

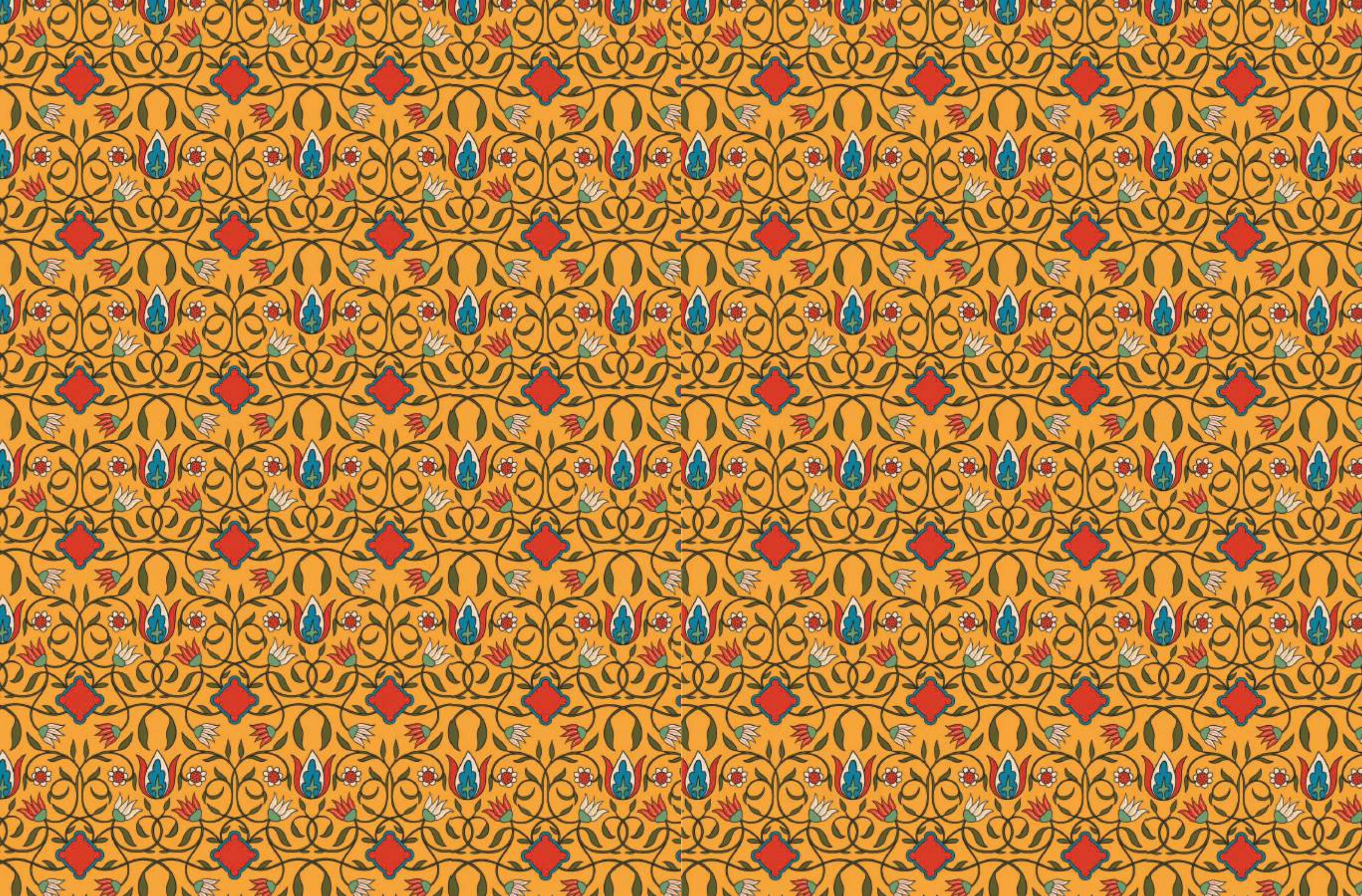


THE EVOLUTION OF
RAGAMALA PAINTINGS

A VISUAL PLAYLIST OF MEDIEVAL INDIA

Dhaani Singhal





THE EVOLUTION OF
Ragamala



Paintings:

A VISUAL PLAYLIST OF
MEDIEVAL INDIA



A PROJECT BY
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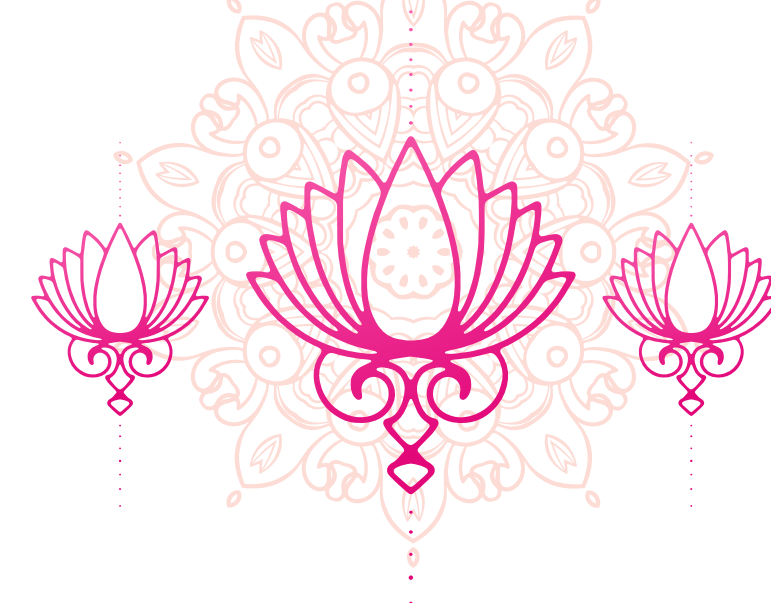
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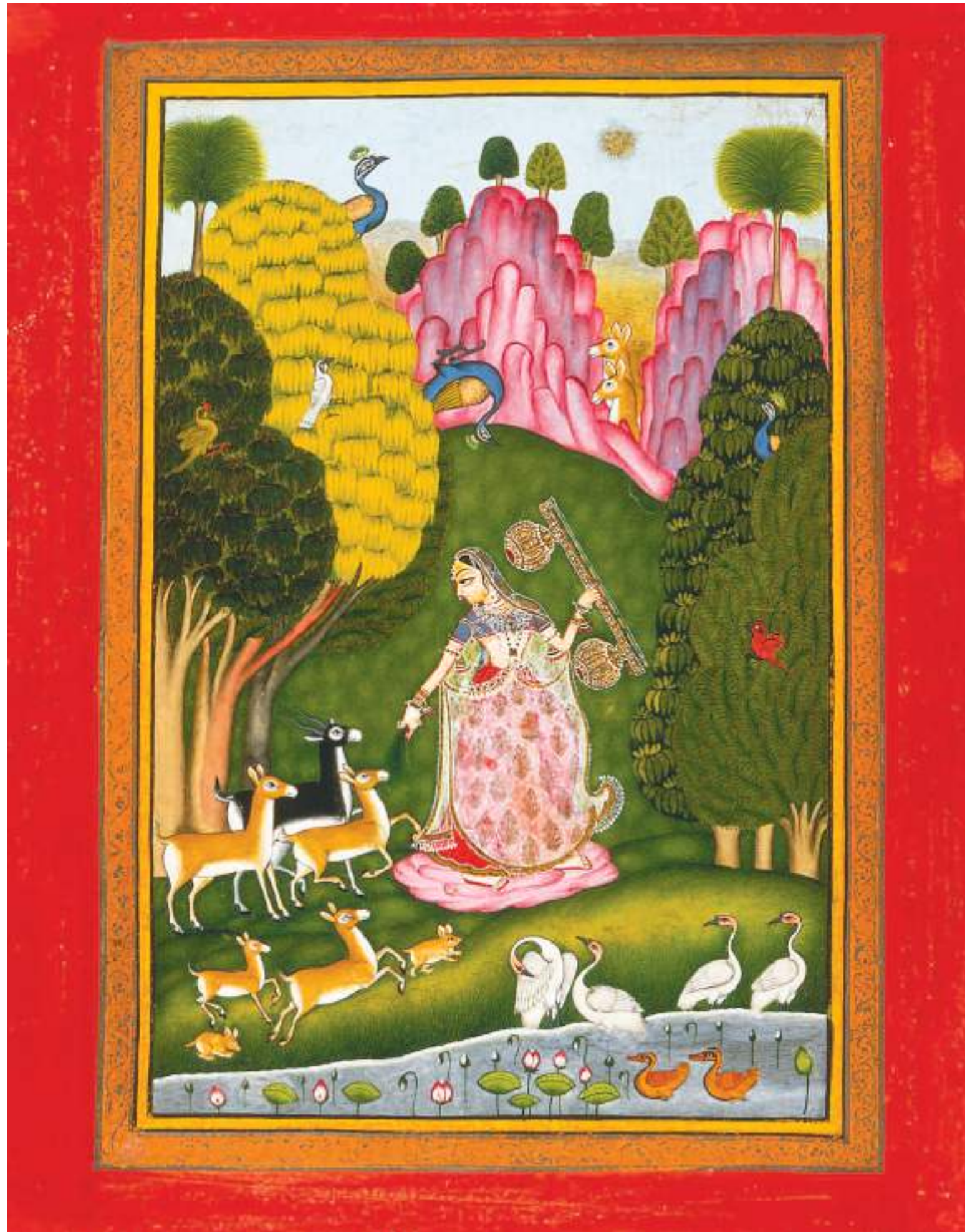
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Cover : *Malar Ragini Krishna Playing the Flute to Seven Gopis*, 18th century, Bundi-KotalIndia, Rajasthan, Cleveland Museum of Art.



Todi Raga, circa 1775-1800, Folio from a *Ragamala* (Garland of Melodies), Opaque watercolor and gold on paper.
Courtesy LACMA.

POSTCARDS FROM MUSIC, THE RAGAMALA PAINTINGS

ARUNDHATI GHOSH
MENTOR

I remember the all-night Indian classical music concerts at Dover Lane Kolkata so vividly. I realise that is a strange way of articulating the experience since for most of these performances I would be an eager young person tucked away at a seat far from the musicians with my eyes tightly shut! That's because as soon as the musicians started warming up their *ragas* - the melodic framework within which the performers improvised - I would begin to imagine these 'scenes' in my head. These came from nowhere and everywhere, emanating as responses to how my body and heart felt listening to the specific combination of notes, arranged in a unique method, style, speed and rhythm that was the definitive structure of that *raga*. There would be rain and rivers for some, fire and deserts for others, lush green fields with grazing cattle and birds, women at home cooking in their kitchen, children playing, men and women dancing at *Holi* - the festival of colour. Many took me away from the grit and grime of urban living into nature's splendor, rural environments I had seen sleepily from the windows of slow moving trains. Some made me sad, reminding me of a dear friend who I had lost touch with, or a pet who had died years ago. The feelings and the visuals created a space that was conjured up in my head and quite cinematically



Saindhavi Ragini of the Sri Raga Family, page from a Ragamala Series. Ink and opaque watercolor on paper. Courtesy of Cleveland Museum of Art.

shifted and moved as the tempo of the music advanced. As each of the *ragas* brought a mood, elements of specific emotions, and the magical kaleidoscope of images, I would get quite lost in them, often missing the boundaries between reality and imagination.

At that time I had no idea that many, many centuries ago these imaginations had already found expression through the creative hearts and skillful hands of artists who drew them out as the *ragamala* paintings – the garland of melodies. Over three centuries and many schools and styles of art from the hills in the north to the parched plateau of the south of this country, artists have been mesmerized by the magical impact of music and the images that enveloped their sensory beings. These found expression as scenes of love, loss, friendships and everyday happenings of life in these paintings. When I found out about them I started reading up and was amazed at the beauty, grace and vulnerability of these artworks. It was as if a whole new universe of sensory experiments had opened up for me.

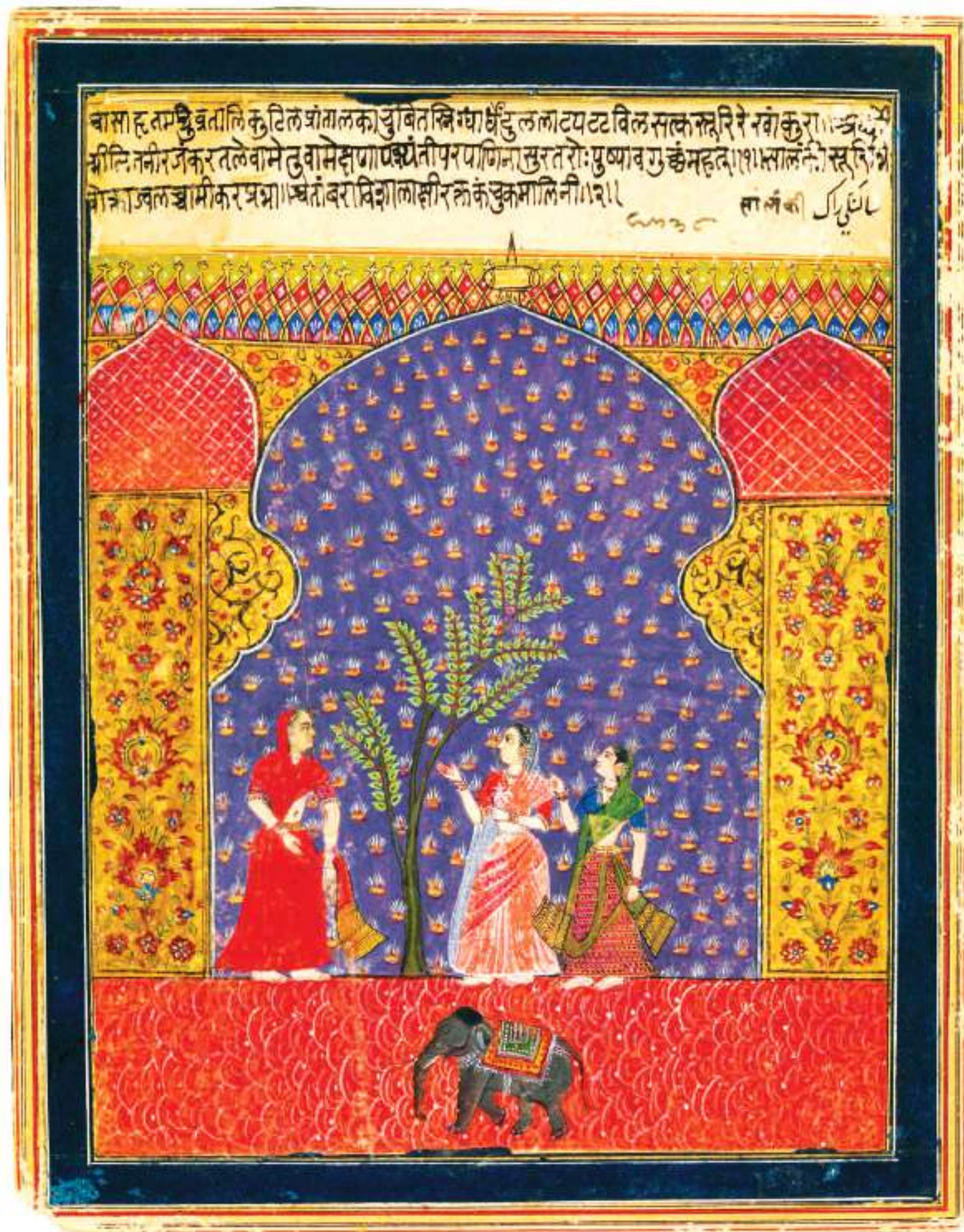
I am so happy that Dhaani has chosen this set of paintings to make this book. I hope many people read about them and then go on a journey to find these treasures that are today spread across various collections and museums of the world. Witnessing some of them and reading about them has been such an exhilarating experience for me. I wish this book a wonderful voyage!

Arundhati Ghosh is a cultural practitioner based in Bangalore with three decades of experience in the arts and culture. She served as the Executive Director of India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) between 2013 and 2023. She speaks and writes for various national and international platforms; sits on the advisory panel for The Museum of Art and Photography (MAP), Bangalore; and is a Board Member of Sangama, Bangalore.



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Solanki Raga, Folio from *Ragamala*, ca. 1590, Attributed to India, Deccan, probably Ahmednagar, Ink and opaque watercolor on paper. Courtesy of the MET.



MEET THE AUTHOR: DHAANI SINGHAL

Dhaani is an avid student and supporter of the Arts, and the co-founder of Young Artiste, India's largest online Arts education platform. Dhaani started learning Indian classical music from a young age and realized that the pursuit of Arts lacks the kind of structure and community that is present in other areas like academics and sports. She was also struck by the fact that access to Arts education is available only to a select few in India. She is on a mission to make Arts education universally available to anyone who desires to learn an Art form irrespective of their social and economic status. In the course of her research into the History of Arts and music, she came across and was captivated by the concept of the *Ragamala* miniature paintings which combined music, poetry and visual art to create an unparalleled artistic feast. This book is her ode to this enthralling concept.

ABSTRACT

Ever since the age of four when I started learning Hindustani classical music, the *Raga* has fascinated me. Singing or hearing the first few notes of a *Raga*, I would feel the stirrings of a distinct mood. Some *ragas* would feel lively and happy, others would be somber and reflective. I would try to look for the reasons why, but there are so many subtle differences between *Ragas* that it is impossible to draw a single pattern that can explain why a particular emotion is evoked. I would argue with my teacher sometimes about why a certain *Raga* can only be sung at a particular time of day or night, yet deep down it felt right - this linking of a *Raga* to a time, a season and a mood. Imagine my surprise when I discovered the concept of the *Ragamala* paintings! It made sense immediately and appealed to my instinct as a student and researcher.

Here was a striking visual way to represent each *Raga* and to bring out its effect on both the musician and the listener. As I delved deeper, there was so much to discover. Over a 300 year span from the Himalayan foothills to the Deccan plateau and across multiple principalities of central and western India, the *Ragamala* had captured the imagination of artists like never before. This work was so prolific that it defined the entire classification system of *Ragas* in this period. So while *Raga Bhairav* is a *Raga*, it is also a family of *Ragas* with multiple offshoots and derivatives that share that unique quality of the *Raga* beyond its notes and patterns - something deeper and more fundamental. During my research into this fascinating concept, I have spent hours pouring over *Ragamala* paintings and manuscripts created in the different styles of Mughal, Rajput, Pahari and Deccan art, bringing together the best loved stories of those times and the unique spirit of each *Raga*. This is truly a treasure of imagination weaving music, poetry and visual art together in a spectacular way.



1

EXPLORING THE REALM OF RAGAMALA PAINTINGS



Fig. 1.0. *Raga Megha* represents monsoon and is associated with the raginis Mallari, Saurati, Saveri, Kaushiki, Gandhari and Harasingara.

The Ragamala paintings are a fascinating genre and style of painting that developed in India around the 15th century and continued to proliferate for the next 300 years across different regions and schools of art in India. The *Raga* is the basic foundational unit of Indian classical music and comprises a musical scale, specific arrangements of notes and a style which uniquely defines it. There are hundreds of *Ragas* in existence even today, which are sung as well as played on various instruments such as the flute, violin, sitar, sarod and veena.

In the *Ragamala* miniature painting tradition the artist attempted to visualize and paint the emotion, mood and environment created by a *Raga* in the listener's hearts and minds. There are 6 principal *Ragas* depicted in these paintings along with several of their derivatives called *Raginis*, *Ragaputras* and *Ragaputris*. Each of these *ragas* was sung or played at a particular time of day or a particular season, which added important imagery to that painting. For e.g. *Raga Bhairav* (*Bhairav* is also the deity Lord Shiva) is a morning *Raga*, said to invoke the stillness and spirituality of the start of a morning. *Raga Megh* (the word *Megh* means cloud) is



associated with the monsoon season in India with the imagery of rain, peacocks and lush green landscapes. A *Ragamala* was usually painted in a set (or folio) of 36 paintings comprising the master *Raga* and its derivatives. Thus creating a series or garland of *ragas*, hence the name *Ragamala* (*Mala* is garland in Sanskrit). On occasion, this number has been known to go up to a 110 with all its derivatives included. The painting usually includes a poetic inscription thus bringing art, music and poetry together. The painting in the previous page depicts *Raga Megha*: the royal consorts Krishna and Radha symbolizing everlasting love, atop an elephant in the rains, with thunder and lightning in the skies. *Raga Megha* is a monsoon *Raga*.

The painting on the right visualizes *Raga Bhairav*: the ascetic and serious Lord Shiva (*Bhairav* is another name for Shiva) in his Himalayan abode, spartan and sage-like, qualities evoked by the early morning *Raga*.

This striking combination of music, poetry and visual art in the *Ragamala*



Fig. 1.1. *Raga Bhairava* represents autumn and is associated with the raginis *Bhairavi*, *Gujjari*, *Ramakiri*, *Gunakiri*, *Bangali* and *Saindhavi*, Courtesy: Simran Agarwal.

paintings is an artistic treat. It is no wonder that while the *Ragamala* painting tradition originated in Western India in the state of Rajasthan, it was rapidly adopted by artists from various schools of painting across India. The Mughal period from the 16th-19th century saw the *Ragamala* painting style develop and progress at an astounding pace. As the Mughal empire grew and established itself across the length and breadth of the



Fig. 1.2. *Ramagadi Ragini*, Folio from a *Ragamala* (Garland of Melodies), circa 1775, Rajasthan, Malpura, Ink on paper. Courtesy of LACMA.

country, court painters carried with them the idea and inspiration for the *Ragamala* paintings. In regions as far as the Deccan in the Southern part of India, *Ragamala* art proliferated among artists. Prominently, apart from the Mughal school of art, three other schools of art developed the *Ragamala* concept in a

meaningful way. These were the Rajput school, the Pahadi school and the Deccan school of Art. From the mid 16th century there was a shift in visual iconography from the Hindu religious deities which had predominated until then, to the depiction of human life, nature, architecture and the environment. The Mughal painters carried into it a distinct Persian influence. The emotional themes of love and longing, separation from the lover or the divine and celebration of the seasons are ubiquitous. Recurring visuals are Radha and Krishna the forever lovers from Indian mythology, other Hindu deities like Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, nature and animals like peacocks, elephants, forests and mountains. Towards the end of this period of development, with the advent of the British into India, we see European artists attempting to bring in Judeo-Christian imagery like flying angels and cherubs into the *Ragamala* paintings. It does seem that no artist in that period was left unaffected by the lure and fascination of the *Ragamala* paintings.



A HISTORICAL JOURNEY THROUGH THE RAGAMALA TRADITION



Fig. 1.3 Two Folios from a *Ragamala* (Garland of Melodies), India, Karnataka, Bijapur, early 19th century, Ink on paper, Courtesy of LACMA.

320-490 AD:

The concept of the *Raga* originated during the Gupta empire in which music flourished under the patronage of the kings, particularly King Samudragupta. This 200 year period was regarded as the golden era for Indian classical music.

5th century:

The musical treatise *Brihaddeshi* written by Matanga Muni defined the *Raga* as a composition adorned with musical notes in a way that evokes colour in the hearts of people. The first mention of the word *Raga* is found here.

10th century:

The treatise *Naradi Shiksha* written by the famous musician Narad described the principal *Ragas* and their derivatives the *Raginis* for the first time in a structured manner. The concept of sound as an emotion also finds its origin here in this book.

1475:

The earliest known *Ragamala* painting was found in a manuscript from western India (now the state of Rajasthan)

15th century second half:

Ragamala painting was identified as a distinct genre and style of painting. Images of Hindu deities personified different *Ragas*. Further, mood, season, time of day and emotions evoked by the *raga* inspired the creation of these paintings.

16th-17th centuries:

There was a proliferation of *Ragamala* paintings in different schools of art, notably Mughal art patronized by the ruling emperors. Other schools of art like the Rajput school, Pahadi school and the Deccan school started developing *Ragamala* paintings too.

Mid 16th century onwards:

There was a shift in iconography in *Ragamala* paintings from religious deities to depicting human environments, women, nature and architecture. Love and devotion as themes may have been sparked by the *Bhakti* movement.

17th-18th century:

The practice of *Ragamala* paintings spread along with the Mughal empire far and wide beyond Rajasthan to other regions such as the Deccan in the South.

Early 19th century:

In the court of Oudh in northern India, European painters started incorporating Judeo-Christian imagery such as angels and birds in *Ragamala* paintings.

1877:

The first complete sequence of *Ragamala* paintings was curated by Raja Sir Sourindro Mohun Tagore, a leader of the Bengal renaissance movement. This sequence included the 6 principal *ragas* and 36 *raginis* with their painted representations.

End of the 19th century onwards:

Decline of the *Ragamala* painting

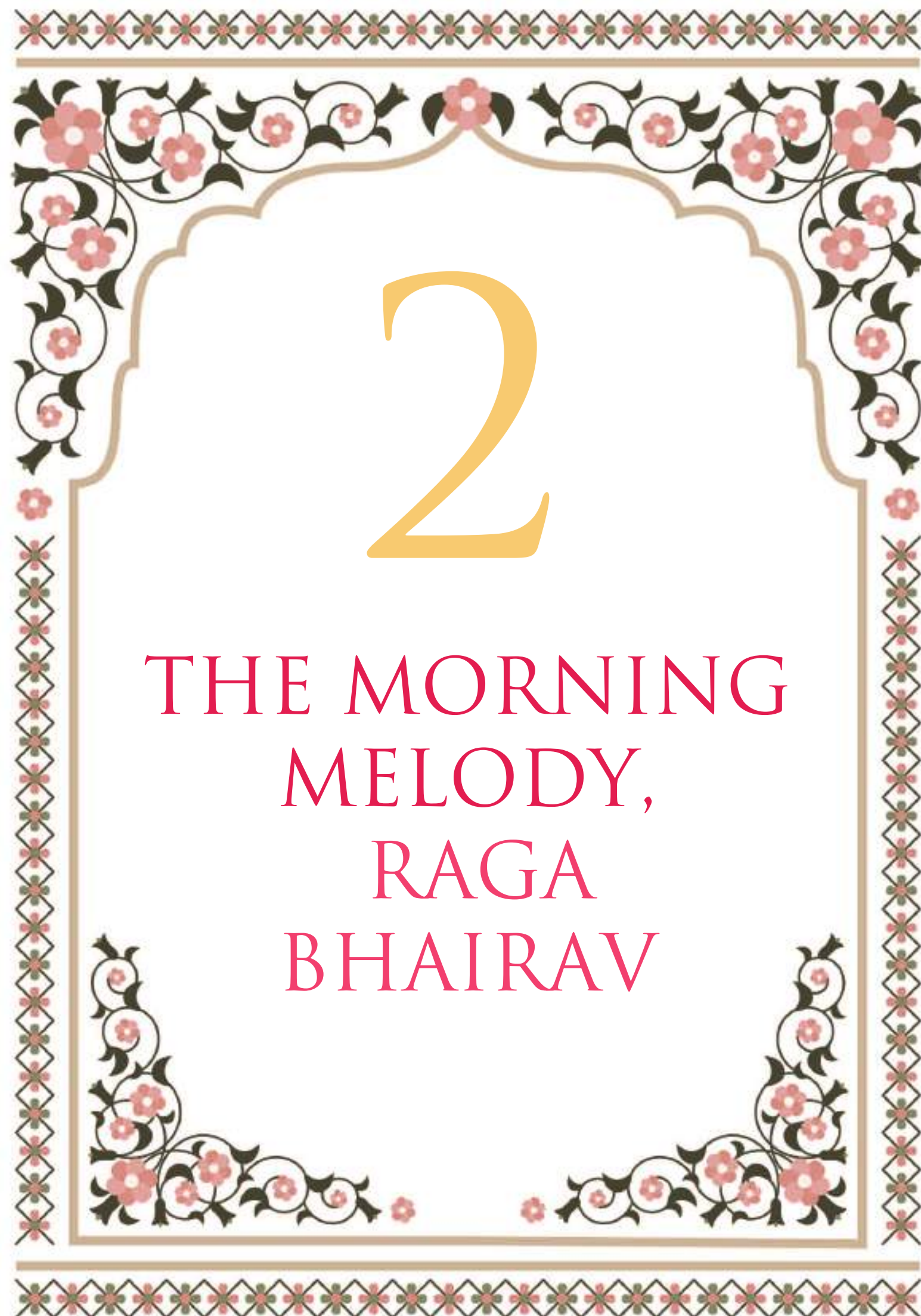


Fig. 2.0 *Ragini Bhairavi*, from a *Garland of Musical Modes (Ragamala)* manuscript, Bundi School, Opaque watercolor on paper. Courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery.



RAGA BHAIRAV: A JOURNEY INTO ITS HISTORY AND ESSENCE

R*aga Bhairav* is an ancient Indian *Raga*, believed to be the very first *Raga* that originated from the throat of Lord Shiva. Bhairav itself is another name for Shiva, so there is a very close relationship between the *Raga* and its alleged creator. This *Raga* is a morning *Raga* and evokes the peace, stillness and spirituality of a morning meditation. The ascetic and austere qualities of Shiva are associated with *Raga Bhairav*. Often this *Raga* is sung in a grave and serious manner with minimum adornment or fuss. *Raga Bhairav* continues to thrive to this day and no morning concert is complete without it. Given its complete seven note scale in both ascending and descending orders (the technical term for it is *sampoorna-sampoorna jati*), it lends itself to thousands of note combinations which generate a multitude of derivative *ragas*. *Ragas* like *Abir Bhairav*, *Bairagi Bhairav*, *Mangal Bhairav* and *Mobini Bhairav* are a few popular examples



RAGA BHAIRAV'S PRESENCE IN THE WORLD OF RAGAMALA PAINTINGS

Figure 2.1. shows a painting from a *Ragamala* on Bhairav shows Lord Shiva and his consort Goddess Parvati seated in their palace. The form of Shiva shown is Bhairav with his matted locks, playing the Veena, a classical musical instrument. The colophon names three artists involved in painting this, all disciples of the famous artist Mir Sayyid Ali, one of the best regarded artists of Emperor Akbar's court. There is thus an interesting juxtaposition of Hindu and Islamic elements in the painting. While the deities are Hindu, the architecture of the palace in the top half of the painting is distinctly Mughal.

The *Ragamala* painting in Figure 2.2. evokes the peace and stillness of dawn breaking, with hints of light in the sky. Lord Shiva with the halo is being anointed by his consort Parvati, in a minimally furnished outdoor space. Mughal aesthetic tastes in fabric, interiors and painting style are prominent. Two blue and white ceramics which are featured in this painting find their origins in China and later found popularly in Turkey and Iran.

The unique *Ragamala* painting in figure 2.3 portrays a woman worshiping the Shiva Linga on a temple site near the river. The mood of devotion and grave surrender is evident. She is seen with her attendant, prayerful carrying offerings of fruit on her side. The bull Nandi, Shiva's special vehicle is prominent on the bottom left corner. This scene is painted in the Deccan school of Art's style - rich and luminous colors, slightly elongated figures and the mix of indigenous and Persian influences.



Fig. 2.1. *Bhairava Raga*, Shiva and Parvati, Circa 1591, Chunar near Varanasi, India, Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



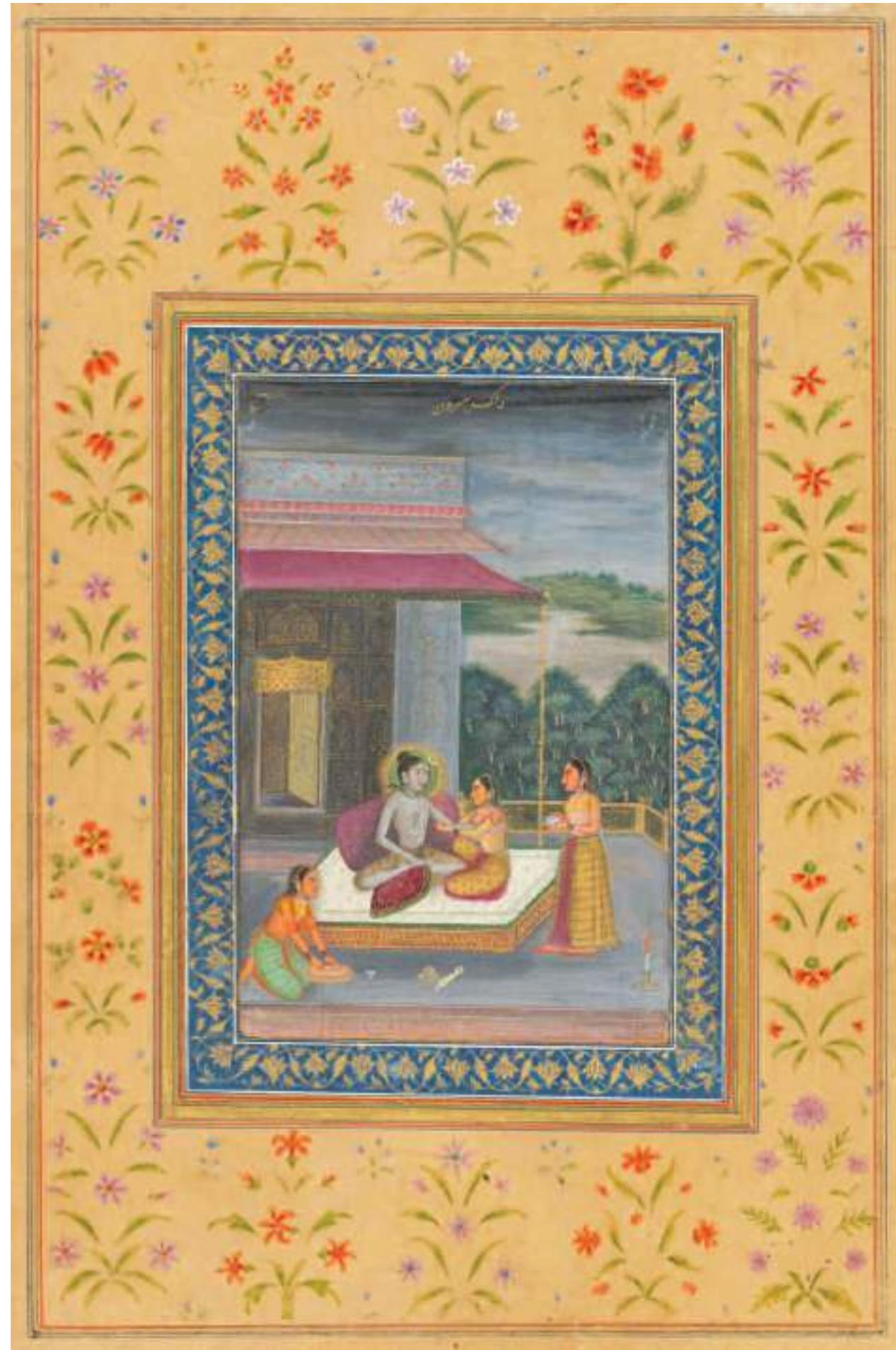


Fig. 2.2. *Raga Bhairav*, 1526–1857, Opaque watercolor on paper, Awadh India, Courtesy: Yale University, Gift of Lauder Greenway, B.A. 1925, Ph.D. 1930.



Fig. 2.3. *Bhairavi Ragini* from the Manley Ragamala, 1610–1620, an album painting in gouache on paper, © The Trustees of the British Museum.

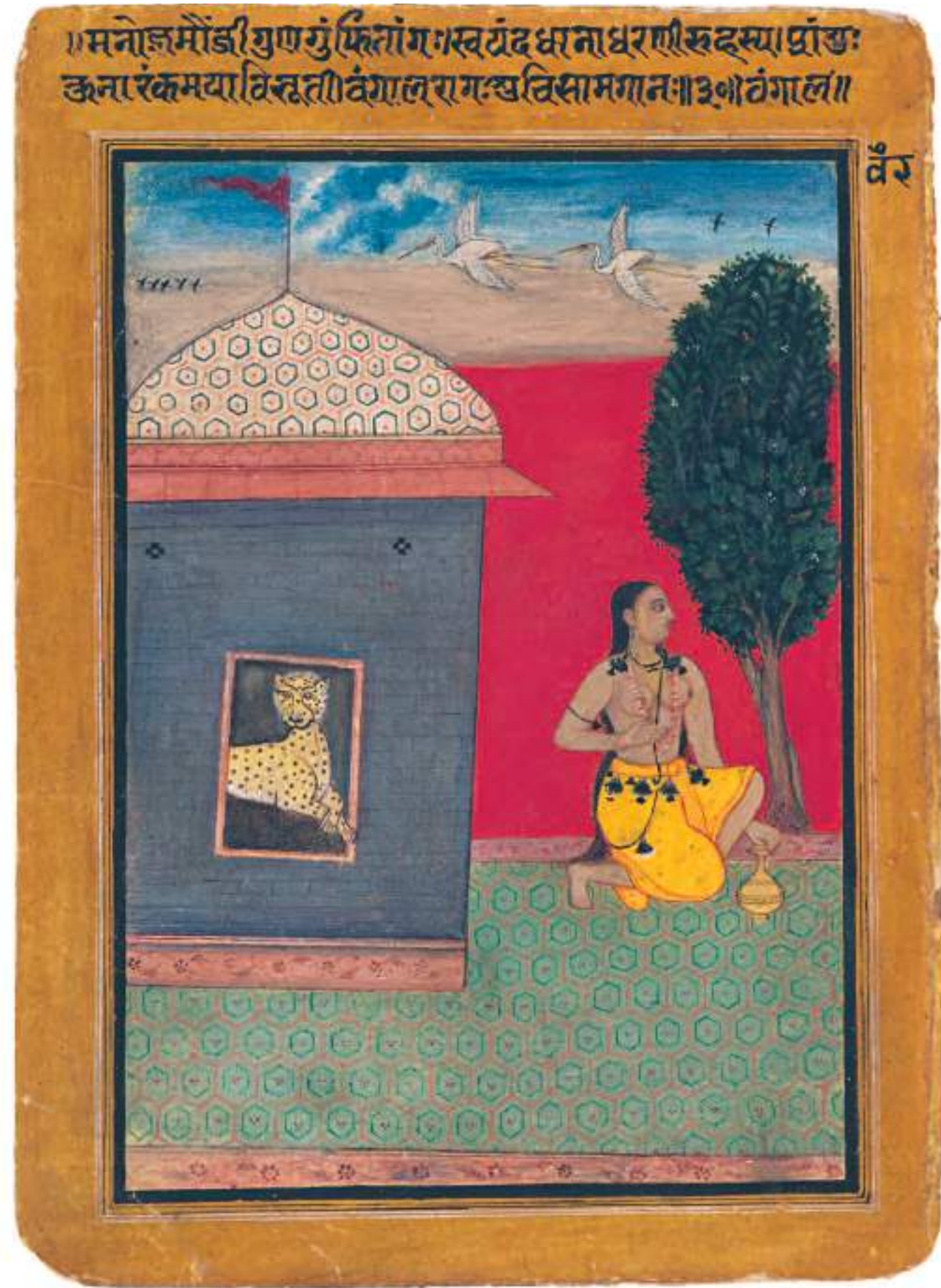


Fig. 2.4. Vangala Ragini of Bhairava Raga, Rajasthan, Marwar, Jodhpur, c.1605, Gouache on paper, 20.5x14.8cm, Claudio Moscatelli Collection.

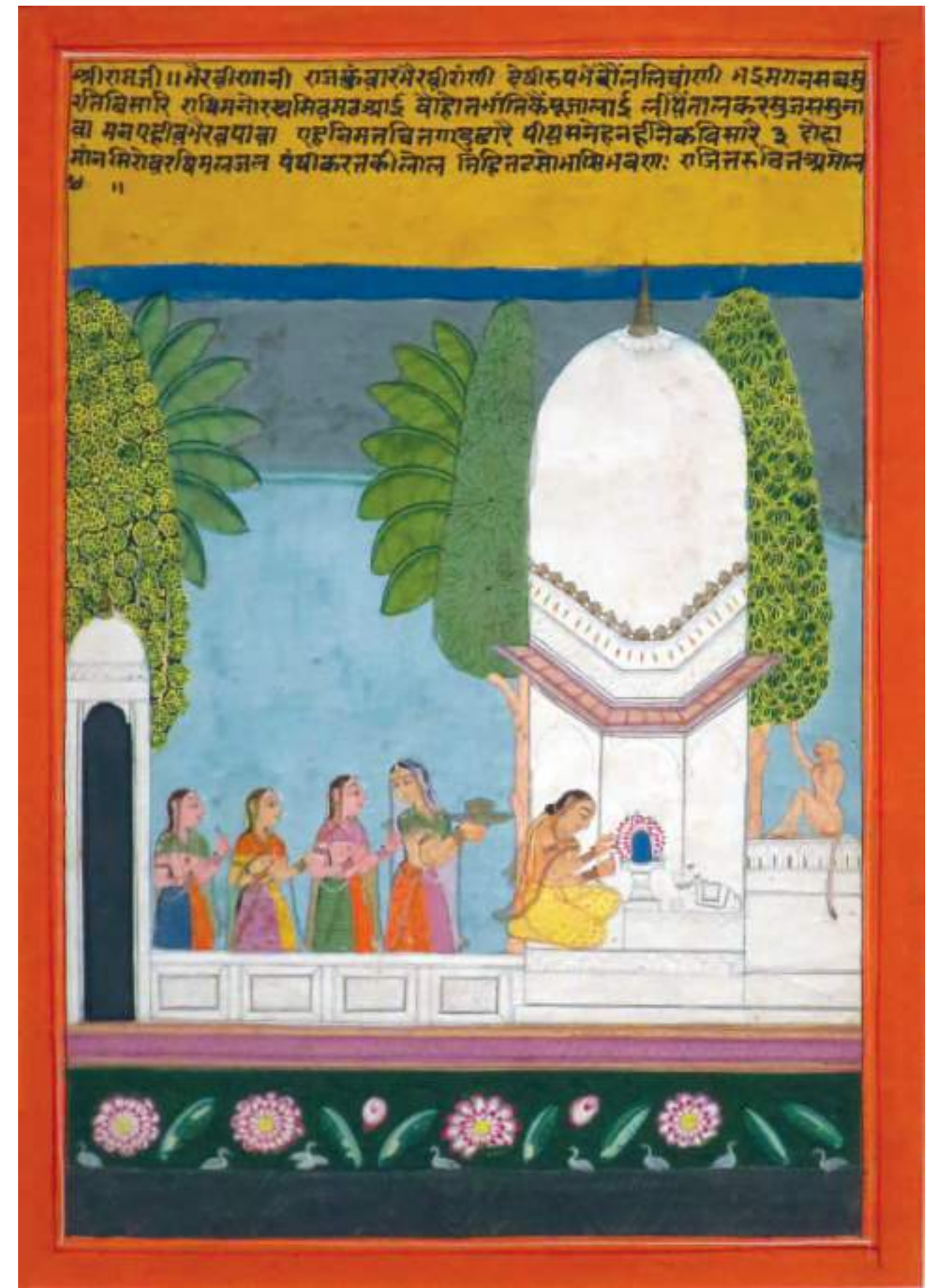


Fig. 2.5 Bhairavi Ragini of the Bhairava Raga of the Ragmala Series. Courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery.

3

HARMONIZING WITH RAGA MALKAUNS

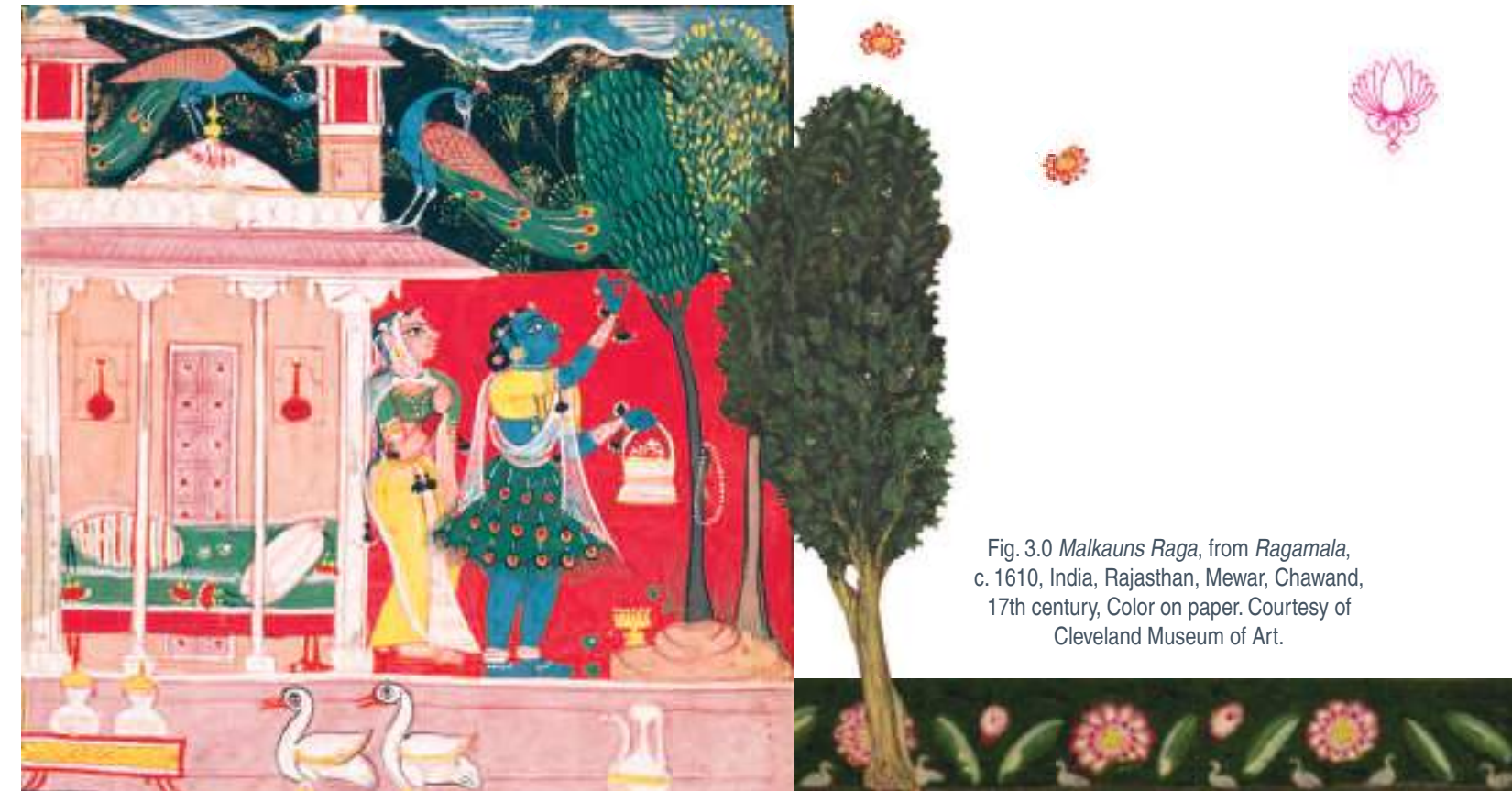
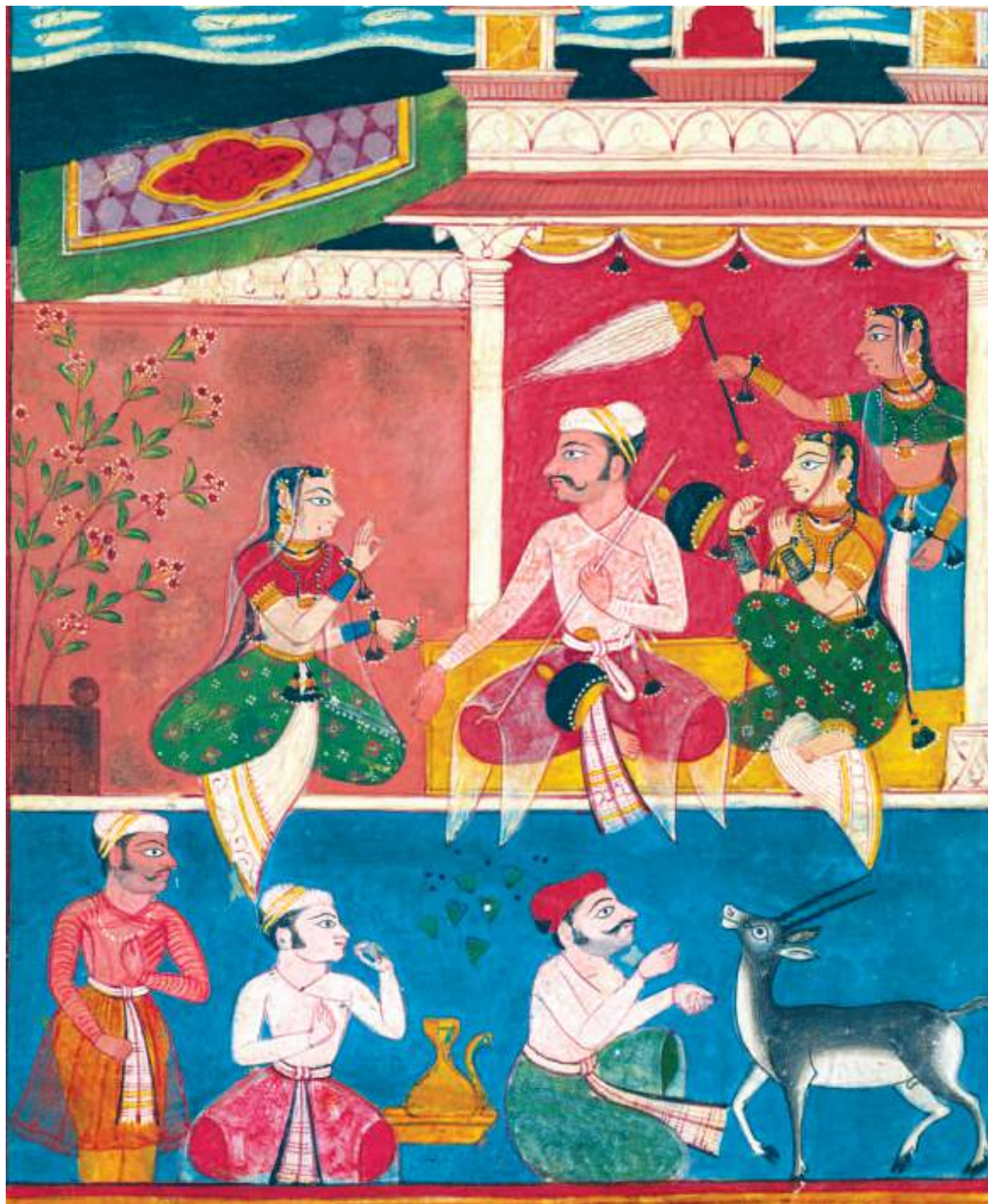


Fig. 3.0 *Malkauns Raga*, from *Ragamala*, c. 1610, India, Rajasthan, Mewar, Chawand, 17th century, Color on paper. Courtesy of Cleveland Museum of Art.

VISIONS OF SERENITY: ENIGMATIC RAGA MALKAUNS

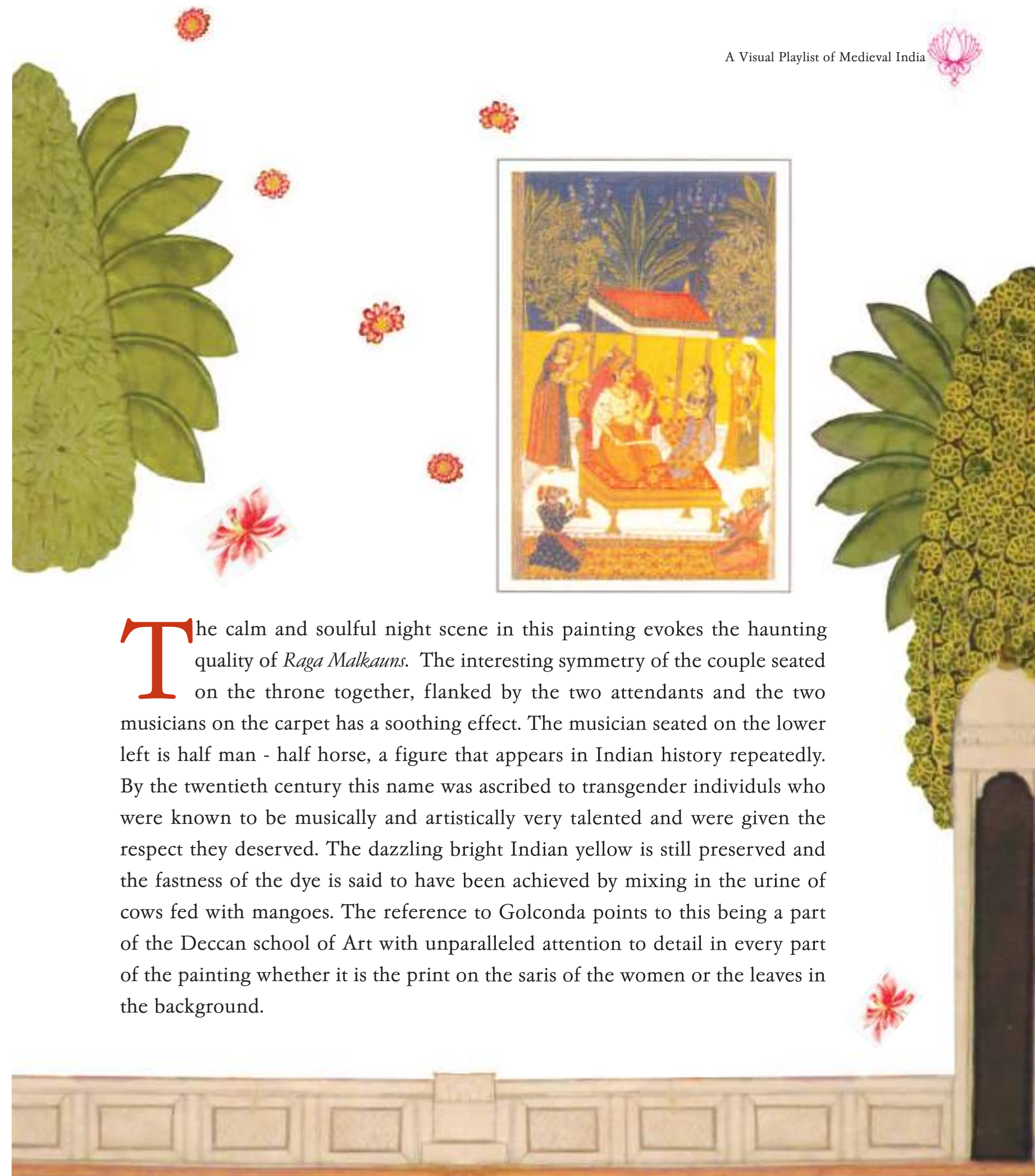
R*aga Malkauns* is a grand and impressive *Raga* that stuns and calms the listener with its beauty. Mythology states that it was composed by Goddess Parvati to calm Lord Shiva who danced the terrifying Tandav dance in an unrelenting rage. It is designed in the pentatonic scale (technically called the *audav-audav jati*) which lends itself to melodious patterns and skipped variations that create a rare and soothing effect on listeners. Artists are cautioned to be careful and mentally strong and prepared while entering the exploration of this *Raga*. Much patience and an almost renunciative mindset is called for, before one can delve into its mysteries. Healers have claimed it can heal bodily ache and mental afflictions if one immerses in its haunting notes. It is sung late at night, solemn and sometimes mournful, yet incomparable in its beauty.

The *Malkauns Ragamala* paintings explore this raga in myriad ways. George Howlett, the music writer articulates this well, writing that, “It can take many forms - a meditating yogi, a passionate lover, a nobleman intoxicating himself with betel nut, and a warrior-king holding a severed head while listening to distant music”. Underlying all these is the power and magnitude of the moment created by *Raga Malkauns*.



Above: Fig. 3.1 *Malkauns Raga*, from *Ragamala*, c. 1610, India, Rajasthan, Mewar, Chawand, 17th century, Color on paper, Courtesy of Cleveland Museum of Art

Facing page: Fig. 3.2. *Raga Malkauns*, circa 1725, Golconda, © National Museum, New Delhi (India).



The calm and soulful night scene in this painting evokes the haunting quality of *Raga Malkauns*. The interesting symmetry of the couple seated on the throne together, flanked by the two attendants and the two musicians on the carpet has a soothing effect. The musician seated on the lower left is half man - half horse, a figure that appears in Indian history repeatedly. By the twentieth century this name was ascribed to transgender individuals who were known to be musically and artistically very talented and were given the respect they deserved. The dazzling bright Indian yellow is still preserved and the fastness of the dye is said to have been achieved by mixing in the urine of cows fed with mangoes. The reference to Golconda points to this being a part of the Deccan school of Art with unparalleled attention to detail in every part of the painting whether it is the print on the saris of the women or the leaves in the background.



Malkos Raga is the second tune in the *Ragamala* collection. It's a lovely song associated with midday or midnight and the late winter months (December to January). This is the eighteenth image of a series. A prince is seen sitting in a magnificent tent in the painting, while a lady is seen fanning him with a beautiful yak tail white hair fan.

The prince is dressed in a magnificent gold hat with flowers and pearls. Interestingly his knees are being supported by a band as he sits on his divan. He also wears a gold necklace embellished with ruby and emerald that match with his bracelets as well. He's clutching a bouquet of flowers, enjoying their scent.

In the background is a gorgeous garden with poppy flowers and mango trees in blossom.

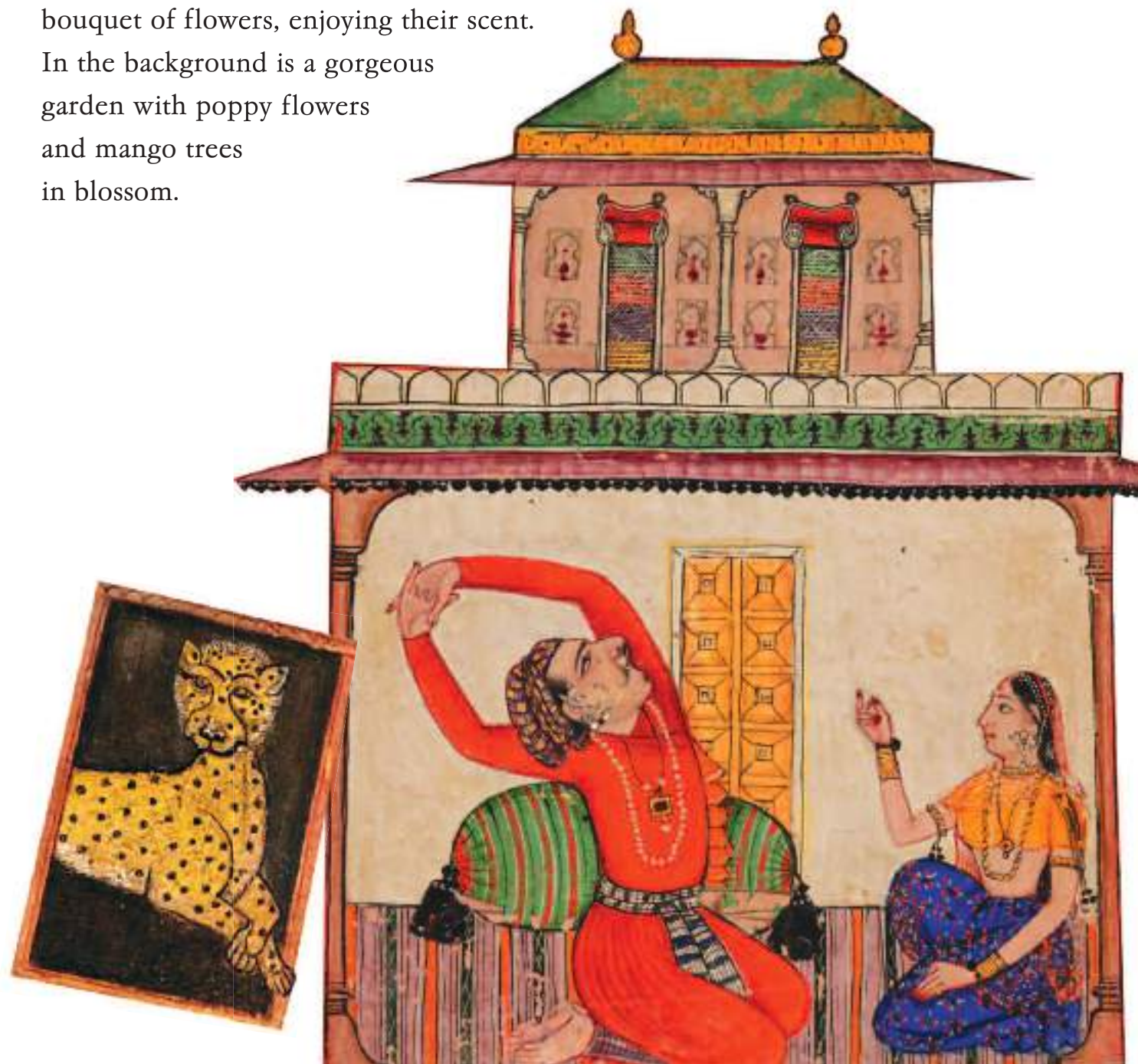


Fig. 3.3. *Malkos Raga*, Folio from a *Ragamala* (Garland of Melodies), circa 1675-1700, Rajasthan, Marwar, watercolors, gold, and ink on paper, © Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

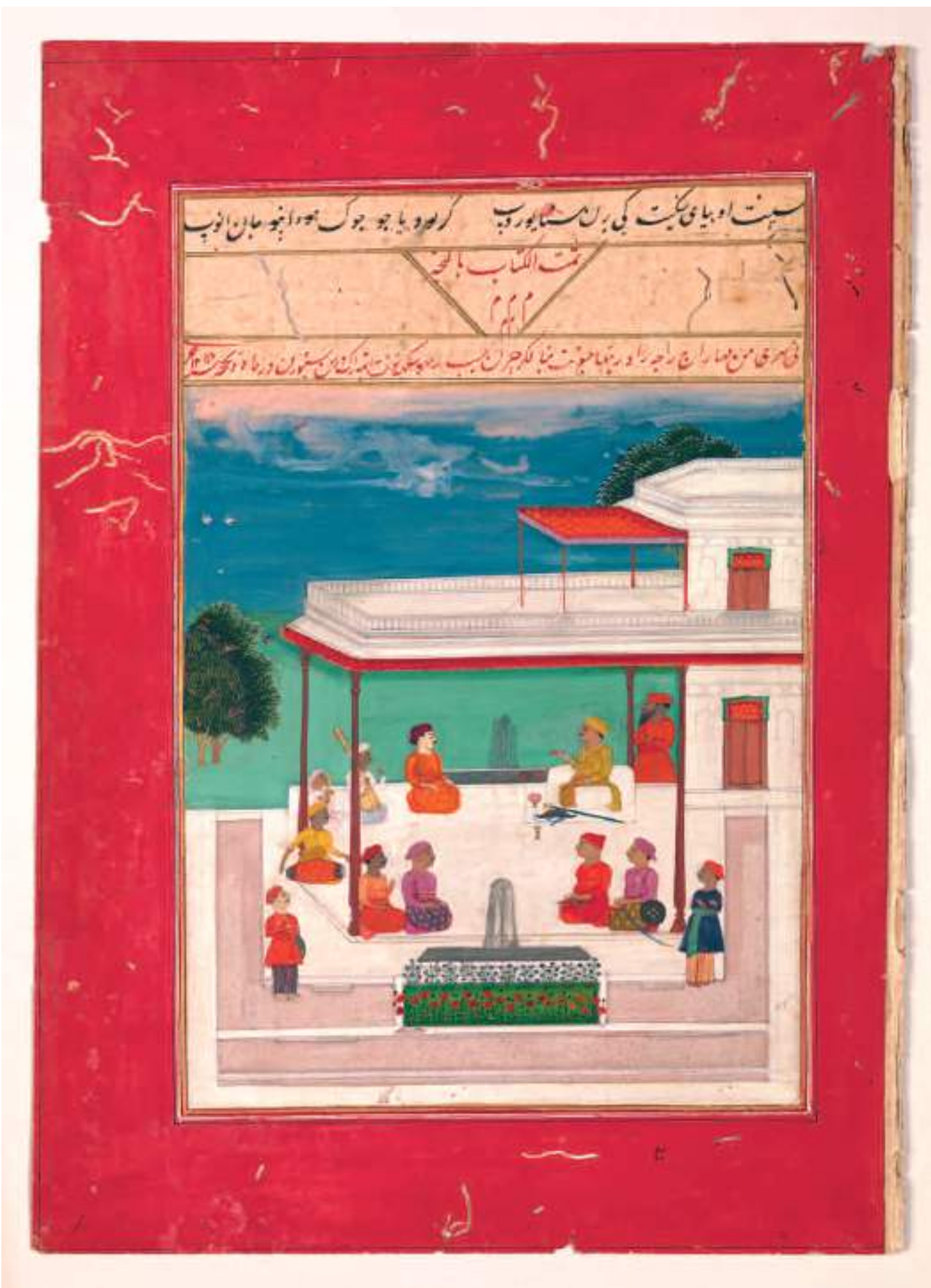
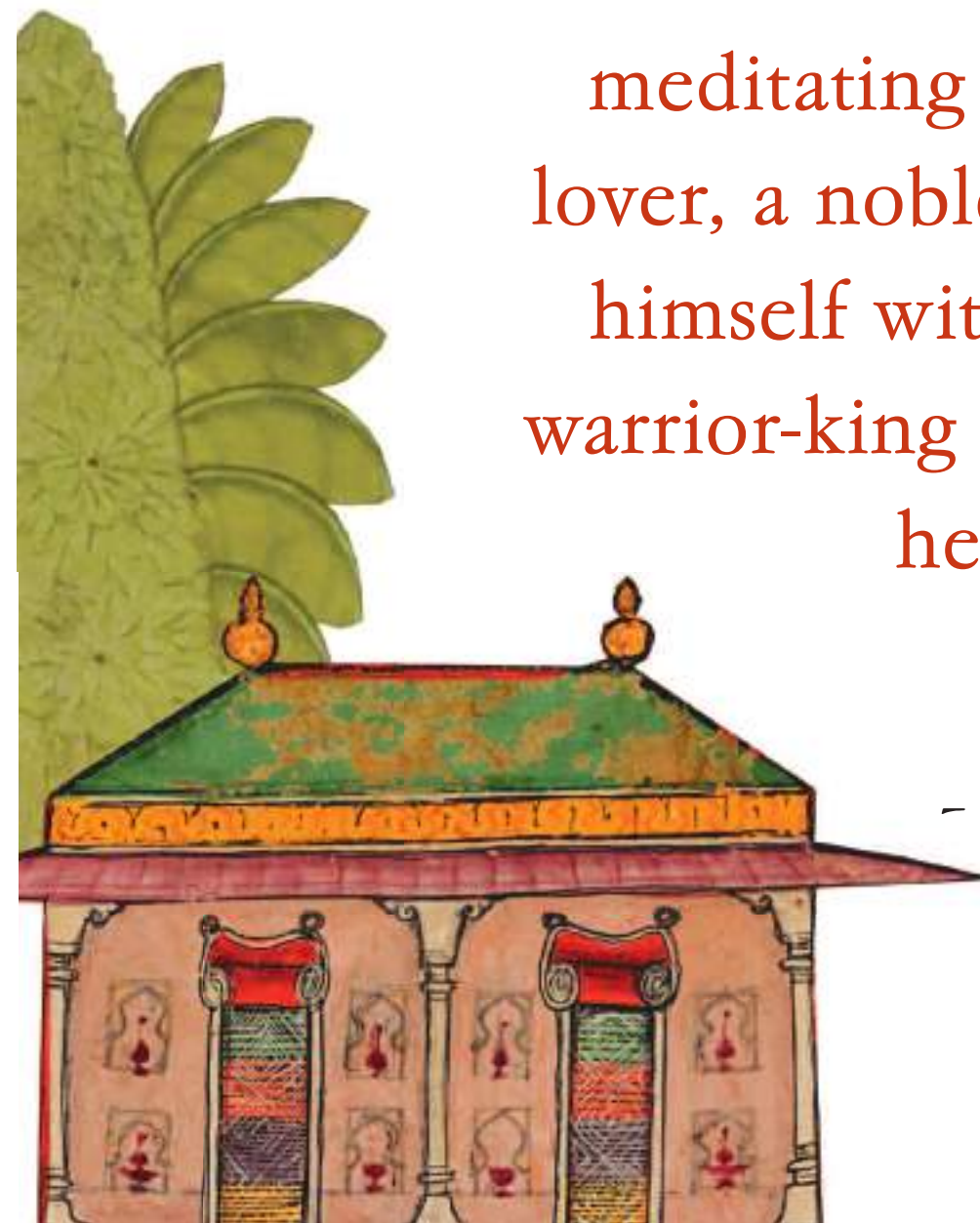


Fig. 3.4. *Raga Malkauns* from a manuscript *Ragamala*, *Raja and a Guest Seated on a Terrace Listening to Musicians Perform*, Folio from a manuscript of the *Raga Darshan* of Anup, Courtesy of the MET.

This painting depicts a nobleman on an open terrace with his attendants. In a departure from the norm, he is having a conversation with one of them while the other attendant observes them from behind him. In contrast to the brilliant and colorful Deccani style of the previous *Malkauns Ragamala*, this one from the court of Awadh is more muted and serene. The shades of dark blues and grays makes the scene somber. This painting carries the stamp of the Mughal school of art that was heavily patronized by the Nawabs (princes) of Awadh. This painting is part of a full folio of *Ragamalas* and as per the art historian Klaus Ebeling in 1973, the album subscribed to the “Painter’s system”, which became the preferred way to arrange the personified melodies.

“It can take many forms - a meditating yogi, a passionate lover, a nobleman intoxicating himself with betel nut, and a warrior-king holding a severed head while listening to distant music”.

- GEORGE HOWLETT



4

CAPTIVATING RHYTHMS OF RAGA HINDOL



SWINGING INTO SPRING: RAGA HINDOL IN ART

The word *Hindola* literally means the swing, a symbol of the spring season in India. During the spring season, young women and men swinging on these simple wooden platforms string by rope used to be a very common sight. Spring festivals even today like *Basant Panchami* include the swing symbolically in celebrations. *Hindol* is a morning *Raga* rich with several pure classical compositions like *kbayal* and *dbamar*. It is a captivating and challenging *Raga* with complex oscillations and note patterns in the ascending scale (*Aroha*) and a lighter touch on the descending scale (*Avroh*).

One can only imagine how attractive *Raga Hindol* would have appeared to visual artists of those times, given the clear imagery of spring. The vibrant colors of spring, flowers starting to bloom, fragrance in the air would have all evoked the love and romance blossoming alongside. The folk lore of Krishna and Radha, the most enduring symbols of love in Hindu mythology were an integral part of this festival imagery too.

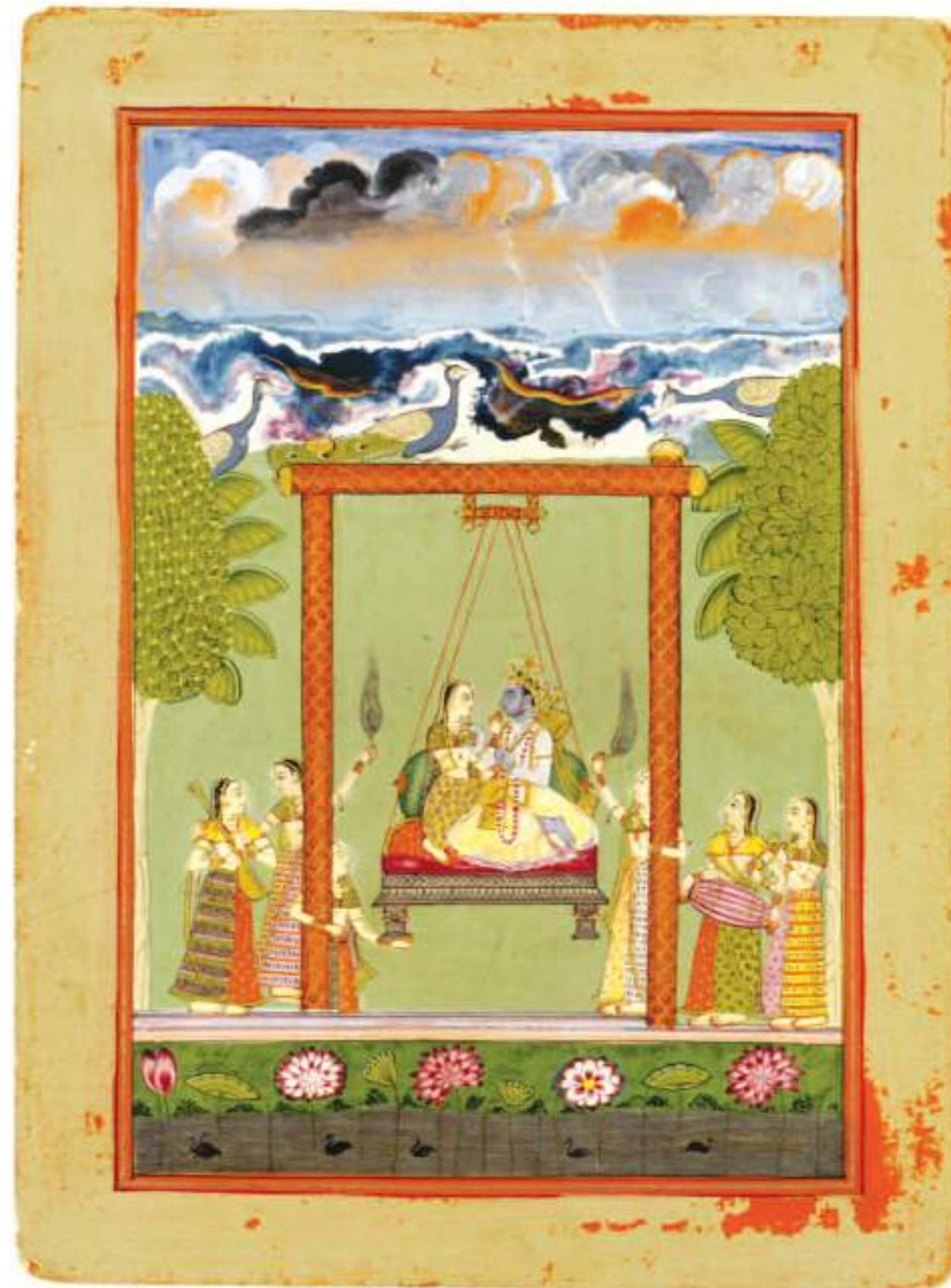


Fig. 4.0. *Hindola Raga*, circa 1770, Radha swinging with Krishna, opaque watercolour on paper, Central India, probably Bundelkhand, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Facing Page : Fig 4.1 *Raga Hindola* with *Ragini Telangi*. Based on Indian classical musical mode, 1900 AD.



The onset of the spring festival is painted with much vibrancy and movement. Radha and Krishna embody love and celebration as they swing surrounded by other women friends (called *gopikas*) and musicians. The lush green of the fields is unmistakable spring. Flowers in bloom border the painting. One can almost hear the songs of spring, looking at this scene.

The divine love of Radha and Krishna continues to flourish here on the swing in the monsoon season characterized by rainy skies, peacocks and lush greenery all around. *Gopikas* (women friends) surround them and join in their joy with music and dancing. The woman below the swing uses a few strings to pull the seat back and forth in rhythmic tempo set to the music. The intricate details on the fabrics worn by the women are characteristic of the Rajput period. The lotus pond is another motif which brings color and life to the occasion. In this set, the paintings are inscribed by two poems one long and one short. The poetry reinforces the themes of love and joy in the air.



Fig. 4.2. *Hindola Raga*, Folio from a Ragamala (Garland of Melodies), circa 1700 or earlier, India, Rajasthan, Amber, Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, from the collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

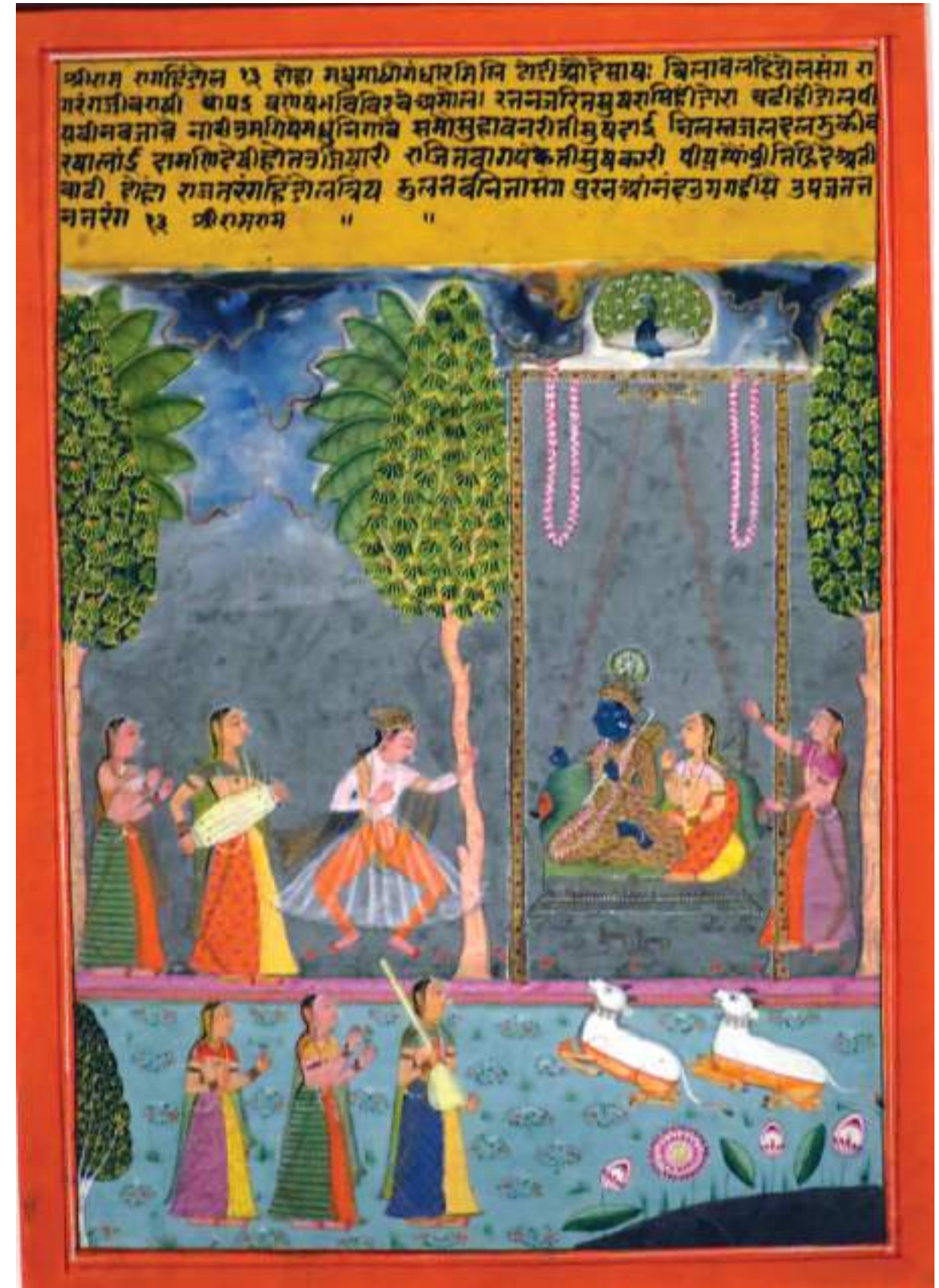


Fig. 4.3. '*Hindol Raga*', Folio from a Ragamala (Garland of Melodies), Courtesy of Honolulu Museum of Art.

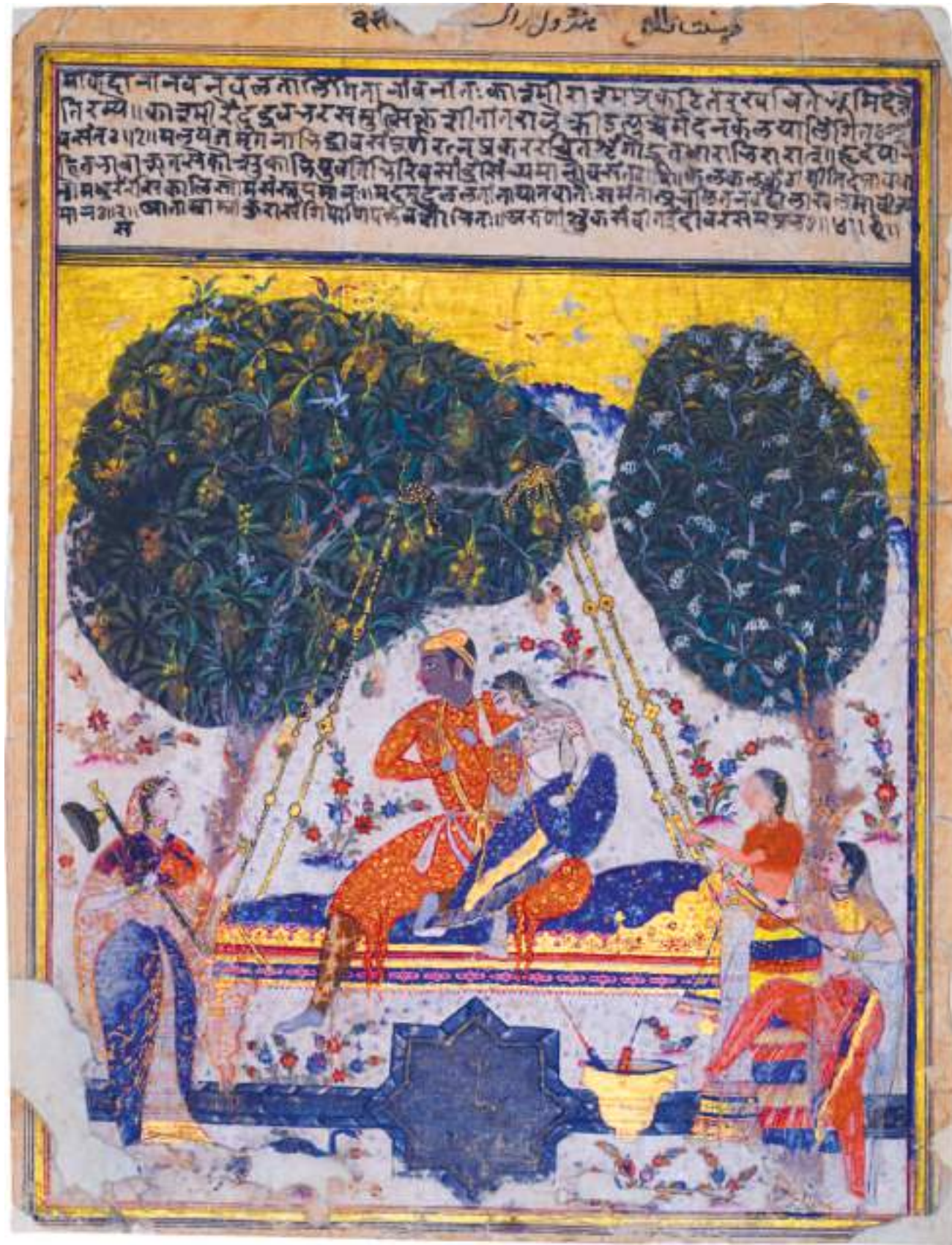


Fig. 4.4. *Raga Hindola* ca. 1590, Ahmadnagar, Delhi National Museum, 1590/1595, Gouache paint and paper.



Fig. 4.5. *Hindola Raga*, Folio from a *Ragamala* (Garland of Melodies), India, Madhya Pradesh, Malwa, circa 1650, Opaque watercolor, gold, and ink on paper. Courtesy of LACMA.



5

THE FIERY TUNES OF RAGA DIPAK



RAGA DIPAK: UNVEILING THE ANCIENT FLAME

R*aga Dipak* is one of the oldest and most primal of Indian *ragas*. Its creation is attributed to Lord Shiva in Indian mythology. The root word *Dipak* means flame or fire and it was widely believed that singing it with real mastery leads to a spontaneous fire that consumes everything in sight. The legendary maestro Tansen was one of the nine jewels (*Navaratnas*) in Emperor Akbar's court in the 15th century. A famous tale tells of how he set the whole palace ablaze by singing *Raga Dipak*, something he was forced into doing against his will. Fortunately he had taught his daughter to sing the *raga* that brings rain, *Raga Megh Malbar* and her singing brought rain and saved him and the palace from being destroyed. This *raga* is sung at night and is said to symbolize the mood of intimacy. It is almost extinct now and seldom sung or passed on in learning.

RAGA DIPAK'S RADIANCE IN RAGAMALA ART

Ragamala paintings around *Raga Dipak* feature the imagery of a flame or fire in some form. They are set mostly at night and show lovers in intimate surroundings. The mood captured is one of serenity, the quietness that night brings and the intimacy it allows.

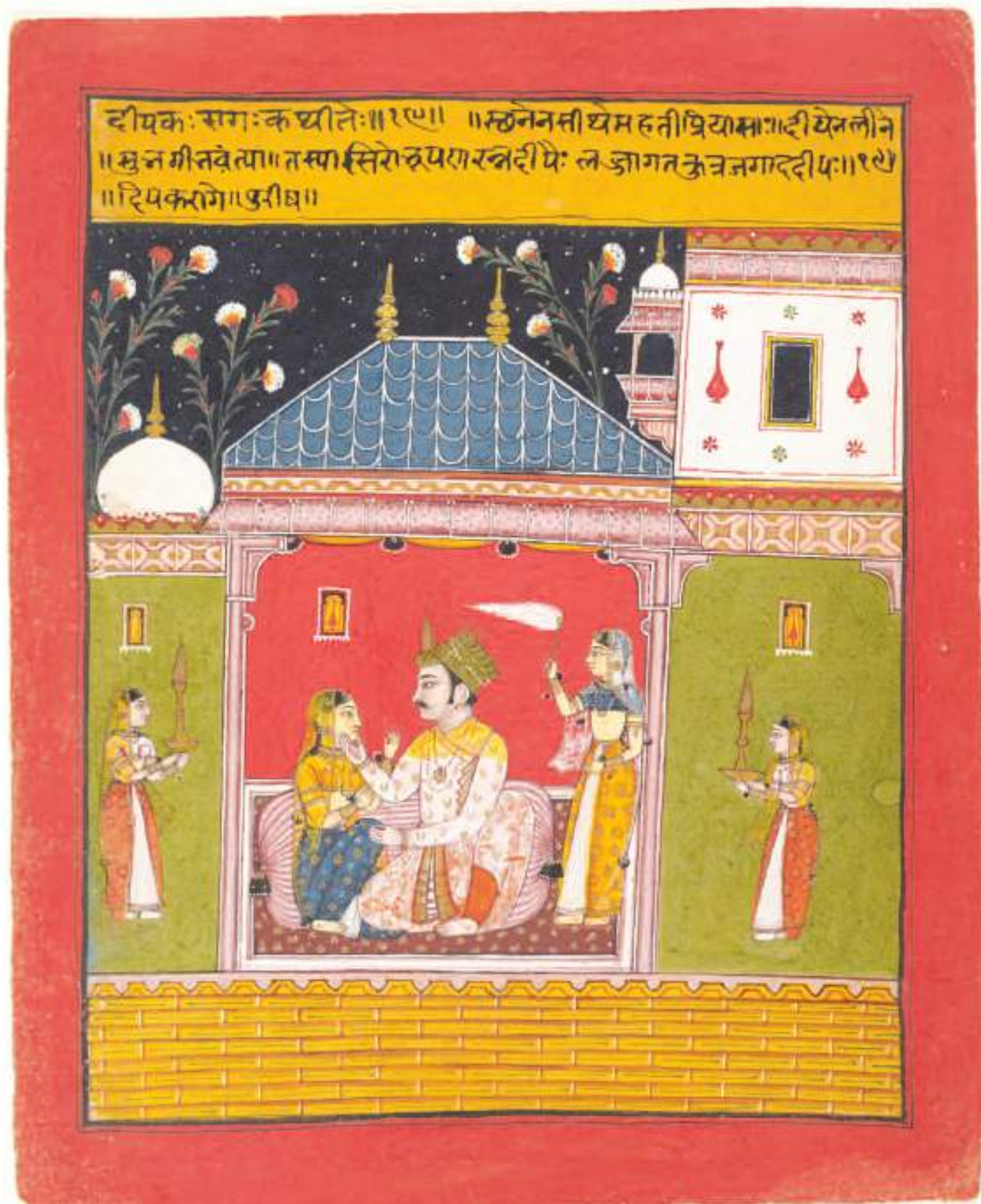


Fig. 5.0. *Dipak Raga*: Folio from a *Ragamala* Series, 1630-40, Malwa Central India, Ink and opaque watercolor on paper, ©Metropolitan Museum of Art.

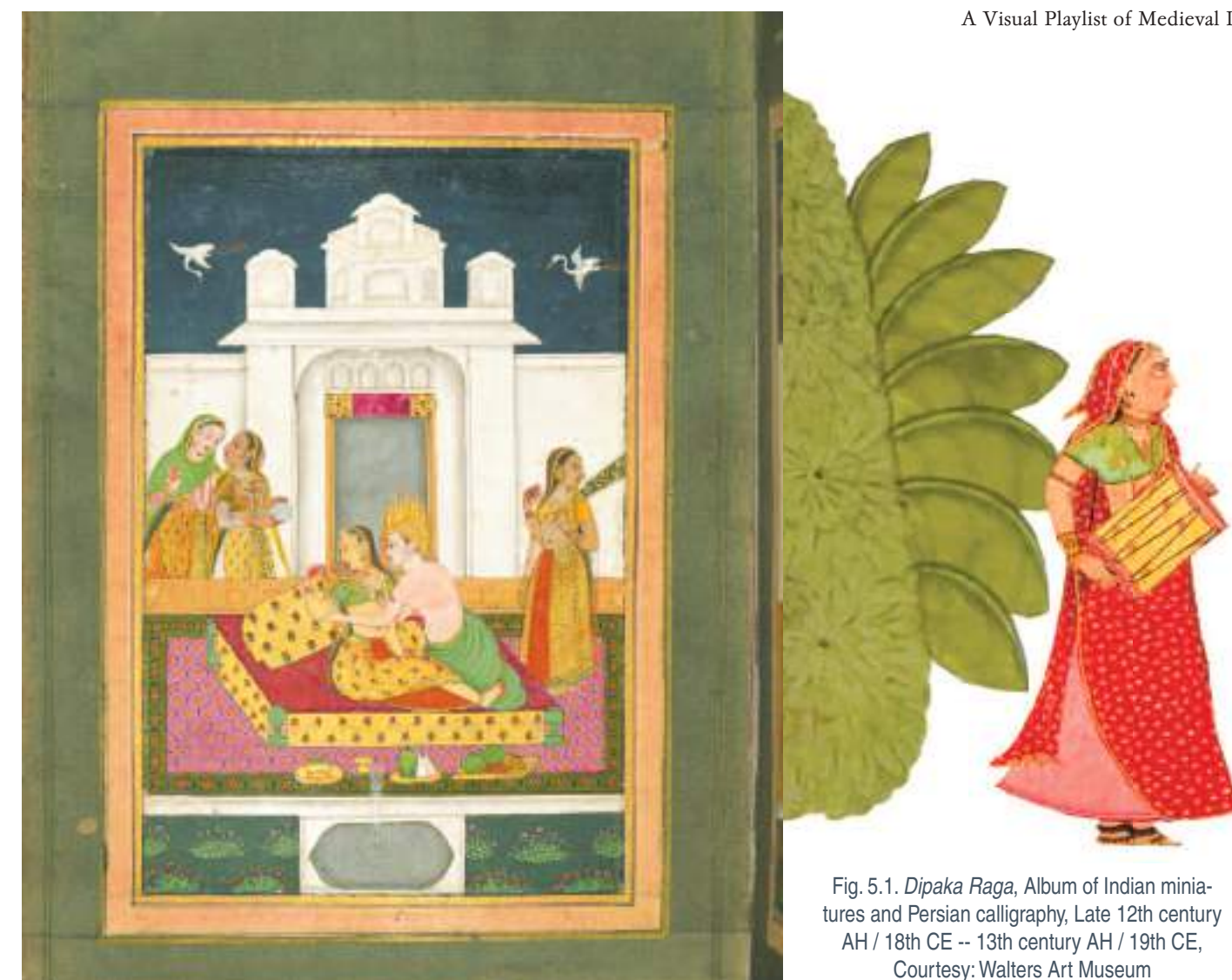


Fig. 5.1. *Dipaka Raga*, Album of Indian miniatures and Persian calligraphy, Late 12th century AH / 18th CE -- 13th century AH / 19th CE, Courtesy: Walters Art Museum

This painting to the left shows a King and his consort at night in their palace. The symbolic flame of *Raga Dipak* is carried by two women bearing lamps on the sides. The figures are enclosed in an architectural frame, reminiscent of the Malwa paintings of central India. In the background is the star-studded night sky with the jasmine in full bloom. One can almost feel the night, with intimacy and heady fragrance in the air.

The *Ragamala* painting above shows a couple in an embrace on their bed at night, surrounded by female attendants, one of which is fanning the couple with a fan made out of peacock feathers. Swans can be seen flying in the sky, the signs of love, purity and grace, while a water fountain in front of the couple sets the mood. The small fireplace behind them is the flame that *Raga Dipak* is synonymous with. The intimacy portrayed is bold and unapologetic and the company of the musicians and attendants seems to enhance the mood of pleasure seeking without shame.



रामचन्द्रिकासुन्दर



The painting presented here retains the mood of love and togetherness between the two figures though it is a bit unclear what their status is. This *Ragamala* is from the Pahadi school and is rich with the detail and lyrical softness of the characters and nature elements portrayed.

Fig. 5.2. *Raga Dipak*. A nobleman is seated on a carpet, attended by a retainer holding a fly whisk, 1600 - 1699, Basohli painting, courtesy of Cleveland Museum



Fig. 5.3. *Kamod Raga* of the *Dipak Raga* Family, page from a *Ragamala* Series, c. 1750, India, Pahari Hills, Bilaspur School, Mughal, Ink, color, and gold on paper. Courtesy of Cleveland Museum.

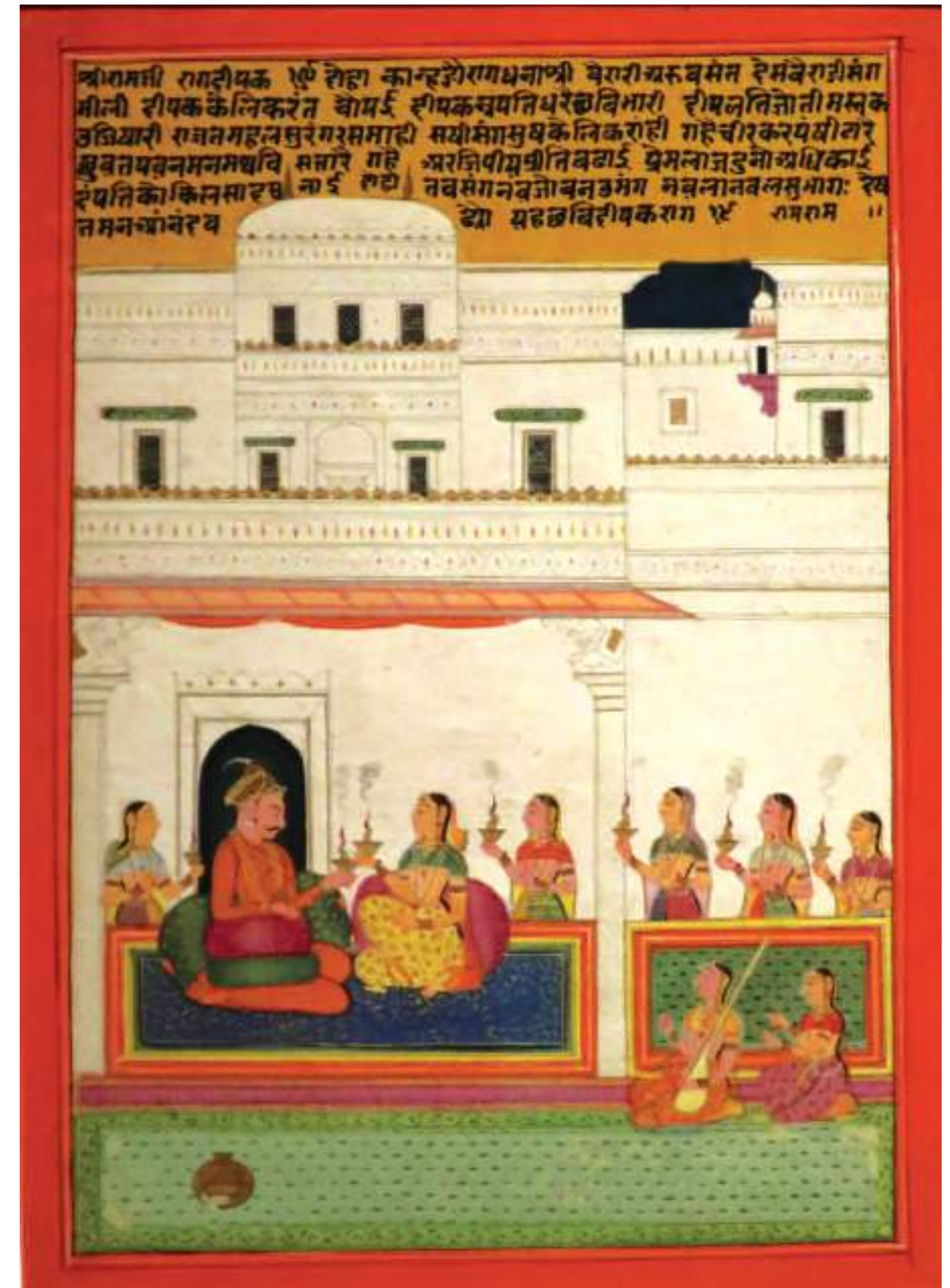


Fig. 5.4 'Dipak Raga' page from a *Ragamala* Series, 1746, Honolulu Museum of Art.

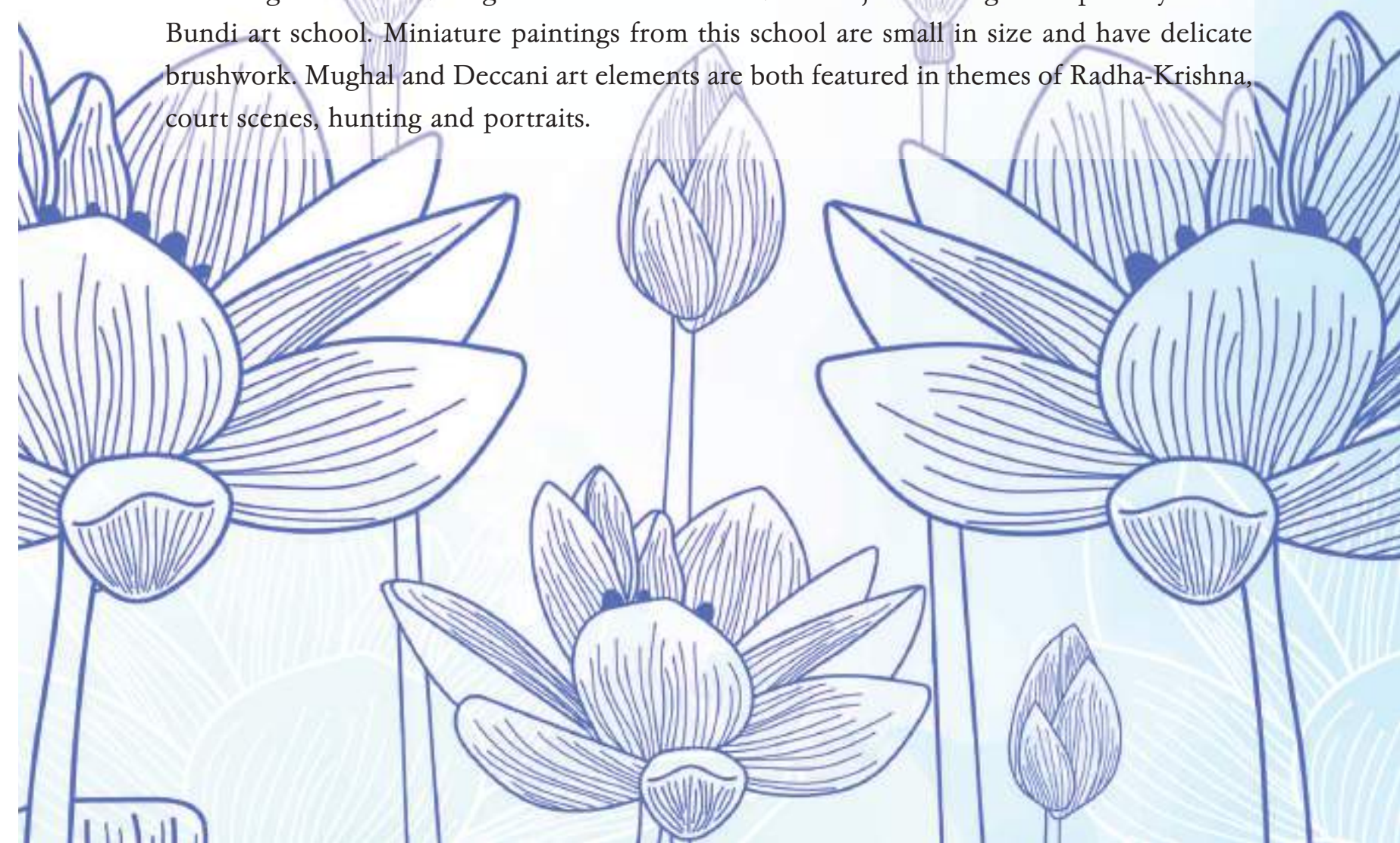


6

THE ENIGMATIC TWILIGHT MELODY OF RAGA SHREE

R*aga Shree* is an ancient raga from North India which is sung in the evening at sunset and a primary member of the series of *Sandhiprakash ragas* which are sung at sunset. **Sandhiprakash** is that special twilight hour between day and night, when an intense yet restful mood prevails. *Raga Shree* also finds a mention in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the holy book of the Sikhs of Punjab, India. Haunting, meditative and melodically challenging, singing or playing requires a high level of expertise, mindfulness and humility. For the listener it is an emotional cornucopia with never a dull moment.

In these paintings we see a rare depiction of the ruler as a performing artist and musician. This was predominantly in paintings made at the Kota and Bindu courts in Rajasthan. The pervasive presence of music, both classical and folk styles particularly in Rajasthan is a possible reason for this. Here the ruler is seen playing a string instrument called the *Veena* and is accompanied by two musicians. The ruler sits on the throne indicating his higher status while his fellow musicians are seated on the carpet below him. The architecture of the palace setting is intricate and complex with several walls and domes seen at angles to each other. Decorative elements and colors on the walls bring a vibrancy to the scene. The flowering tree in the background treated like embedded jewels is again a specialty of the Bundi art school. Miniature paintings from this school are small in size and have delicate brushwork. Mughal and Deccani art elements are both featured in themes of Radha-Krishna, court scenes, hunting and portraits.



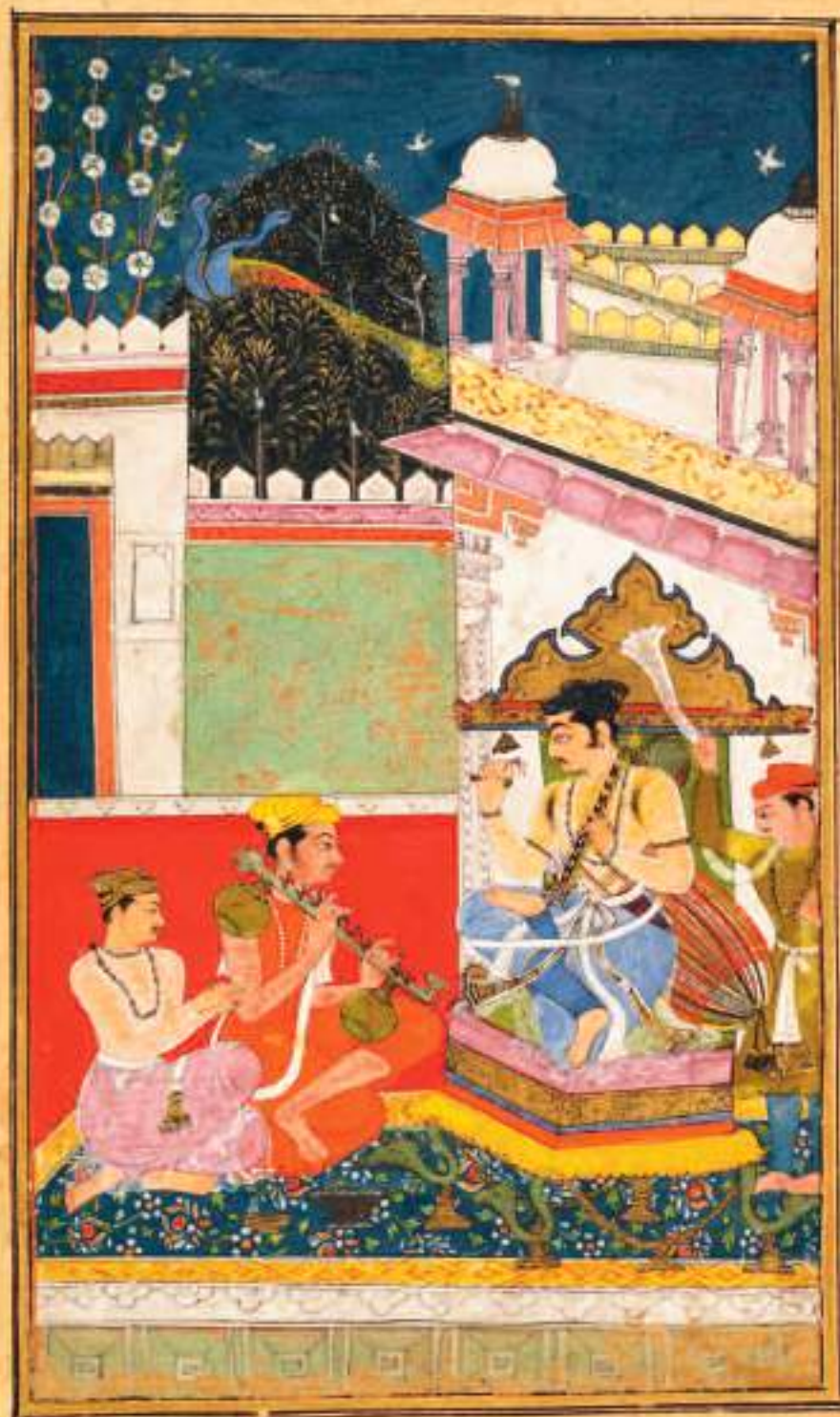


Fig. 6.0. *Shri Raga*: Folio from a *Ragamala* series, mid 17th century, Rajasthan (Bundi), Ink and opaque watercolor on paper, Courtesy: Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 6.1. *Shri Raga*, from the *Chawand Ragamala*, 1605, Chawand, Mewar - Rajasthan state, Opaque watercolor on paper, Artist Nasiruddin, Rajput school of art, ©Smithsonian.

This is a painting from the famous Chawand *Ragamala* Folio representing *Raga Shree*. The artist Nasiruddin, doyen of the Rajput school of Art, from the Mewar court is named here. The ruler is holding court with two musicians in a relaxed and soothing ambience reflective of the powerful *Raag Shree*. The blend of Hindu and Muslim elements is particularly typical of this style. The ruler is shown in a red turban and a white four pointed *jama*, the royal garment worn by nobles of that period. The musician with the instrument (a *Veena*),

is a Hindu *Shaivite* (Shiva worshiper) as is clear from his clothing and hair style. The inscription refers to this musician as the famous sage Narada. The second musician holds a pair of hand-cymbals providing the basic percussion and rhythm to the music. An attendant waves the *cauri* (a hand fan) to cool the air around the master. The design of the utensils and the wine jug in the foreground is Mughal in nature. The bejeweled trees in the background are typical of Chawand and Rajput art school. So here the ruler himself is personified as the *Raga Shree* with all its majestic qualities - beauty, serenity, knowledge seeking and grand. The inscription is written in Sanskrit on the top border of the painting and a rough translation is available (given in Ebeling, Klaus) as below:

“Splendidly enthroned, of peerless beauty and lovely as the autumn moon, he sits hearing stories from Narada and Tumbaru. By the great sages he is called “Sriraga King”.

- KLAUS EBELING

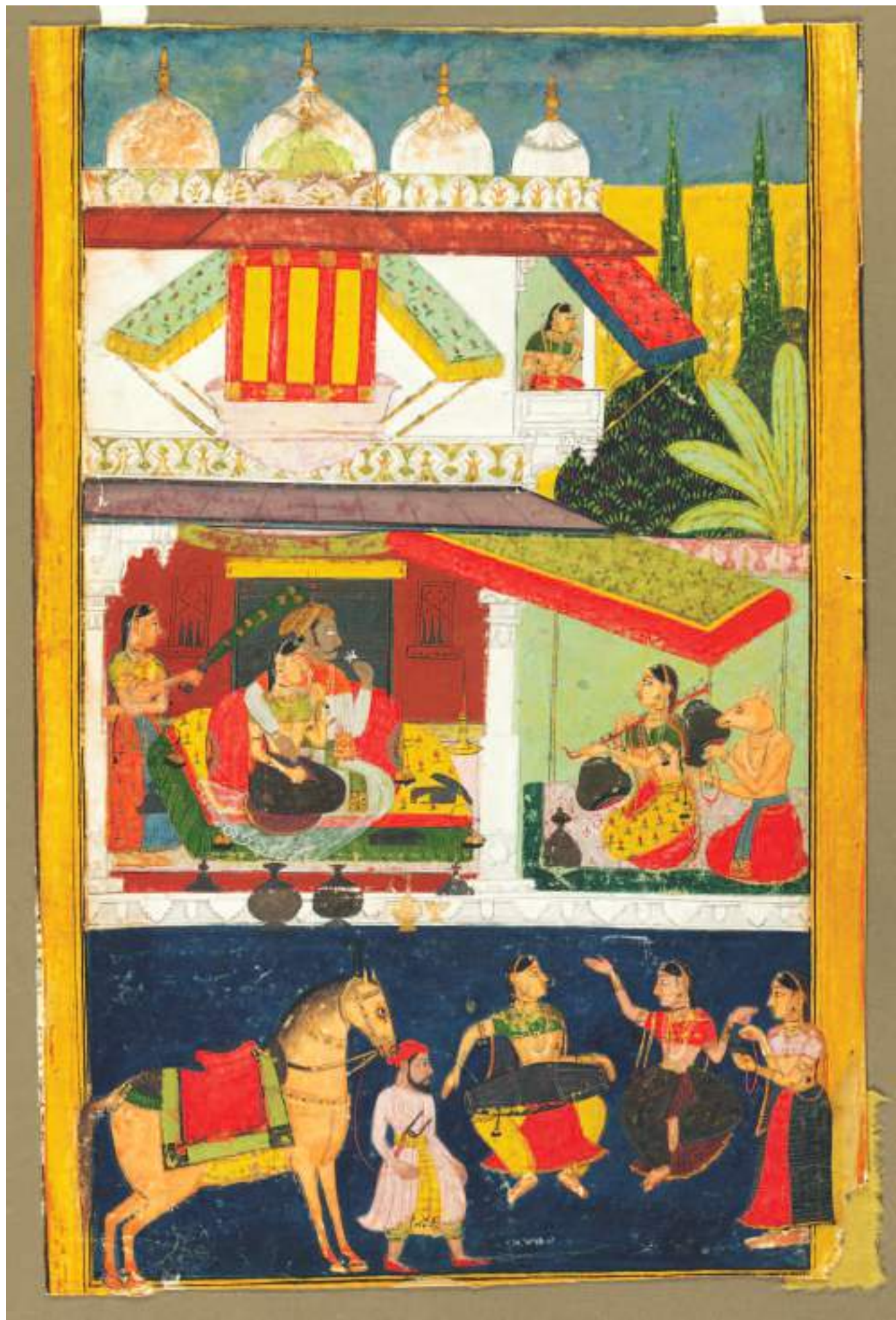


Fig. 6.2 *Shri Raga*, c. 1695, India, Rajasthan, Mewar, 17th century, Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, Courtesy of Cleveland Museum of Art.



Fig. 6.3 *Sri Raga*. An illustration from a Ragamala Series, India, Mughal, 18th century, Courtesy of Cleveland Museum of Art.

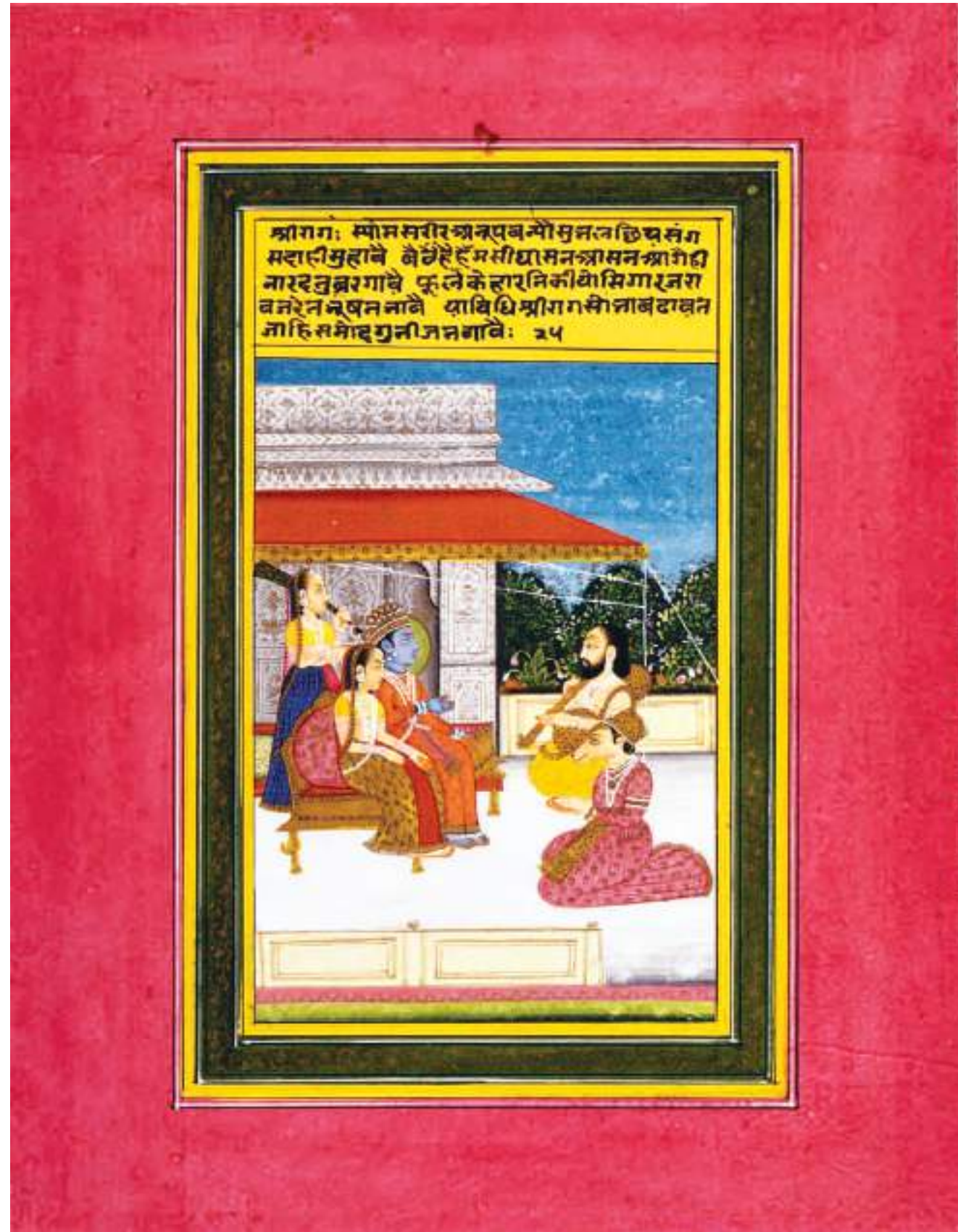


Fig. 6.4 *Shri Raga*. Folio from a *Ragamala* (Garland of Melodies), India, Rajasthan, Jaipur, circa 1850-1900; watercolors, Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, Courtesy of LACMA.

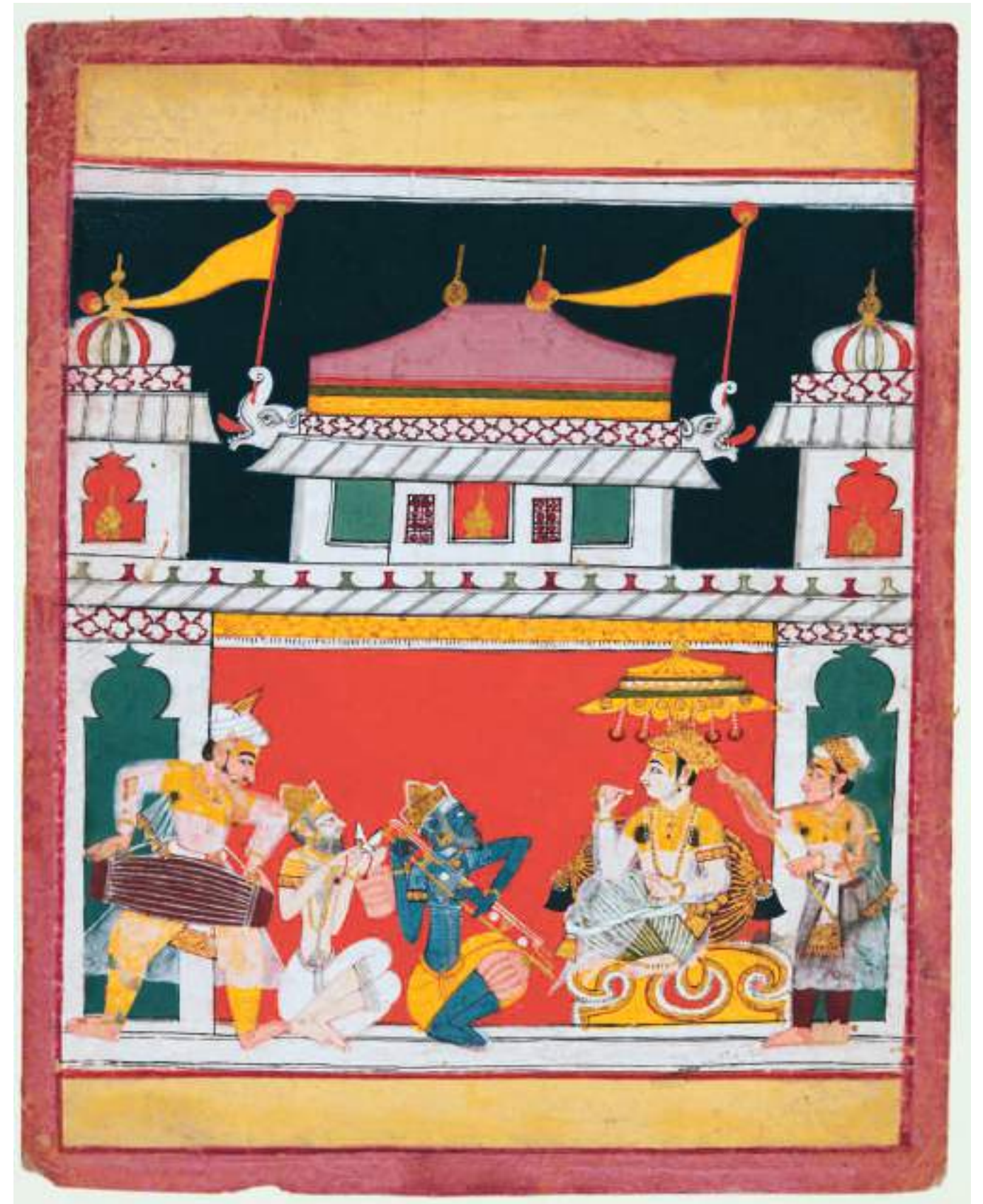


Fig. 6.5 *Shri Raga*, from a *Ragamala* series; Three musicians perform before a noble, c. 1650, Central India, Malwa, Color on paper. Courtesy of Cleveland Museum of Art

7

THE STORMY BEAUTY OF RAGA MEGH MALHAR



R*aga Megh* is one of the oldest Indian *ragas* and is the Sanskrit word for 'clouds'. It is sung during the monsoon or rainy season in India which is a significant season between summer and autumn. In a predominantly agrarian country, appeasing the rain Gods and celebrating rain were a big part of the culture. *Raga Megh* has ancient elements of *Dhrupad gayaki* which is the forebearer of Indian classical music. There are both sweet and somber tones in this *Raga* leading to a lot of variety and improvisation when the *raga* is developed by a musician. *Raga Megh* has a cooling and soothing effect.

The famous story of Tansen setting himself ablaze while singing *Raga Dipak* in the Emperor Akbar's court ends with his daughter singing *Raga Megh* to bring the rain down and douse the flames.

Fig 7.1 on the following page is a painting of Lord Krishna dancing in the rain to personify *Raga Megh*. He is surrounded by female musicians, peacocks and a water fountain in the foreground. The background is busy with a sky full of clouds, flying birds and swaying trees representing a stormy monsoon evening. The storm and thunder is equally a part of the strong intonations (called *gamak*) in *Raga Megh*. The powerful *gamak* punctuates the smooth sweetness of the *Raga* akin to thunder interrupting the sweet sound of steadily falling rain.

While the iconography of *Raga Megh* usually shows Lord Krishna dancing in the rain, the *ragamala* painting from Malwa in fig. 7.2, on the following page, depicts the anticipation of two lovers as they unite on a monsoon night.

The hero is seen lying down and gazing longingly at his counterpart. She is seen as being startled by a flash of lightning and the sound of a peacock. She comes to a complete halt and turns around, making her posture more graceful. She raises her hand to feel the raindrops as they fall. This is a distinct variation in the interpretation of *Raga Megh* between the schools of art.



Fig. 7.1. *Raga Megh Malhar Ragamala* set, mid 18th century. Opaque watercolor on paper. Deccan India, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

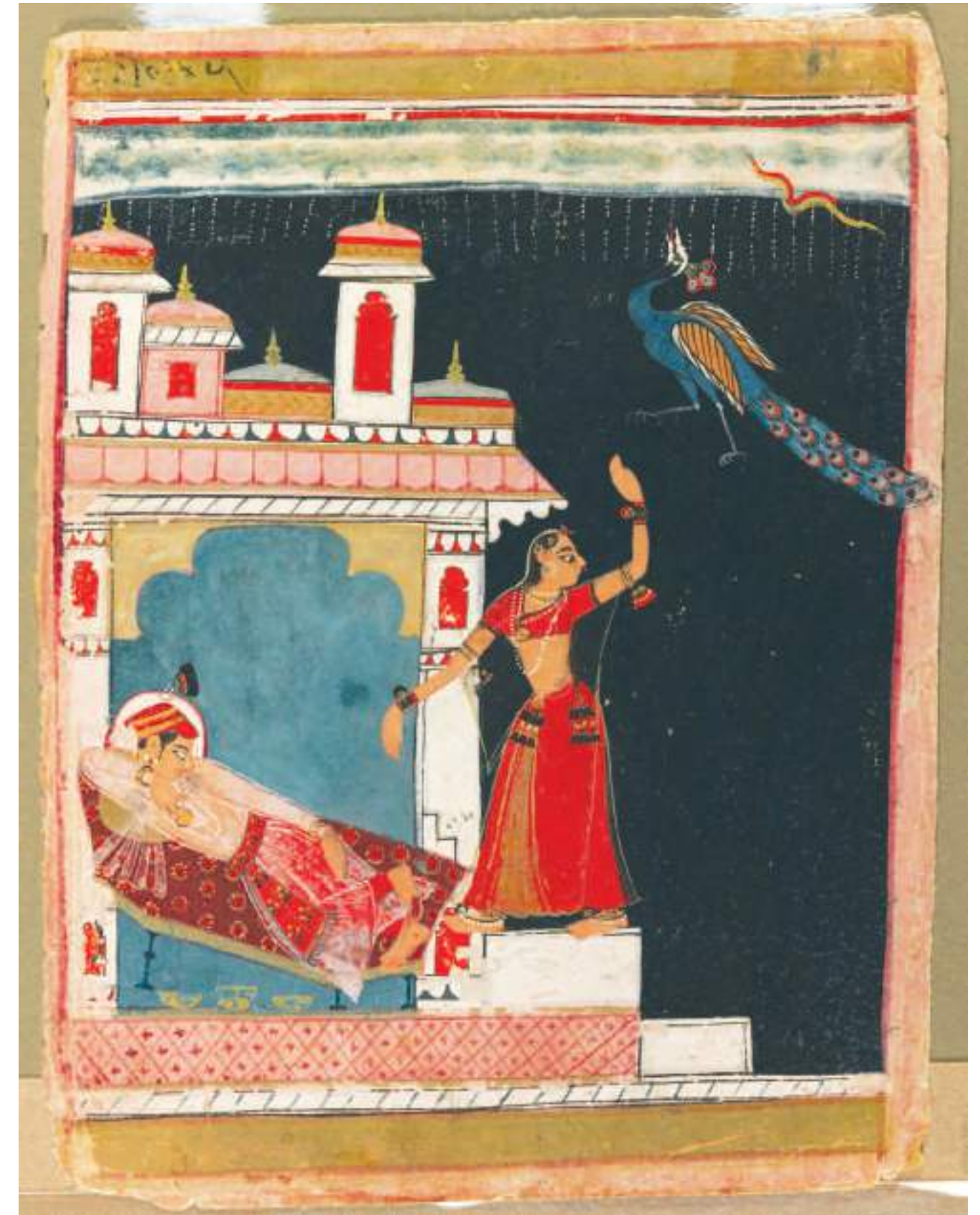


Fig. 7.2. *Madhu Madhavi Ragini, Raga Megha*, c. 1630–40, Central India, Malwa, Gum tempera, ink, and gold on paper, Courtesy of Cleveland Museum of Art.



Fig. 7.3 *Megha Malhar Raga*, Folio from a *Ragamala* (Garland of Melodies). Courtesy of LACMA.

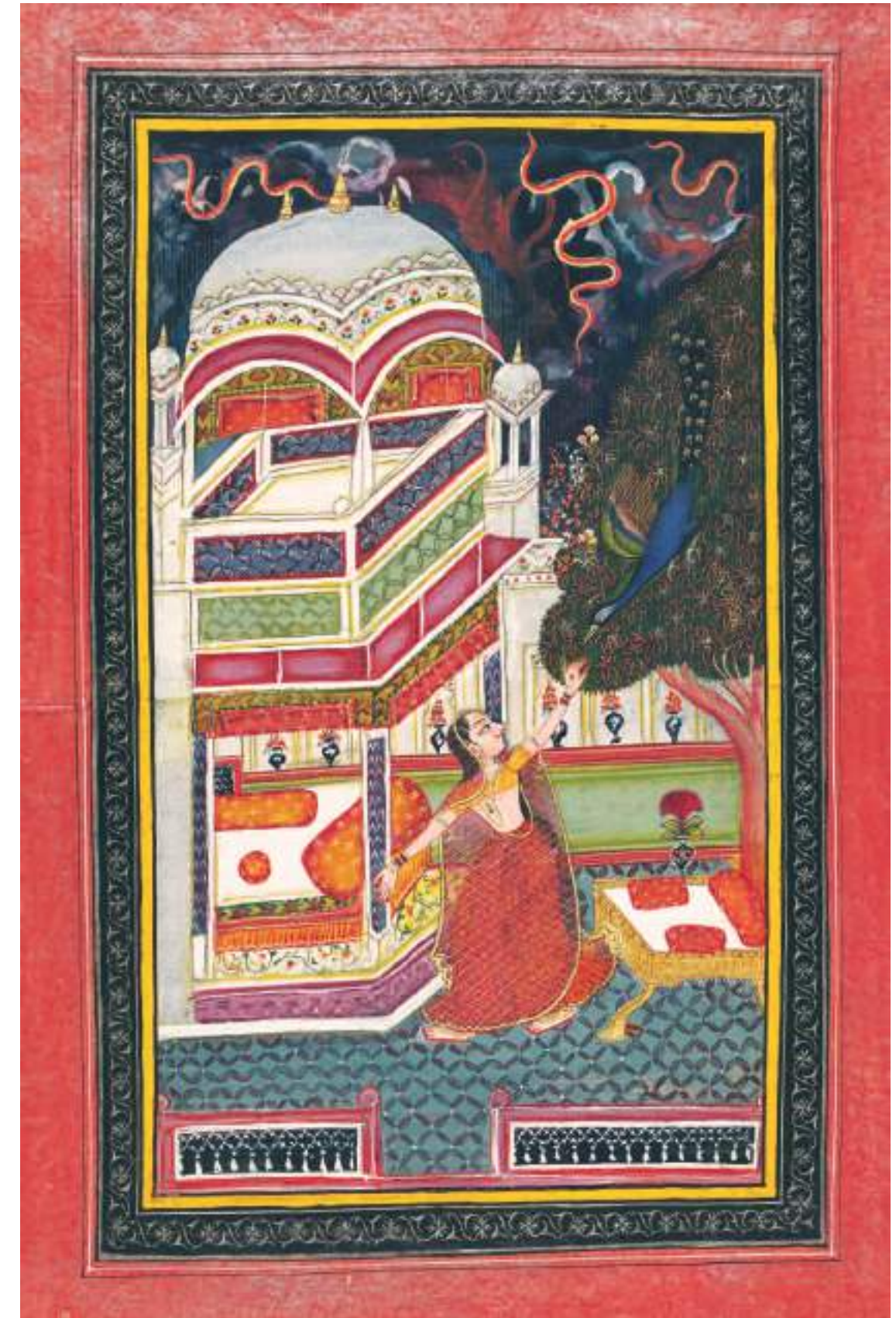


Fig. 7.4 *Ragini Madhu-Madhavi of Raga Megha*, National Museum, New Delhi.

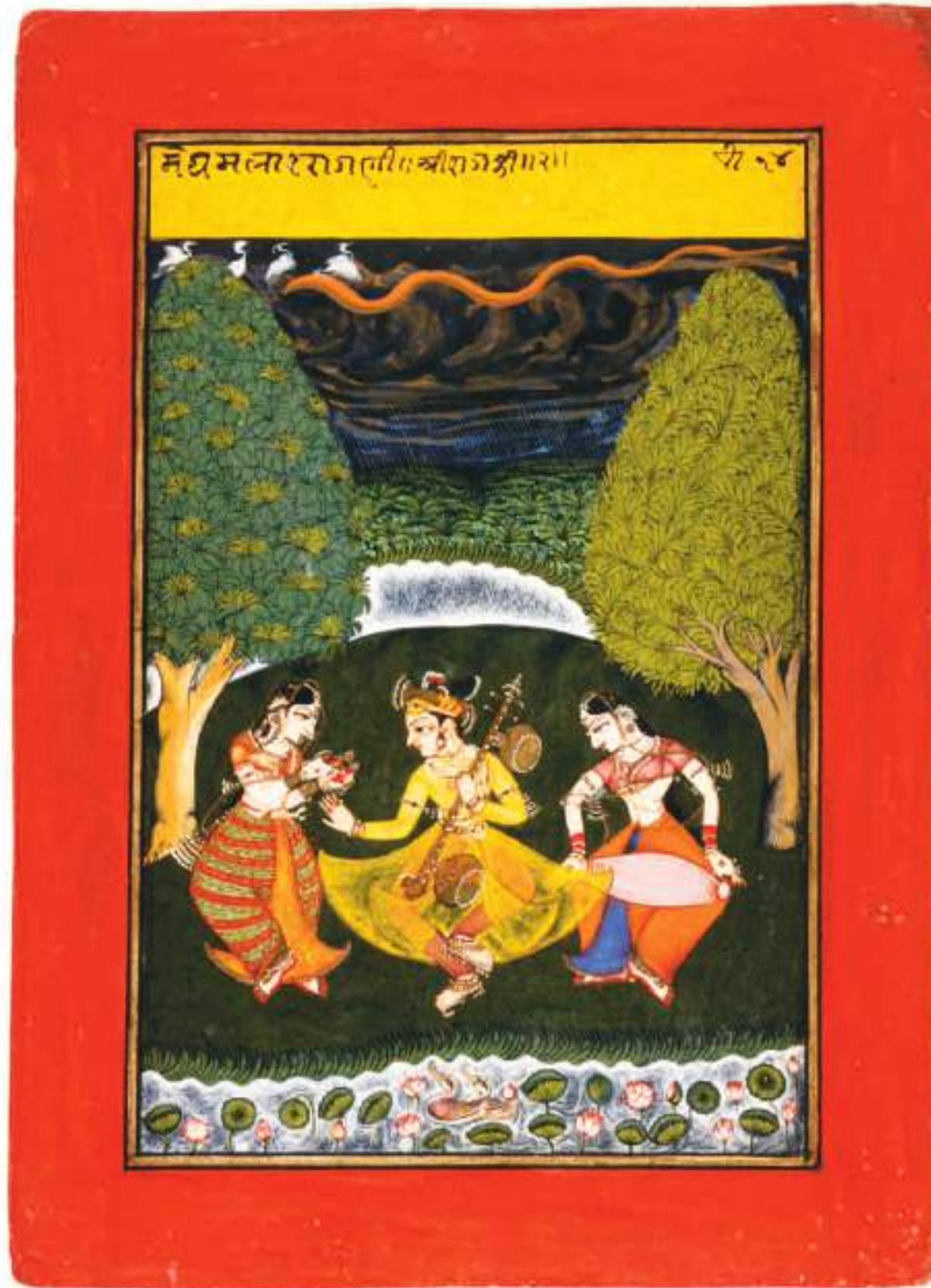


Fig. 7.5 *Megh Malhar*, circa 1725-1750, Kota, Drawings; watercolors, Opaque watercolor, gold, and ink on paper. Courtesy of LACMA.



Fig. 7.6 *Ragini Desi Megh*, an illustration from a *Ragamala* series, Courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery.



8

THE TAPESTRY OF FOUR SCHOOLS IN RAGAMALA PAINTINGS



While the concept of *Ragamala* paintings is believed to have originated in Rajasthan, it was adopted across several schools of art across India. *Ragas* paintings have been associated with the Mughal era in which art and architecture flourished as a whole. However *Ragas* as a theme have been extensively used in miniature paintings by artists of all sects, schools and periods – Pre-Mughal, Mughal and Post Mughal. For understanding the musical aspects of *Ragas*, the texts of Narada, Haribhallubha, Hanuman, and Meshkaran are said to have been the knowledge base for artists. But the innovations in art, brushwork, detailing and motifs have

been drawn from the Art schools and periods to which the painters belonged. *Ragamala* painters, personifying ragas as creatures, humans, moods, seasons and scenes from daily life have developed a language of their own. Prominent amongst the art schools are the Mughal, the Rajput, the Pahadi and the Deccan schools of Art.

8.1. MUGHAL MARVELS: THE ARTISTRY OF RAGAMALA IN THE IMPERIAL COURT

The Mughal school of miniature painting developed from the sixteenth to the mid nineteenth century and flourished under the generous patronage of the Mughal emperors. Each successor brought his own unique taste and preference to the development of art in his period. The Mughal school is known to have developed a great deal of sophistication in painting, calligraphy, inscriptions, book making and illustration all of which are visible in the *Ragamala* folios as well. The emperors were personally involved in gathering artists from different parts of India and bringing them into the courts and ateliers of Mughal hubs. The Mughal style of miniature painting amalgamated indigenous, Persian and even European styles towards the later period. It is said that this is an unmatched period of the development of Art owing to the purposeful involvement and patronage combined with the unsurpassed skill level of the artists. The very first Mughal emperor



Babur was particularly fond of literature, art, architecture and gardening. The autobiographical *Baburnama* mentions the master artist Behzaad from the Persian school of painting as the founding member of this school of Art. Babur's son Humayun brought back with him two master painters from Kabul - Mir Sayyid Ali and Abd us Samad to establish a studio in the court and attract other artists. The illustration of the *Hamzanama*, an extensive Mughal work, began at this time and was continued by Emperor Akbar whose reign marked a significant development of unique Mughal art that was to dominate the art landscape for the next 200 years. It is believed that Emperor Akbar was dyslexic and thus laid great emphasis on the illustration of manuscripts in an effort to make them easier to understand. A unique characteristic of Mughal paintings is the team work by a group of artists that went into each painting. Artistic inspiration was drawn from the flora and fauna in their natural surroundings as well as the landscapes and architectural elements as well as court scenes, important kings and queens. Emperor Akbar emphasized cultural integration and commissioned



Fig. 8.0. Sita Shies Away from Hanuman, Believing He is Ravana in Disguise, *Ramayana*, 1594, The David Collection, Copenhagen, Courtesy: Picryl.

the translation and illustration of the Hindu epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Artists like Govardhan and Miskin in Akbar's court developed this amalgamated style of art which propagated widely. In later years of Emperor Jehangir's and Shah Jhan's reign the European influences with Byzantine art, Classical and Renaissance period art starts to seep into the Mughal school of art making it even more vibrant and impressive.



Mughal miniatures were generally parts of manuscripts and royal albums in which both the visual art and the inscribed text were integrated. The book making process was complex and used sheets of handmade paper cut to the size of the manuscript. Leaving empty space for the painting, the text was filled in on ruled lines. The pages were now ready to be handed over to the artist, who would compose the painting. The artist followed a three stage process - first making the composition, i.e., *tarh*, to drawing the portraits, i.e., *chibaranama* and finally to coloring it using watercolors or other material, i.e., *rang amizi*. The process of making colors was painstaking and involved working on natural sources of pigments mixed together in fine proportions to achieve the range and richness of colors required for coloring the paintings

The present painting depicts the visualization of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* in Mughal miniature style during Emperor Akbar's reign. The Indo-Persian aesthetic quality, surface brilliance, vivid color palette and refined execution stand out. The seamless integration of image and text are seen here to produce a high quality manuscript. One hundred and seventy six miniatures complete this manuscript. The imperial copy of this *Ramayana* is now in Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum in Jaipur.

8.2. DECCAN SCHOOL: FUSION OF CULTURES IN DECCANI RAGAMALA PAINTINGS

A distinctly Islamic culture developed in the Deccan region situated in the Southern part of India. It retained its political independence from Northern India for the most part of the 15th to 18th centuries and this independence could be the reason for the development of such a unique culture. The Deccan population was a very diverse mix of Indian Hindus and Muslims as well as Persians, Arabs, Turks and Africans. In the year 1520 when the Bahamani sultanate disintegrated, there were five sultanates that emerged - Bijapur, Golkonda, Ahmadnagar, Bidar, and Berar. Of these, Bijapur sultanate developed the most famous painting style. Ibrahim Adil Shah II's religious tolerance and generous patronage of the Arts led to the seamless blend of Hindu and Islamic culture. All the Deccan sultanates remained friendly to the Safavids of Iran who identified with the Shia sect of Islam as different from the Mughals who identified as Sunni Muslims. Apart



Fig. 8.1. *Abdullah Qutubshah, Sultan of Golconda*, circa 1640, gold and silver on paper, Golconda, India, © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

from the Safavid bond, the Deccan also became the greatest center of Arabic literature and learning in India. The Deccan region had close trading and commercial links with Egypt, Yemen and other Arab countries and this led to an exchange of cultural practices and sensibilities. The painting style that emerged in the Deccan was thus a unique blend of cultural and aesthetic styles. In the Deccani Ragamala paintings, we see elongated figures based on the Vijaynagar murals. On the other hand, the floral motifs, use of landscapes and architecture reflect a Persian influence. The colors are vibrant and rich. Geometry and symmetry play an important role in Deccani miniatures and serve to magnify its small



Fig. 8.2. *Krishna lifts Mount Govardhan*, Bikaner, c. 1690, by Ustad Sahibdin, Courtesy: British Museum.

canvas. The male and female characters painted are sensuous and appealing with wide open eyes, flawless complexions and adorned in exquisite clothing and jewelry. Women are depicted in a variety of roles traditional and non traditional. There is a boldness and confidence to their overall look and posture which is unique to the Deccani paintings.

8.3. RAJPUT SCHOOL: VIBRANT EXPRESSION IN RAJPUT RAGAMALA ART

Rajput art is a genre and style of painting that emerged in the Rajputana courts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Rajasthani and Pahari schools of art are both believed to have originated in the Rajput school. The princely states of Rajasthan which patronized art include Mewar (later Udaipur), Jaipur, Bundi, Kota, Kishangarh, Jodhpur and Bikaner. For a large part of that period these principalities were



ruled by the Mughals, hence there is a significant influence of Mughal art here. One big difference that is reported is that while Mughal art was largely made for the royal audience and taste, Rajput art was created more for the general public and covered a much wider range of Hindu mythology and scenes from public life. While Mughal art focused on miniatures, Rajput art is found on walls of palaces, forts and havelis in addition to miniatures. These paintings are lyrical and romantic with bold lines and vibrant colors found in the costumes, jewelry and other objects of Rajasthan folk and princely life. The influence of Rajasthani folk music and dance is also seen in the paintings with frequent depictions of musicians performing, women dancing and celebrating festivals in different seasons. The Ragamala paintings of the Rajput school of art are also rich with these varied visualizations imagined to represent the mood and emotion of each Raga. Colors were meticulously prepared using natural extracts of some minerals, plant sources and even conch shells which are popular in this region. Precious stones like rubies and emeralds were processed for color, given the

proximity of the jewelry industry in Rajasthan. Precious metals like gold and silver were often used to give a gilded, royal look and feel to the borders or within the painting areas. The artists used the medium of opaque watercolor on paper, developing layer upon layer of color to give the painting depth and perspective. Fine brushes are known to give clean lines and delicacy to the miniatures. Figures are flat and traditional in appearance. The canvas for this school of art was made from paper, ivory and silk.

There are interesting variations among the different sects that come under the Rajput school of Art. Bundi is perhaps the oldest with well known artists like Rao Ratan Singh and Rao Chattar Sal who brought alive court scenes and lives of noblemen and women like no other. The Bikaner school was more influenced by Mughal art and chose themes of *Raga*, Indian mythology, Gods and Goddesses. *Bani Thani* paintings and the poetry of Raja Sawant Singh are the best known products of the Kishangarh school. The most conservative of these is the Malwa school with what is known as the *Chaurapanbasika* style.



Fig. 8.3. Sudama, Lord Krishna's friend and devotee returning home through the foothills of the lower Himalayas, An early 18th century Pahari school miniature, Courtesy: Sarah Welch

8.4. PAHARI POETRY: THE SUBLIME BEAUTY OF PAHARI RAGAMALA PAINTINGS

Pahari comes from the root word "*Pabar*" for a hill or mountain. This school of Art originated in the hilly areas of the western Himalayan ranges in towns such as Basohli, Guler, Kangra, Kullu, Chamba, Mankot, Nurpur, Mandi, Bilaspur, Jammu and others. Starting around Basholi with a rudimentary style in the seventeenth century, this style grew leaps and bounds in intricacy and sophistication in the towns of Guler and Kangra. The Kangra school eventually became world famous. Researcher B N Goswamy, traces the development of this style to a family of artists whose chief ancestor was the artist Pandit Seu. From the early paintings we see a remarkable transformation taking place owing most likely to the influence of artists who arrived here from the Mughal ateliers. The use of nature in the visualizations as well as bringing actual natural material like shiny, green particles of beetle wings to depict jewelry in paintings is a defining characteristic of the Pahari school. Popular themes include the *Rasamanjari*, the *Ragamala* and the *Bhagavata Purana*. From the 1630s to the 1790s came a time known as the Guler-Kangra phase during which much experimentation and innovation took place. The *Ramayana* was one of the most popular texts that inspired the hill artists to create imaginative versions of the popular scenes



from the epic. This style was more refined and elegant compared to the earlier Pahari artwork. Artist Nainsukh is well known for his portraiture. In delicate, pastel shades with expansive white or gray backgrounds. The Kangra style is now known as the most poetic of Indian styles with deep romanticism, lyrical play and color. The series of Bhagavata Purana paintings depicting Lord Krishna's life is hailed as a stellar contribution to art by the Pahari artists. The portrayal of the eternal love of Hindu deities Radha and Krishna is the fundamental theme of Pahari painting. The devotion of the gopis for Krishna, his intoxicating flute and the devastating pain of separation are all depicted with great sensitivity and attention to detail. Another striking series is the Ashta Nayikas - eight heroines where women are skillfully portrayed in different moods and roles. The drama and dynamism of this series is unparalleled. After the 1800s, this school declined though lower quality imitations survive to this day.

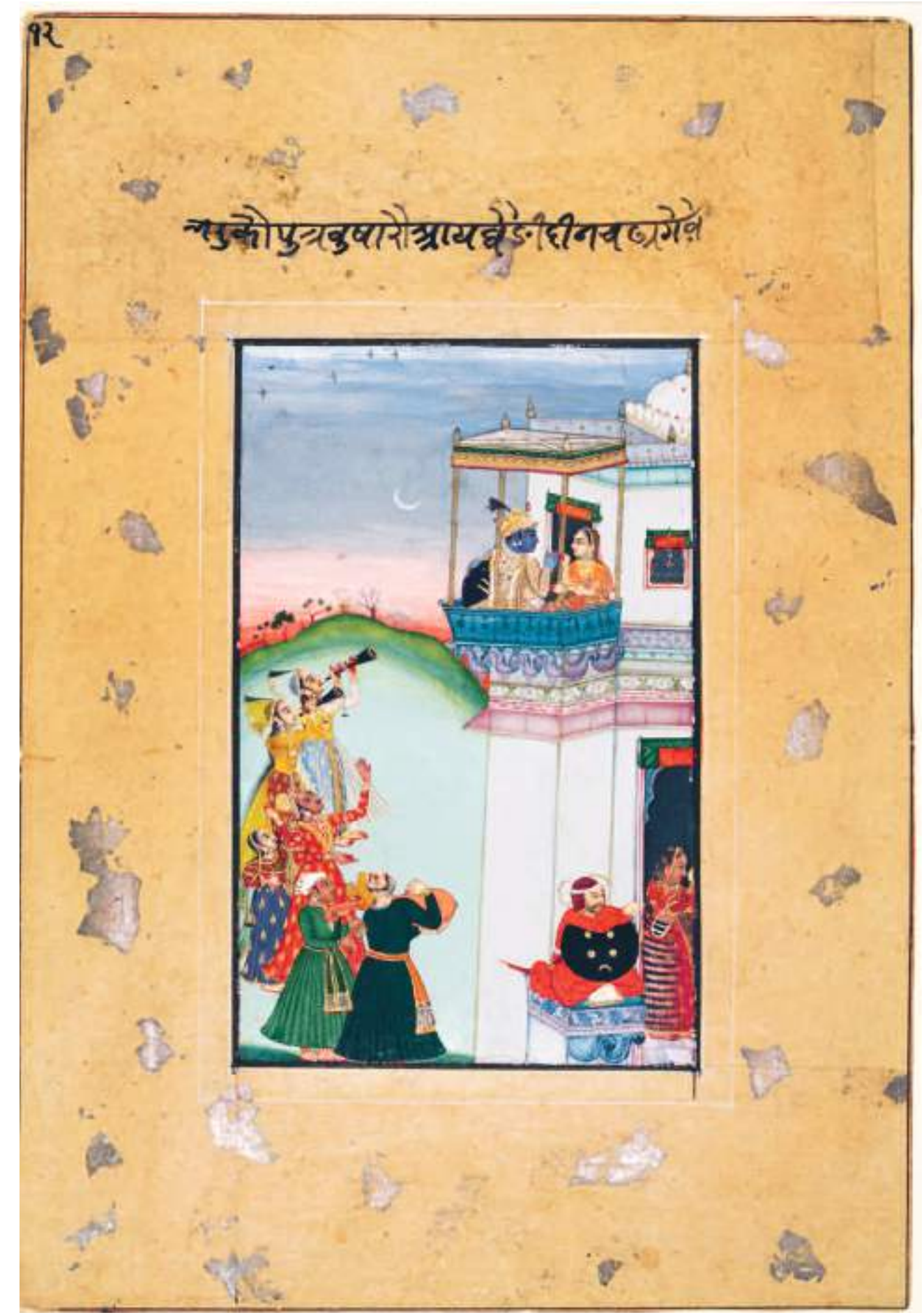


Fig. 8.4 *Krishna and Consort on a Palace Balcony with Musicians*: Vukharo Ragaputra of Bhairav, from the "Boston Ragamala," 1770-75, Rajput Kingdom of Bundi or Kota, Northwestern India, Rajasthan, Opaque watercolor, ink, silver, and gold on paper

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