

INTRODUCTION, MATERIALS, AND THEMATIC FOUNDATIONS

The term *Rajasthani Schools of Painting* designates a group of pictorial traditions that flourished across the princely kingdoms and *thikanas* of Rajasthan and adjoining regions of Central India between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

These included centres such as Mewar, Bundi, Kota, Jaipur, Bikaner, Kishangarh, Jodhpur (Marwar), Malwa, and others. The nomenclature itself has undergone a significant transformation over time.

Initially, scholar Anand Coomaraswamy in 1916 coined the term *Rajput Paintings* to distinguish these works from the Mughal School and to underline their indigenous origins.

However, subsequent art historical developments rendered this classification inadequate, leading to the adoption of more precise categories such as *Rajasthani* and *Pahari Schools*.

Despite their geographical proximity, these schools exhibit remarkable stylistic diversity. Differences manifest in execution—ranging from bold and direct to refined and delicate—along with variations in colour palettes, compositional strategies, and narrative techniques.

Some traditions favour brilliant and saturated hues, while others employ gentle tonalities. Similarly, compositions may emphasise architecture, landscape, or figural dynamism, and oscillate between naturalistic tendencies and pronounced mannerism.

This diversity underscores the autonomy of regional courts while simultaneously reflecting a shared cultural matrix.

The technical process of painting reveals a high degree of sophistication and collaborative organisation. Paintings were executed on *waslis*, which were layered sheets of handmade paper prepared to achieve the required thickness.

The composition was first outlined in black or brown, after which colours were applied based on notations or sample patches. Pigments were predominantly derived

from minerals and precious metals such as gold and silver, bound together using organic adhesives.

Brushes, crafted from camel and squirrel hair, allowed for both precision and fluidity. Upon completion, the surface was burnished with an agate, producing a luminous sheen that enhanced the painting's visual appeal.

The entire process was collaborative: the master artist conceptualised and executed the primary drawing, while assistants specialised in colouring, architecture, portraiture, or landscape.

A scribe would later inscribe verses in designated spaces, thus integrating text and image into a unified aesthetic experience.

The thematic universe of Rajasthani painting is deeply rooted in the religious and literary milieu of the Bhakti movement.

By the sixteenth century, Vaishnavism—particularly the worship of Rama and Krishna—had gained widespread popularity across northern and western India. Among these, Krishna emerged as a central figure, not only as a deity but also as an idealised lover.

The notion of divine love, imbued with both sensuous and mystical dimensions, became a dominant theme. Radha, representing the human soul, is often depicted in complete devotion and surrender to Krishna, symbolising the spiritual union between the individual and the divine.

A significant portion of Rajasthani paintings draws upon classical literary texts. Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* (twelfth century) occupies a preeminent position, offering lyrical depictions of Radha-Krishna love that evoke *shringara rasa*.

Similarly, Bhanu Datta's *Rasamanjari* provides a systematic classification of lovers (*nayakas* and *nayikas*) based on their physical attributes and emotional states, which artists translated into vivid visual forms. Keshav Das's *Rasikapriya* further elaborates the emotional spectrum of love, addressing themes such as union, separation, jealousy, and reconciliation within a courtly aesthetic framework.

His *Kavipriya*, particularly the *Baramasa* section, introduces a cyclical representation of seasons and moods, intertwining human emotions with the passage

of time. Additionally, Bihari Lal's *Bihari Satsai*, composed of aphoristic verses, offered rich material for visual interpretation, especially in the Mewar tradition.

Another important thematic category is the *Ragamala* series, which visualises musical modes (*ragas* and *raginis*) as human or divine figures associated with specific moods, times of day, and seasons.

These sets were typically organised into families and compiled into albums. Alongside these, artists frequently illustrated epics and Puranic texts such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagvata Purana*, and *Devi Mahatmya*.

Secular subjects also occupied a prominent place, including courtly assemblies (*darbar*), hunting expeditions, festivals, portraits, and scenes of everyday life.

Together, these themes reflect a synthesis of devotion, literary imagination, and lived experience, forming the conceptual foundation of Rajasthani painting.

centre but instead reflects a broader territorial spread, including regions such as Mandu and Bundelkhand.

Its visual language is marked by a strong two-dimensional quality, simplicity of composition, and bold use of colour. This stylistic austerity suggests a continuity from earlier Jain manuscript traditions and the *Chaurpanchashika* style.

Notably, Malwa paintings lack explicit references to royal patrons or portraits, leading scholars to suggest that they were produced by itinerant artists catering to popular demand.

Themes frequently include literary and devotional texts such as the *Amaru Shataka*, *Ragamala*, *Rasikapriya*, and *Baramasa*.

The Mewar School is widely regarded as one of the earliest and most influential centres of Rajasthani painting. Its emergence is associated with a *Ragamala* series dated 1605, painted by the artist Nisardin at Chawand.

Early Mewar paintings are characterised by bold lines, vibrant colours, and straightforward compositions, reflecting an indigenous aesthetic sensibility.

The reign of Jagat Singh I (1628–1652) marks a period of significant artistic refinement, during which master artists such as Sahibdin and Manohar introduced greater sophistication into the style.

Sahibdin's illustrated manuscripts of the *Bhagvata Purana*, *Rasikapriya*, and *Ramayana* exemplify the narrative richness and technical mastery of the school.

One notable innovation is the use of oblique aerial perspective, allowing artists to depict multiple episodes within a single frame or extend a narrative across several folios.

By the eighteenth century, Mewar painting gradually shifted from religious texts to secular themes, including courtly life, hunting scenes, and portraiture.

The emergence of the Nathdwara sub-school further enriched this tradition, particularly through the production of *pichhwais*—large painted backdrops for temple rituals dedicated to Shrinathji.



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MALWA, MEWAR, BUNDI, AND KOTA SCHOOLS

The Malwa School of Painting, flourishing between 1600 and 1700 CE, represents a distinctive regional idiom rooted in Central India.

Unlike other Rajasthani schools tied to specific courts, Malwa painting does not adhere to a single geographic

The continued use of bright colours, especially reds and yellows, remained a defining feature of the Mewar palette.

The Bundi School, flourishing in the seventeenth century, is distinguished by its refined colour sense and elegant formal design. Early examples, such as the *Bundi Ragamala* of 1591, reveal connections with Mughal-trained artists, indicating an initial phase of stylistic exchange.

Under the patronage of rulers like Rao Chhattar Sal and Rao Bhao Singh, Bundi painting attained maturity and sophistication. A hallmark of this school is its evocative depiction of nature—lush vegetation, undulating hills, water bodies, and diverse flora and fauna.

Human figures, particularly female forms, are rendered with distinctive features such as round faces, sharp noses, and slender waists. In the eighteenth century, Bundi paintings display an increased affinity for bright, vivid colours, possibly influenced by the Deccani style.

The Kota School emerged as an offshoot of Bundi following the political division of the kingdom in 1625. Initially indistinguishable from Bundi, Kota painting gradually developed a distinct identity characterised by its dynamic compositions and emphasis on movement.

The depiction of hunting scenes became a defining feature, reflecting the interests of its patrons, especially Umed Singh, whose passion for hunting is vividly recorded in numerous paintings.

Kota artists demonstrated exceptional skill in rendering animals and combat scenes, often employing calligraphic lines and dramatic shading techniques. Over time, landscape itself became a central subject, marking a significant shift in pictorial emphasis.

BIKANER, KISHANGARH, JODHPUR, JAIPUR AND SYNTHESIS

The Bikaner School of Painting developed under strong Mughal influence due to the kingdom's close political ties with the Mughal court. Founded by Rao Bika, Bikaner became an important centre of artistic production, particularly during the reign of Anup Singh (1669–1698).

The school is characterised by its refined elegance, subdued colour palette, and meticulous detailing.

Several artists associated with the Mughal atelier, such as Ustad Ali Raza, contributed to its development.

The presence of organised workshops, known as *mandis*, facilitated collaborative production under the supervision of master artists like Ruknuddin and Ibrahim.

A distinctive feature of Bikaner painting is its extensive documentation, with inscriptions recording the names of artists, dates, and even circumstances of production.

The practice of *gudarayi* (final finishing), *marammat* (repair), and *nakal* (copying) further illustrates the professional structure of artistic practice.

The Kishangarh School represents the most stylised and aesthetically refined expression of Rajasthani painting. Founded in the early seventeenth century, it achieved its zenith under the patronage of Sawant Singh and the artistic genius of Nihal Chand.



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Kishangarh paintings are renowned for their distinctive facial type, characterised by elongated features, arched eyebrows, lotus-shaped eyes, and slender noses. The figures often appear set within expansive, panoramic landscapes rendered in luminous colours. The theme of Radha-Krishna love dominates, reflecting the devotional inclinations of the patron.

The iconic figure of *Bani Thani*, believed to be inspired by a real courtly figure, epitomises the idealised feminine beauty of this school and has become synonymous with Kishangarh aesthetics.

The Jodhpur (Marwar) School presents a unique synthesis of Mughal and indigenous elements. While Mughal influence is evident in portraiture and court scenes, the persistence of a robust folk tradition ensures a distinctive regional character.

The reign of Jaswant Singh witnessed the emergence of documentary painting, with a focus on recording courtly events and royal portraits. Themes derived from the *Bhagvata Purana*, *Dhola-Maru*, and other literary sources were also widely depicted.

A notable feature of Jodhpur painting is the localisation of narrative settings, where mythological scenes are rendered using contemporary architectural and cultural contexts. However, the lack of consistent inscriptions limits the documentation of this tradition.

The Jaipur School, originating in Amer and later flourishing in Jaipur under Sawai Jai Singh, reflects a strong Mughal influence combined with indigenous elements.

The establishment of Jaipur as a new capital in 1727 marked a significant turning point, leading to the reorganisation of artistic production within the *Suratkhana*. Jaipur paintings are characterised by their large formats, lavish use of gold, and emphasis on portraiture.

Themes include Radha-Krishna narratives, *Ragamala*, *Gita Govinda*, and scenes of courtly splendour. By the late eighteenth century, the style evolved into a synthesis of Mughal refinement and regional sensibility, achieving a distinctive identity.

In conclusion, the Rajasthani Schools of Painting represent a rich and multifaceted artistic tradition shaped by regional diversity, religious devotion, and courtly patronage.

While united by a shared cultural and thematic framework—particularly the influence of the Bhakti movement and classical literature—each school developed its own stylistic vocabulary.

The interplay between indigenous traditions and external influences, especially from the Mughal and Deccani schools, further enriched this artistic landscape.

Ultimately, Rajasthani painting stands as a testament to the creative synthesis of spirituality, aesthetics, and regional identity in Indian art.