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The Splendor of Wall Paintings in Bundi

A Review Article of *The Bundi Wall – Paintings in Rajasthan (Rediscovered Treasures)*
by Pratapaditya Pal

The Bundi Wall – Paintings in Rajasthan (Rediscovered Treasures)

Text by Milo C. Beach

Photography by Hilde Lauwaert, Additional Photography by Winne Goby
Mercatorfonds, Brussels. (Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London), 2013

January 26, 2016

(click on the small image for full screen image with captions.)

The surface is as if glistening and embracing as if coming out to meet the spectator,
the sweetness is as if smiling, it works as if endowed with life.

The Vishṇudharmottarapurāṇa [1]

1.



Fig. 1: The west veranda, Chitra Mahal

Wall paintings have a long history in India, both archaeological and literary. While the surviving archaeological evidence can be traced back at least to the first century BCE (among the remaining murals at Ajanta in Maharashtra), the literary evidence, as is always the case in Indic cultures, is not as precisely datable; some of it may be older. All the archaeological evidence survives on walls of religious monuments and hence depict mythological and spiritual subject matter, though the cave shrines of both the Buddhists and the Jains contain images and compositions which throw considerable light on the secular realm. Most ancient palaces and other secular buildings in ancient South Asia are lost but from texts such as the 3rd part (*Khaṇḍa*) of the *Vishṇudharmottarapurāṇa* (7th century) –from which the epigraph above is quoted– we have considerable information of the types of pictures that once adorned the walls of secular buildings. Evidently a thin line divided the two worlds for religious and mythological subjects are also recommended for both types of structures.

In fact, this is what we encounter in the rich treasure trove of wall paintings on the magnificent palace complex of the state of Bundi in Rajasthan as brilliantly and copiously photographed by Hilde Lauwaert and Winne Goby for the book under review. Unfortunately, nowhere in the book do we get any biographical or professional information about these two intrepid photographers though searching the internet is an option of all geeks; this reviewer is a proud luddite.

Fortunately, as Hilde Lauwaert states in her Foreword, she was able to excite Dr. Milo Beach to write the Introduction and descriptions of the plates, indeed a coup. Beach, who is now one of the seniormost and eminent authorities in the history of Mughal and Rajput pictorial traditions of the subcontinent, began his academic career with a PhD thesis on portable pictures produced at Bundi and Kota almost half a century ago. The erudite introduction he has contributed to this volume is not only adequate to appreciate the wall paintings but it also provides the reader with a great deal of insight for understanding the relationship between them and the portable pictures produced for generations of members of the Bundi court, beginning with Rao Surjan Singh (1554–1585) and ending with the submergence of the state, along with most of the others in Rajasthan and elsewhere, into independent India in 1947. Brief though the introduction is, it is a nuanced tapestry of the history of the paintings interwoven with art historical context, style and aesthetics.

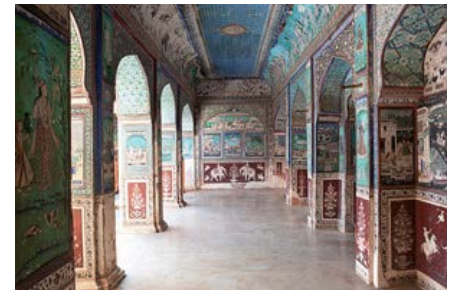


Fig. 2: Veranda in the Chitra Mahal

2.

Particularly apt are the passages Beach quotes from Rudyard Kipling's account of his visit to Bundi in 1887. The British author was charmed by the city which he characterized as "a fascinating place – this jumbled city of straight streets and cool gardens" dominated by the sprawling crowded assemblage of inter connected buildings of the palace rising like manmade peaks (p.11).

Kipling was also fortunate in observing artists at work during his visit. As quoted by Beach, he wrote as follows of his guided tour by the "warden" of the palace

At one end of the garden was a small room [i.e. the Chitra Mahal] under treatment by native artists who were painting the panel with historical pictures, in distemper. Theirs was a florid polychromatic art, but skirting the floor ran a series of frescos in red, black, and white, of combats with elephants, bold and temperate as good German work. They were worn and defaced in places but the hand of some bygone limner, who did not know how to waste a line, showed under the bruises and scratches, and put the newer work to shame (p.22).

Beach's pithy comment on the passage is "Kipling's judgment was, in fact, sound." It was obvious to me that Rudyard was indeed a chip off the block of his artist father Lockwood and had he taken up art history, he might well have rivaled his contemporaries, such as E.B. Havell and Percy Brown, and even Coomaraswamy, the first exponent of Rajput painting of the portable kind, characterized inappropriately by scholars as "miniatures," a misnomer if ever there was one.

3.



Fig. 3: Courtiers in Procession

(*Sthavirāvalīcharitra*), the polymath author Hemachandrasuri (1089–1172) describing the house of the courtesan Kosha in the story of Sthulabhadra writes as follows:

In the house of the prostitute named Kośā there is a chamber painted with murals depicting the various postures of love-making described in the textbooks on erotics. I shall stay in it for four months, eating a six-course dinner every day, while performing a remarkable act of asceticism. This is my vow, master [2].

It would be wrong to presume that this was simply a literary trope on the part of the learned monk for he was not a frivolous scholar. Whether Hemachandra was writing about the time of Mahāvira in the 6th century BCE or about his own times, the passage is significant in denoting the practice of using wall paintings long before what we encounter in Rajput palaces.

While earlier texts such as the ca. 7th century Vishṇudharmottarapurāṇa says nothing about the residences of courtesans, it does provide considerable information about palaces as well as homes of the ordinary citizens. The guiding principle is the theory of the nine *rasas* or flavors and we are told that only the erotic (*śṛīṅāra*), comic (*hāsya*) and tranquil (*śānta*) are appropriate for the homes and the others are prohibited. Subjects saturated with all nine *rasas*, however, can be represented on the walls of the houses of the gods (*devālaya*) and of the kings (*nṛpatālaya*) [3].



Fig. 4: Krishna dancing and fluting

4.

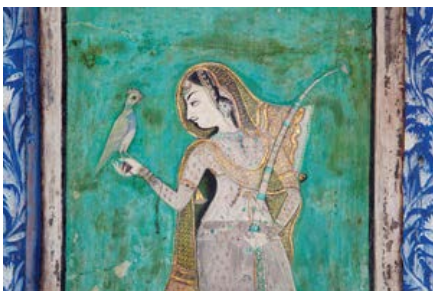


Fig. 5: Woman with a Pet Bird

And this is in fact what we witness in the wall paintings of Bundi in profusion. What has been so vividly reproduced in the large format book with such lavish generosity can hardly match the first impression that a contemporary visitor forms when visiting such Hindu palaces as I can vouchsafe. The modern palaces (mostly converted to luxury hotels) erected during the first half of the 20th century that coincides with the last gasp of the British Raj, with their blank ceilings and walls, even if adorned with portable pictures, cannot compare with the luxurious ambiance of form and riotous color that envelopes one so thoroughly in chamber after chamber in the older palaces.

As the photographer Hilde Lauwaert, responsible for this book, states in her Foreword:

In 2009, touring Rajasthan, I visited the small city of Bundi. In the palace complex – abandoned and uninhabited since India's independence in 1947 – I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the murals that decorated a number of its rooms. At the same time I was struck by the extensive decline of many of them. As I was wandering around the complex, my thoughts often strayed to the artists who once spent years of their lives working here with dedication and expert craftsmanship. I felt a deep respect and gratitude for what they had left behind for their country and for the world, but could not understand how it was possible that no one had put

a stop to the process of decline, which in many places has caused irreparable damage (p.22).

As an octogenarian art historian of Indian origin, I completely share her exhilaration and her despair; I too had the same reaction when visiting many of the palaces. At the same time I hang my head in shame for the neglect and ultimate destruction of such treasures of the old country's heritage, even though the current obsession is with the supremacy of "Hindu" civilization and the media, both there and here, are possessed with the hyped-up issue of the departure of art from the ancient land. Yet both apathy for their heritage and the environment – witness the steady and continued pollution of our natural resources and the ignorance of the past – are so deep-rooted that it is unlikely that outcry from such well-meaning foreigners, as Hilde Lauwaert, will fall on receptive ears.



Fig. 6: Elephant Fight



Fig. 7: The Sun, from the bedroom
of
Maharao Umaid Singh

Unambiguously, Milo Beach asserts that the "extraordinary series of wall painting... remain the earliest, as well as the finest and best preserved, royal wall paintings anywhere in India" [p. 13]. I would hate to think that they may well disappear by the time my grandchildren grow up and visit Bundi. Or will future generations of Indians and foreign tourists have to taste their rasa vicariously from the sensitive and empathetic photographs reproduced here or in the virtual realm of the internet only?

Endnotes

1. Priyabala Shah, *Vishṇudharmottara-purāṇa Third Khaṇḍa* vol. II, Baroda, Oriental Institute, 1961, p.136.
2. Hemacandra *The Lives of the Jain Elders*. Translated by R.C.C. Fynes, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p.164.
3. Priyabala Shah, *Vishṇudharmottara-purāṇa Third Khaṇḍa* vol. II, Baroda, Oriental Institute, 1961, pp.130–137.



Dr. Pratapaditya Pal

Dr. Pratapaditya Pal is a world-renowned Asian art scholar. He was born in Bangladesh and grew up in Kolkata. In 1967, Dr. Pal moved to the U.S. and took a curatorial position as the 'Keeper of the Indian Collection' at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, he has lived in the United States ever since. In 1970, he joined the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and worked there as the Senior Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian art until he retired in 1995. He has also been Visiting Curator of Indian, Himalayan and Southeast Asian Art at the Art Institute of Chicago (1995–2003) and Fellow for Research at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena (1995–2005). Dr. Pal was General Editor of *Marg* from 1993 to 2012. He has written over 60 books on Asian art, whose titles include, *Art of the Himalayas: Treasures from Nepal and Tibet* (1992), *The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India* (1999) and *The Arts of Kashmir* (2008). He has furthermore written over 200 papers on Asian art. In 2009 Dr. Pal was awarded the Padma Shri for his extraordinary contribution to the sphere of art.

Forthcoming for Marg publications in March 2016: [Bundi Fort--A Rajput World](#), edited by Milo Cleveland Beach.

The wall-paintings in the Rajput fort at Bundi, Rajasthan, include the earliest and finest examples of court painting known in India. Only recently available for sustained study, these wall-decorations help to define the religious, literary, and artistic interests of the court; the functions of the spaces they adorn; the political aspirations of the rulers; and the evolving relationships between one court, its Rajput neighbors, and its Mughal overlords. This new study will transform understanding of Rajput painting and architecture in Rajasthan.

The book will include essays by Allison Busch, Cynthia Talbot, D. Fairchild Ruggles, Edward Rothfarb, and Milo Cleveland Beach. As well as new photographs, there will be drawings and plans of the fort made by the School of Architecture at the Polytechnik University, Bari, Italy, and new studies drawn from court historical accounts and poetic texts.

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