

## **Compositional Elements in Pahari Miniature Painting**

**Dr. (Mrs.) Sonika**

*Assistant Professor, Department of Drawing & Painting Faculty of Arts*

*Dayalbagh Educational Institute (Deemed to be University)*

*Dayalbagh, Agra, (Uttar Pradesh)*

*Email: sonikasandhu1@gmail.com*

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**Dr. (Mrs.) Sonika**

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### **Abstract**

*Every artwork has some composition which is the relation between the elements of the artwork. This formal aspect of visual composition is like the grammar of a language. Artists have been using these visual ideas for centuries to create their art, whether representational or in non-objective images. No artistic pursuit is ever fulfilled in the absence of these elements.*

*Like any form of art, Indian miniatures are in the art world a class by themselves. Miniature art form made its debut in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Early miniatures are divided as Pala and Jain and later as Rajasthani, Mughal, Pahari, and Deccani.*

*The painting style developed around the lower hills of the Himalayan range is known as Pahari Art School. Pahari miniatures are known for their soft touch, serenity, lyricism, spontaneity, inherent symbolism, minute details, a deep feeling for human emotions, and above all superb sense of composition. Pahari miniatures are indeed beautifully executed compositions. Artists had used the compositional elements to create an effect and to convey the artist's intent. Colors played an important role in the composition of Pahari miniatures. Main colors are used in a contrastive manner in perfectly balanced naturalistic backgrounds in the paintings.*

*Basohli is known for its far bolder use of colors for creating emphasis in illustrated works like Rasa – Manjari, Ramayana, Gita - Govinda, and Ragamala. The paintings attributed to the Guler style both portraiture and composition, wondrously explore the mystic beauty of the feminine world. Red and blue colors dominated in Chamba miniature, creating an interesting contrast. Paintings from Kangra represent the most glorious phase of Pahari Art with the vibrant use of primitive colors. Thus it can be said that the delectable and judicious use of compositional elements provides a distinction to Pahari Miniature Paintings in the world of art.*

### **Keywords**

*Compositional Elements, Pahari, Miniature, Painting, Basohli, Guler, Kangra, Chamba, Mandi, Gita - Govinda*

“A well-composed painting is half done.” Pierre Bonnard

Every artwork has some composition which is the relation between the elements of the artwork. This formal aspect of visual composition is like the grammar of a language. The compositional elements are balance, proportion, emphasis, contrast, rhythm, harmony, and unity/variety. Artists have been using these visual ideas for centuries to create their art, whether representational or in non-objective images. No artistic pursuit is ever fulfilled in the absence of these elements.

Like any form of art, Indian miniatures are in the art world a class by themselves. ‘Miniature’ generally refers to a painting or illumination, small in size, meticulous in detail, and delicate in brushwork<sup>1</sup>. Indian Miniature Painting has a long history of over a thousand years and presents a comprehensive record of the religious and emotional feelings of the Indian people. These paintings show the Indian genius in its pure form. Its inspiration is rooted in the people’s hearts, keeping close to their poetry, music, and drama. The great merit of this art is the exquisite delicacy of drawing with decorative details and a superb sense of composition. The artists of these miniatures used bright colors with tempera effect and display an unusual understanding of color combinations.

Miniature art form made its debut in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest of miniatures are found painted on palm leaves and their themes relating to Jainism and Buddhism. The palm-leaf paintings seem to have developed between the 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, palm leaf was replaced by paper and to earlier colors were added new mineral colors and pigments. Paper, with its tougher, smoother, and better pigments absorbing surface almost revolutionized the entire art scenario<sup>2</sup>.

Early miniatures are divided as Pala and Jain and later as Rajasthani, Mughal, Pahari, and Deccani. The painting style developed around the lower hills of the Himalayan range is known as Pahari Art School. It found patronage in the Rajput princedoms of the Punjab (now Himachal Pradesh) and Garhwal hills. It developed during the late seventeenth century and flourished down to the nineteenth. The precision of a Mughalized realism and a symbolism derived from classical and medieval literature were combined, the sublime and sensuous were lyrically woven together. Besides, the beauty of the local landscape played an important role in some of the great works painted in the Pahari ateliers<sup>3</sup>. It had four centers, namely, Basohli on river Ravi, Guler on river Banaganga, Chamba too on Ravi, and Kangra on river Beas. Pahari miniatures are known for their soft touch, serenity, lyricism, spontaneity, inherent symbolism, minute details, a deep feeling for human emotions, and above all superb sense of composition. ‘A.K. Coomaraswamy’ expounding on Rajput painting, presented seminal ideas which are also valuable for appreciating the Pahari Schools:

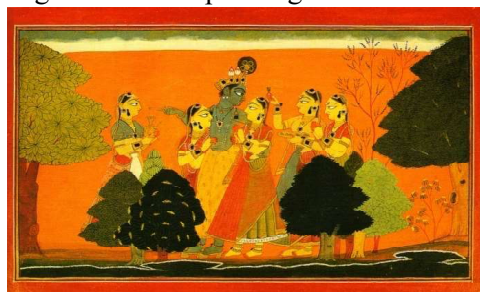
..... their ethos is unique: what Chinese art achieved for landscape is here accomplished for human love ..... Rajput Art creates a magic world where all men

*Dr. (Mrs.) Sonika*

are heroic, all women are beautiful and passionate and shy, beasts both wild and tame are the friends of man, and trees and flowers are conscious of the footsteps of the Bridegroom as he passes by. This magic world is not unreal or fanciful, but a world of imagination and eternity, visible to all who do not refuse to see with the transfiguring eyes of love. (Rajput Painting, 1916, Page 7)<sup>4</sup>.

Pahari paintings are basically decorative oriental art. These are indeed beautifully executed compositions. The aesthetically arranged elements of these paintings are a visual treat for the viewers. Artists had used the compositional elements to create an effect and to convey the artist's intent. The use of these principles can help determine whether a painting is successful or not. The artist decides what principles of art he or she wants to use in a painting. While an artist might not use all the principles of design in one piece, the principles are intertwined and the use of one will often depend on another. For example, when creating emphasis, the artist might also be using contrast or vice versa. It is generally agreed that a successful painting is **unified**, while also having some **variety** created by areas of **contrast** and **emphasis**; is visually **balanced**; and **moves** the viewer's eye around the composition. Thus it is that one principle of art can influence the effect and impact of another.

Colors played an important role in the composition of Pahari miniatures. Colors have been used symbolically. Main colors are used in a contrastive manner in perfectly balanced naturalistic backgrounds in the paintings.



**Krishna dallying with cowherd maidens Basohli, about 1730**

In the illustrations of Vaishnava themes, the backgrounds with hillocks, gushing rivulets, green meadows, and a variety of flowering trees and creepers were painted. A beautiful painting of 'Krishna dallying with cowherd maidens' based on the poetry of Jaideva's Gita – Govinda depicts a composition of multiple figures in bright colors against a scenic background<sup>5</sup>. The composition is symmetrically balanced and unified in its visual appeal.

The subject matter of Pahari paintings is figure-based. Although Pahari art flourished at places of great natural beauty, the artists were not inspired to paint the landscapes just for the sake of depicting the beauty of nature. In traditional Indian art, including Pahari

paintings, nature serves as a backdrop for human emotions, and subtle changes of moods were often expressed through nature acting as the backdrop.

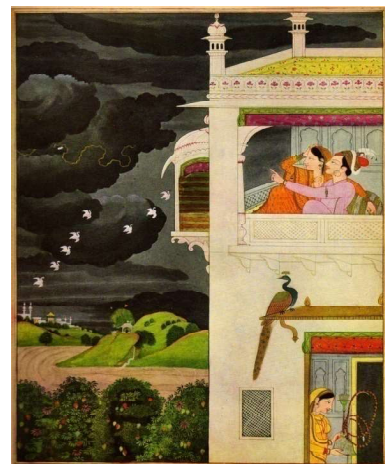
Even when paintings on seasons known as Baramasa Paintings, are made, nature is depicted only in relation to human beings. In such paintings, the change of human behavior according to seasons is a primary method of indicating seasonal changes and the appropriate use of compositional elements is immensely helpful in achieving this. The marvelous painting of 'The month of Chaitra' based on Baramasa is a good example of such type of composition.



In Pahari miniature painting artists had used bright colors like red, yellow, blue, and green in abundance. Colors have been used symbolically. The main colors are used in a contrastive manner in a perfectly balanced naturalistic landscaped background in the paintings. Even the painted main figures (Nayaka and the Nayika) are often sharply contrasting yet they blend in to create an artistic harmony. The paintings are in opaque tempera technique, so colors flowing into one another creating a merging effect that we find in watercolors is not found here.

### **The month of Chaitra, Kangra, c.1790**

The artists carefully chose the colors that created pleasant contrasts. Monsoon clouds instead of merging into one another were painted in flat shades of grey and black, one overlapping the other. This effect is splendidly depicted in the painting 'Lovers watching rain clouds' in Kangra kalam<sup>6</sup>. Here the balance is achieved through the use of contrastive colors – black and white. The paints were very often applied in a uniformly flat manner with excellence, thus proving that flat application of color can effectively create an aesthetic appeal.



### **Lovers watching rain clouds, Kangra, about 780**

Basohli initiated Pahari art by illustrating literary classics like *Rasa – Manjari*, *Ramayana* and *Gita – Govinda* and abstract themes like *Ragamala*. Square format, a background usually consisting of a double-story building structures with elaborate shikharas, lotuses used as a ‘must’, and various other decorative elements characterize a Basohli miniature. It is famous for its far bolder use of colors.

A richly imaginative painting of ‘*Ragini Dhanasri*’, in Basohli style shows a lady holding the branch of a tree and carrying a lotus bud as she yearns for her absent lover. It is spring and the exuberant mood of nature is in contrast with the suffering of the woman<sup>7</sup>.



Nature is shown in its full glory, flora, and fauna. Blossoming flowers are shown in bright colors on a pleasant green background. The painting is in perfect harmony presenting a balanced composition.

The paintings attributed to the Guler style are endowed with exceptionally delicate coloring, fine draughtsmanship, an unusual refinement of lines, a sensitive treatment of landscape, and superb composition. All these

**Ragini Dhanasri, Basohli, about 1720** characteristics of Guler style are present in the painting ‘*God adoring Lord Vishnu*’<sup>8</sup>. Here a sense of movement is created through the placement of figures and the curvy edges of hillocks. In both, portraiture and composition, the Guler art wondrously explores the mystic beauty of the feminine world.

Chamba is known for its typical and distinctive female figures endowed with the most charming appearances. Red and Blue colors dominate a Chamba miniature, as shown in the painting ‘*Adoration of Vishnu – Vaikunthamurti*’.



**God adoring Lord Vishnu, Guler, 1780**

Chamba is outstanding in its technique of artistically mixing colors and amplifying their visual impact.



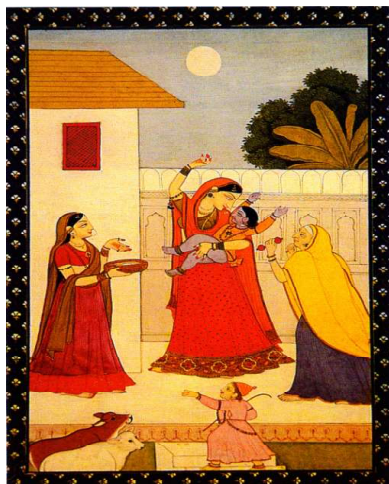
**Adoration of Vishnu – Vaikunthamurti, Chamba, c.1805**



This illustration from “Ramayana Series” in Mandi style is a perfect example of rhythm in composition through the repetition of figures. Mandi acquired a great distinction in Devi’s Tantrik cult. These forms of the Devi acquire further impetus in the Mandi style by excessively and mystically using black, red, and blue colors in their deepest tones.

#### **Illustration from Ramayana Series, Mandi, c 1830**

Kangra represents the most glorious phase of Pahari art. The scenic setting of Kangra inspired the painters to paint in delicate harmonies. The rounded hillocks, with little blobs of green paint shaped like trees, may be recognized as simplified landscape motifs. Kangra miniatures vibrate with realism, are endowed with natural emotions and their colors seem to echo with the softness of music<sup>9</sup>. The use of primitive colors- red, yellow, and blue, plain or decorative fine borders, carefully brushed jewelry, neatly laid buildings, and richly relieved landscape balanced with contrasting colors and consisting of superbly treated nature – trees, leaves, flowers, shrubs, birds, and hills, are attributes of Kangra art. Glorification of female beauty, in all its charming details, is another peculiar trait of the Kangra painters. In the painting ‘Krishna demanding the



moon from mother Yashoda,' the feminine beauty and the use of primitive colors can be seen. The composition is symmetrically balanced and an interesting focal point is created with the use of bright contrastive colors.

All the Pahari miniature paintings are generally presented with borders that are sometimes painted with decorative motifs with pleasing forms. They compliment the ornate nature of Pahari Schools of Art and are often done in golden paint also.

In its few inches length and width the canvas of a Pahari miniature is seen translating into its lines, colors, and compositions the legends of ages, faith of generations, eternal yearnings of those who were in love, glow of youthful faces, the serenity of soul,

**Krishna demanding the moon  
from mother Yashoda, Kangra 1780**

sublimation of temporal aspirations, dimensions of tiny human efforts, emotions of pain and pleasure, and all that scripts and lingual media would have covered volumes to express. Thus it can be said that the delectable and judicious use of compositional elements provides a distinction to Pahari Miniature Paintings in the world of art.

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