

## Nature in Pahari Miniature Paintings

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Nature, with its awesome manifold energy both benign and destructive, has always played an elemental role in Indian art and life. Its seasonal power is manifested most dramatically in the monsoon rains, which fertilize and regenerate the earth after the searing summer heat. This life giving transformation of the landscape has been celebrated in most ages by our poets in Sanskrit as well as in the vernacular literature, in Indian sculpture and painting that are based on the former.

The finest, most luxuriant, splendid and enchanting treatment of Nature has found expression in Pahari miniature paintings that flourished for two centuries from the 18<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the courts of the Rajput rulers of thirty-five erstwhile Punjab Hill States that were welded together to form the modern state of Himachal. Most of the Rajput rulers of these states, steeped in refined aristocratic culture, maintained ateliers of court artists who gave rise to local schools of Pahari miniature paintings known as Guler, Chamba, Kangra, Kulu, Mandi, Nurpur, etc. To these may be added the painting schools of Basohli, Jammu and Garhwal that lie outside of Himachal.

The themes of these paintings were religious, but the largest number revolves around the Kṛṣṇa legend, especially his romantic escapades with Rādhā and the *gopīs* of Braja. These gave the Pahari artists ample opportunities to paint dream-like landscapes, the inspiration for which mostly came from the natural surroundings in which they lived. Most of the areas where the art of painting flourished are located in the Shivalik hills, renowned for their picturesque sylvan settings, verdant hills and dales, dense forests with all kinds of beautiful trees laden with fruits and flowers, delicate flowering shrubs, the gushing waters of the waterfalls, rivers and gurgling streams flowing past the green meadows. The clean, crisp mountain air refreshes not only the mind and

soul of the natives, but also the natural beauty of the undulating hills, the constantly changing moods of the seasons from sunrise to sunset, followed by starry dark as well as moonlit nights bathed in the silvery coolness. The whole atmosphere is charged with the melodious cooing of the cuckoo and the chirping of a variety of birds. The peacocks dance in the green meadows; the cows sit spellbound by the melodious notes of Kṛṣṇa's flute near the banks of the river Yamunā.

The hills were a haven for body and soul. The hills and mountains are painted in all their loveliness in these paintings. Śiva along with his family wandered or danced in the snow-capped rugged ranges of Mount Kailāśa. Kṛṣṇa roamed in the woodlands of the flower-bedecked foothills. At the hour of the cowdust, when the herds returned home, Kṛṣṇa played his flute and the hill rivulet swelled into the river Yamunā flowing by Vrindavan. In the dreamland of the hills, the Pahari artists revealed their own vision. The rhythm and curves of the hill forest, trees and creepers are woven into a unified pattern with the graceful movements of the *nāyikās* and with the rhythmic fall of their drapery. A hill storm with clouds about to burst poignantly emphasises the growing anguish in the heart of a long separated and unhappy *nāyikā*. The pale white of the hill palace stresses the purity of the fair maiden who pines within, constant to her absent husband. The clear flower-scented starlit summer night such as is seen only in the hills seems to say, in the words of Vidyāpati : "there is no greater bliss for any heart than loving you, o fair maid!"

In spring time, every accent in Nature is a reminder of what the poets had sung about : the cuckoo ceaselessly calling out to her mate, exulting in the joy of spring; the bees roaming around in thieving bands, stealing honey from the buds. Love is the main spring of existence. In the hill forests, the large-eyed deer roam, the white musk roses, yellow creepers, jasmine and pink peach buds and salmon coloured apricot blossoms – all these add colour, sometimes vivid, sometimes delicate, to this woodland; this is an enchanting world which at dawn assumes the form of a pretty, fairy landscape, and at dusk becomes strange, mysterious and haunted.

In most miniature paintings, Kṛṣṇa sports in the lush woodlands in the hilly area, and dances in the green grassy meadows with the *gopīs* (milkmaids). The bank of the river Yamunā studded with pink lotuses plays an important

part in the setting. In almost all the paintings, the river bank in the foreground is the meeting place for the eternal lovers Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa who stand under the shady mango tree. Around the dark trunk of the mango tree meanders the *mādhavī* creeper with its pale yellow flowers. A pair of birds perched atop the branches is intently gazing at each other, exactly like Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, and this symbolism has been further intensified by the imagery of the creeper entwined around the tree, like a *nāyikā* (beloved) clinging to her lover. This imagery, common to most Pahari miniature paintings, is derived from ancient Sanskrit literature that alludes to the marriage of the mango tree with the *mādhavī* creeper. The gentle spurs of the verdant hills studded with trees, the murmuring flow of the waters, the gently blowing breeze is audible to a sensitive connoisseur.

In the treatment of Nature, the theme of the *nāyaka-nāyikā-bheda* that captures the moods and emotions of the lovers (*nāyakas*) and beloveds (*nāyikās*) in union and separation, the six seasons (*ṣaṭartu*) in the year and the melodious musical modes (the *rāgamālā*) played a very significant role. In the rainy season, the dark rain clouds overhanging in the sky with golden streaks of lightning and the flight of white *sārasa* (cranes) in picturesque flocks and water dripping in fast descending rain drops tending towards heavy downpour, violently shaken by the wind, the movement of which is observed in the direction in which bend and quiver the boughs and foliage of plants and trees, in the joy of the peacocks dancing with colourful feathers spread out, is all vivid in many paintings of the Kangra and Basohli schools, particularly of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa caught in the rain, sometimes welcoming it and at other times pretending to escape from it. In one of the paintings, the clouds seem to be determined to inconvenience the Divine Lovers, as they move away fast to a rain shelter. The wild movement of the wind is obvious in the sway of the trees and their boughs. In another painting, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa enjoy the shower from the clouds as they are protected by a cover. In this painting, the fast falling raindrops are meticulously painted.

In the paintings illustrative of the *Megha-malhāra rāga*, the cranes against the rain clouds are picturesque and the music of Kṛṣṇa's flute seems to enliven the atmosphere. The clouds create a pang in the heart of the lovers separated from one another.

A rain-swept landscape is depicted by a series of straight white parallel

lines set extremely close to each other. A continuous streak of thin curling lightning extends along the cloud laden sky from end to end. Sometimes the background of the woodland, particularly in the *nāyikā* paintings, has an eerie atmosphere of fantasy with its bizarre tree forms. A river is depicted by scroll-like ripples in some Pahari paintings.

The *rāgas* or the musical melodies create a mood of joy, gaiety, and yearning. The *Rāginī Vasanta* is visualised by the spectacle of Kṛṣṇa dancing with *gopīs* against a background of flowering trees. *Rāginī Toḍī* always shows a beautiful woman playing on a *vīṇā* and surrounded by a gazelle, who is charmed by her melody. Various *rāgas* and *rāginīs* are painted against the most charming conventionalised landscapes teeming with trees, flowers, shrubs, birds and animals. The landscapes presented are idyllic world – Nature at its most beautiful.

When the *Abhisārikā nāyikā*, especially the *Kṛṣṇābhisārikā*, wends her way on a dark night through these forests, many ghosts, hags and goblins try to terrorise her. It is the magic of the woodlands, charmed hills that endow so much courage on the bold, beautiful and the determined *nāyikā* who remains undeterred by all kinds of dangers lurking in the forest at night and keeps her tryst with her lover. Her path is lit up by flashes of lightning.

The Pahari artists were true children of Nature, who rendered her ever-changing moods and colours with great sensitivity and accomplishment. Needless to point out that the lyrical poetry of numerous great poets, such as Kālidāsa, Jayadeva (*Gīta-Govinda*), Vidyāpati, Bihārī (*Satsai*), Keśavadāsa, Bhānudatta (*Rasikapriyā*) also inspired the Pahari artists.

Nature has always inspired beautiful melodies, both heard and unheard. When the cloud-thrilled blue sky sings, rainbows appear with their seven coloured glowing notes. The seven musical notes, the *svaras*, literally mean glistening things, since *svara* means radiance. Nature has always inspired music in the heart of human beings. When the *rāgas* were evolved in ancient times, they were named after the natural phenomena, such as *Megha* or cloud, *Vasanta* or spring, *Candrakaunsa*, etc. It is well known that the seven *svaras* (musical notes) were inspired by the birds and animals : 'sa' by the peacock, 're' by the *cātaka* dove, 'ga' by *chāga* or goat, 'ma' by *kraunca* or curlew, 'pa' by *kokilā* or cuckoo, 'dha' by *durdura* or frog and 'ni' by *gaja*, i.e. elephant. Nature's many

moods and many pleasant situations have inspired the *rāgas*. After the sweltering heat of the summer when dark clouds rumble in the sky, portending rain, the peacocks dance; so does the human heart. This earth-cooling experience has inspired *rāgas*, such as the *Megha-malhāra*, *Megha-rañjanī*, *Meghambarī*, etc. The experience of listening to a well rendered *rāga Malhāra* is similar to that of being cooled by a shower after an afternoon of sweltering heat. A lovely *rāga* known as *Cāñdanī-keḍāra* meaning the moonlit meadow evokes the picture of a meadow bathed in soft moonlight. Nature appears in a highly romantic mood, an appropriate setting for the lovers meeting in a grove.

There are *rāgas*, *rāginīs* and *rāgaputras*. The *Rāgamālā* paintings came into existence when the *rāgas* became more numerous. These miniature paintings are visual interpretations of the poetic description. The relationship between nature and the *rāga* is strictly followed in Indian classical music. Each *rāga* has an appropriate time of the day for its rendering. Time is measured by Nature's clock, the sun. The magic of dawn and twilight, the restless day hours and the deep, sensuous, mysterious night are all musically captured. There are early morning *rāgas* (*Bhairava*, *Ahira-Bhairava*, *Lalita*), later morning *rāgas* (*Asāvarī*, *Jaunpurī*, *Deśī*), the midday and afternoon *rāgas* (*Śuddha-sāraṅga*, *Br̥ndāvanī-sāraṅga*), evening and night (*rāga Yamana*, *Bihāga*, *Chāyāṇaṭa*, *Puriyā-kalyāṇa*, followed by *rāga Darbārī* and *Śivarañjanī*). In the *rāgas* of the rainy season, diverse fascinating varieties of *Malhāra* are available. They all sing of clouds-navigated skies, lightning and thunder that form a backdrop to a love-lorn woman whose husband is away.

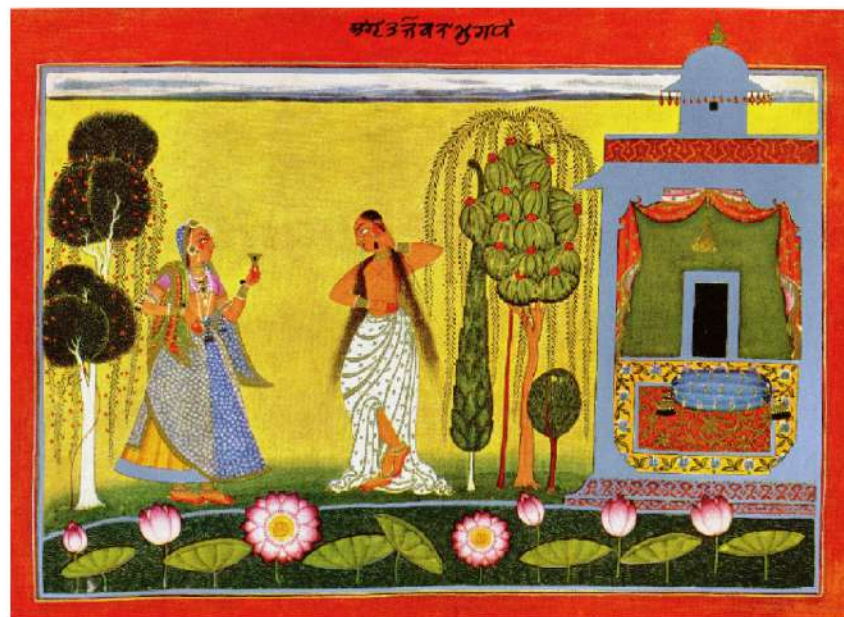


Fig.1: An adolescent girl with her companion standing near the lotus pond, Basohli style, Dogra Art Gallery, Jammu, 17<sup>th</sup> century. This is an illustration of Bhānudatta's *Rasamañjarī*.

Fig.2: The rugged, wind-swept landscape of the Himalayas illustrating verses from the *Gīta-Govinda*, Early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Basohli, Coll. National Museum, New Delhi

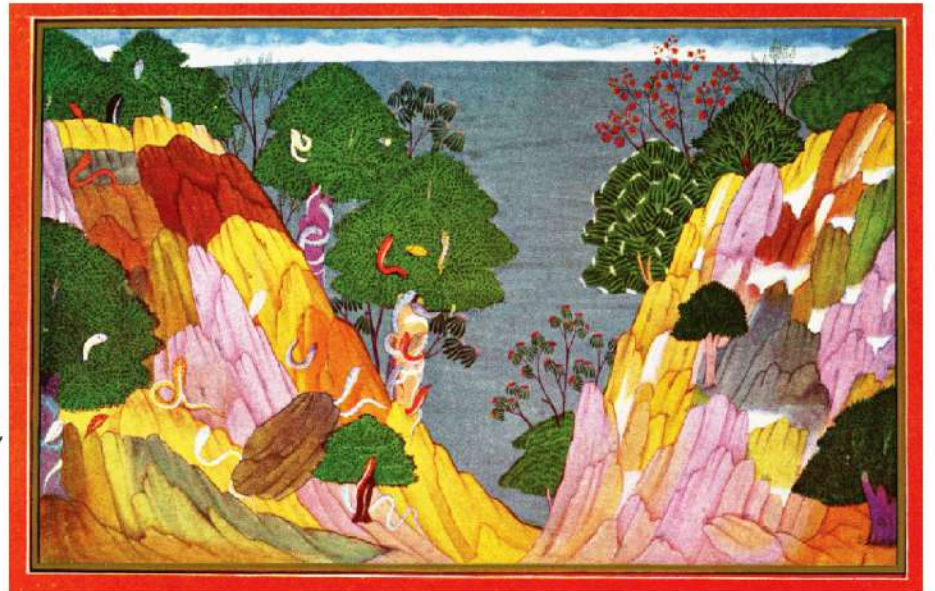


Fig.3: Rainy season exhorts the *abhisārikā nāyikā* to meet her lover in spite of rain, Basohli style, 17<sup>th</sup> century. A *Rasamañjarī* illustration from Dogra Art Gallery, Jammu.

Fig.4: Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa sorrowing after Sītā's abduction, An illustration from the *Śāṅgrī Rāmāyaṇa* album, Kulu style, 18<sup>th</sup> century.



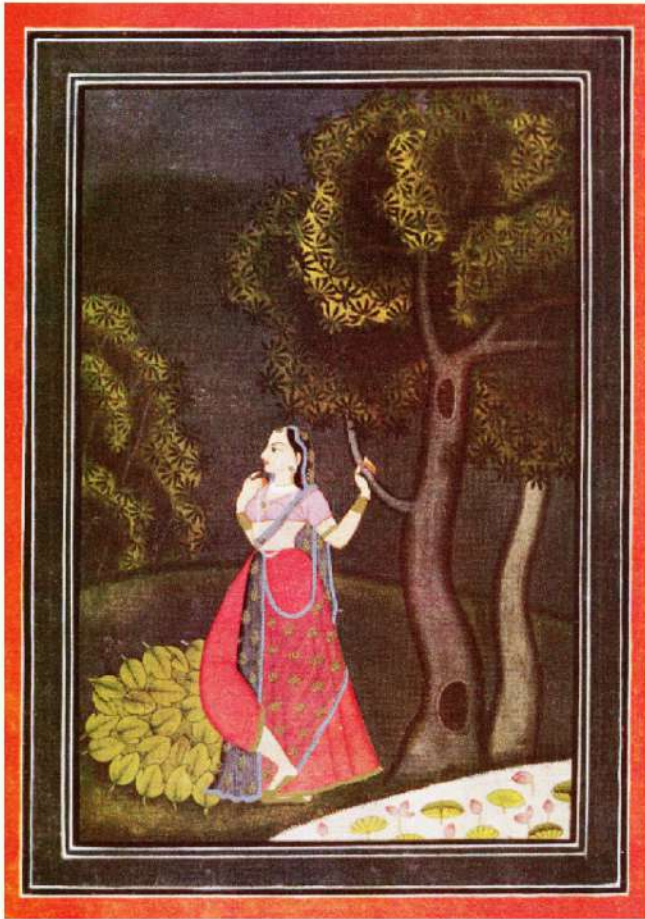


Fig.5: *Utkaṅṭhita nāyikā* awaiting her lover, Chamba style, 18<sup>th</sup> century, Punjab Museum, Patiala

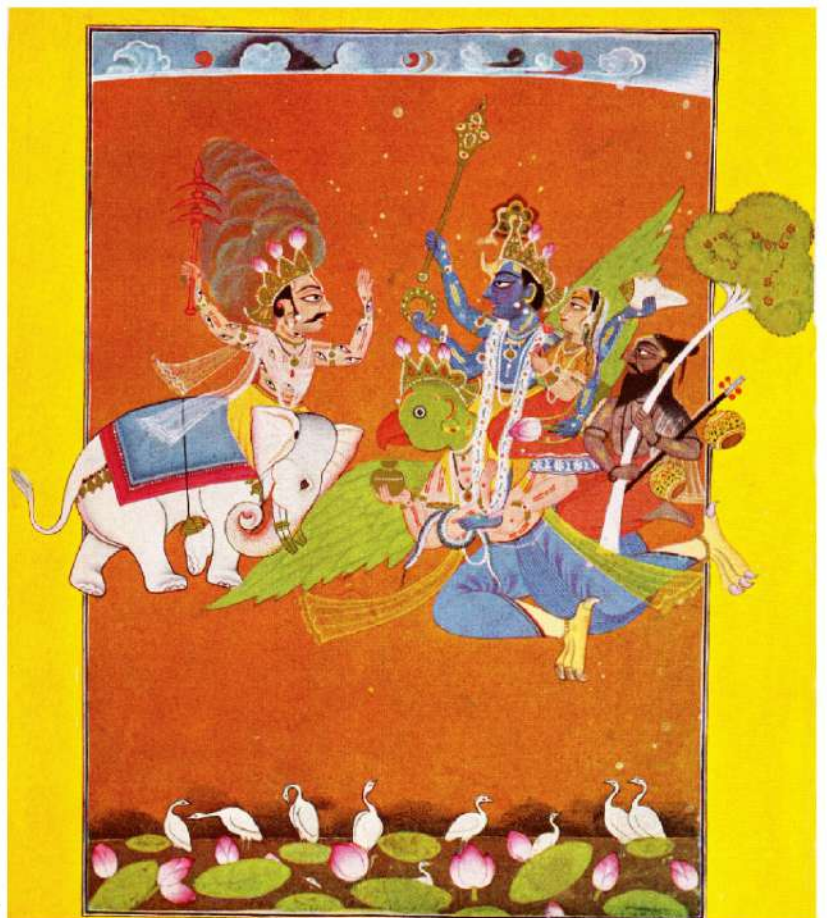


Fig.6: Battle between Indra and Kṛṣṇa with Nārada Muni carrying the Pārijāta tree, A *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* illustration from Kangra, 18<sup>th</sup> century, Coll. Raja Lambagraon of Kangra.

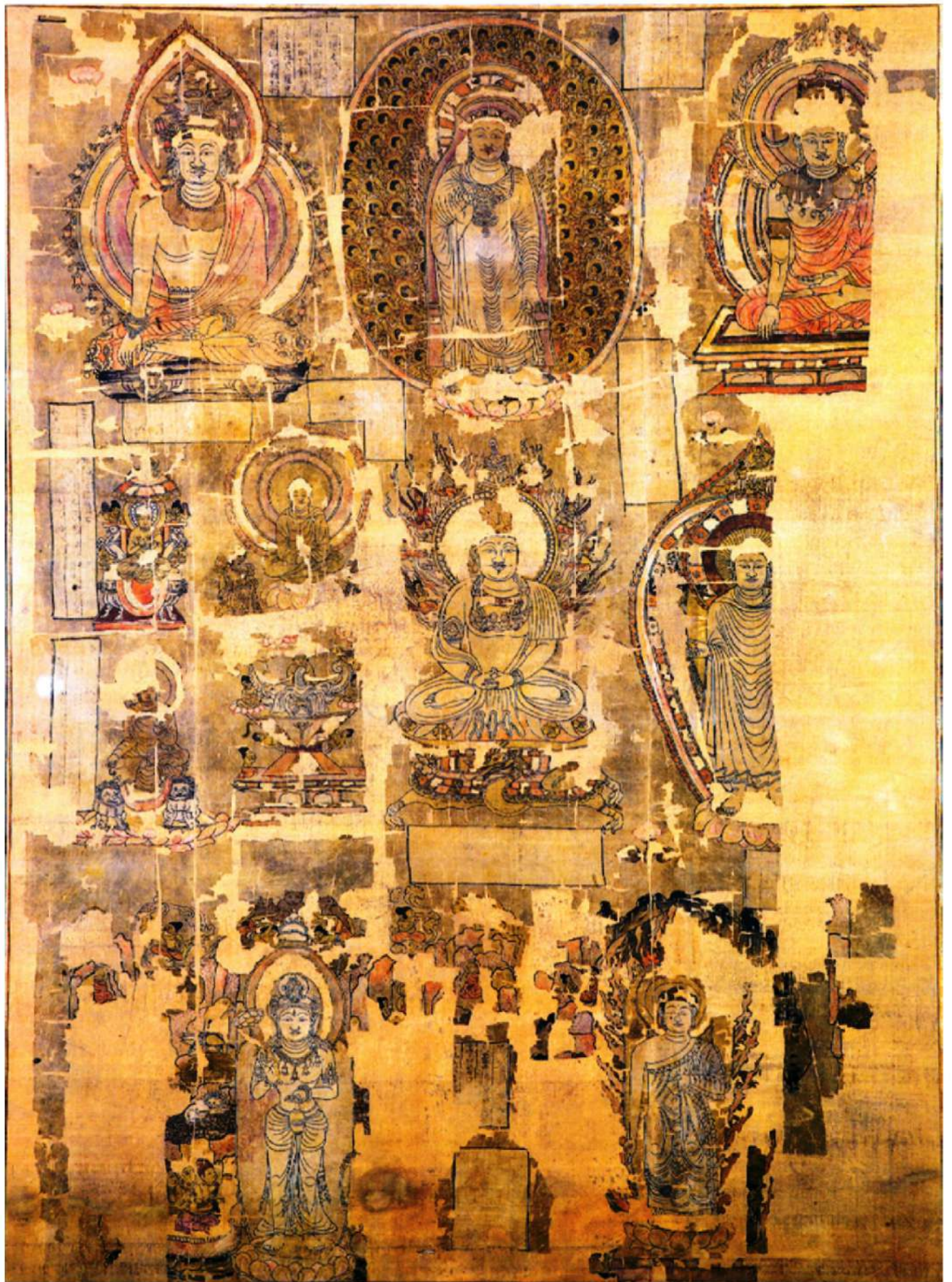


Fig.1: Full view of the banner showing Buddha and Bodhisattva figures, National Museum, New Delhi