

The Valiant and the Divine: Men in Pahari Miniature Painting

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Abstract

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

Received: 19-05-26

Approved: 16-06-26

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Artistic Narration 2026,
Vol. XVII, No. 1,
Article No.07 Pg.055-062

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2026-vol-xvii-no1](https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/artistic-narration-june-2026-vol-xvii-no1)

Referred by:
DOI:[https://doi.org/10.31995/
an.2026.v17i01.007](https://doi.org/10.31995/an.2026.v17i01.007)

From the 1600s into the 1800s, small hill states across northern India began shaping fragile forms of visual beauty - Basohli, then Kangra, followed by Guler, Chamba, Mandi, Garhwal, Jammu, each feeding something lasting into India's art story. Though raised in Rajput courts, their painters pulled quietly from elsewhere - Gujarat's ancient picture rolls, say, or sharp Mughal lines, Rajasthan's bold colors, even gestures born in farm huts. The results softened. They breathed. Faces carried weight that words could not hold. Most attention lands on women shown here: yearning lovers, hearts split open, glowing with quiet delight. But male figures? These wander less examined. Paying closer attention makes room for them now - how they pose, just off center; which roles they wear lightly; moments they freeze, pretending nothing matters.

From divine figures, human shapes emerge in five main ways through Pahari art. Not passion alone defines Krishna - he moves like longing made visible. Rama carries authority, yet his calm speaks more than power ever could. Shiva stands outside, bare-bodied, caught between storm and silence. Without strain, Vishnu holds all worlds - timeless, unmoving, endlessly wide. Following behind, lovers appear - rarely pure, often pulled apart or playing games with trust. Under pale light, one stands still, gaze locked on a faraway entrance. Peering into male figures' looks, the research reveals lotus-like eyes, bent postures, sewn jackets, ornate headwraps, complexions hinting at hidden messages - together building a visual code refined across more than two centuries. Region by region, contrasts show plainly: Basohli's bold, intense form melts into Guler's quiet depth, glides into Kangra's soft glow, encounters Mandi's solemn weight, settles in Jammu's graceful composure. Branches stir near their sides. Waterways travel beside them. The time of year changes as they sense it.



Clouds thicken as grief climbs. Not merely a backdrop, the wild reflects inner states - shaped by an old system of nine feeling-tones.

From the study emerges something real: feeling lives within the figure painted in Pahari art, beyond shape, beneath sight. Not resting in still landscapes or fading behind female forms does he belong, but rather rising with mood woven into posture. Through him flows meaning - sudden, plain - showing what hearts once held close. Craft shows up here, yes, though not merely that; soul spills out, built by a culture wide in thought. Out of sight, beauty grows deeper than looks - linked to what people hold true, built through the years. Not just marks on a page, it carries meaning much heavier than color or stroke.

Keywords

Pahari, Miniature, Basohli, Kangra, Guler, Mandi, Chamba, Jammu

History

From the 17th into the 19th century, small-scale paintings began rising through hill regions in north India. Skilled painters trained under the Mughals also began appearing in remote hill kingdoms around the 1750s. With Delhi's power fading, royal studios shrank, pushing creators to move uphill for steady work. Their bags carried more than tools - they held refined techniques in likeness, depth, and delicate hues shaped by imperial years. Yet once those methods brushed against local devotion, lyrical themes, and earthy energy, something fresh took root. A quiet shift unfolded, not loud but deep, reshaping art one brushstroke at a time. Golden times began when the Kangra school rose, glowing brightest while supported by Raja Sansar Chand during the late 1700s into the early 1800s. Cool greens, gentle blues, and mellow brownish shades shaped its look; figures appeared with quiet grace, drawn close to feeling rather than form. Nature played a lead role here - trees, rivers, hills breathed through every scene. This way of painting stood apart, setting the standard for all Pahari art that came before it.

Paintings from the hills drew deep from sacred tales and courtly verse. Because faith mattered so much there, gods often appeared in vivid scenes. Rulers asked artists to show legends - Ramayana battles, Krishna's youth, Mahabharata clashes - all rooted in old scriptures. Devotion to Vishnu guided many patrons, shaping what got made. Love between Radha and Krishna showed up more than almost any other idea. Older ways fed into it: hand-painted books from Gujarat, strong lines borrowed from Chaurapanchasika drawings.



Men rarely stood just as men; they became symbols through roles - lover under moonlight, king on a throne, warrior mid-stride, hermit lost in thought, deity floating beyond time. Emotion gave shape to form, not just rule or technique. Each face carried weight not because it looked real - but because it felt true.

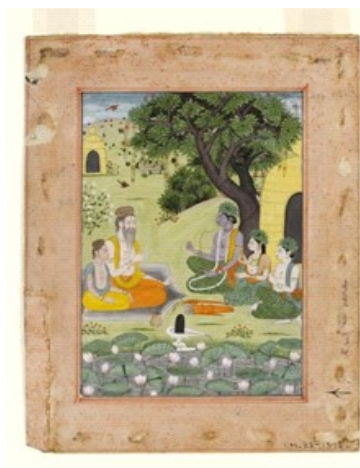
Appearance and Visual Convection

Within Pahari miniatures, bodies were more than flesh - each limb shaped meaning, built by rhythm,

balance, pose, and detail. Because posture carried weight, not just grace. While colour whispered rank, devotion, and mood. Since gods appeared as men, ideals walked on earth in pigment and curve. Even silence had shape here, drawn with intent. As every contour answered questions about power, spirit, and desire. When viewed slowly, arms and eyes reveal codes older than print. So much depends on the tilt of the

head, the fall of the cloth, direction of the glance. Nowhere else does skin carry so many stories beneath its outline. Wherever you look, form follows feeling. Yet nothing feels accidental - not a finger, not a fold. Through such precision, mountain courts once defined what it meant to be male, divine, and real.

In Pahari miniatures, the man's face carries more emotion than any other part. Starting at the top, the forehead rises wide and tall, curving softly down toward the bridge of the nose. From there, the gaze draws you in - eyes stretched long like lotus petals, glowing as if lit from within. These eyes speak without words: yearning for a lover, holding royal calm, or resting in quiet wisdom. It's their glow that holds attention, never stiff, always breathing with life. Above them, brows arch sharply, giving a look of awareness, almost like thought is visible. Meanwhile, the mouth sits full and finely shaped, ready to hint at feelings barely spoken. Together, each feature works not by shouting but by whispering through small details. No single piece stands alone - the power comes from



how they move together. Even stillness feels active on these faces, frozen mid-sense, caught between breaths. Clothing on men in Pahari miniatures tells deep stories through fabric and form. Tight trousers appear often, matched with a short tunic or a decorated scarf draped above. A flowing robe called angarkha wraps around nobles, its vivid shades stitched with detailed patterns that twist like vines or snap into sharp shapes. Headwear stands out boldly - turbans do more than shade, they speak of position, origin, and presence. Court scenes show them layered and jewelled; village moments keep them plain, grounded. Each fold and hue hold meaning without spelling it aloud. Like the women shown in Pahari miniatures wearing detailed jewellery, men - especially gods and kings - are drawn

with care, showing pearl strands, golden chains, and gemstones around their necks; on



their arms sit bangles, while gold-and-pearl earrings hang at their ears. Skin tones here carry meaning: Krishna glows dark blue like moonlit water, Rama wears a calm bluish green, Shiva appears pale as ash - all colours that speak without words about who they are.

What stands out about Pahari miniature painting is how each main school shaped its own look, even though they grew from similar roots. The men in Guler art feel different - less rigid, more like real people. Where Basohli once shaped males with sharp lines and strong symbols, Guler softens the edges. Between the bold past and delicate future stands Guler. Men become layered. They gain presence. Something inside them stirs. In Kangra paintings, the man comes alive with quiet feeling, shaped like a poem rather than stone. Slender limbs, delicate posture - every line speaks softly of grace. They stand not above others, but within moments - sad, sweet, waiting. Trees bloom because he feels; rivers glide because he longs. Moonlight does not just fall - it answers him. The Mandi school is perhaps the most spiritually intense of all the Pahari traditions, dominated by Shiva in his many cosmic and ascetic forms. Male figures in Mandi paintings are rendered with a heightened spiritual energy, sometimes approaching the fierce and the otherworldly. The Chamba school depicts male figures with a robust warmth and physical solidity grounded in the earthy, folk-influenced sensibility of the region. The Garhwal school, sharing close affinity with the Kangra tradition, depicts male figures moving through misty, atmospheric landscapes with a quality of poetic melancholy and quiet contemplation that reflects the school's deep connection to the devotional poetry of the Bhakti tradition.

Inside Pahari paintings, feelings do not stay hidden. They rise - pulled out by trees, caught in river light, shaped by sky. Each setting listens to the soul inside the figure. Trees bend toward sorrow. Light pauses where joy passes. Nothing stands apart. Mood after mood, earth answers breath. What lives in skin also spreads into soil.

The Divine Male

Deep in the heart of many stories, one figure stands apart - Krishna. More than any other godlike man, he draws attention through endless forms and moods. Graceful yet bold, he becomes the ultimate hero, shaped by love shared with Radha and the women who walked Vrindavan's paths. Artists from the hills found something alive in these tales - energy that never ran dry. Look at how he appears: skin like midnight clouds lit from within, hinting at vast skies above and storm-swollen rivers below. Slender limbs twist into flowing stances, often



caught mid-motion, as if paused while dancing. Above it all rests a single plume - bright-eyed feathers fanned into a crown, unmatched in symbol or sight across sacred images. From the Gita Govinda, he burns with quiet desperation, caught in love's ache. Then suddenly, from tales in the Bhagavata Purana, laughter spills out - he becomes mischief shaped like a boy. Blue-green skin catches the light. A bow rests by his side, never far away. Not just king but also keeper of what is right. Pahari painters show him calm, upright, steady in posture. Always nearby: Lakshmana close, Hanuman ready, Sita beside him. When she vanishes, he searches - eyes heavy, heart open. Even gods can ache like men. His pain does not weaken him. Instead, it deepens who he already is. Quiet sorrow moves through the scenes. Strength here wears no mask. Dharma walks with bare feet on the forest ground.

White as ash or pale like sky before dawn, Shiva holds two lives at once - he walks apart from all things, yet burns with love for Parvati. Not just distant stillness, but fire held close; his skin dusted with cremation ash, hair knotted into wild coils where the Ganges slips through like breath. Mount Kailash cradles him beside her, in quiet scenes painted long ago - gods resting not above life, but inside it, softened by nearness. Pahari hands shaped these moments gently, showing strength that does not crush, but bends toward another without breaking. Blue beyond depth, Vishnu stands whole in himself, four arms holding symbols older than speech - spiral shell, spinning wheel, iron rod, flower rising from mud. His face carries weight without strain, calm not because nothing moves, but because everything rests where it belongs. Stillness here is full, never empty; presence built not by taking space, but filling it without effort.

The Nayakas

Among the hills where art and poetry thrived, heroes in love were never just types - each carried distinct shades of feeling. Not through mere listing but layered thought did writers shape how men in passion could be seen. Long before paint touched paper, ancient texts like the Natyashastra laid quiet groundwork. From those roots grew finer branches - Rasamanjari, then Rasikapriya - feeding insight into emotion's many forms. Artists watched closely. They painted lovers not as symbols, yet living figures shaped by longing, hesitation, and joy as a nayaka.

The Anukula Nayaka stands as the purest form among lovers - steady, true, full of quiet feeling that never shifts or fades. In Pahari art, this nature shines brightest through Krishna, seen here not as divine but soft, arranging blossoms just for Radha's return. His face holds a glow born of trust, calm like someone sure of being loved yet touched by sadness when apart, even briefly. The Dakshina Nayaka moves between women, drawn to more than one heart, sharing time though it pulls him thin. Court scenes show him balanced on edge, body tense despite rich clothes, trying hard to keep every promise without breaking

any. The Shatha Nayaka, tangled in lies, loving falsely, giving words that mean little while pretending deep care. Paintings frame him with careful grace, ornaments heavy and bright, yet something stiff behind his smile shows guilt dressed up as ease. The Viraha Nayaka, whose sorrow stays silent, settled deep beneath his surface, shaped by missing someone too much. Not loud, never forced, just there, like breath on glass that fades too slowly. Each tree along his path pulls memory forward; rivers speak in tones he once knew; seasons shift, colder now she is gone. Absence drapes across him as storm-heavy clouds do before breaking - held long, felt deeper than seen. The Abhisarika Nayaka, unlike those who linger, is drawn onward while rain lashes thick woods and thunder cracks above swollen streams. Though branches claw and winds whip, he presses on because longing weighs heavier than risk. Not bold by reckoning, yet driven - his posture tells how purpose shapes path, night yielding not to courage but clarity. Painted in haste by Pahari hands, cloak snapping sideways, gaze locked true, each stroke shows legs moving before thought, arrival claimed in intent alone.

Conclusion

One look at Pahari miniatures shows men drawn not just as forms but as feelings made visible. Though rooted in northern India's hill kingdoms, these images grew under royal support, where rulers shaped what artists saw fit to show. Because Mughal styles brought sharper eyes for detail, bodies began to carry weight, gesture, and presence. While devotion to Krishna softened expressions into longing, poetry like the Rasikapriya gave structure to desire and separation. Even epic tales slipped into frames - silent moments pulled from grand stories. Far from stiff symbols, male figures breathe hesitation, pride, and stillness. What emerges lives between line and colour - a man caught mid-thought, not posed.



Out of how men looked, plus their painted forms, came a clear kind of visual speech - eyes shaped like petals, bodies bent softly sideways, richly stitched coats worn open, headgear set with stones, skin tones hinting at godliness - not just seen, yet felt. Though rooted in habit, these choices shifted across time, breathing in styles from royal workshops, borrowing gestures from village art, still holding tight to a dreamlike rhythm all their own.

Out of nowhere, Basohli gave the man sharp lines and fire behind his eyes. Not quite the same, Guler shaped him with quiet depth, thoughts lingering beneath the surface.

Elsewhere, Kangra softened everything - his gestures light, almost humming. Then came Mandi, where presence mattered more than form, breath edged with devotion. Jammu took another path entirely, draping him in poise, every pose carrying weight without effort. Altogether, these ways of seeing didn't clash - they overlapped, shifted, stood apart, yet still belonged to one world.

Looking at Krishna, Rama, Shiva, Vishnu, and Hanuman shows they are more than holy images - each one reflects a different way of living the sacred masculine, like passion in love, justice in rule, stillness in solitude, balance in preservation, loyalty in service. Though often seen through romance, the male figure in Pahari paintings carries depth equal to the female counterpart, where feelings and choices appear not just in the face, but in the instance, hand position, clothing, and even the trees around him. Kings appear draped in splendor yet bow before wisdom, their power tied less to land and weapons than quiet moments near sages or folded hands in prayer. Meanwhile, those who walk away from wealth and noise find strength not in display but absence - stripped bare, calm, awake, glowing without effort because what matters now lies within.

These results add up to something clear: the way men appear in Pahari miniatures carries deep layers, just as much as the famous female figures. Not shadows beside the heroine, but vivid participants full of feeling and meaning. Their forms speak not only of artistry, but of a world shaped by inner discipline and devotion. Through them, we glimpse what mattered most in a culture where beauty walked hand in hand with spiritual intent. Each gesture, each face, holds echoes of a northern Indian heritage both refined and intense. They demand notice on their own terms, not as additions, but as central voices in a century-old visual story.

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