

**Studies into the Origin and Development of the Chamba School of Painting From Mid-Seventeenth to Mid-Eighteenth Century: An Analysis of the Evolution of Style, Patronage and Subject-Matter in the Painting Tradition**

**SYNOPSIS**

The valley of Chamba, located in the North-Western Himalayas, is a prominent centre of Pahari painting with available evidence suggesting the tradition of painting activity dating back to the first half of the 17th century. The politically stable and financially affluent monarchy patronised miniature artists from various regions of North India who migrated to the hill-states in several waves. The mobility of painters and the fusion of their various techniques over the ages lead to the emergence of the Chamba school of painting which has perplexed academics for decades, as the traditional classification of Pahari schools is done on the basis of style, resulting in an ambivalent perspective regarding the individuality of Chamba as a school of painting. Therefore, the fundamental aim of the present research is to find the origins of Chamba school and follow the evolutionary development of Chamba painting in terms of patronage, style, and iconography.

The area of research is built around the time period of about one hundred years, from mid-17th to mid-18th century. Sites of Nurpur and Mandi are also selected for investigation due to their geographical proximity and political relationship with Chamba. A study of the political history of the region, genealogies of artists, and a visual examination of miniature paintings and temple murals of the region is done for this purpose.

**Objectives of the Study**

The primary objective of the study is to delineate the sequential evolution of Chamba school of painting in terms of style, subject-matter, iconography and patronage. The work is aimed at the following:

1. Tracing the development of scholarship in the study of Chamba painting.
2. Evaluating the interaction between the sub-Imperial Pahari and Imperial Mughal courts, which resulted in a bilateral cultural exchange.
3. Examining the social and political context of the North-Western Himalayas in the seventeenth century, the circumstances that contributed to the creation of miniature painting in the region, and the artists' migration patterns between centres.
4. Understanding the political and matrimonial relationships that existed between various hill states which resulted in the exchange of artists and artworks.
5. Differentiating between distinct painting hands and identifying the origins of their mannerisms. This is accomplished by employing the Morellian scientific approach to examine minute details and procedures such as face-types, line quality, colour composition, and handling of physiognomies.
6. Evaluating the influence of pre-existing craft traditions on the painting tradition and the traditions inspired by Pahari painting. For instance, the impact of the sculpture tradition on miniature painting and the influence of miniature painting on woodcarving.

## **Outline of the Thesis**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter primarily discusses the objectives of the research and scope of the present work with a general discussion on the history of scholarship on Chamba school. It includes the description of the existing knowledge about the early beginning and sequential development of Chamba painting. The chapter also incorporates a discussion on the conventional norms which determine the categorisation and classification of Pahari painting and at times justifies, and at times contents the agencies and devices which have been employed in the study of Chamba as a painting centre.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

The chapter discusses and illustrates the many approaches undertaken to investigate the evolution and development of Chamba painting. The methodologies used in this study include selection of sites for documentation, ethnographic survey of Chamba, evaluation of political and historical accounts, analysis of style, examination of iconography in painting, study of sculpture and woodcarving tradition, and palaeographic analysis of Takri and Sharada inscriptions on paintings, copper-plate charters, rock inscriptions, and temple inscriptions. The various methods and approaches which have been employed in the present work to analyse the factors that influenced the development of Chamba painting are detailed.

## **Chapter 3: Socio-Political and Cultural Background of Chamba**

This chapter's principal objective is to examine and investigate the numerous social, political, and cultural factors that influenced and shaped the painting tradition of Chamba. This chapter is critical for understanding the circumstances that contributed to the emergence of Chamba painting in the seventeenth century, the migration of painters from various centres, the evolution of subject matter, and the interaction of painters with other Chamba artisans. The chapter's primary concerns include – the topography of Chamba, the political history of the royal family, the genealogy of the Rajas, the cults and religious beliefs prevalent in the region, the social division of the masses, and the urban layout of the Chamba town.

## **Chapter 4: The Emergence of Chamba Painting and its Development till 1760 CE**

The prime focus of this chapter is to understand the emergence of Chamba as a leading centre of painting in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, and its chronological development till 1760. The foremost concern of the chapter is to understand the sequential evolution and development of the nature of patronage, which is mostly hereditary in nature. The chapter is critical in order to understand the political inclinations and religious mindsets of the various Rajas of Chamba which contributed towards the development of popular subject-matter at Chamba. The migration of several artist families in the reigns of the respective Rajas is discussed elaborately in the chapter. The patrons who form the core of this chapter include – Raja Balabhadra Varmana (r. 1589—1641), Raja Prithvi Singh (r. 1641—1664), Raja Chattar Singh (r. 1664—1690), Raja Udai

Singh (r. 1690—1720), Raja Umed Singh (r. 1720—1735), Raja Dalel Singh (r. 1735—1748), and Raja Umed Singh (r. 1748—1764).

### **Chapter 5: Themes and Subject-Matter in Chamba Painting: An Analysis**

This chapter deals with the popular themes and subject-matter prevalent in Chamba painting during the period between mid-17<sup>th</sup> and mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. An analysis of the subject-matter and its synthesis with the personal lives and tastes of the Rajas of Chamba does not only tell us about the nature of patronage provided at Chamba, but also helps in order to highlight key elements of the treatment of the subject-matter including compositional elements and iconographic motifs which remain particular to Chamba. The factors which led to the development of the subject-matter and shaped the iconographic standard of Chamba painting are elaborated. The popular subject-matter which is studied in the chapter includes – Portraiture, Dasavatara, Bhagavata Purana, Ramayana, and Ragamala. Minor subject-matter including Durgasaptasati, Shalihotra Samhita, Svapna Darpana, the legend of the two Goswamis, Taking of the Toll, and Descent of the Ganges are also considered. Other than paintings, the wall murals of the Shakti Devi Temple at Gand-Dehra and the Devi-Kothi temple at Churah are also taken into consideration.

### **Chapter 6: Influences and Innovations: Analysing the Collaboration of Painters with Regional Sculptors, Metalsmiths and Woodcarvers**

The chapter is focused on the iconographic, symbolic, and typological elements of Chamba painting that are related to motifs and symbols found in the region's sculpture and woodcarving heritage, which dates back to the seventh century. The chapter illustrates that the painters in Chamba fundamentally followed an uninterrupted and perpetual iconographic system that emerged as a result of a bilateral exchange with sculpture and woodcarving traditions. The iconography, typology, and symbolism of – the Rajas' hero-stones, the Torana of the Laxmi Narayana Temple, the wooden doorways of the Bharmour Kothi, and the woodcarvings of three Devi temples at Chamba – are used to establish the visual correlation and association of Chamba's sculpture, woodcarving, and metal-casting with the miniature painting tradition. References to regional architecture and the tradition of Chamba Rumal embroidery are also made cursorily.

## **Chapter 7: Classification of Chamba Painting on the Basis of Style**

A stylistic analysis of the various hands active at Chamba is done to serve a twofold purpose: to reveal the individualistic characteristics of a painting workshop; and to understand the dominant visual language of Chamba painting on the whole. The methodological framework which is undertaken in this chapter relies comprehensively on the stylistic examination of paintings. The examination focuses on the depiction of human figures, including face types, physiognomies, the representation of the eyes, nose, chin, ears, hands, and feet, as well as jewellery, clothing, headdress, and hairstyles. At the secondary level, an examination of – line types; colour composition; and pigment selection – is considered. Similarly, a visual study of compositional aspects such as architecture, flora and fauna, decorative motifs, handling of the backdrop, and depiction of the ground and sky is done. The stylistic analysis gestured towards the presence of more than one painting workshops at Chamba during the mid-17th to mid-18th century. Hence, the several portraits of the Rajas of Chamba are considered as evidence suggesting royal patronage that was continuously provided to these schools over the generations. A chronological trajectory of the various schools from their origin to their development as well as their successive decline has also been drawn.

## **Chapter 8: Chronological Arrangement of Chamba Painting (1650—1750)**

The chapter is a culmination of the findings of the research which have helped in order to understand the development of Chamba school in terms of style, iconography, and patronage. The chapter employs the various methodologies, dating mechanisms and stylistic attributions to arrange major sets of paintings from Chamba in a chronological order.

## **Chapter 9: Conclusion**

This chapter outlines the major findings of the thesis and summarises the results of the research. It deals with the outcomes of the study, addressing the hypotheses that were underlined in the beginning of the thesis, and discusses how the results are aligned. The chapter also discusses the various trajectories of Chamba painting, the role of patrons, and the concept of style.

## STATEMENT-I

(Statement showing the particulars, on which the work is based, the discovery of new facts and of new relationships between facts observed by others and how the work tends to help the general advancement of knowledge.)

Chamba remains as one of the earliest and most important centres of Pahari painting. The financial prosperity of Chamba allowed the Rajas to patronage several painter families to work at the royal atelier parallelly, resulting in the simultaneous growth of many painting styles. The stylistic categorisation of Pahari painting is helpful in order to study the origins and evolutions of the various schools of painting. However, the classification of Pahari schools in terms of style has resulted in an ambivalent perspective regarding the individuality of Chamba as a school of painting.

Therefore, the fundamental aim of the present research is to find the origins of Chamba school and follow the evolutionary development of Chamba painting in terms of patronage, style, and iconography.

This dissertation adds up the following advancements in the existing knowledge of the paintings of Chamba.

1. First detailed study of Chamba painting in terms of style, iconography, subject-matter and patronage.
2. Emergence of Chamba as the most prolific and consistent centre of Pahari painting.
3. Identification and classification of various Chamba painting styles and the individualistic analysis of their gradual evolution over time.
4. Discovery of the influence of sculpture and metalcraft on painting tradition and vice versa.
5. A number of Ragamala sets previously attributed to various schools have been identified and attributed to Chamba.
6. A number of Bhagavata Purana sets previously attributed to various schools have been identified and attributed to Chamba.
7. Discovery of symbolism in the posthumous portraits made at Chamba.
8. Identification of a number of portraits of the Rajas of Chamba.

9. Identification of the 'Bathu set' as one of the early specimens of Chamba painting, creating a new definition of painting activity which was in vogue during the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century.
10. Identification of portraits of two Rajas of Guler made at Chamba.
11. Comparison of the iconography and compositional elements of several Dasavatara and Ragamala paintings suggest that instead of following the theory of 'family as the basis of style', the artists of Chamba, belonging to different workshops and generations, share a commonality on the grounds of iconography. Hence, iconography becomes the basis of attribution.
12. The revised study of the Chamba school of painting is a major contributor in reconstructing the art history of the region which remained oblivious earlier. The complex processes like the several waves of migration, suggest that more than one painter family had been active in Chamba, but have not been studied. The present research therefore analysed the data both from the literature and visual analysis and brought into light evidence which would help to untangle the visual history of Pahari painting in general.

## STATEMENT II

(Statement indicating the sources of information and the extent to which the thesis is based on the works of others and the portion of the thesis claimed as original.)

The main objective of the present research was to locate the origins and trace the evolution of Chamba painting, based on the analysis of the stylistic and iconographic elements of Pahari painting in museums and private collections in India and abroad, along with the study of the political history of the region, undertaken by the researcher between 2018-2023. The earlier work of the scholarship on Pahari painting has been useful in providing data for further investigations.

The portions claimed as original in this thesis are the identification of recently discovered portrait of the Rajas of Chamba, identification of the 'Bathu set' as one of the early specimens of Chamba painting, attribution of several Ragamala and Dasavatara sets to Chamba, a revised sequential arrangement of paintings to understand the stylistic evolution in a linear manner, understanding symbolism in the sculpture and painting tradition of the region, and considering iconography as the basis of attribution.

The following is the list of selected references upon which the basic concepts of the thesis have been formulated.

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