

FOUNDATIONS OF THE MANUSCRIPT PAINTING TRADITION

The manuscript painting tradition in India has its conceptual roots in early textual sources, most notably the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, a fifth-century treatise whose third *Khanda* contains the *Chitrasutra*.

This text may be regarded as a foundational source for Indian art in general and painting in particular. It elaborates upon the art of image-making, referred to as *pratima lakshana*, laying down the canons that governed artistic production across centuries.

These principles include not only the techniques, tools, materials, and surfaces used in painting, but also deeper aesthetic concerns such as perception, perspective, and the rendering of three-dimensionality in human figures.

Central to this theoretical framework are the six limbs of painting: *roopbheda* (variety of forms and appearances), *pramana* (proportion and measurement), *bhava* (expression), *lavanya yojana* (aesthetic composition), *sadrishya* (resemblance), and *varnikabhanga* (handling of colours and brushwork).

These principles were not merely theoretical constructs but were internalised by artists and transmitted across generations, forming the basis of all major schools and styles of painting in India.

In the medieval period, paintings came to be commonly known as miniature paintings due to their relatively small size. Unlike mural paintings that adorned the walls of palaces and mansions, these miniatures were meant to be held in the hand and viewed from close proximity, allowing for appreciation of their minute detailing.

A significant category within these is manuscript painting, which refers to illustrations created as visual translations of literary and poetic texts. These paintings were closely integrated with written text, often appearing alongside verses inscribed in a demarcated space at the top of the folio or sometimes on the reverse side.

Manuscript paintings were conceived in systematic thematic sets, each consisting of multiple folios. Every folio corresponded to a particular segment of text, forming a coherent visual and narrative sequence.

These sets could illustrate epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, devotional works like the *Bhagavata Purana*, lyrical compositions such as the *Gita Govinda*, or musical themes like *Ragamala*.

Once completed, these folios were bundled together, wrapped in cloth, and preserved in the libraries of kings and patrons.

An important component of such sets was the colophon page, which typically recorded essential information such as the names of the patron, artist or scribe, as well as the date and place of production.

However, many such colophons have been lost over time due to the fragility of the material. Paintings, being delicate objects, were susceptible to damage from fire, humidity, and mishandling.

Moreover, their portability contributed to their wide circulation—they were gifted as dowries, exchanged among rulers, traded across regions, and carried by pilgrims and travellers.

As a result, paintings often travelled far from their place of origin, leading to stylistic overlaps between regions.

These factors have made the reconstruction of the history of manuscript painting a complex and challenging task. Many sets remain undated, and scholars are often required to assign approximate dates based on stylistic analysis and circumstantial evidence.

Furthermore, original sets have been fragmented, with individual folios dispersed across museums and private collections worldwide. This fragmentation creates gaps in the chronological narrative, compelling scholars to continually revise and reinterpret the history of Indian painting.

WESTERN INDIAN SCHOOL AND JAIN MANUSCRIPT PAINTING

The Western Indian School of Painting represents one of the earliest and most significant developments in the manuscript painting tradition. This school flourished primarily in Gujarat, with additional centres in southern Rajasthan and parts of western Central India.

The region's prosperity, supported by thriving trade networks and important port cities, led to the emergence of a wealthy merchant class that became a major patron

of the arts. Among these patrons, the Jain community played a particularly crucial role, giving rise to what is often referred to as the Jain School of Painting.

Jain patronage was deeply intertwined with religious practices, particularly the concept of *shaastradaan*, or the donation of sacred texts.

Commissioning and donating illustrated manuscripts to monastic libraries, known as *bhandars*, was considered an act of piety, charity, and devotion. As a result, a large number of illustrated Jain manuscripts were produced, many of which survive today.

Among the most frequently illustrated texts is the *Kalpasutra*, which narrates the lives of the 24 *Tirthankaras*. The text provides a structured narrative centred around five key events in the life of each Tirthankara—conception, birth, renunciation, enlightenment (and first sermon), and final liberation.

These episodes offered rich visual material for artists. Other important texts include the *Kalakacharyakatha*, which recounts the adventurous story of Acharya Kalaka and his efforts to rescue his abducted sister; the *Uttaradhyana Sutra*, which lays down ethical codes for monks; and the *Sangrahini Sutra*, a cosmological text describing the structure of the universe.

Initially, these manuscripts were executed on palm leaves, which required careful preparation before use.

The text was inscribed using sharp tools, and due to the limited space available, the scope for illustration was restricted. Paintings were often concentrated on wooden covers known as *patlis*, which were richly decorated with images of deities and narrative scenes.

With the introduction of paper in the fourteenth century, the format of manuscripts evolved, allowing for more elaborate compositions.

A typical manuscript folio was divided into sections to accommodate both text and image. The folios were bound together by a string passed through a central hole and protected by wooden covers.

The constraints of the medium influenced the development of a distinctive visual language.

Jain paintings are characterised by a schematic and highly stylised approach. The composition is often divided into multiple compartments to depict different

scenes within a single frame. Artists showed a strong preference for bright, vibrant colours and intricate textile patterns.

Figures are rendered with thin, wiry lines, and an attempt at three-dimensionality is made by depicting an additional eye in profile faces.

Architectural elements, such as domes and pointed arches, reflect the influence of contemporary Sultanate architecture, while details of furniture, costumes, and everyday objects provide insights into local life and culture.



The landscape, however, remains largely symbolic and minimally detailed.

The period between approximately 1350 and 1450 marks the most creative phase of Jain painting. During this time, there is a noticeable shift from rigid, iconic representations to more dynamic and decorative compositions.

Marginal spaces began to be filled with figures of dancers, musicians, and ornamental motifs, enhancing the visual richness of the paintings. The use of costly materials such as gold and lapis lazuli further indicates the wealth and status of the patrons.

Alongside these religious manuscripts, other forms such as *Tirthipatas*, mandalas, and secular narratives were also produced. A parallel indigenous tradition of painting developed under the patronage of feudal lords and wealthy individuals.

This style, often referred to as pre-Mughal or pre-Rajasthani, included illustrations of texts such as the *Mahapurana*, *Bhagavata Purana*, and *Gita Govinda*, and laid the groundwork for later developments in Indian painting.



SULTANATE INFLUENCE AND PALA SCHOOL OF PAINTING

The indigenous style of manuscript painting that developed in western India gradually evolved and incorporated new influences, particularly with the establishment of Sultanate rule in various regions after the twelfth century.

This led to the emergence of a hybrid artistic tradition known as the Sultanate School of Painting. Rather than constituting a unified school, it represents a stylistic synthesis of indigenous Indian elements with Persian, Turkic, and Afghan artistic features.

In this style, one observes the adoption of Persian elements such as a refined colour palette, distinctive physiognomy, and decorative, simplified landscapes.

At the same time, indigenous compositional methods and narrative techniques continued to persist. This blending of traditions resulted in a unique visual language that reflects the cultural interactions of the period.

A prominent example of this style is the *Nimatnama* (Book of Delicacies), produced at Mandu during the

reign of Nasir Shah Khalji in the early sixteenth century. Unlike purely religious manuscripts, the *Nimatnama* deals with a wide range of secular subjects, including recipes, hunting practices, medicinal preparations, cosmetics, and perfumes.

This indicates an expansion of thematic concerns and a growing interest in courtly life and everyday practices. Additionally, narrative traditions influenced by Sufi ideas also gained prominence, as seen in works like the *Laurchanda* paintings.

Parallel to these developments in western and central India, the eastern region witnessed the flourishing of the Pala School of Painting between the eighth and twelfth centuries.

This tradition is closely associated with Buddhist monastic centres such as Nalanda and Vikramshila, which were important hubs of learning and artistic production. The Pala period represents the last major phase of Buddhist art in India.

Pala manuscripts were primarily executed on palm leaves and featured illustrations of Buddhist themes, particularly those related to Vajrayana Buddhism.

The style is marked by the use of soft, subdued colours and fluid, sinuous lines, in contrast to the sharp and angular forms of Jain paintings.

There is a close affinity between the sculptural and painterly traditions of this period, reminiscent of earlier examples such as Ajanta.

These monasteries attracted students and pilgrims from across South-East Asia, facilitating the spread of Pala artistic traditions to regions such as Nepal, Tibet, Burma, Sri Lanka, and Java. As a result, Pala art played a significant role in shaping the visual culture of Buddhist art beyond India.

One of the finest examples of Pala manuscript painting is the *Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita*, a text comprising eight thousand lines that expound the concept of the 'Perfection of Wisdom'.

Produced at Nalanda during the reign of King Ramapala in the eleventh century, the manuscript includes illustrated folios and painted wooden covers, demonstrating the high level of artistic refinement achieved during this period.

However, the Pala tradition declined with the weakening of the dynasty and the advent of Muslim invasions, which led to the destruction of major monastic centres. By the early thirteenth century, this once-flourishing tradition had largely come to an end.

