

## Grace and Devotion: The Women of Pahari Miniature

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### **Abstract**

*Pahari miniatures began in the Himalayas during the 1600s, forming a unique strand of Indian art by blending Persian touches, Mughal styles, Rajasthani forms, along with local folk roots. This study looks at how women appear in these paintings, suggesting they're more than just ornamental - they show deep feelings, faith, and inner depth. Instead of being quiet background figures, females - especially seen through the idea of Ashta Nayika (eight heroine types) - become ways to dive into layered emotions and ideas drawn from Hindu stories and worship culture.*

*The research follows how images of women changed in Pahari painting - from their bold start in Basholi to the smoother styles seen later in Kangra and nearby mountain courts. By looking closely at body features - like unique face ratios, fluid poses, or rich clothing details - it shows how painters built a way of seeing that expressed inner feelings. Instead of just listing traits, it digs into symbols found in ornaments, fabric designs, or background settings, using them as coded messages about love, distance, loyalty, or deep yearning. A key focus lands on the Ashta Nayika framework, grouping females by mood states - from restless waiting (Vasakasajja) to daring initiative (Abhisarika) - highlighting how these small-scale artists pulled from old Sanskrit texts yet shaped original visual stories.*

*This study places Pahari women into the wider scene of Indian miniatures, showing how the Pahari style stood apart - not by rigid court rules or bold energy like Mughal and Rajasthani pieces - but through quiet emotion, heartfelt expression, yet a deep sense of spirit. Instead of just viewing women as visual delights, it digs into their roles as figures carrying real feeling and thought; because of this shift, Pahari art pushes back on old ideas that treat female images as mere decoration. Rather than passive beauties, they appear here as signs of faith, endurance, also inner power - shaped by Himalayan royal tastes, still reaching beyond time to echo emotions anyone might know: affection, grief, desire.*

*This cross-field look helps grow the talk about how gender shows up in India's art past, at the same time revealing the deep thought and visual skill behind Pahari miniatures - a key cultural form that stands apart yet connects with other Indian art styles.*

## **Introduction**

Regardless of the term “miniature” it may seem to refer or depict something tiny, it encompasses a whole world inside its fine details. It is not just a neat style of art, it breathes culture, feeling, and deep love. Through silent stories of faith, grace, and lived moments, every bold and magnificent brush stroke carries tradition’s heartbeat. At the heart of India’s imagination, it stands - were painting mirrors life’s soul, not only pleasing eyes but feeding spirit with a visual delight also.

The history miniature paintings in India are very vast, lengthy and complicated - starting around 19<sup>th</sup> century AD, it is full of twists and turns. The primary sources of early Indian miniature paintings are Gujrati and Pala school. These drawings were first carved into palm leaves, with a limitation of space and confined for both size and detailing. But things shifted with the development of paper in 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D after that artist had a smoother, more flexible surface for their work opening door to bolder styles and richer expression, experimentation and expressing things with greater depth and a variety of work in their painting style. During the interval of time, manuscripts painting flourished increasingly it accepted new artistry style and technique that eventually becomes essential to miniature painting as a category. These early steps laid deep roots for India’s small-scale art traditions, which evolved across ages through local flavours and cultural shifts.

Indian art shifted high time once the Mughals showed up around the 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. It had a shaking effect upon daily life and on economic matters, these rulers introduced new architectural style and painting. Artists across India quickly latched onto Persian influences, especially. Blending those with local flavours with Persian elements that gave birth to the Indo-Persian look, which reshaped how Indian creators approached their craft mentally and technically and emotionally. The Mughal period marked a peak for tiny paintings, since rulers backed artists at court while encouraging bold tries filled with rich colours, intricate patterns, yet fine craftsmanship. On top of that, Mughal kings pushed joint efforts between their own painters and those linked to Rajput leaders - sparking fresh ideas along with distinct local painting styles.

A number of local painting styles emerged across regions - artists reshaping outside ideas to fit their own methods and with the adaptation of their local environment and culture. Among them, Pahari, Mughal, and Rajasthani stood out the most. Bright colours, sharp details, alongside the themes and stories drawn from myths, folk tales, and palace life defined Rajasthani work. Meanwhile, Mughal art, shaped by Persian tastes, focused on depth, lifelike figures, and elaborate scenes of courtly gatherings. In the meantime, Pahari miniatures started standing out with the unique identity, across Himalayan Mountain zones. “Pahari,” meaning “from the hills,” goes back to the 1600s. With backing from Rajput rulers, this art thrived in places such as Basholi, Kangra, Guler, Kullu-Mandi,

Chamba, along with Garhwal. To form a distinct look reflecting both nature and spiritual depth of the region, it mixed features from Gujarati manuscripts, Mughal-style miniatures, Rajasthani visuals, as well as local folk practices. In order to create an individual visual language that captured the Himalayan region's natural beauty and spiritual ethos, the Pahari style combined elements from Gujarati manuscripts, Mughal miniatures, Rajasthani art, and regional folk traditions.

Pahari miniatures covered a wide range of subjects - historical tales, religious scenes, or literary ideas many paintings depicted stories from Hindu epics like Mahabharata, Ramayana, Krishna Lila, Durga Saptashati, Bhagwat Purana, Shiva Purana showed up often, given that Rajput patrons leaned toward Vaishnavism. Alongside addition to religious stories, painters drew inspiration from texts such as Gita Govinda by Jayadeva or Chittarasamanjari by Bhanu Datta, plus visual series like Ragamala, Rasikapriya, Brahmas, and Nayak-Nayika Bheda. Scenes of royalty, court life, ceremonies, battles and conflict were among the many historical and elite subjects that were frequently featured in the painting. What stood out most was the love between Krishna (Nayak) and Radha (Nayika), symbolizing spiritual devotion while opening doors to express deep feelings, symbolic layers, and artistic beauty.

In Pahari miniatures women played a crucial role, as women weren't just shown as a subject only, but they are the emotion holder carrier in the painting that they are the nayikas of the painting - they brought deep feelings and traditions to life. This art often portrayed women in a range of emotions, a central female figure shaped by emotions, that was the idea of the nayikas. Instead of static images, nayikas expressed devotion, desire, sorrow, anger, envy - usually tied to their lovers. Rather than being mere ornaments they symbolise the emotion, power, love, and their pain they appeared complex, full of emotion, meaning, and inner strength. Through soft lines, flowing stances, and elegant gestures, painters built a unique way of showing Indian womanhood - calm, expressive, alive. They created an original visual language to portray feminine, beauty, grace and love.

Women in Pahari miniatures stood out because of their unique features painted by artists. Their faces were round, often with tall foreheads stretching upward. Instead of broad noses, they had slim ones that came to a fine point. Eyes resembled petals from lotus flowers, soft and slightly curved. Fingers appeared stretched out, graceful, arranged like notes in a quiet melody. Eyebrows curved gently, almost like whispers above the eyes. In Basholi paintings, hair usually hung free, spilling past cheeks down to shoulders. Sometimes, artists left parts of the body uncovered - not for shock, but to show natural grace. Women's figures appeared stretched, thin, with tight waists. The way they were shown shifted fast as well as dramatically through the years. At first, poses felt stiff - backs straight, necks drawn long, heads flattened out. As the approach evolved, artists turned to flowing lines

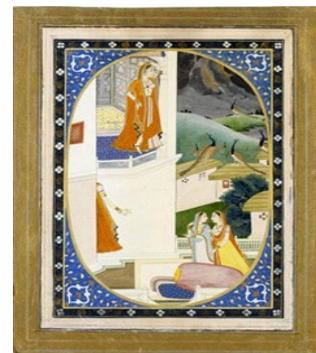
instead, bringing motion and flow, shrinking necks, encouraging looser stances. Expressions grew clearer, emotions deeper, lifting the storytelling in these artworks.

The Himalayan area's rich culture showed up in Pahari art through their clothing styles used in miniature paintings. A floor-length outfit called Pathani - featuring snug sleeves, a flared lower half, and a close-fitting top under the bust - was widely seen. People often wore classic pieces such as choli, dupatta, along with Ghaghara too. Head coverings included shawls or sheer scarves, usually decorated using thread work and tiny mirrors are example of headgear. These garments didn't just reveal old weaving methods but also added elegance and flow to painted figures. In Pahari miniatures, jewellery spelled out grace a key component of defining, charm, or rank in quiet detail. Gold, pearls, or green emeralds dressed up female figures - crafted with artistic skills and amazing accuracy. Necklaces, pendants, armllets, even anklets appeared finely drawn, showing off a deep grasp of ornament styles, often passed down through goldsmith kin shows the specializes knowledge of jewellery. Artists picked white tones to make pearls stand out softly on canvas. Red wash often covered palms, fingers, soles - hinting at mehndi stains from celebration. Payal, or ankle rings, sometimes showed tiny bells, drawn just enough to suggest sound. The subjects' wealth, along with their rank and cultural flair, showed up in their clothes and jewellery. To express emotions, roles, or standing, women appeared in different poses and settings. Although some queens were shown on swings or reclining on couches, others stood praying or played instruments such as flutes or veenas. Meanwhile, a number of royal women sat on chairs, suggesting dignity and control. Artists used cushions, platforms, hookahs, or decorative items to build context and deepen the narrative. Because each pose and backdrop was chosen carefully, every woman's character, action, and feeling came through clearly, pulling the viewer into a lively, engaging moment.

The Ashta Nayika - eight types of heroines - showed how women in love might feel, act, or react, becoming a core subject in Pahari miniatures. Though Bharat Muni's Natyashastra first laid down these categories, it was Keshavdas' Rasikapriya that expanded them later on. Writers shaped these ideas, yet painters took them further - turning inner emotions into vivid scenes using stance, movement, clothes, and background hints. Each detail carried meaning. Here are those eight forms of Nayika:

### **1. Vasakasajja**

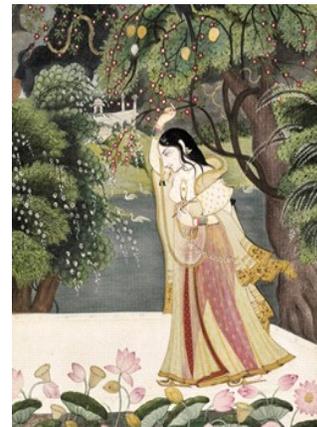
Vasakasajja, sometimes called "The Prepared Maiden," shows a joyful woman getting set for her lover to come. Instead of just sitting, she's often shown putting on jewellery, fixing her hair, or smoothing out her clothes, usually with calm, poised movements. Around her - flowers bloom,



mirrors reflect light, or rich room details add warmth - each hinting at anticipation building up. Her face? Full of delight, maybe even a quiet eagerness shining through. This figure stands out as someone graceful, balanced, yet fully grown into herself. In Pahari paintings, she appears near flowering vines or beneath soft moon glow - images that quietly speak of innocence and love just starting to unfold. Her look in the mirror shows pride mixed with deep faith, while each jewel she wears hints at her quiet strength. Romance blends with spiritual hope, lifted by gentle hues - pale pink flowing into warm gold.

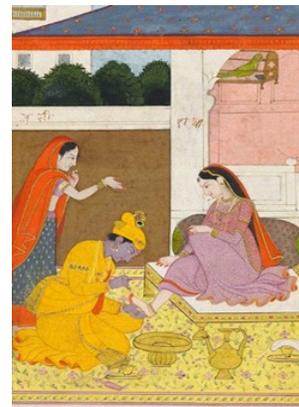
## **2. Virahotkanthita**

This Nayika stands for being apart, carrying the ache of missing someone dear - A. Often shown looking sad, slumped down or deep in thought, her hands resting gently or held back as she gazes far away. Sometimes tears appear, hinted at with light strokes of paint - her environment, like empty gardens or shadowy rooms, mirrors how she feels inside. The artist catches both her quiet pain and gentle grace. Wilted blooms and sagging branches echo her yearning, while the dimming dusk or a lone moon on the horizon speaks her sorrow. A single bird, or maybe a gentle flute tune, can stir up feelings of loneliness now and then. With her delicate gaze and a sadness that lingers, she shows what it's like to wait - the ache of love held still by silence and endless moments.



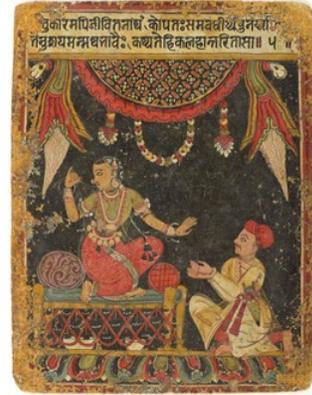
## **3. Svadhinabhartruka**

The heroine Svadhinabhartruka - called The Independent Wife - knows deep down her husband cares for her. Yet she's shown relaxed and graceful, sometimes seated with calm confidence or chatting lightly with him beside her. Her face stays peaceful, quiet pride showing in steady eyes and soft features. Around her, scenes suggest balance and quiet triumph, painting someone settled in both love and daily life. Her clothes and ornaments shine bright, drawn sharply to mark her status without fuss. Sometimes artists show her placing sandalwood on her lover's brow or fixing his necklace, moments that hint at mutual care without needing words. She comes off as regal yet watchful, her graceful moves calm and steady. Her lively, radiant spirit shows in the colours - usually deep reds mixed with gold - that wrap around her like warmth from a quiet fire.



#### 4. Kalahantarita

When she's had a fight or mix-up with her lover, that's when the Kalahantarita Nayika shows up. Instead of calm looks, painters go for fierce eyes, impatient frowns, or lips pushed out - one arm tucked, the other hanging loose. Body turned sideways, gaze shifted away slightly, showing she's upset without saying a word. Things like flowers tossed aside or bangles flung down hint at the quarrel, no explanation needed. Harsh colours, jagged lines bring out the tension buzzing under her skin. She stands for raw emotion - the hot flash of love when it burns too strong. Skies turned grey, branches bent by wind often back her mood on canvas. Jewellery half-on, hair loose or messy - little details screaming she's somewhere else entirely. Her eyes often look soft even when she's furious, suggesting desire hides beneath anger. Artists celebrate the raw pulse of feeling through this woman.



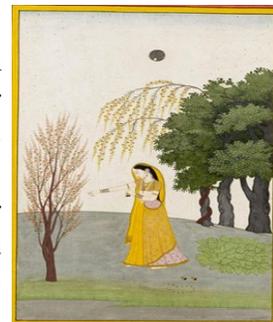
#### 5. Khandita

The Khandita shows fierce anger - way more intense than the conflicted Nayika. She's shown through bold actions like stomping feet, tearing a veil apart, or hurling things in fury. Her stance feels charged, full of force; eyes are wide open, mouth tight or slightly open with spite. To mirror her chaos inside, scenes might use fluttering fabrics, sudden gusts, or darkening clouds overhead. She stands for deep longing; love pushed to its breaking point. Yet her shiny ornaments, paired with graceful attire, clash with the fury on her face - a gap artists highlight to show beauty cracked by deceit. Nearby, a dying spark or wavering light hints at loyalty shattered. While fierce, she carries herself with quiet strength, representing a woman hurt but unbroken.



#### 6. Vipralabdha

This Nayika senses betrayal - maybe from lies, maybe from neglect. Artists paint her alone, often slumped, arms wrapped over her face or chin tucked low. Her eyes carry sorrow, her mouth hints at defeat, a quiet ache settled deep. A broken bloom near the sill, shadows stretching across an empty room - these echo her inner silence, a world gone still without him. The Vipralabdha Nayika holds the quiet ache of love that never found its way. Often, she's shown with shattered anklets, garlands wilting under time's weight,



or a candle fading into shadow - each hinting at hope worn thin. Around her, colours sink into soft blues, pale greys, faint whispers of tone mirroring her hollow core. Yet despite it all, she stands in stillness, not broken but shaped by patience. Her aloneness isn't defeat - more like calm resolve wearing the shape of silence.

### 7. Proshitartruka

This woman shows yearning along with grit while searching hard for her missing partner. Often she's spotted near doorways, stepping across streams, or walking garden paths - each stance hinting at motion and waiting. Her hair might look tousled, garments fluttering like they're caught mid-step, her expression mixing wishful thinking with worry. What sets this Nayika apart is drive, deep affection, together with persistence. Sometimes her friends hold lanterns cutting through darkness, hinting how faith fuels devotion. Her gaze lingers on the horizon - calm, unshifting. Moonlight softens her edges while silence wraps around like a second skin; in this stillness, she turns into something deeper - not just feeling, but endurance made visible. Distance doesn't touch it. Time slips by, yet it holds.



### 8. Abhisarika

The Abhisarika stands out as the fiercest, most daring among the Nayikas - she moves toward her lover without hesitation, often after dark or through rough terrain such as thick groves, rushing streams, or tangled forests. With each step full of vigour, her stance screams self-assurance while her expression radiates courage, thrill, along with a sense of anticipation. Flowing garments plus lively arrangements amplify movement, whereas mood intensifies thanks to ambient touches - glowing moonbeams, fluttering birds, or branches rocking in the wind. Abhisarika's about breaking free inside, chasing love without flinching. Artists toss in flashes, dark skies, or serpents on her route - to ramp up tension - yet she keeps moving, undeterred.



Her jewellery, hinting at honest motives, glimmers through the shadows. This isn't just desire - it's daring like prayer, a bond stronger than time, fear, or stuff people cling to.

### Conclusion

Women have long been central to Pahari miniatures, not just for looks but as deep expressions of feeling and art. Instead of mere beauty, they stand for love, loyalty, and quiet power across these works. Whether shown as queens, goddesses, or lovers waiting

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faithfully, their faces carry every shade of emotion - happiness, grief, yearning, dignity, belief. Painters used soft hues, fine strokes, telling stories through how they shaped eyes, hands, stances. With every glance and pose, these figures spoke volumes, turning each piece into something flowing like verse - more than pretty, alive with meaning.

From the quiet longing of Vasakasajja to the bold journey of Abhisarika, painters showed eight unique feelings of women in love using the Ashta Nayika idea. With movement, hue, and scene, each Nayika expressed a different shade of affection - not just copied, but felt. The Pahari creators didn't just draw them - they breathed life into every form. Tender, deep, alive, these figures moved beyond stillness into something personal. The hill culture's view of women showed up in how they were painted: loyal, devoted, brave, yet deeply feeling. Every stroke carried the artist's quiet awe for women's inner strength instead of just skill.

Women showed varied ideals of beauty and character across different miniature art styles. Though the Rajasthani school focused on courage and loyalty, the Mughal tradition highlighted grace and sophistication. In contrast, the Pahari school let female figures shine with emotional richness and lyrical depth - shaping them into images of sacred charm, affection, and devotion. They stood for inner strength and sincerity, whether portrayed as a girl absorbed in melody and nightlight or Radha longing for Krishna. Women in Pahari miniatures aren't just shown - they're celebrated for the quiet force that fuels making art. These figures carry the soul, flow, and pulse of the style - soft but strong, grounded but sacred, ageless but always alive.

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