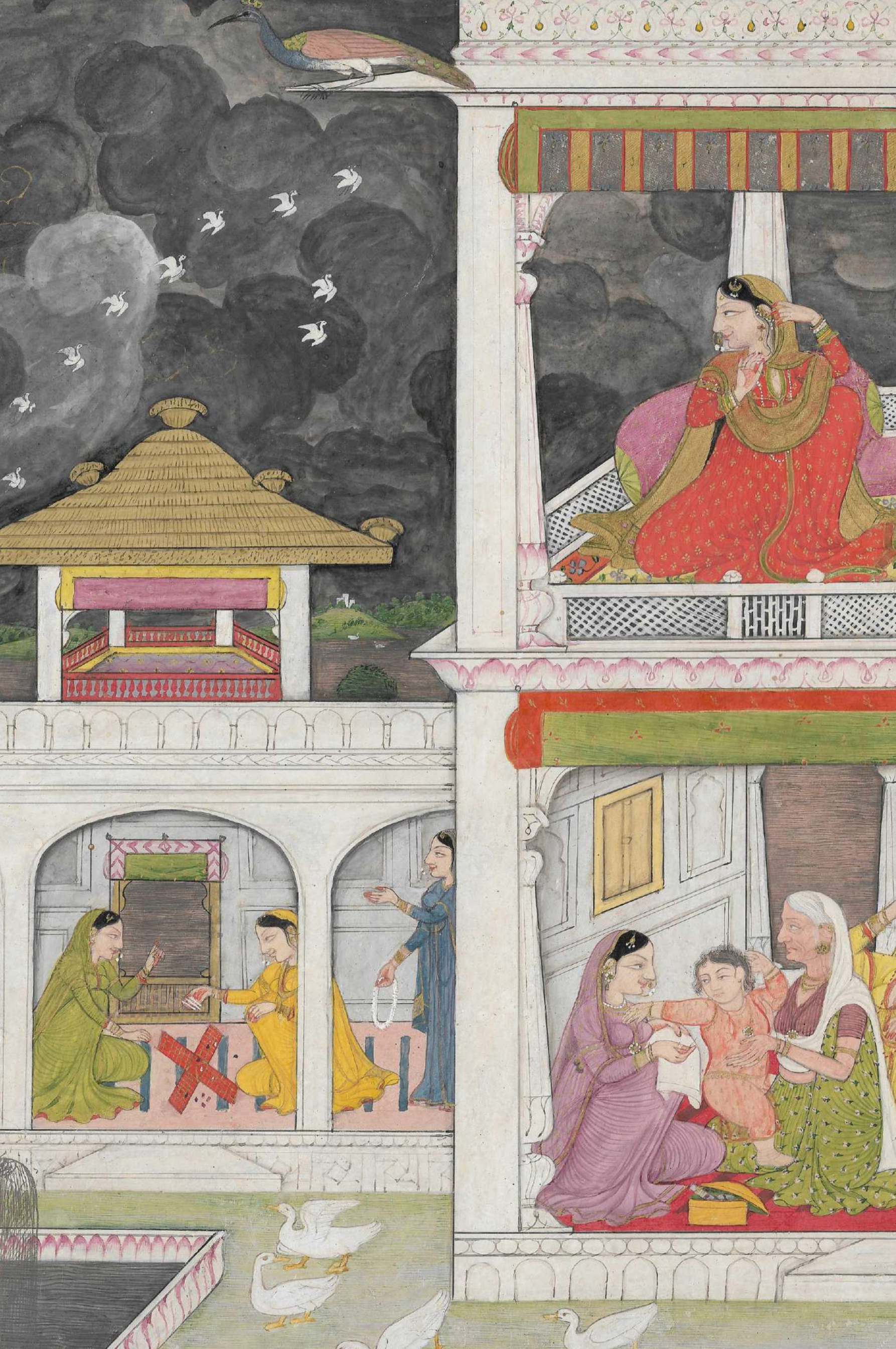

9 From Brush to the Needle: Tracing the Painting Origins of Chamba *Rumal* and its Self-Referential Depiction in the Painting Tradition

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While no consensus is established regarding the precise origin of Chamba *rumal,* it is widely acknowledged that the tradition emerged during the latter-half of the 18th century, due to close association of motifs present in the earliest known specimens of Chamba *rumal* with near contemporary paintings. In all likelihood, the tradition originated as a favoured pastime for the women of royal and elite background and miniature painters were commissioned for designing the *rumals,* a luxury only they could have afforded. As a result, the subject-matter in Chamba *rumal* was heavily inspired by the painting tradition, with episodes from the *Ramayana* and *Bhagavata Purana,* and *Nayika-bheda* and *Ragamala,* Fig.9.1.

The association of painters with the production of embroidered *rumals* in the royal households commences at an early stage, with the miniaturists playing a crucial role in designing embroideries and sharing their technical expertise to the process, Fig.9.2. Miniaturists conceptualized the original designs, leveraging their understanding of composition, colour balance, and iconographies to develop intricate patterns suitable for embroidery. While Chamba *rumal* tradition was a direct off-shoot of painting, as mentioned previously, in the contemporary scenario the painters often adapt existing artworks into embroidery designs, simplifying or modifying complex images to fit the medium while retaining their essence. Applying their knowledge of colour composition, the painters ensure the selection of appropriate threads and fabrics by leaving colour-marked clues for the embroiderer, Fig.9.3. By providing detailed sketches and patterns, painters offer blueprints that guide embroiderers in achieving precision and consistency.

The transition of Chamba *rumal* from an elite pastime to a reflection of Chamba's social and cultural character deserves attention. Embroidered articles became an integral part of various ceremonies, festivals and rituals, often given as a token or goodwill or as decorative pieces in homes and temples. The tradition particularly became a staple during wedding ceremonies, and the *rumals* would be exchanged between the families of the bride and groom, symbolising goodwill and strengthening of familial bonds.[1] Embroidered *rumals* would also be included in the bridal trousseau, and the bride's family prepared embroidered clothes and decor as gifts to the groom's family, later to become generational heirlooms. Chamba *rumals* also served as sacred offerings in temples, donated by the devotees as a gesture of reverence.[2] The *rumals* would then be placed on altars or used as backdrop to adorn the shrine during religious ceremonies.[3]

The transition of Chamba *rumal* from a pastime to social significance also seems to have been observed by painters, making references to embroidery in miniature paintings as well. Pahari painters drew inspiration from the world around them, captured the essence of their surroundings and transformed these into art. The process involved keen observation of mundane occurrences and commonplace objects, invariably sources of their artistic innovation. A fairly big number of paintings became reflections of societal norms, cultural practices, turning the otherwise generic composition into

Fig.9.1 : *Ashta-Nayika Bheda*, Chamba *rumal*, 19th century CE, cotton embroidered with floss silk and gilt thread, 64 x 60 cm
Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, Himachal Pradesh, Acc. No. 69.70, Image courtesy: Vijay Sharma

visages that are profoundly evocative. In this context, a portrait of Raja Bhupendra Pal of Basohli merits particular attention, Fig.9.4. The depiction captures the youthful Raja seated by a *jharokha* window, delighting in the admiration of the dark monsoon clouds assembling in the sky. The Raja is in the zenana quarters of the palace, surrounded by courtly women engaged in various activities of leisure and merriment. Behind him, two female attendants stand bashfully, exchanging playful murmurs. In the outer veranda by the river, two women engage in a spirited game of *pachisi*, with their laughter mingling

with the gentle rustling of the monsoon breeze. A beautiful damsel draped in a resplendent red *peshwaz*, casts flirtatious glances towards the Raja, who reciprocates from the opposite quarter of the inner palace. The scene is rich with the vibrancy of courtly life, yet what particularly captures attention is the depiction of the lower terrace. Here, a young woman meticulously embroiders a *rumal*, while an infant boy, presumably her son, tugs stubbornly at her lap, yearning for her attention. An elderly woman, likely a maid as suggested by her modest garments, endeavours to keep the child away from disturbing his mother. Nearby, a box brimming with colourful threads lies open. The depiction of a woman engaged in embroidering a *rumal* is significant, indicating the painters' awareness of its importance as an activity esteemed by women of noble background. This detail not only embellishes the composition but also provides a deeper glimpse into the daily lives and refined tastes of the aristocracy.[4]

A comparative illustration is found in a *Nala-Damayanti* folio, presently housed at the Amar Palace Museum in Jammu, Fig.9.5. The painting depicts a young woman, seated inside a veranda of the palace, deeply engrossed in embroidering a *rumal*. Besides her stands a young attendant holding a box of threads. While the *Naishadhiya Charita*, the Sanskrit text narrating the story of Nala and Damayanti, does not explicitly mention embroidery, however, the painter likely drew inspiration from the daily activities within royal surroundings to incorporate such a noteworthy detail into the painting.

A *Bhagavata Purana* painting depicting wives of Brahmins offering food to Krishna, Fig.9.6 is also worthy of attention. The designs found on the white cloth covers draped over the utensils containing food evoke a striking resemblance to Chamba *rumal*. The inclusion of these embroidered cloth covers in the painting suggests that such articles were not only valued for their decorative and devotional functions but also served practical, utilitarian purposes. This dual functionality reflects the integration of artistic expression into everyday life within noble and religious settings. Furthermore, the presence of Chamba *rumal* in a religious narrative underscores the cultural importance of embroidery, elevating their status beyond mere decorative objects to essential elements of devotional practice.

Fig.9.2 : Chamba-based miniaturist Parikshit Sharma designing a *Rumal*, Image courtesy: Sarang Sharma

Fig.9.3 : Embroiderer follow guidelines received from the miniaturist, Image courtesy: Sarang Sharma

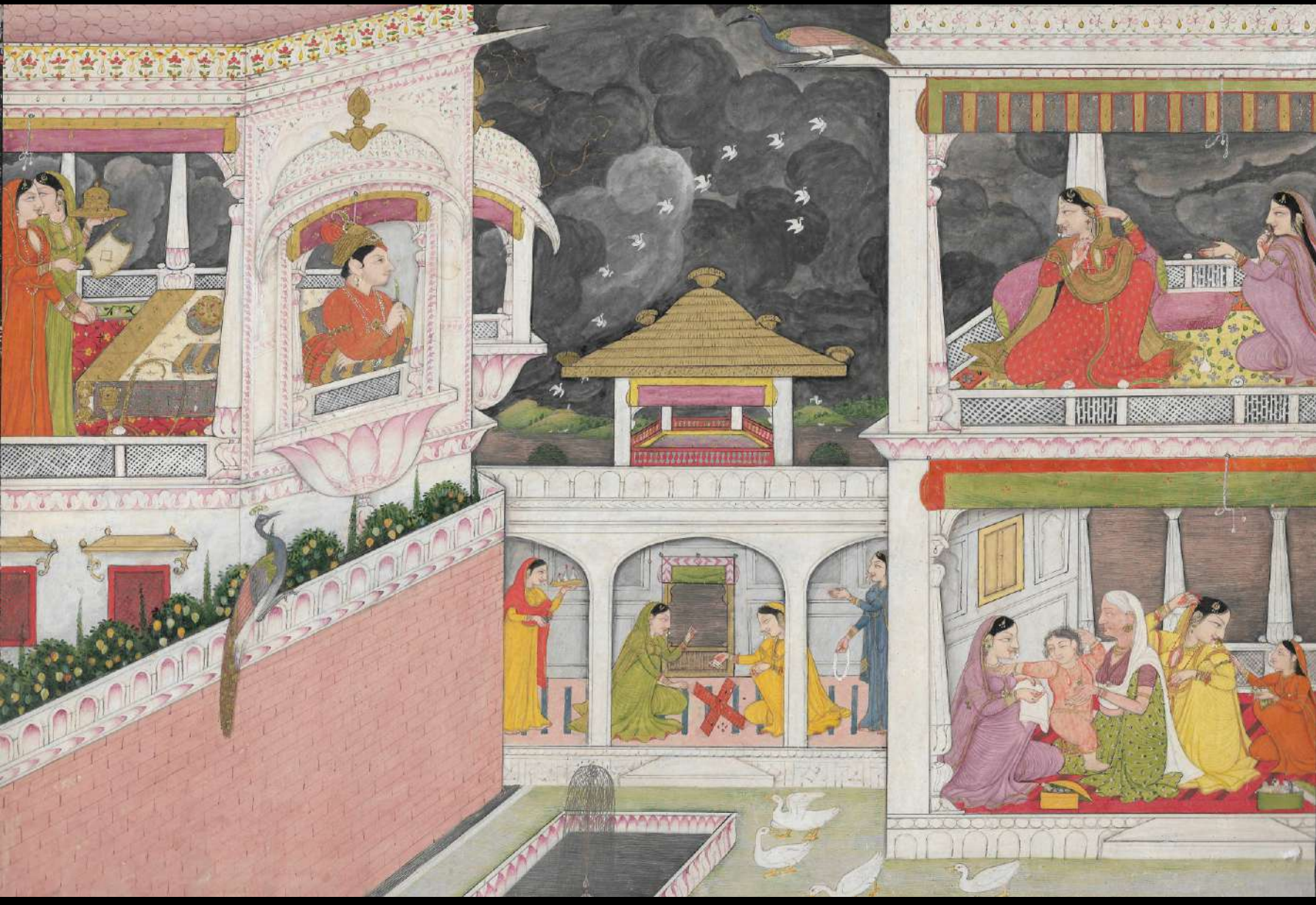

Fig.9.4 : Raja Bhupendra Pal of Basohli (r.1813-1834) seated by the *Jharokha*, c.1815 CE, opaque watercolour on paper 16.8 x 25.4 cm, Dogra Art Museum, Jammu, Acc. No. 395, Image courtesy: Vijay Sharma

▲ Fig.9.5 : Detail from a *Nala-Damayanti* folio
c.1790-1800, opaque watercolour on paper, Amar Palace Museum, Jammu
Image courtesy: Vijay Sharma

Fig.9.6
Wives of the Brahmins offer
Food to Krishna
from a *Bhagavata Purana*
Kangra, c.1775-80
opaque watercolour on paper
State Museum, Lucknow
Image courtesy: Vijay Sharma ▼

Fig.9.7 : *Raga Hindola*, c.1790-1800, Kangra, 35.5 x 25.4 cm
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Edward L. Whittemore Fund 1975.9

In a painting depicting *Raga Hindola,* Fig.9.7, a significant parallel can be drawn with the aforementioned *Bhagavata Purana* scene regarding the use and significance of embroidered coverlets. As Krishna and Radha sway on a swing, surrounded by joyous *gopas* and *gopis* of Braj engaged in spirited dance, the inclusion of a damsel carrying offerings in a container draped with a Chamba *rumal* is noteworthy. This portrayal suggests a continuation of the theme observed in the *Bhagavata Purana* painting.

The phenomenon termed as "meta-art" or "self-referential art" is a concept that involves art reflections on its own creation process, creating a layered and introspective dialogue between different artistic practices. In this case, the initial phase involves painters designing intricate embroidery patterns, blending their skills in composition, colour, and aesthetics to transform painted imagery into textile. As the tradition evolves, painters begin to depict embroiderers engaged in embroidery, thus creating paintings that capture the essence of artistic labour and craftsmanship. This "self-referential" cycle not only underscores the interconnectedness of painting and embroidery but also elevates the act of embroidery to a subject worthy of fine art. Such "meta-art" highlights the mutual influence and respect between the two mediums, celebrating the importance of handicraft and the sustaining creative inputs.

References

1. Personal communication with Dr. Vijay Sharma, Chamba.
2. An index is maintained in the reserve of the Lakshmi Narayana Temple at Chamba containing information about several articles donated by devotees over centuries including jewels, utensils, paintings and *rumals*. A large number of *rumals* present in the reserve signifies their importance as sacred offerings.
3. Personal communication with Mr. Bhuvaneshwar Sharma, Chamba. He mentions having observed the practice being in vogue until a few decades ago.
4. As the painting was rendered by a Guler artist working at Basohli during the reign of Raja Bhupendra Pal, it is a testament to the fact that while Chamba *rumal* embroidery had originated at Chamba, it had started becoming popular in other hill-states by the early 19th century.

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