

Chapter 9

Conclusion

The concern of the thesis was to comprehend the origins and sequential evolution of Chamba painting from the mid-17th century CE to the mid-18th century CE, in terms of style, subject matter, iconography, patronage and conceptualise the **Chamba school of painting**. The central argument of the thesis is to evaluate and investigate the organic development of Chamba as a centre of miniature painting in the context of its socio-political and religious climate and its impact on the establishment of painting ateliers, migration of artists from neighbouring states, and the rationale that directed the popular subject-matter in Chamba painting.

The second essential focus of the study has been to examine the evolution of Chamba painting in terms of style and trajectories, which led to the identification of numerous Chamba painting hands and their characterisation on stylistic grounds. This thesis also examines the painters' interactions with other craftsmen, such as carpenters and sculptors, in order to understand the source behind the iconographic devices in the painting tradition, as well as the influence of the painting's visual language on the sculpture and woodcarving traditions of the region and vice versa. In addition, rigorous palaeographic research of Takri and its parent scripts — Sharada and Devashesha — has been performed to comprehend the evolution of the script, which assisted in dating the visual material based on their inscriptions.

The findings of the research supported my hypothesis that Chamba was among the earliest centres of painting activity in the North-Western Himalayan region, with initial painting activity dating to the second reign of Raja Balabhadra Varmana (1621-1643). The hypothesis was majorly corroborated by the fact that no specimens – either in the form of manuscripts or wall-paintings – prior to this period came to my attention. Pictorial traditions must have certainly existed in Chamba in various forms, as copper-plate charters of 14th century bear engraved seals in the form of rosettes, and the designers of a vast number of fountain-stone slabs must have been familiar with the art of painting, though not necessarily the art of miniature painting. The factors that

paved way for the beginning of miniature painting in the erstwhile Chamba state in the early 17th century CE has origins in the political atmosphere in the region.

The overall art tradition of Chamba can broadly be divided into two groups, as mentioned in Chapter 3, the Kashmir influence through sculpture and woodcarving – 7th c CE to late 16th c CE; and the Mughal influence through painting and woodcarving – mid 17th c CE to late 18th c CE. Being situated in the crossroads of major political powers, Chamba was always in threat of invasions, and thus had to rely upon regional powers for security. From the reign of Raja Ajyavarmana (c. 760 CE), the state had acted as a vassal of Kashmir, an allegiance which made its influence marked in the regional sculpture and woodcarving tradition. In 17th century, Chamba came under direct subjugation of the Mughal empire, and new artistic sensibilities were introduced in the region. New sensibilities in the form of symbols and motifs of Perso-Timurid origin were introduced in the region. The emergence of these motifs in its initial stage was largely inspired from the Popular Mughal tradition.

The hypothesis that painting activity emerged in Chamba as a result of Mughal political influence is in accordance with the factors responsible for the beginning of art activity in the neighbouring states of Nurpur and Mandi, where patronage to miniature painting began immediately following Mughal contact.³¹³

Raja Balabhadra Varmana, who ruled Chamba under subjugation to Jagat Singh³¹⁴, was known for his religious piety, and must have invited painters to Chamba. As a painting atelier had already been founded in **Nurpur**, a group of painters appear to have migrated to Chamba. On the other hand, the only passage into Chamba was through Nurpur, so it was customary for painters to spend some time at Nurpur.

The formulating period of Chamba painting was during the second reign of Balabhadra Varmana (1623—41), even though the number of available specimens belonging to his reign is scarce. As the available paintings dating to his reign are limited in number, it greatly limits the understanding of the subject-matter in vogue in Chamba painting

³¹³ 4.1.2 Political Atmosphere of the Punjab Hills in the 17th Century and the Beginning of Pahari Painting in Nurpur and Mandi

³¹⁴ 3.2 Political History

in this period. A portrait of the Raja and a facial study of his son Bishambar are testament to the fact that portraiture must have been in vogue at Chamba. The Raja was certainly an ardent devotee of Vishnu, as he gave lavish land grants to Brahmins during his reign and constructed the Vamsigopala temple in the Chamba town. Consequently, the only available set to surface from his reign is the dispersed 'Bharat Kala Bhawan' Dasavatara set, four folios of which are preserved in the Bharat Kala Bhawan Museum, Banaras. A Narasimha Avatara painting belonging to this period has also come to my attention, bearing strong flavour of Popular Mughal sensibility. It is probable that this might not have been a standalone painting and depiction of other incarnations of Vishnu would certainly have been made. This painter family, in all possibility, settled down in Chamba and founded a painting workshop of their own. I have noted that the portrait of Balabhadra Varmana, the 'Bharat Kala Bhawan' Dasavatara set and the Narsimha Avatara painting are each rendered in completely different sensibilities. I have concluded that at least three separate guilds of painters had established workshops at Chamba during this period.

Simultaneously, painting activity in continuation of the Mughal visual language had already started taking form in **Mandi** during the reign of Raja Hari Sen (r. 1604/1616—37)³¹⁵. Being impressed by the Imperial painting of the period, he was inspired to either patronise a Mughal artist at Mandi or train a Mandi painter into the Mughal visual language. Young Prithvi Singh (future Raja Prithvi Singh of Chamba) grew up at Mandi in a period when Mandi painting had flourished. Witnessing the art from an early age, he must have been inspired to establish a painting atelier at Chamba after reconsolidating his state in 1641 CE. He was a much-travelled man and had visited the Mughal court nine times in his life. The political supremacy of Chamba during the reign of Prithvi Singh, his exposure to the Mughal court, the financial prosperity of the state, and his personal inclination towards the art of miniature painting inspired him to attract painters to Chamba, who migrated in several waves, while continuing patronage to the painters who had arrived at Chamba during the reign of Balabhadra Varmana.

³¹⁵ 4.1.2 Political Atmosphere of the Punjab Hills in the 17th Century and the Beginning of Pahari Painting in Nurpur and Mandi

The reign of Prithvi Singh (r. 1641—1664) ushered a new cultural movement at Chamba³¹⁶, since he was well received at the court of Shahjahan, and maintained cordial relationship with the emperor, visiting him nine times in his life. Woodcarvings belonging to this period showcase Perso-Timurid motifs, the most notable example of which is the Bharmour-Kothi doorway, depicting Prithvi Singh receiving Mahi-Maratib from Dara Shikoh. However, the paintings also bear formal and technical similarities to the paintings belonging to reign of Balabhadra Varmana, leading towards the understanding that a syncretic exchange between the Chamba and Mandi sensibilities must have likely taken form.

Raja Chattar Singh (r. 1664—90), the son and successor of Prithvi Singh, was certainly an important patron of painting, as a large number of paintings dating to his reign have come to my attention. His reign was also marked by the rise of Chamba as a regional political power which attracted painters from neighbouring states to migrate to Chamba. The Raja favoured portraiture, as I discovered a considerable number of portraits depicting his seven brothers and several neighbouring chieftains. During his reign, Chamba entered the stage of standardisation with established iconographies to be followed by the future generation of artists. This is evidenced in popular themes that developed in Chamba painting, which include Dasavatara, Bhagavata Purana, Ragamala, Parijata Harana, and Descent of Ganga.

Chattar Singh was succeeded by his infant son Udai Singh (r. 1690—1720), who emerged as the youngest patron of painting in the North-Western Himalayas. Like his father, also displayed an affinity for patronising painting, which continued throughout his lifetime, as indicated by several portraits of him in different stages of his life. A selection of portraits of Udai Singh from his adolescence to his youth to his assassination in 1720 demonstrate not only the evolution of the Raja's appearance, but also the various stages in the development of Chamba painting during the late 17th and early 18th centuries, especially the suggestion that different hands were active in Chamba simultaneously.

³¹⁶ 4.2.2 Prithvi Singh

Udai Singh was succeeded in the year 1720 CE by his cousin Ugar Singh amidst the period of political upheaval. He was appointed on the throne with the assistance of Raja Dhruv Dev of Jammu, who also married his daughter to the Chamba Raja. This political and matrimonial allegiance manifested in the visual language of Chamba painting during his time and culminated with the arrival of an itinerant painter from Jammu to Chamba.

Based on the documentary evidence available till this period, the nature of patronage at Chamba appears to be entirely royal. The nobility of Chamba – comprising of the close relatives and inner circle of the Raja, as well as officials and other important members of the court – might have been patronising paintings since the reign of Balabhadra Varmana, however, no documentary evidence has come to light. An example of Shakti Dehra temple at Gand-Dehra is worth mentioning, which was constructed by the influential Barotra family of Chamba in c. 1725 CE. The implication that the Raja was not the only patron in the state is substantial.

While painters enjoyed continuous support during the reign of Ugar Singh, unavailability of substantial evidence and dip in the scale of production of paintings during Dalel Singh's reign (1735—48), leads to the assumption that the patronage during this period was limited. The only aspect noteworthy of the reign of Dalel Singh with respect to the painting tradition of Chamba is the design of the Torana of the Lakshmi Narayana temple at Chamba attributed to the painters Laharu and Mahesh. Albeit the involvement of painters with the woodcarving is noted since the reign of Prithvi Singh, the Torana is among the earliest known instances in which the names of the painters indulged in activities other than painting are mentioned.

The resurgence of Chamba painting ushered with the reign of Umed Singh (r. 1748—64), led by the major commission of the murals of the Devi-Kothi temple. During this period, Umed Singh's brother and wazir Mian Shamsher Singh emerged as an important patron, with the commission of the 'Laharu Bhagavata Purana' set (dated. 1757) attributed to him. Prior to this period, the artists of Chamba remained anonymous, with no recorded inscriptions or signatures on paintings or other pertinent documents. Colophons would either not be added to complete sets or might have been lost with time. Like their sculpture or woodcarving counterparts, names of painters did

not find mention. It was during this period that the first recorded mention of the name of artist(s), the patron and the date of production took place.

An inscription in the Devi-Kothi temple identifies the mural painters as Jhanda and Gurdev, while a folio of the 'Laharu Bhagavata Purana' identifies the painter as Laharu and gives 1757 as the year of production. This new occurrence signifies the paradigm shift of the artist's status as an anonymous craftsman among sculptors and woodcarvers to that of an individual, signifying the ruling house's coming to terms with new trends in the painter-patron relationship.

The spontaneous growth of Chamba as a centre for painting paralleled the organic growth of popular themes and subject-matter. I determined that the prevalent subject-matter was a reflection of the personalities of the Rajas of Chamba, reflecting their interests, habits, fondness for poetry, music, and religious preferences. Additional investigation indicated that the popular themes also represent the socio-religious context of Chamba, as well as extensive folklore, regional legends, and mythologies.

Since portraits of all the Rajas, from Balabhadra Varmana to Umed Singh, came to my notice, I concluded that portraiture was among the most popular themes in Chamba painting.³¹⁷ Prior to the development of painting, portraiture existed in Chamba in the form of funerary plaques, hero-stones, votive reliefs, fountain-stone slabs, and decoration on temple *rathas*. Portraiture of living Rajas must have gained impetus due to contact with the Mughal court, where recording likenesses of the emperor, his nobility and the allies of the empire was a popular tradition. The popular modes of depicting the Rajas include – holding courts, meeting delegates of other states, smoking hookahs, enjoying singing and dancing performances, in the company of courtesans, or praying at shrines. Through the medium of these portraits, Rajas were able to record their political affiliations, preference of leisure, and religious inclinations.

The religious inclination of the Chamba ruling house by the beginning of the 17th century was largely Vaishnavite in nature, the emergence of which is credited to a

³¹⁷ 5.1 Portraiture

Bengali Brahmin Surananda, who was appointed the Rajguru of Chamba state. Pandit Surananda introduced a rather uncomplicated religious sect to an otherwise superstitious populace restrained by ritualistic worship.³¹⁸ Vaishnavism based on the essence of love became popular among the masses and set them free from the bondage of the priestly class. The wave of Vaishnavism coincided with the emergence of painting tradition and hence, subject-matter such as Dasavatara, Bhagavata Purana and Ramayana became popular themes in Chamba painting.

On examining the contents of the ten incarnations of Vishnu in various Puranas, I determined that while some episodes were derived from the Bhagavata Purana, some were derived from the Agni Purana, whereas an influence of Garuda Purana was also evident. Similarly, recurring references were also made to Skanda Purana. This finding led to the conclusion that the iconography of the Chamba Dasavatara paintings is not derived from a single source.

Furthermore, I realised that the Dasavatara iconography draws minimal inspiration from the local sculpture tradition and is highly influenced by the oral tradition of *Kathavachana*. The painters of the earliest Dasavatara sets must have derived their iconographic details from the *Kathavachana* tradition. Subsequently, the pictorial language of the early Dasavatara sets became standardised in accordance with the *Kathavachana* tradition, with successive painters adding features and additions in accordance with their own skill and understanding.

The focus towards the oral tradition was also partly inspired from the fact that the enumeration of the ten incarnations is in accordance with the contents of the Gita Govinda, further indicating the influence of oral and performative traditions on painting. I also noted that local beliefs have also influenced the iconography of the Dasavatara representations, as the depiction of Buddha is based on the idol of Avalokiteshwara in Udaipur, Lahul, which is venerated by Hindus as Shiva and the Buddhist populace as Buddha.

³¹⁸ 2.3 Religious background of Chamba

As a result of the Vaishnavite wave, Sanskrit texts such as Bhagavata Purana and Harivamsa Purana became popular and found recurring mentions in the legal documents and copper-plate charters of the early 17th century CE. Bhagavata Saptah, the week-long recitation of the Bhagavata Purana, became a traditional event in the North-Western Himalayas that is still organised in various villages. This information signifies the importance of Bhagavata Purana in Chamba, leading to the production of Bhagavata Purana sets.

The paintings of the Chamba Bhagavata Purana are based on the *Dasham Skanda* (10th canto) which is dedicated to the life of Krishna. These commence at the events conspiring towards the birth of Krishna and conclude with the killing of Kamsa. Four Bhagavata Purana sets, and murals on two wooden temples from this timeframe have come to my attention, indicating that it was a popular subject-matter at Chamba.

The epic of Ramayana also has an important role to play in the society of Chamba, as the Suryavamshi Rajputs of Chamba contextualise their descent from the lineage of Rama, and Ramayana paintings were likely commissioned by the Rajas to legitimise their own claim as descendants of the clan of Rama or to remind themselves of the ideal responsibilities of a king. The legend of Rama is celebrated in the bardic traditions of the Gaddi Rajput shepherds of Bharmour as *Ramyana*.

Surprisingly, only two Ramayana sets attributed to Laharu have come to my attention, dateable to c. 1760-1765. The paintings are based on a series of Ramayana themed drawings which are believed to be prepared in the generation prior to Laharu (c. 1730-1740 CE). In my opinion, the intricacy of the organisation of the paintings suggests that it could not have been the first time that Chamba artists attempted to constitute such elaborate sets. Hence, some previous full set, albeit no longer extant, from which they sought inspiration must have existed.

Other popular Vaishnavite themes in Chamba include the legend of Parijata Harana from the Harivamsa Purana, and the *dana-lila* episode. Parallel to the widespread Vaishnavite theme, the Rajas also exhibited their devotion to Durga through paintings based on Durgasaptasati. A number of handwritten manuscripts on the subject have

come to light, and a copper-plate charter dated 1748 CE mentions a land grant to a Brahmin for the recitation of the Durgasaptasati, indicating that the Shakta cult was largely prevalent in Chamba. While a number of standalone paintings of Durga have come to my attention, the only instance of a complete set dedicated to Durgasaptasati is in the form of an illustrated manuscript of which two folios are preserved in the Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba.

A detailed depiction of Durgasaptasati is rendered in the murals of the Shakti Dehra temple at Gand-Dehra, and the Devi-Kothi temple in Churah. However, the production of the intricate murals in the absence of reference material is a phenomenon as improbable as if the murals had materialised out of thin air. I have opined that an elaborate set must have certainly existed prior to the murals, from which the painters who executed the murals sought inspiration.

The subject of **Descent of Ganga** is a reflection of the folklore of Chamba, especially pertinent to hydromythology especially with regard to shortage of water which was believed to be solved by a sacrifice for an ulterior motive. As the Descent of Ganga subject-matter is of Shaivite nature, I also opined that the true inspiration behind its representation is the convergence of hydromyths with the origin of the Ravi river. In my opinion, the belief that Shiva resides in Bharmour from where the river Ravi originates has to contribute to the popularity of the Descent of Ganga in Chamba painting. Four paintings belonging to different periods though identical in iconographic lexicons have come to my attention.

Folk legends further find reference in Chamba painting in the form of popular subject-matter titled as **Ordeal by Liquor**, which is based on the popular regional narrative of a Vaishnavite saint surviving an ordeal by liquor administered by Jahangir during the latter's visit to Nurpur in 1621 CE. Narainji was a saint at the Pindori Shrine, and the Rajas of Chamba were ardent devotees of the establishment, justifying the recurring depiction of the narrative in Chamba painting. Three paintings based on the subject of Ordeal by Liquor has come to my attention.

Ragamala, based on the Kshemakarana system, is another popular subject-matter of Chamba painting, classifying 84 musical modes in families of Raga, Raginis and

Ragaputra, who are personified with descriptions of their origin, residence, physical attributes, costumes, ornaments, weapons and related activities. The poet also provides sound imagery for each mode, comparing the emotion they generate to the sounds found in nature.

On analysing the iconography of Chamba Ragamala sets, I noted that painters drew inspiration from the personification of the Ragas and their accompanying sound imagery. However, it also came to my attention that in many cases the artist has interpreted the Raga as per his own intellect, usually taking linguistic cues from the terminology and nomenclature of the Ragas. The varying iconographies were considered by the painter only in the case when the description of two modes was too similar to one another. Hence, in order to avoid repetition in terms of visuals, the painter used his own intellectual abilities to create further distinctions, which, with the course of time, resulted in a very esoteric and unique iconographic system at Chamba, which is not adopted by any other Pahari Ragamalas.

The most important conclusion I drew from my research of the predominant themes of Chamba painting is that the artists frequently drew iconographic inspiration from earlier works. Future generations of painters would use the preparatory resources passed down via their families as reference material. Thus, the distinctive interpretations of iconographies by the painters were adopted by their successors, resulting in the standardisation of a Chamba-specific, **esoteric iconographic lexicon**. While the painters at Chamba were not affiliated to the region with their styles, which differed from workshop to workshop, their iconographies became the criterion for categorising the many hands under the classification of Chamba painting. Through this investigation, it becomes clear that the painters are essentially following an uninterrupted and perpetual iconographic system, leading to the formation of an organic school of painting – characterised by varying styles, but cohesively bonded by a continual iconographic tradition.

In addition to paintings, I also branched out to study the painting tradition in the context of the regional sculpture and woodcarving to identify the source of

iconographies, as well as to examine the influence of sculpture and woodcarving on painting and vice versa.³¹⁹

The rationale behind the comparative examination of paintings with woodcarvings, metal-casting and sculpture was dictated by the hypothesis that the painters were dwelling in close vicinity of local craftsmen including sculptors and woodcarvers, and hence, an exchange of idea was natural to take place. As the early painters settled at Chamba were not native to the region, they must have brought new artistic sensibilities into the region from their centre of origin, while familiarising themselves with the pre-existing visual culture of Chamba.

This syncretism reflected in sculpture and woodcarving whereas the painters must have borrowed elements from the same into their oeuvre. This exchange contributed towards the development of a characteristic iconographic and typological lexicon, which was particular to Chamba, contouring the Chamba school of painting.

For the purpose of this study, a case study was formed which included a comparison of motifs from the hero-stones of Rajas, torana of the Laxmi Narayana Temple, wooden doorway of the Bharmour Kothi, and the woodcarvings of three Devi temples at Chamba.

The collaboration of painters, sculptors, metalsmiths, and carpenters resulted in a syncretism of diverse artistic processes, paving the way for multilateral exchange of iconographic and typological materials. This constant exchange resulted in the development of an iconographic tradition that binds together the numerous painting styles that were dominant in Chamba for a century. The findings of this study also culminated with the observation that 'style' is a fluid and adaptable mechanism that could change over time. Hence, a formalistic and iconographic comparison with other tangible material culture of an art centre is a more reliable criterion for assigning paintings to a certain school.

³¹⁹ Discussed in Chapter 6: A Comparative Study of Chamba Painting with the Sculpture and Woodcarving Tradition of the Region

The classification of Chamba paintings on the basis of the formalistic and typological analysis of paintings reveal that a number of distinct hands were active in Chamba simultaneously over the course of a century. As discussed earlier, since painters arrived from diverse backgrounds, they brought along their own sensibilities, and retained their individualistic character over time. My attempt to create trajectories of various styles and their chronological evolution over time resulted in the identification of eight major stylistic streams which were active in Chamba from mid-17th century to mid-18th century. Since only a handful of paintings bear the signature of the artists, the paintings were not attributed to the masters by name, and the labelling of ‘Style A’, ‘Style B’ was favoured for the convenience of distinction.

Noting formalistic similarities in the many painting sets executed by diverse hands, it is implied that the painters at Chamba worked in close proximity to one another and frequently exchanged ideas and assimilated elements from other workshops into their own work — a normal occurrence in such an environment.

This leads to the conclusion that a **homogenous ‘Chamba style’ does not exist**. This insight was highly beneficial in understanding the evolution of Chamba painting in terms of style, and categorisation of paintings.

The findings of the research paint the picture of Chamba as a major centre of painting activity where Rajas generously provided patronage to artists migrating from diverse backgrounds. Painting must have been considered as an act of great significance as even during the periods of political turmoil the patronage to artists was constant. With the passage of time, the visual language of paintings began to overshadow other artforms of Chamba and were favoured over the traditional iconography of woodcarving and sculpture, indicating the rise of the status of the painter among other craftsmen.

The research also reflected upon the nature of style as a flexible and adaptable element which can be transformed over time or through generational difference, and hence not a reliable criterion to assign paintings. Given the lack of information pertaining to the families of the craftsmen, the position that style has a genealogical character was

eschewed, instead of a focus on the master-disciple relationship which is not necessarily genealogical in nature.