

Chapter 1

Introduction

In the early 20th century, the tradition of miniature painting that flourished in the various hill-states of the North-Western Himalayas from the 17th century onwards, known collectively and commonly as Pahari painting, attracted substantial scholarly interest. On the basis of stylistic analysis and provenance, the earliest investigations focused primarily on the categorization of paintings into distinct "schools" or centres of painting. Hence, as a result, the paintings were largely categorised into major classifications such as Basohli, Kangra, Mandi, Chamba etc.

Despite its provision of a temporal framework, this method exhibits limited efficacy in capturing the nuanced intricacies and addressing the multifaceted nature inherent in the movement of paintings between distinct artistic centres. The movement of artworks was notably influenced by diverse factors, encompassing matrimonial alliances, diplomatic exchanges, fluctuations in political power dynamics, and the mobility of artists and rulers.

Early scholars of Pahari painting overlooked exploring these crucial phenomena. Consequently, the abrupt and unexplained shifts in artistic sensibilities have resulted in misattributions of paintings to disparate schools, thereby disrupting the coherent trajectory of individual schools and imposing limitations on the comprehensive understanding of evolutionary trajectory within the painting tradition.

Rising interest in the social and political aspects of Pahari painting in the last quarter of the 20th century has greatly aided our comprehension of the evolution of Pahari painting as a whole, as well as the individual development of the various painting schools. A number of scholars have investigated the contribution of migrating painter families and the impact of changing political tides on Pahari painting, resulting in a greater understanding of schools such as Guler and Kangra.

Chamba of the early 17th century as a centre of miniature painting became the nexus of my study Pahari painting due to several factors which made it to be the most favourable centre where miniature painting could have emerged and bloomed from its most rudimentary state to its sophisticated and matured form. Among the primary factors exists its geographic location, which places it in close proximity to Nurpur and Basohli, two prominent centres of miniature painting in the region in the 17th century. Not only was Chamba geographically close to the two chiefdoms, but also maintained diplomatic ties with the respective courts. As painting tradition had already begun to take form at these centres by the mid-17th century, it was likely that painting activity in some form must have existed in Chamba as well.

The Varmana dynasty of Chamba (6th century CE – 20th century CE) is considered among the oldest ruling houses of the North-Western Himalayas which reigned uninterruptedly for a course of more than fifteen centuries. The state must have been of some significance at the intra-regional level, as the counsel of the Rajas of Chamba was requested for several political matters over the centuries. Similarly, the Chamba throne must have been held high at the Mughal court as well, as the Imperial court intervened many a times in the political matters of the North-Western Himalayas, always in favour of Chamba. The close association of the Mughal court with the Rajas of Chamba, and the frequent visits of Raja Prithvi Singh (r. 1641—64) at the court of emperor Shah Jahan must have certainly paved way for some artists trained in the Mughal sensibility to work at Chamba. The political stability of Chamba compared to the plains of Punjab in the period from 1650 CE to 1750 CE must have compelled painters to seek patronage at a state of Chamba's reputation. The same factor would have also contributed towards the migration of painters from neighbouring Nurpur, Basohli and Mandi, where painting ateliers had already been established by then.

The third important factor which led to my hypothesis of Chamba being a prominent centre of miniature painting was the financial affluence of the state. While the actual details pertaining to the financial matters of the erstwhile state are unknown, it could be assumed that the Chamba throne possessed considerable

amount of wealth, given the vast number of magnificent temples in and around the Chamba town, the construction of which could not have been a task of inconsiderable extravagance. Jahangir in Tuzk-i-Jahangiri mentions Raja Janardan Varmana of Chamba as 'the mightiest zamindar of the hill country.' He also mentions that the Raja had never sent tribute to any monarch, further suggestive of the financial independence of the Chamba state. Furthermore, the chiefdom also had important trade centres such as Bhalei and Chattargarh which emerged as flourishing emporiums of Central Asian trade and must have earned the throne significant revenue. The financial stability and affluence must have been another catalyst which not only attracted painters from distant centres towards Chamba, but also made their employment for generations possible. This information led to my initial assumption that more than one painter family must have been dwelling in Chamba in 17th century and continued working for the Chamba court for generations.

The last important factor contributing towards my hypothesis of Chamba being a major centre of miniature painting was the rich and abundant cultural heritage that Chamba had amassed over the years. Beginning from the 6th century, the Varmana ruling family had been patronising extravagant commissions of temples, earlier in Bharmour, and then in Chamba after the shift of capital in the 11th century. The Nagara temples in stone, dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu and Devi, are considered among the finest specimens of temple architecture in North India. There has also been a history of sophisticated sculptural tradition which borrows elements from Kashmir as well as Post-Gupta sensibilities. Other than these, remarkable specimens of woodcarving that exist in the complexes of Lakshana Devi Temple at Bharmour and Shakti Devi Temple at Chattarari also signify the presence of an awe-inspiring tradition of woodcarving that flourished in Chamba since the 6th century.

Considering these examples leads to the understanding that, firstly, the Rajas of Chamba were admirers of art, and gave whole-hearted patronage to art activity in the chiefdom; and secondly, patronising religious art must have been considered an act of piety, and hence magnificent temples embellished with stone sculptures and woodcarvings were raised. These characteristics contribute towards the

assumption that the art loving Rajas of Chamba must have also patronised paintings on a grand scale. The commission of paintings must have also been considered as an act of piety, as majority of the paintings are based on the episodes of Ramayana, Bhagavata Purana, Dasavatara, and the exploits of the Devi.

Considering these factors, with the hypothesis of Chamba state being a forerunner among the various schools of Pahari painting, my work focuses on the emergence of Chamba painting in the early 17th century, the evolution of various styles in vogue in the painting tradition, the nature of patronage, and the sources of iconography and typology in Chamba painting, between the timeframe of mid-17th century to mid-18th century.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to elucidate the conception of the Chamba school of painting, encompassing aspects of style, subject-matter, iconography, and patronage. The objectives of this work are as follows:

1. To assess the sociopolitical factors that set the backdrop for the emergence and development of the miniature painting tradition in Chamba. This entails exploring the political history of Chamba, the relationships forged by the Chamba court with other ruling houses in the Pahari region, as well as the Imperial Mughal authority.

Of particular interest is the status of Chamba in the 17th century political landscape and its role in establishing painting workshops. Additionally, the study focuses on the religious context of the ruling house of Chamba and the general populace, seeking to comprehend the social factors that compelled the Rajas to patronise painting and influenced the popular subject-matter in Chamba painting.

2. To examine the factors that led to the migration of painters from various painting centres to Chamba. This involves investigating the influences behind artisans migrating to Chamba from other painting centres. A central hypothesis

is that the Chamba court patronized painters from distant origins. The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that prompted painters to migrate to Chamba, such as the cessation of patronage in their previous centres, the pursuit of better financial prospects, matrimonial and diplomatic ties between ruling houses, and the travels of the Rajas.

3. To understand the nature of patronage extended to the painters and evaluate the interest of the Chamba nobility in supporting painting. In the context of Pahari painting, it is widely assumed that the king is the primary patron. This study seeks to identify the role of non-regal patrons, including the Wazirs and nobility, in supporting painting. Notable individuals include the seven brothers of Raja Chattar Singh (c. 1664—90), Mian Shamsher Singh, the brother of Raja Umed Singh (r. 1648—64), and the influential Barotra family.
4. To determine the prevalent themes and subject-matter in Chamba painting and trace their literary sources and identify iconographic patterns. This objective is crucial for understanding the factors that contributed to the development of themes, the origins of their iconography, and the transmission of visual elements from one generation to the next. Key considerations include identifying various subjects prevalent in Chamba painting, the motivations behind their commissioning, the visual components associated with these themes and their origins, and the evolution of this iconographic syntax.
5. To ascertain the position of the painter within the social and political milieu of Chamba and their status in relation to other artisans and craftspeople. This study has revealed instances where painters worked alongside sculptors, metal-craftsmen, and woodcarvers on various commissions. Analysing the status of Chamba painters among other artisans in the town aims to understand the nature of synthesis that occurred between painters and other craftspeople.
6. To evaluate the reciprocal impact of pre-existing art practices on miniature painting and vice versa. This study focuses on the bilateral exchange between painters and other artisans, resulting in typological elements inspired by sculpture and woodcarving traditions being incorporated into the painting

lexicon, while woodcarvers and sculptors adopt visual elements from paintings into their own works.

7. To identify various painting styles prevalent in Chamba, tracing their origin and systematic development over generations. Given that painters in Chamba hailed from diverse backgrounds, their body of work exhibited a notable range of stylistic and formalistic diversity. This study aims to trace the systematic evolution of eight distinct styles that I identified to have been popular in Chamba from the mid-17th to mid-18th centuries.

1.2 The Question of 'Style'

In the realm of the scholarship of Pahari painting, style has emerged as a foremost criterion for the classification of diverse schools. This emphasis on stylistic analysis to discern distinctive artistic sensibilities of each school traces its roots back to Coomaraswamy's seminal work, the monumental treatise "Rajput Painting" (1916). Subsequently, Karl Khandalavala's comprehensive volume "Pahari Miniature Painting" (1958) delved into stylistic nuances, meticulously documenting variations in facial features, eyes, and jewellery as hallmarks of different painting styles prevalent across various schools. Building upon these foundations, Goswamy's groundbreaking article, "Family as the Basis of Style" (1968), shed illuminating light on the hereditary transmission of painting styles across generations, akin to the *gharanas* (lineages) observed in Hindustani music tradition. Consequently, the concept of 'style' has become intrinsically linked to that of a 'school', rooted in the deeply ingrained notion that each school possesses a distinctive painting atelier characterised by a specific and homogenous stylistic approach.

Chamba occupies a unique position as a result of the extraordinary coexistence of multiple lineages of painters who were active concurrently, thereby exhibiting striking stylistic and formalistic disparities which essentialises Chamba school of painting. Researchers have attributed paintings that I believe were created for the Chamba court to distinct painting centres, primarily Bilaspur and Nurpur, due to the existence of those stylistic manifestations within Chamba painting.

Consequently, the investigation of the evolutionary trajectories of these styles across generations of painters constitutes a significant focus of this study.

My research is centred on a fundamental inquiry into the inherent nature of style in Chamba painting. The extent to which artistic expression was subjected to external influences, particularly the preferences of patrons who commissioned these works of art, is the subject of scholarly inquiry. The research questions whether the patrons harboured particular aesthetic preferences, compelling painters to adhere to particular stylistic paradigms. This perspective posits that painters may have lacked complete artistic agency in their choice of preferred styles, instead being compelled to modify their creative endeavours to meet the demands of patrons.

In contrast, the study also addresses the possibility whether Chamba painters enjoyed a degree of artistic autonomy, allowing them the freedom to make their own creative decisions and stylistic preferences. This perspective suggests that the observed variations in stylistic expression within Chamba painting may have originated from the painters' own artistic sensibilities, as opposed to being imposed from without.

In addition, the study investigates the popular methodology of assertion of the transmission of stylistic tradition through hereditary channels. The investigation and the subsequent overruling of hereditary transmission of style in Chamba school adds a layer of complexity to its understanding, eliciting questions about the influence of lineage, training, and apprenticeship on the formation and development of artistic style among Chamba painters.

1.3 Subject-Matter and the Generational Continuity of Typological Elements

The subject-matter depicted in Chamba paintings between 1650 and 1750 may reflect the preferences of patrons, but also functions as a cultural reflection of Chamba's larger society. These works of art provide a window into the religious fervour, musical and dance traditions, folk narratives, and oral heritage that permeated the population of Chamba. Despite the significant differences in the

personalities of the succeeding Rajas, the subject-matter of the paintings remained remarkably consistent and uninterrupted. This recurrent thematic continuity necessitates an investigation into the social and cultural milieu that spawned these works of art.

This study uses the socio-political context of Chamba as a lens to discern the sources and inspirations that influenced the patrons' choice of subject-matter. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the intricate social complexities that influenced the Chamba state. It examines how the religious practises, cultural traditions, and prevalent beliefs of local populace influenced the choice of subject-matter. Through a thorough examination, the study aims to shed light on the underlying social dynamics that underpin Chamba society and manifest through the paintings.

My research implies that Chamba paintings exhibit a wide variety of stylistic characteristics, however its unifying element is characterised by typological and compositional similarities. I postulate that the subject-matter that evolved in Chamba is rooted in local oral traditions, folklore, and firmly held beliefs. These cultural influences played a pivotal role in shaping the iconography and typology of Chamba paintings during their formative stages, resulting in a framework that persisted for generations.

Evidently, Chamba painters historically drew inspiration from the works of their predecessors, using preparatory sketches, drawings, and paintings conserved in workshops as invaluable resources for their own artistic endeavours. This practise resulted in shared iconographic and typographical details that serve as the ties that bound these disparate paintings together, despite their divergent aesthetic sensibilities.

By examining the subject-matter of Chamba painting and elucidating its connection to the socio-cultural tapestry of the region, this study seeks to decipher the complex relationship between art and society. It seeks to illuminate the motivations, inspirations, and creative processes that contributed to the formation of subject-matter of Chamba painting.

Using an interdisciplinary approach that includes art historical analysis, socio-cultural examination, and archival research, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interaction between artistic expression, societal influences, and formation of a distinctive artistic heritage in the realm of Chamba.

1.4 Shared Patronage: Participation of the Nobility

The attribution that Raja as the primary patronage of Pahari painting is based on the widespread belief that Pahari paintings were created during the reign of particular Rajas. This interpretation is supported by the existence of documentary evidence, such as land grants and temple inscriptions, which indicate the Raja's role as the chief patron within the chiefdom. In addition, the abundance of portraits depicting Rajas lends credence to the theory that they had a vested interest in having their likenesses immortalised in art.

The belief that only the Raja possessed the necessary financial resources to support artistic endeavours in the petty chiefdoms of the North-Western Himalayas is an additional factor that contributes to the perception of royal patronage in Pahari painting. This presumption is based on the belief that the Rajas primarily supported other artistic endeavours, such as temple construction and sculpture commissions. Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that painting, as an integral part of the larger artistic milieu, would also fall under the scope of royal patronage. The potential contributions of non-royal patrons to the support and promotion of miniature painting in the region have been marginalised or neglected as a result of this prevalent viewpoint.

This research aims to rectify this omission by employing a broader perspective on the nature of patronage in Pahari painting. It argues that individuals intimately associated with the Raja, such as his relatives and members of the Chamba nobility, also actively commissioned paintings, contradicting the notion that the Raja was the sole patron. While acknowledging the central importance of the Raja as a primary patron, the study asserts that other patrons played influential roles in

nurturing the art of miniature painting in the North-Western Himalayas, in relevance of political history, inscriptions on painting and other corroborating evidence. In order to contextualise the paintings within historical frameworks, the study proceeds to consider the respective Rajas' reigns as relevant references.

This study also seeks to shed light on the diverse array of individuals who contributed to the flourishing of Chamba painting by conducting a comprehensive examination of the patronage dynamics beyond the Raja. It attempts to investigate the motivations, interests, and relationships of these patrons, thereby enhancing our comprehension of the complex sociocultural milieu that fostered and sustained the art form. By reassessing the multifaceted nature of patronage, this study aims to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the historical development of miniature painting in the North-Western Himalayas.