ragas and raginis, particularly in the collection of Bharat Kala Bhavan, Banaras. These Ragamala paintings are characterized by simplicity of composition and delicacy of colouring which mark them out from other Basohli paintings.

The theme popular with artists of Nurpur was the ordeal of Narayan, the saint of Damthal. Many miracles are attributed to Narayan who performed penance at the present site of Damthal Ashram. It was, however, the ordeal of drinking poison which profoundly stirred the imagination of the hill people, so much so, that it formed the theme of many paintings including murals. On hearing the reputation of Narayan that he performed miracles, Jahangir, who was camping at Shahdara, sent for him. He asked him to take poison in his presence, and Narayan after remembering his Guru Bhagwan, swallowed six cups of poison in succession. The seventh cup was given to an elephant who died instantaneously. In the paintings Narayan is always shown along with Bhagwan, who is encouraging him in his hour of trial. Raja Jagat Singh of Nurpur built the main temple in the memory of Narayan at Damthal in 1646 A.D. All paintings showing the ordeal of Narayan are either from Nurpur or Guler, and are in the primitive Basohli style.

Basil Grey also described in one of his rajput painting as "the Poet Valmiki teaching Ramayana to Kusha and Lava". Lava and Kusha were the boys in their teens when they were in the hermitage of Valmiki, while the two persons seated in front of the saint are grown-up men. In fact, it is a painting of the Durga series in which Vaishya and King Suratha are shown in the hermitage of Rshi Markandeya. The Basohli artists also painted a number of portraits of the Hill Rajas. The fierce and bold style of these portraits particularly suits the subjects of these paintings for these Rajput princelings were rugged warriors who were constantly at war with one another. Apart from the Rajas, their consorts, concubines,

courtiers, servants and astrologers, learned men, soldiers, sadhus, mendicants, farmers and herdsmen are also depicted. Hence as a visual record of a social order which has passed away, these paintings are very valuable. They tell us what types of clothes were worn by the princes, nobles and their wives as well as the herdsmen and the farmers. They tell us what type of architecture prevailed, and in what type of houses the people lived in those times. Above all they tell us of the ideals which inspired the Hindus, the rulers, the common people, the poets as well as the painters. In the love of gopis for Krishna, they interpreted the yearning of the human soul for God. For after all the sole purpose of Human existence is the union of the soul with the Supreme Being, and when this occurs, the individual achieves the bliss of Nirvana. It is the very reason for existence, and the soul yearns for this mystic union, as the gopis yearned for Krishna, or as a loving wife yearns for her husband, or the moth for the flame. In fact the Basohli artists have represented in a tangible and expressive form the entire material and spiritual texture of the life of the Hindus in the Western Himalayas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in their paintings.

### **CONCLUSION**

The first and most dramatic example of work from the hill states is from Basohli. Under Prince Kirpal Pal, Basohli developed a distinctive and magnificent style. It is characterised by a strong use of primary colours and warm yellows—filling the background and horizon, stylised treatment of vegetation and raised white paint for imitating the representation of pearls in ornaments. However, the most significant characteristic of Basohli painting is the use of small, shiny green particles of beetle wings to delineate jewellery and simulate the effect of emeralds. In their vibrant palette and elegance, they share the aesthetics of the Chaurpanchashika group of paintings of Western India.

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