Rāgmālā – The Dancing Melodies

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Abstract

This paper examines Ragamala paintings--illustrated manuscripts from the 15th to 17th centuries that visually interpret the melodic and emotional essence of ragas in the Indian classical music system. It explores how these paintings evolved as a confluence of visual, musical, and poetic traditions within Rajput courtly culture, revealing the synthesis of aesthetic, spiritual, and philosophical dimensions inherent in Hindu art. Methodologically, the research adopts a comparative visual and textual analysis supported by art-historical, iconographic, and hermeneutic approaches, combining primary visual case studies with secondary scholarly discourse. Through formal examination of exemplary miniatures such as Bhairava Raga, Bhairavi Ragini, and Baramasa, the study investigates how artists visualized sound and emotion through color, gesture, and symbolic form, guided by the Rasa theory and Natya Shastra. The paper situates Ragamala within broader debates on the "Art and the Real" in Indian philosophy, emphasizing its role as a medium of transcendence and aesthetic experience. Lastly the current research investigates how Ragamala paintings synthesize the auditory, poetic, and spiritual dimensions of Indian classical aesthetics to visually express the moods (rasa) and philosophies underlying the raga system.

Keywords: Ragamala Paintings; Indian Classical Aesthetics; Rasa Theory; Natya Shastra; Rajput Miniature Art; Visual-Musical Synesthesia

Fig 1: Sarangi Ragini, c.1625, Nepal: Bhaktapur, 1600-1675, Opaque Watercolor and Gold on Paper, 7 x 5-1/2 in. (17.8 x 14.0 cm) Norton Simon Museum

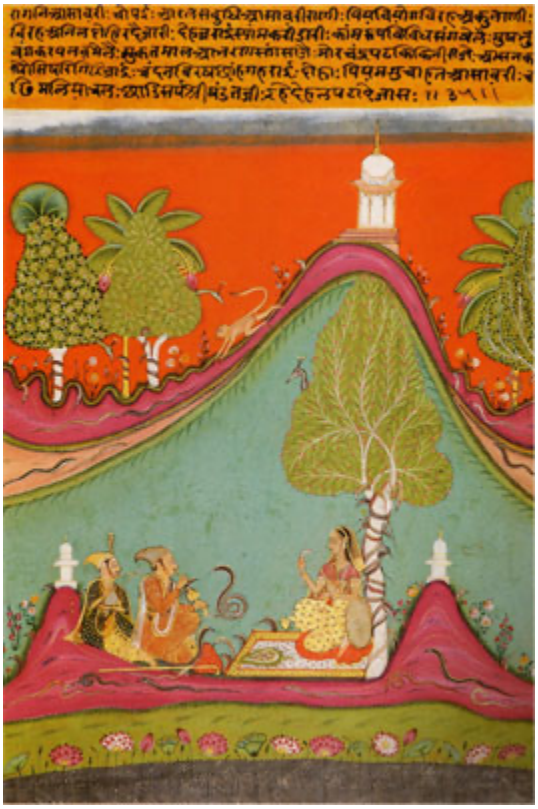
Introduction

Ragamala (Rāgmālā) is a word of Sanskrit which literally means 'garland of ragas.' The Ragas (Rag) are musical modes of the Indian system of music. Hence the term Ragamala painting is synonymous to painted imagery that depicted the mood of different musical melodies and dance forms.

The basic element of the Raga or the musical modes is Svara (Sanskrit) or the tone. A musical tone or Svara is different from what a sound note is. Sound notes are identified by variation in the pitch of one particular tone or Svara. Translating from Sanskrit, Sva means ‘self’ and ‘Ra’ means ‘shining forth’, thus giving the word Svara the meaning of a sound in which the self must shine forth. These paintings also depicted the colors associated with each Raga, and their wives Ragini, their various sons the Ragaputra and daughters the Ragaputri. Each Raga is a unique sequence of five, six or seven Svara, while each of the six major Ragas branch out as Raginis, Ragaputras and Ragaputris.

The theme was practiced over 15th, 16th and 17th centuries in different variations of style according to the different schools it was produced under. Each Raga was usually associated to specific Hindu deities by the medieval Indian musicians to memorize and distinguish each mode. This classification was followed by the poets that elucidated and personified each musical mode in the highly imaginative verses. And the Ragamala poems were transferred into miniature paintings by the illustrators while each page of the illustration usually carried an inscription of verses in Sanskrit, Devanagri script and rarely Persian, in later Mughal courtly Ragamala paintings or of the time the Raga was associated with.

Fig 2: Asavari Ragini, Female Snake Charmer with Attendants, Rajasthan, Date Unknown, Gouache on Paper



The Ragamala paintings followed the prescribed sequences of the Ragas by the musical authorities and exhibited each Raga in the particular mood of the time of the day and the season they are meant to be sung in. Offering a variety in depiction of six times of a year; summer, monsoon, autumn, early winter, winter, spring, the sets respectively personified the six principle Ragas - Bhairava, Dipika, Sri, Malkaunsa, Magha and Hindola. These six major Ragas form the basic system of thirty-six - six Ragas each with five Raginis - for most of the classification systems. Other important Ragas, Raginis and Ragaputras, are known as Bhairava Raga, Bhairavi Ragini, Sri Raga, Malava Ragaputra of Sri Raga, Sarangi Ragini, Vasant Ragini, Kanhra Ragini, Kedara Ragini, Vangala Ragini, Setamallar Ragini, Nata Ragini, Khokhara Ragaputra, Ragaputra

Velavala of Bhairava, Varari Ragini, Lalit Ragini, Gauri Ragini, Asavari Ragini, Vilavali Ragini, Todi Ragini and Kakubha Ragini.

Similarly, Baramasa or the Barahmasa, literally meaning twelve months, i.e. songs of the twelve months, refers to the albums of miniatures comprising of twelve paintings representing the mood and season of twelve different months. The total estimate of Ragas and their subordinates may be too large. The most widely acknowledged system of Ragas is the Painter's system. The other commonly recognized ones are the Hanuman system and the Mesakarna systems. The significance of these Raga systems lies in their power to arouse the emotions, symbolize the mood and the ability to connote the essence of the aesthetic experience for both the musician and the listener.

As one of the prolific themes in Rajput painting, Ragamala painting underwent further modification and classification, along the pace of chronology. However, there is a contradiction among art historians like Karl J. Khandalavala and Hermann Goetz (John Guy and Deborah Swallow, Arts of India: 1500-1900, 1990, p. 131) regarding its place of origin and seamy Mughalization like in other parallel Rajput courtly painting practices. For example, according to Khandalavala, the style was first introduced at the Mughal ateliers, by Ibrahim Adil Shah II of Bijapur, a great patron of music and painting in Deccan, as the Bikaner and Baroda collections dated from 1590s onwards and later on was adapted by the Rajput painters, the first rudimentary attempt by a Gujrati illustrator being the Ragini Dhanasri in the Sarabhai Nawab collection, dated from the beginning of 17th century which the Nawab himself claims to be even older. On the contrary, according to Goetze, the Bikaner and Baroda collections dated from 1570s.

Nevertheless, there is enough evidence and a common believe that the pictorial representation of dancing figures has been quite a primitive tradition in Indian Art, and illustration of the poetics

that were based on the same formations as the musical melodies of the Indian musical system, had been done before 1500.

Fig 3: Bhairavi Ragini, Shiva Devotion, Nepal, Gouache on Paper, circa 1650-75

One such example is the J.C. French Bhairavi Ragini which is illustrated in a rather matured Chaurapanchasika style which dates back undoubtedly to mid sixteenth century and does not express in its aesthetic quality any Mughal or Deccan influence. Chaurapanchasika style itself is derived and developed from its precursory trends of Hindu mythological and Jain manuscripts. It was only after the encounter of the Mughal and the Rajput courtly painting traditions that a strong yet carefully measured influence crept into Rajasthani painting styles. For the Rajput painters, it was mandatory to follow the convention and the canon, to acquire the desired aesthetic quality in their art. For, the ancient Hindu and Jain mythological concerns were already being explored since ever. Ragamalas also were created in the quest of the portrayal of mythical stories and extreme

devotion.

Literature Review:

The study of Ragamala paintings has evolved through a multidisciplinary lens that encompasses art history, musicology, religious studies, and aesthetics. Early Western scholarship, such as Hermann Goetz's and Karl J. Khandalavala's seminal studies, debated the origins and stylistic chronology of Ragamala manuscripts, attributing their development alternately to Deccani or Rajput ateliers. Their analyses, rooted in stylistic comparison, established the foundation for understanding Ragamala as both a pictorial and musical system.

John Guy and Deborah Swallow (1990) in Arts of India: 1500–1900 contextualized Ragamala within the broader artistic production of Mughal and Rajput courts, emphasizing the hybrid visual language born of cross-cultural patronage. Krishna Chaitanya (1982) further deepened the discourse by connecting Rajasthani painting traditions to philosophical underpinnings of rasa and bhava, arguing that Ragamala imagery functioned as visual theology-an instrument of emotional and spiritual elevation rather than mere aesthetic pleasure.

Walter Kaufmann's influential essay "Rasa, Rāga-mālā and Performance Times in North Indian Rāgās" (1965) provided an ethnomusicological dimension, defining the temporal, performative, and affective logic behind the raga system that the paintings sought to visualize. His analysis linked the iconography of Ragamala scenes to musical temporality and devotional mood, thereby bridging musical structure and pictorial representation.

Pratapaditya Pal (1997) in Dancing to the Flute: Music and Dance in Indian Art examined the integration of performance and visuality, suggesting that Ragamala paintings served as a "visual concert," where music, gesture, and iconography intertwined to evoke emotional resonance (rasa).

Susan Fuchser (2000) extended this argument, emphasizing the reflective and meditative function of Ragamala art within Indian devotional practices, while also critiquing the colonial framing that once reduced these works to mere ethnographic curiosities.

Contemporary scholarship has increasingly approached Ragamala as a form of visual-musical synesthesia-an attempt to transcribe sound into image, and emotion into color. Modern analyses place equal weight on the philosophical frameworks of Natya Shastra and Rasa theory, situating Ragamala within the continuum of Indian aesthetic thought where artistic creation, ritual experience, and spiritual transcendence intersect. Collectively, this body of literature establishes the foundation for the present study, which builds upon these interpretive frameworks to explore how Ragamala painting not only reflected but embodied the metaphysics of sound, vision, and devotion in early modern India.

Materials and Methods

The study employs a qualitative art-historical methodology that integrates visual analysis, iconographic interpretation, and contextual comparison. Selected Ragamala miniatures are analyzed in relation to their textual inscriptions, aesthetic codes, and musical correspondences. The research draws upon primary visual sources housed in major collections (e.g., Victoria and Albert Museum) and correlates them with Sanskrit treatises such as Natya Shastra and Rasa theory texts. A hermeneutic framework is applied to interpret how visual form mediates spiritual and sensory experience. Comparative analysis across regional styles, Mewar, Bundi, and Deccan, supports the tracing of stylistic evolution and philosophical continuity.

Research Findings:

- Ragamala paintings served as visual embodiments of musical emotion (bhava and rasa), bridging sensory modalities of sound, sight, and devotion.
- Their stylistic evolution across regional schools from early Mewar and Bundi to later Deccani and Mughal-influenced ateliers demonstrates a dynamic adaptation of local idioms within a shared spiritual framework.
- The philosophical foundation drawn from Natya Shastra and the Rasa theory positioned art as a vehicle for transcendence and divine union, merging ritual practice with aesthetic experience.
- Comparative analysis of Bhairava Raga, Bhairavi Ragini, and Baramasa miniatures reveals a consistent concern with portraying cyclical time, seasonal mood, and divine-human interaction through codified visual language.

Discussion:

Questioning Art and the Real Led the Imagination through Religious Transcendence, Meditation and Impassioned Realization:

Hinduism, as a religion significantly influenced much of the Indian Art and it becomes necessary to draw attention to this influence to understand the very basic philosophy behind the interplay of art forms like music, dance, poetry and painting. There can be more than one religious agendum identifiable throughout the Indian Art such as depiction and record of the avatars (manifestations) of different gods, Yoga (ritual of meditation) and the Mantra (verses recited during the rituals), Yantra (visual patterns used for meditation), reincarnation of every being into either a lower life or a higher life after death. The romance of Radha and Krishna, the depiction of female

mythological figures longing for their lovers, the ascetics and devotees intensely busy in their cosmic activities are common examples of the subject matter explored.

The Hindus believe that the only path to Moksha (utter devotion/salvation) is to worship and to seek realization through the rituals, during Samsara (one life and death cycle). Major part of these rituals comprises sensory and physical experiences that involve dance and music, advised by the Vedas (Indian Sacred Texts), instead of gaining taught knowledge. From 3rd to the 13th century, many of the Indian art philosophies were in the process of development and the Brahman priests were questioning the reality of art. What gave rise to such debates was the presence of the concept of Maya: the belief that the reality lies in the experience, pure logic, what is empirically true and that the material world and the self is neither real nor unreal.

A Hindu individual wants to achieve transcendence, supremacy or the escape from the physical world so that he may merge his soul with Brahma (the Hindu god of wisdom) through meditation or the ritual. This concept of Maya is comparable to Art because Art also suggests the truth through the aesthetic experience of the viewer and his emotional reaction, instead of its sheer corporeality or physicality.

Fig:4: Vasant Ragini, Murshidabad, circa 1755, Opaque Watercolor with Gold on Wasli,, 27.5 x 17.3 cm

There has always been an extensive interplay between various forms of Indian Art like music, dance, poetry, painting, drama, theatre, all connected together in purpose and theme called the Natya Shastra, which has been given due importance in all the prominent festivities held in the Indian society and are considered higher form of art in the Indian art philosophy with an emphasis on transcendental excitement, emotional pleasure, bliss ad the erotica. Pure delight is considered

good because the humans are subject to the misuse of their passions otherwise. Natya Shastra is also the name for the religious texts that deal with the instruction of these art forms. In Indian philosophy, Kala (Art) is thought to be the key form of instruction instead of taught knowledge because Art or Kala, like religious teaching provides the individual with the chance to increase wisdom through experience and redirect their passions towards the betterment of their soul.

Fig 5: Hindola Raga, Ahmadnagar, c. 1580-1590, A Royal Couple Sitting on a Swing While Maidens Play Music and Spray Them with Colors from Pichkaris (Hand-pumps)

A Raga denotes to evoke in the listener, a certain kind of mood and emotion such as eroticism, serenity, abandonment, despair, love, devotion and heroism. Every playing is a progression of Ragas which is improvised by the musician who follows the canon of the authentic formats. In the 3rd century A.D. a collection of Brahman writings Bharata established that Rasa, literally meaning nectar or juice, was the essence of Art. Rasa is a term given to the possible interpretation, the satisfaction driven, and the emotional response caused by the flavor of the whole aesthetic experience. There are said to be four major flavors or themes in Indian Art: heroic, odious, violent and erotic. One may lose consciousness to the point where remains no distinction between the one experiencing the Art and the subject matter of the Art. This act of forgetting self is meant to symbolize the merging of one's soul with the creator, Brahma, according to the Indian thinking. For example, if a painting depicts a dancing deity or a supernatural hero, whether through realistic imitation or through symbols and stylization, the viewer may relate or identify with the deity or the hero and the mood of the painting.

According to the Rasa theory, laughter, sorrow, anger, bliss, pride, fear, tranquility, disgust and wonder are the nine major recognized states of mind or emotions. Moreover, there are thirty-three to forty-nine Bhavas. Bhavas are the different states of mind that are associated to different time, weather and hour of the day. Hatred, love, joy, fury, pity, surprise, terror, courage and spiritual peace are the nine mood tastes of Indian Art. Whichever system one may want to follow there is a

limited number of emotions described and depicted which may vary according to its connection with the reality perceived.

Fig 6: Bhairava Raga, Rajasthan, Bundi, 1591, 26.3 x 16.3, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Bhairava is a horrifying avatar for Shiva usually holding a hand drum/Damaru but in this painting he is holding an instrument called Vina. Shiva is wearing the hermetic dress made of tiger skin and sitting on a canopy made of elephant skin in a highly decorated setting along with his consort

Parvati. Even though Shiva is carrying most of the conventional emblems of Bhairava, like a third on his forehead, the lotus cushion, the garland of skulls and his hair tied in a high hermetic chignon with an image of the goddess Ganga reminding of the mythological incident according to which Bhairava agrees to break the fall of the goddess who is descending from heavens only to be caught in the tangles of Bhairava's hair, the depiction here is not frightening visually. The Raga with a spiritual mood is meant to be sung at dawn in the season of autumn.Raga Bhairavi is a morning Raga and comes first in all the Ragamala albums one can possibly name.

As one of the earliest and most important Ragamala paintings, this miniature painting has an archival value in the Rajasthani court painting for the establishment of the Bundi style of painting. Bundi School of Painting was established by the Rajput tribe: Hara. This painting was produced at Chunar, Benares, Rajasthan, by three Mughal trained artists. The painting is from a set of Ragamalas and was owned by one of the rulers of Chunar as a token of the legacy of the governors of Chunar.

The set was a prototype, for next two hundred years, for all the later reproductions, various pictorial illustrations and other traditional painting in the Bundi style. These paintings were reproduced by using Charba (Persian for replica), a tracing method in which the lines of the drawings are pierced by pins and are transferable.

Fig 7: Bhairavi Ragini, Rajasthan, Mewar, c. 1520-1540, 21.2 x 16.5, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Purchased with the Assistance of the National Art Collections Fund from the Executors of J.C. French

The image shows a scene from a shrine, with the domed roof pavilion, simple brackets, and the mythical animal-head shaped finial (Makara) grabbing a pointed religious flag in its trunk, which visually exemplifies the architectural style of the Sultanate period in Mewar.

On the right side of the image is a Shivalingam. Shivalingam is the representational symbol for the Hindu deity Shiva. The Shivalingam here is surrounded by a garland of stylized flower buds and fully bloomed flowers, as halo symbolizes a deity's sacredness. The flowers are also forming a partially visible aureole around the image. On the left side of the image is a seated woman performing Puja and beating the instrument Tala or cymbals.

The painting can absolutely represent the group of Ragamalas painted according to the Chaurapanchasika style before the Mughal rule. From the treatment of the figure in the round shaped, extreme stylization around the checkered dress, the bold color palette, the contrasting color panels, to the mood of painting reflected through the devotee's extraordinary involvement in the worship of Lord Shiva, the rendering of her dreamy, elongated fish shaped eyes, everything is exclusively situational. Therefore, the painting serves as an extremely important example of the development of the Ragamala painted manuscripts from earlier regional traditions in Rajasthan.

The inscription on the top of the manuscript is the verses translated as:

"Out in the lake, in a shrine of crystal, she worships Shiva with songs punctuated by the beat, the fair one, the bright one that is Narada Bhairavi."

The couplet itself is a brief description of the mood or the essence of the painting. This tradition of inscribing relevant text on the folios was followed for about next three hundred year by other miniature paintings according to the Painters System. The fact that painting is numbered as '2' on the right side of the page, suggests that it was placed right after the Bhairava Raga painting as the wife of Bhairava or the Bharavi Ragini. Typically, other Ragas, Raginis and Ragaputras must follow the sequence but in this case few have survived from this set of Ragamalas.

The place where the painting was produced is not known. It is said to be originated in the Delhi-Agra neighborhood but the most reliable guess is that it was painted in Mewar which is nowadays called Udaipur, in the Rajasthani courts which were, as part of the Hindu kingdom, struggling in opposition to the Muslim dominance in the region.

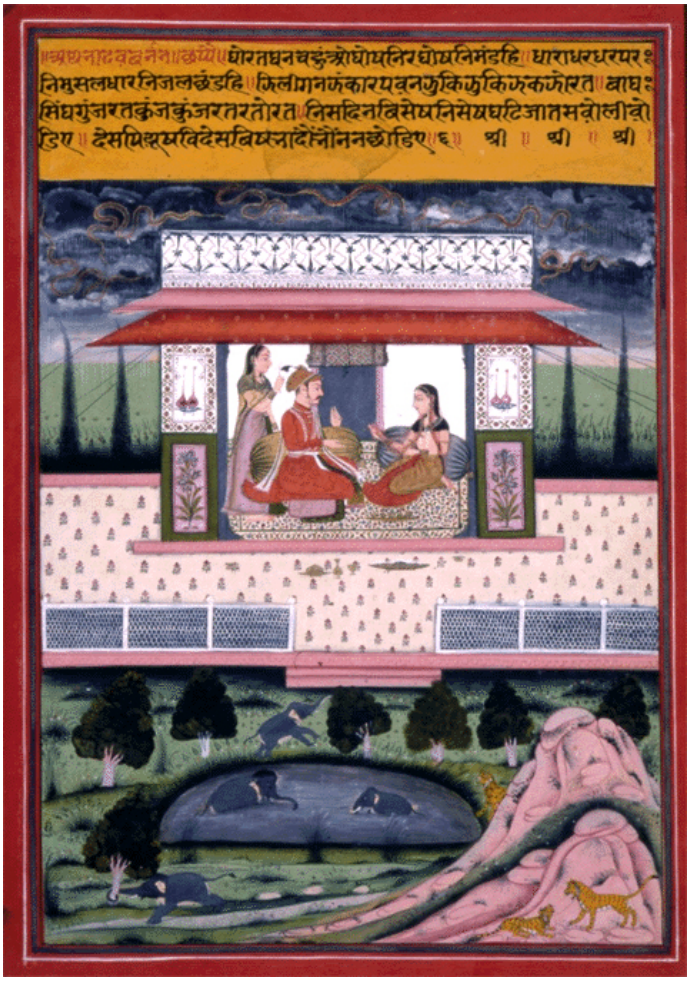


Fig 8: Baramasa: The Month of Bhadon or Bhadra (Keeping Indoors during Monsoon), Amber, Jaipur, c. 1700, British Museum Collection

The painting is an example of the Baramasa series and illustrates a scene of the monsoon season. The strange use of orange, grays and dark gray indicate the presence of heavy clouds and rainy weather. The lightning flashes on the horizon in the distant background are dramatically painted in contrasting gold, while animals like elephants are breaking tree trunks, swimming in the water, and lions roaring in the foreground, all composed together to portray the topsy-turvy monsoon scene. In middle ground people are relaxing in their comfortable abodes.

The inscription on the manuscripts is the verses from the poet Keshavdas - Baramasa poetics - which translate as:

"Dark clouds have gathered all around and loud sounds of thunder can be heard. Rain pours in torrents. Cicadas chirp continuously and strong winds blow fiercely. Tigers and lions roar and herds of elephants break trees. There is no longer any difference between night and day because of the constantly cloudy sky. One's own home is like nectar while venturing outdoors is comparable to poison. The poet is of the opinion that one should not leave home during this month."

The miniature is a part of an album bound in red striped fabric which contains fourteen miniatures including eleven Baramasa paintings numbered as painting 2 to 12, one from the Mewar region and two miniatures from Thikanas.

The painting seems to have an influence on later Deccani painting traditions since the Maharajas of Amber, later known as Jaipur, served under the Mughal armies and court for many years. Hence, depicting the Rajasthani cultural history on paper, the Ragamala Art of Manuscript was undeniably earliest and one of a kind, pictorial rendition of the Indian Classical Musical system. The technical, aesthetical and spiritual concerns revolved around the quest of exhibiting Indian fashions and

philosophies, danced to the rhythm of ritual convention through the mundane and converged towards the union of cultures, media, themes, the painter and the painted, with the Divine.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Ragamala paintings represent more than decorative manuscripts; they are meditative instruments of synesthetic worship, translating the metaphysics of sound into the language of color and form. By aligning musical theory with visual and poetic imagination, these works embody the Indian philosophical pursuit of unity between the sensory and the spiritual. Ultimately, Ragamala art articulates the Indian worldview where art, devotion, and existence converge in rhythmic harmony.

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