

ORIGIN, NATURE AND HISTORIOGRAPHY OF PAHARI PAINTING

The term *Pahari* literally denotes “hilly or mountainous” in origin, and is used to describe a remarkable body of paintings that emerged in the hill states of the western Himalayas.

These include centres such as Basohli, Guler, Kangra, Chamba, Kullu, Mandi, Bilaspur, Jammu and others, which developed as important artistic hubs between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.

The evolution of Pahari painting presents a fascinating trajectory—from the bold, vigorous and somewhat flamboyant style of Basohli to the highly refined, lyrical and sophisticated Kangra style.

This gradual transformation reflects not only stylistic changes but also deeper aesthetic and cultural shifts within the hill regions.

Unlike the Mughal, Deccani and Rajasthani schools, which can be more clearly classified on the basis of geography and courtly patronage, the Pahari schools present a unique challenge in terms of classification.

Although different centres developed distinctive characteristics—such as variations in depiction of landscape, architecture, costume, figural types and colour preferences—they did not evolve as entirely independent schools with rigid stylistic boundaries.

The absence of sufficient dated works, inscriptions and colophons further complicates attempts at precise categorisation.

The origins of the Pahari school remain uncertain and continue to be debated among scholars. However, it is widely accepted that Mughal and Rajasthani painting traditions played a significant role in shaping the early visual language of the hills.

These influences likely reached the region through provincial Mughal works, as well as through political and matrimonial alliances between hill rulers and the royal courts of Rajasthan.

At the same time, the earliest pictorial idiom of the hills—particularly the Basohli style—retained a distinct local vigour and individuality.

A major scholarly intervention in understanding Pahari painting comes from B. N. Goswamy, who proposed that the development of style should be understood not through regions but through **artist families**.

According to him, the family of Pandit Seu, including his sons Manak (Manaku) and Nainsukh, played a decisive role in shaping the evolution of Pahari painting.

This approach helps explain stylistic continuities across regions, especially in a context where political boundaries were fluid and constantly changing.

During the early eighteenth century, the painting style in the hills largely conformed to the Basohli idiom. However, by the mid-eighteenth century, a significant transformation occurred.

This shift is marked by experimentation and the emergence of new stylistic idioms across various centres.

Rather than being caused by a sudden migration of Mughal artists—as earlier believed—this transformation is now understood as a response of local artists to the introduction of Mughal paintings and their naturalistic approach.

The increasing exposure to Mughal naturalism deeply influenced Pahari artists. They began to adopt more refined compositions, experiment with perspective, and introduce greater subtlety in figural representation.

Themes expanded to include not only religious narratives but also scenes from the daily life of rulers and courtly activities. A new prototype of feminine beauty emerged, characterised by idealised facial features and graceful proportions.

Thus, the stylistic journey of Pahari painting—from Basohli through Guler to Kangra—represents a gradual movement from bold expressiveness to delicate lyricism.

This transformation reflects both continuity and innovation, shaped by artistic lineage, cultural exchange and evolving aesthetic sensibilities.

BASOHLI AND GULER SCHOOLS — FORMATION AND TRANSFORMATION

The Basohli school represents the earliest and most dramatic phase of Pahari painting. Flourishing under the patronage of Raja Kirpal Pal (1678–1695), Basohli

developed a distinctive and powerful style marked by its boldness, vibrancy and emotional intensity.

One of the defining features of Basohli painting is its striking use of colour. Artists employed strong primary colours along with warm yellow backgrounds that often fill the entire pictorial space.



The advertisement features a blue and orange gradient background. At the top right is the UniDrill logo. The main text reads 'Prepare Smart for CUET UG'. Below this, it lists 'Mock Tests | PYQs | Performance Analysis'. A call-to-action button says 'Start Now at www.unidrill.in'. The bottom part of the ad shows an illustration of a person in a yellow shirt sitting at a desk with a laptop, with books and a small plant nearby.

Vegetation is treated in a stylised manner, and raised white paint is used to imitate pearls in jewellery. A particularly unique technique is the use of small green particles of beetle wings to create a shimmering effect resembling emeralds. This lends the paintings a rich and ornamental quality.

The themes of Basohli paintings are largely drawn from literary and religious texts. The *Rasamanjari* of Bhanu Datta was especially popular, as seen in the celebrated series painted by the artist Devida.

Other important themes include the *Bhagvata Purana* and *Ragamala*. In addition to these, artists also produced portraits of rulers along with depictions of courtiers, ascetics, astrologers and other social types.

A notable aspect of Basohli painting is its narrative richness and emotional expressiveness. For instance, in the *Ramayana* series, scenes are rendered with great sensitivity to human emotions.

The calm composure of Rama, the curiosity of Lakshmana and the apprehension of Sita are depicted through subtle facial expressions and gestures. The artist carefully includes a variety of figures—Brahmins,

recluses, commoners—thereby creating a vivid social tableau.

Nature, too, is treated with symbolic and expressive intent. Dense forests populated with partially visible animals create a sense of mystery and tension, enhancing the narrative drama.

Such elements demonstrate the artist's ability to combine observation with imagination.

From Basohli, the style gradually spread to neighbouring hill states such as Chamba, Kullu, Mankot and Nurpur, giving rise to local variations.

However, by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a new stylistic phase began to emerge—known as the Guler–Kangra phase.

The Guler school marks a significant transformation in Pahari painting.

Emerging under the patronage of Raja Govardhan Chand, it reflects a shift towards refinement, elegance and naturalism. The key figures responsible for this transformation were Pandit Seu and his sons, Manak and Nainsukh.

Compared to the bold and vigorous Basohli style, Guler paintings are more subdued and delicate. The palette becomes softer, often using pastel shades with expansive areas of white and grey.

The modelling of figures is more naturalistic, and compositions are more balanced and harmonious.

Nainsukh, in particular, made a remarkable contribution to the development of portraiture. As the court painter of Balwant Singh of Jasrota, he produced a series of highly individualised portraits that depict the ruler engaged in everyday activities—such as prayer, leisure or inspecting work.

These works provide an intimate and realistic portrayal of courtly life and represent a significant departure from the more stylised representations of earlier periods.

Manaku, on the other hand, is known for his *Gita Govinda* series, which retains certain Basohli elements while moving towards greater refinement. Together, these artists laid the foundation for the fully developed Kangra style.

Thus, the Guler phase serves as a crucial bridge between Basohli's expressive vigour and Kangra's lyrical sophistication, marking a period of experimentation, innovation and artistic maturity.

KANGRA SCHOOL — CLIMAX, THEMES AND LEGACY

The Kangra school represents the most refined and celebrated phase of Pahari painting. It flourished under the patronage of Raja Sansar Chand (1775–1823), who established Kangra as a major centre of artistic production. Under his rule, places such as Tira Sujanpur and Nadaun became vibrant centres of painting.

The rise of the Kangra style is closely linked to historical developments, including the decline of Mughal power and the migration of artists from Guler to Kangra. These artists brought with them the refined techniques developed during the Guler phase, which were further enhanced under royal patronage.

The Kangra style is distinguished by its poetic and lyrical quality. It is characterised by delicate lines, brilliant yet harmonious colours, and meticulous attention to detail.

One of its most distinctive features is the representation of the female face, with a straight nose aligned with the forehead, creating an idealised and graceful appearance.

The themes of Kangra painting are deeply rooted in literature and devotion. Popular subjects include the *Bhagvata Purana*, *Gita Govinda*, *Nala Damayanti*, *Bihari Satsai*, *Ragamala* and *Baramasa*.

These themes allow artists to explore a wide range of emotions, particularly those associated with love, longing and devotion.

A significant aspect of Kangra painting is its mastery of narrative and emotional expression. For example, in depictions of the *Rasa Panchadhyayi*, the gopis are shown experiencing intense feelings of love and separation from Krishna.

The artists skillfully capture these emotions through gestures, expressions and dynamic compositions.

The depiction of the *Ashta Nayikas*—the eight heroines representing different emotional states—is another important theme.

Among these, the *Abhisarika Nayika*, who ventures out at night to meet her beloved despite dangers, is particularly dramatic.



The surrounding elements—dark forests, lightning, snakes—heighten the emotional intensity and create a powerful visual narrative.

The *Baramasa* theme, illustrating the moods of love across the twelve months, further demonstrates the integration of poetry and painting. Here, nature plays a central role, reflecting the emotional states of the characters.

Kangra artists are also remarkable for their keen observation of nature and everyday life. Landscapes are rendered with great detail and naturalism, often resembling real settings. Human figures display subtle expressions and gestures, conveying a sense of realism and immediacy. The compositions sometimes resemble a "flush-cut" view, similar to a photograph, enhancing their lifelike quality.

Despite its brilliance, the Kangra school began to decline in the early nineteenth century, particularly after the Gurkha invasion of 1805.

Although patronage continued, the later works did not match the excellence of the earlier period. Nevertheless, the style spread to other regions such as Garhwal and Kashmir, influencing local traditions.

In addition to Kangra, several other centres developed distinctive variations. Kullu paintings are marked by

prominent facial features and bold colours, while Nurpur combines Basohli's vibrancy with Kangra's delicacy.

Mandi paintings include both Vaishnavite and Shaivite themes, and Jasrota is known for its refined portraiture under Nainsukh.

